Don't Let the Girls Play: Gender Representation in Videogame Journalism and the Influence of Hegemonic Masculinity, Media Filters, and Message Mediation

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Howard D. Fisher
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This dissertation titled
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ABSTRACT

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Don't let the girls play: Gender representation in videogame journalism and the influence of Hegemonic Masculinity, Media Filters, and Message Mediation

Director of Dissertation: Bernhard S. Debatin

The researcher proposed that videogame magazines and journalists were misrepresenting the full breadth of modern videogame players, specifically women. Based on a foundation of Hegemonic Masculinity, the researcher conducted frame analyses of select magazines and in-depth interviews with select journalists. The researcher used Herman & Chomsky and Shoemaker & Reese as theoretical background and the standards proposed by the Hutchins commission and the Society of Professional Journalists to analyze the frames and interviews. The researcher found that women avatars were either ignored or portrayed as sex objects in the magazines, and that women videogame players were frequently mocked or insulted. Analyses further revealed that videogame journalists subscribe to an Ideology of Anxiety, primarily based on their fear-driven relationship with videogame developers and publishers.

Approved: _______________________________________________________

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Videogames have been a part of American pop culture since the 1970’s release of multiple home videogame systems (including the iconic Atari 2600) and the exploding popularity of arcades. By the 1980s videogame arcade revenue in the United States surpassed $5 billion; the U.S. legislature launched investigations into videogame violence in the 1990s; and by the 2000s, Microsoft’s Xbox videogame unit was ushering in the age of online multiplayer games for the masses (Kent, 2001). Nothing more than an interactive bunch of lights dancing on a screen, videogames have grown into an entertainment industry that has annual incomes that rival – and at times surpass – many other modern pastimes, including movies.

Depending which particular branch of videogame history people want to follow, the argument can be made that videogames were born anywhere from as late as the 1970s when the home videogame market really took off to as early as 1889 when Fusajiro Yamauchi founded the Marufuku Company in Japan to distribute playing cards (Kent, 2001). That playing card company changed its name in 1951 to Nintendo, which has been dominating the home videogame industry for nearly 40 years.

My own interest in videogames dates back to my 1970s childhood when my parents bought one of the earliest videogame systems on the market, a Coleco Telstar Ranger. A self-contained videogame system, it featured four variations of the game “Pong” and a replica Western six-shooter to use in two target-practice games. Since then I have owned 9 videogame systems and three computers with the processing power to handle most current-generation PC games, and one of my favorite hobbies is playing videogames online or in local co-op with my friends and family members. I have also
been reading about videogames since I bought my Atari 2600 in the early 1980s and joined the Atari Club, a promotional/informational organization for all things Atari that published the short-lived magazine Atari Age (Anonymous, 2011b).

With years of personally playing and reading about videogames, I was surprised by one graduate student’s reaction to videogame research. When discussing with a graduate-level class the ways videogames can exclude women gamers or objectify women avatars, one man’s response was, “But why should women even play videogames?” To him, videogames were something men did, and women either weren’t interested in playing or weren’t welcome to play, so all the “excluding” or “objectifying” that might be going on was simply irrelevant – videogames were a man’s world.

His reaction seemed especially surprising because the Nintendo Wii had only recently been released. The Wii was becoming quite popular with women, and it seemed on the verge of opening the videogaming world to millions of people who had never before picked up a controller. I wondered where that young man had developed his anti-women-gamers attitude, and – coming from a mass communication perspective – I also wondered how much influence the media might have had on his opinions.

While the Atari Age magazine might have been one of the earliest – and shortest-lived – magazines devoted to videogaming, it was certainly not the last. With the rise of Nintendo’s first home system, the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), came the magazine *Nintendo Power* in 1988 (Anonymous, 2011h). *S: The Sega Magazine* soon followed in 1989 (DRussian, 2007), *PC Gamer* magazine in 1993 (Anonymous, 2011j), *Next Generation* in 1995 (Anonymous, 2011g), and a flood of newer and rebranded
videogame magazines that continues through today with both physical and online sales and subscriptions. Articles in those magazines range from basic reviews and previews of the videogames on the market, to industry trends, to investigative reports and features about gaming controversies like the recent row between videogame developer Infinity Ward and videogame publisher Activision (Pereira, 2011).

While those Atari Age magazines showed both boys and girls playing games, offered Atari-themed merchandise for both men and women, and displayed just as much digital and artistic skin of men as it did of women (Anonymous, 2011b), the modern videogame magazines seemed to me to be more one-sided, offering far more content aimed at men than what was aimed at women. Even game reviews and previews, some of the most basic articles written in the magazines, seemed to leave women gamers and women avatars out in the cold. If the media were excluding or objectifying women, it seemed possible that graduate student could have developed some of his anti-women-gamers attitude with the help of sources such as those, especially when considering Bandura’s research into the role that media play in shaping people’s attitudes as they grow up (Bandura & Walters, 1963).

With those questions in mind, I began researching various theories about the factors that go into the preparation of media content, how men and women “own” or dominate spaces, how women have been portrayed in other areas of journalism – especially those areas that have traditionally been “owned” or dominated by men, such as sports and hard-news journalism – how people use the media to learn about their roles in
society, and the responsibilities the media have for presenting information to the public. Those theories are discussed in Chapter 2: Literature Review.

In Chapter 3: Method, I discuss the two primary methods I used to research this topic. I conducted a Frame Analysis of select articles and magazines from 2008, looking specifically at the ways in which women were portrayed in the article text as well as the artwork alongside the articles. I also conducted In-depth Interviews with various videogame journalists to learn how they do their jobs, their attitudes toward women gamers and women avatars, and what other issues they see as especially important to them as they do their jobs.

The magazine analysis is discussed in Chapter 4: Frame Analysis Findings. Among other things, I uncovered evidence that shows women gamers were almost completely ignored by the magazines surveyed, and women avatars were most often either used by the magazines as pinups or were also ignored. Some online forums were especially hostile toward women gamers, and those findings are also presented.

Chapter 5: In-depth Interviews Findings is about the results of the videogame journalist interviews. While the journalists interviewed rarely considered the perspectives of women when writing their articles, few of them saw any systemic problems with the ways either the women gamers or the women avatars were portrayed in the magazines. The journalists were very concerned, however, with what they perceive as the overwhelming influence of the videogame publishers and public relations personnel on the articles they write. Those relationships were described at various times
as hostile, a chess match over information, a power struggle, and other such terms that expressed their frustrations with the restrictions on the way they do their jobs.

In Chapter 6: Conclusion, I discuss the findings in more depth, especially analyzing those results that were expected based on the theoretical foundations of the literature. Furthermore, I propose that videogame journalists produce their work while they adhere to an Ideology of Anxiety, a structure of rules and limitations on their work that may or may not be based in any reality in which they are employed but still underpins their thinking as they research and write. That Ideology of Anxiety means that the reporters “know” they will be struggling to wrestle every nugget of information from their sources, “know” their articles will be scrutinized by the publishers and public relations representatives for any hint of negativity toward their company or their games, “know” it is likely their editors may not support them in the face of external pressures – especially those pressures involving advertising dollars – and “know” that they risk being blacklisted for the slightest infraction, perceived or real, that the videogame companies might cite. All of that “knowledge” produces anxiety in the writers and – while none admitted to overtly changing article content based on any perceived external pressures – impacts the particular stories they write and the ways in which they choose to write those stories.

This research was first proposed in 2008, data were gathered in 2009 and 2010, the research was successfully defended in 2011, and the final draft submitted for approval in spring 2012.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Women and Videogaming History

The history of the videogame industry in its modern form owes much to a few researchers and students experimenting with waveform patterns in a 1960s laboratory (Burnham, 2003). Meant as a way to merely show off their equipment, resources, and talent, they created a game in which two space ships moved around an open-arena playing field and shot at each other, racking up kills until a timer expired (Burnham, 2003). The game was a phenomenal laboratory success, with colleagues and visitors lining up for the opportunity to play for even a few minutes at a time, and so the videogame “Space War!” was born (Burnham, 2003; King & Borland, 2003).

From that rather obscure beginning, however, the videogame industry exploded. The next decade would see video arcades pop up around the United States and throughout the world as well as the development, and frequent failure, of a variety of home videogame consoles (Burnham, 2003). That growing excitement, however, did not always extend to women. Perhaps because of the “boy-oriented” games being created (2006), perhaps because of a historical, stereotypically male predilection toward the latest, newest technological gadgets (Keightley, 2003; Rentel & Zellnik, 2007), or perhaps because of the “geeky” way in which the videogame industry was birthed by men within the laboratory (Burnham, 2003), but women have displayed less interest in videogames over the years, have less overall knowledge about videogames, and have historically played videogames less frequently and for shorter periods of time than have

Those initial gender trends have been changing in recent years, however. Statistics show that women make up 40 percent of the total gaming population in the United States (Entertainment_Software_Association, 2008), they make up 40 percent of the online gaming population (ESA, 2010), and women ages 25-54 make up 29 percent of PC videogame players, which is the largest single demographic playing PC videogames (The_Nielsen_Company, 2009). Women have also begun forming online communities that specifically serve women gamers and encourage more women to get into videogame development (Anonymous, 2011c; Eyles, 2008; GamerChix, 2008, 2011; WomenGamers.com, 2008).

Gaming’s Male-Centric History

While the videogame industry’s male-centric demographics have been shifting in recent years, most of the games produced today and a vast majority of the games produced for the past 30 years have portrayed worlds through a primarily male lens and for the enjoyment of a primarily male player. One of the earliest and most wildly successful videogame franchises ever, “Mario Brothers,” has as its basic premise that the heroes are risking their lives to rescue a princess. Reminiscent of the “King Kong” films, Mario’s original videogame incarnation, “Donkey Kong,” showed the princess standing next to a giant ape, powerless to do anything to alter her circumstances. Contrary to some misconceptions of early videogames on machines such as the Atari 2600 being
simply fun, mindless activity for children (2008e), adult-oriented content, from a predominantly male perspective, has also been portrayed in videogames since as far back as the 1970s. One notable, early game, “Custer’s Revenge” (1982), requires as its basic premise the player to rape a captive and bound Native American woman (Burnham, 2003).

According to Hartmann and Klimmt, videogames that offer few opportunities for meaningful, social interaction, those that glorify violent content, and those that promote sexualized gender role stereotyping are the kinds of games that women least prefer (Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006). With that research in mind, many of the popular games that have been produced throughout the past 30 years included: sports games that regularly highlighted competition, almost exclusively among the men’s divisions; 1st-person shooters that starred male heroes gunning down hordes of human or alien enemies; fighting games that encouraged players to beat each other up and that starred primarily male casts; and various action games that featured hypersexualized, scantily clad women. Female videogame characters, whether player-controlled or non-playable characters (NPCs), are more likely to be helpless and sexually provocative than male characters within the same games (Ogletree & Drake, 2007), and they are more likely to wear skimpy, revealing clothing (B. Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002), such as one game, “Conan,” published during the early development of this research project that portrayed women NPCs as bare-chested slaves clothed only in thongs (Goldstein, 2007). The competitive nature of the games, the violent content, the inclusion of pornographic
videogames, and the presence of so much digital skin has only reinforced over the years the notion that videogames are a male’s domain.

The introduction of the Nintendo Wii home gaming console and the Nintendo DS handheld gaming console, however, has begun to change that dynamic, much to the consternation of some male, hardcore gamers. Nintendo promotes the Wii as a family gaming console accessible to everyone, but most especially to women of all ages, including the elderly (2008g). While that claim has been made for decades from other videogame console manufacturers, the message of the medium seems to be catching up with the message of the advertising where the Wii is concerned. With its television remote-style controller, its control mechanism based on wand movements through the air instead of multiple configurations of button maps, and its games full of bright, cartoon style graphics, the Wii is presented as the perfect console to attract a new audience of gamers to the global videogame market (2008n). Even the definition of the term “hardcore gamer” has begun to be debated as people propose that it means far more than just the men who play games all the time (McLaughlin, 2008). Traditional male gamers, however, complain that this new console could transition the videogame market away from young males, ushering in an era of emasculated games that force men to use their virtual soldiers for chopping onions instead of shooting aliens (Croal, 2007).

Gender Representation

The entire notion of how “engaged” a certain portion of the population is with a technology brings up notions of representation, both of representational statistics as well
as perceived representation. By “representational statistics,” I refer to research on how much an area of media represents the population based simply on pure numbers. For example, when U.S. Census Bureau numbers were compared against the buying habits of men and women and then compared against the number of men and women portrayed in television commercials, researchers showed that even though the proportion of women making household purchases was greater than the proportion of men making household purchases, commercials portrayed more men in primary roles in the commercials than they did women, thereby misrepresenting the numerical reality of the situation (Ganahl, Prinsen, & Netzley, 2003). The basic numbers were not representational of the population.

Further research into statistical representation in mass communication has shown such evidence as the following: men make up an inordinate proportion of national news reporters and anchors as opposed to local news reporters and anchors (Armstrong, Wood, & Nelson, 2006); efforts to more adequately portray the number of women in sports when compared to the number of men in sports has been more successful in recent years than it was in the past (Cunningham, Sagas, Sartore, Amsden, & Schelihase, 2004); women appear more often than men appear in tourism marketing and advertising, thereby providing what is called an edited view of the tourism industry (Pritchard, 2001); and even though more women than men work in library professions, library trade publications portray more men than women working in those careers, thereby misrepresenting the numerical reality of the situation (Carle & Anthes, 1999). While far from an exhaustive
look at statistical representation research, this gives an idea of some of the areas in which researchers have used this particular paradigm to study gender representation.

By “perceived representation,” however, I refer not to the number of times a man or a woman appears but to the way in which that man or woman appears. For example, research into children’s picture books has shown that the number of women appearing on the pages of such books has increased notably since the 1970s when compared against the number of men appearing on the pages (Gooden & Gooden, 2001). However, while the numbers of women in the books have gone up, those women are portrayed more often in traditional gender roles that do not include such roles as employees in the workforce, career professionals, or heads of households (Gooden & Gooden, 2001). This misrepresentation of options available to adult women is said to have an adverse effect on children’s perceptions of gender equity or opportunity (Gooden & Gooden, 2001).

Further examples of mass communication research into perceived representation of the genders has shown such results as the following: women portrayed in agricultural magazines of the 1970s were more often shown in domestic roles and within domestic spaces than were the women portrayed in agricultural magazines of the 1990s (Morris & Evans, 2001); when women are portrayed in television commercials, they are most often portrayed in leading roles in commercials that promote health and beauty products, and they are more often than men portrayed as younger instead of older women and in supportive roles to whatever the men are doing in the commercials (Ganahl et al., 2003); and while female videogame characters were underrepresented numerically in online reviews of videogames, those female videogame characters who were present were far
more often portrayed in a highly sexualized manner than were male videogame characters (Ivory, 2006).

This kind of gender representation has carried significance throughout the ages, with even ancient cultures portraying themselves through their art as they wanted others to perceive them in reality (Asher-Greve, 2003). Psychology has shown that boys and girls learn what it is to be boys and girls by imitating what they see around them, including by watching their parents and by playing what are considered boy-appropriate or girl-appropriate games, even if such attitudes are never given voice but are simply portrayed (Spence & Helmreich, 1978; Wesley & Welsey, 1977). People learn attitudes and behaviors by watching those around them and by imitating the people they want to be and shunning those they do not want to be as they grow up, as they enter college, and as they begin careers in the workplace. For young people, pagers were once considered a technology of the drug dealers and gang members, a technology to be shunned if a young person wanted to be considered a so-called good kid (Milner, 2004). Alternatively, cell phones are now considered such an omnipresent part of childhood that for a child to NOT have one is for that child to be considered a lower status of person in the eyes of his/her classmates (Milner, 2004) – they have learned by example of popularity what they must do to conform so that they can be considered normal in the eyes of their peers.

When considering issues of sexuality, some basic definitions must also be brought into the discussion. Sex differences between men and women are discussed in this research from a biological point of view. The sex difference here is based on genetic and biological factors (J. T. Wood, 2007), i.e., the state of being male or female (Iverson et
al., 1998). Gender, on the other hand, is discussed in this research as what it means to be a man or a woman in a society based on social and cultural aspects of that society (Iverson et al., 1998). Gender is something defined by a person’s self, but also by the people who surround him/her and help that person to define who he/she is in society (Butler, 2004a). While Judith Butler argues that sex and gender are not as uniquely separate as I have outlined above (Butler, 2004b), she also says, “Gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes” (Butler, 1990), leading to the statement that the people, the society, and the institutions around the person help to create the gender of a person (Butler, 1990). Gender in American society is expressed by such things as the belief that “real men” are strong, ambitious, and emotionally controlled, while “real women” are physically attractive, nurturing, and emotionally expressive (J. T. Wood, 2007). Gender in American society is expressed by the belief that little girls ride their pink tricycles to their pink kitchens to cook with their pink pots and pans (Orenstein, 2011). Gender in American society is expressed by the belief that little boys always play sports on teams that require that they strategize to accomplish their goal of beating an opposing team of boys (J. T. Wood, 2007). Gender is regulated by societal norms as well as by codified laws and regulations that define through exterior force – real or imagined – what is permitted by the individual (Butler, 2004a). It is examples of that definition that this research seeks to uncover in order to better understand what norms (regulations) videogame magazines are telegraphing to the women who play the games or who might want to play them but believe they have no place in the playing of them. Other areas of mass communication, most notably television, have a history of studying this very issue,
but videogames are such a new medium that far fewer studies have been conducted on them, and the magazines that promote the videogames and transmit the news about the videogames have had even less study, especially with regard to how they frame women in the contexts of the in-game avatars and the women who are playing or who are attempting to play the games.

Returning to studies of gender representation in mass communication, television has been shown to carry representational messages of what it means to be a man or a woman in society for decades. In the 1960s when the animated television series “Scooby Doo, Where are You?” was first broadcast, it portrayed a variety of teenagers going around in a van and solving mysteries. All the characters represented different stereotypes of adolescents, but the message to women was quite clear regarding Daphne and Velma, the two women of the mystery-solving team. Women were either beautiful and dumb like Daphne who enjoyed the company of smart, athletic men, or they were plain-looking, intelligent women like Velma who had to hang out with the less intelligent and less attractive people and animals (Inness, 2007). For a more recent example, the WB and CW show “Beauty and the Geek” that ran from 2005 to 2008 began by introducing seven beautiful but unintelligent women to seven smart but unattractive men. The message of the show and the producer was that beautiful women are dumb, smart men are ugly, and that while each might playact at being the other, a smart man can never really be beautiful and a beautiful woman can never really be smart, no matter how many laughs might be generated along the way (Westman, 2007).
These examples of gender differentiation by representation between what is appropriate for men or women has far-reaching consequences when coupled with what opportunities might potentially be available to men or women if not for these matters of perception. When a female child perceives that the way to succeed in life is for her to marry young, to marry rich, and to push aside any innate intelligence in the name of her femininity, then she also learns that careers such as IT or science are not appropriate choices for women (Spertus, 2006). Whether that perception is true or false becomes irrelevant to the perception of the reality. When women in college perceive that majors such as technology or law are unwelcoming to women, they then tend to avoid them, creating a cycle in which those majors appear inappropriate for women who do not go into those inappropriate majors because those majors appear inappropriate for women (Seltzer, 2006).

Gender representation from the perspective of the perceived representation, such as the examples above, becomes quite important when also considering the far-reaching impact that mass media have as a whole. The gender-representative stereotypes portrayed regarding people in science, sports, and the news could be quite important in people’s development and to the growth of various industries including videogames.

Female Representation in Sports and in Sports Journalism

Parallel to the tension that seems to be growing in the gaming market and played out through misrepresentative videogame journalism, a similar phenomenon has occurred in sports journalism for many years. In sports, men were considered the athletes, the
participants, while women were considered the sports watchers – if they were considered to have anything at all to do with sports (Anonymous, 1988). Women have a history of participating in American sports that goes back to the 1800s (Sandoz, 2000), but it was not until Title IX legislation was enacted in the United States that doors into sports were flung open for American women (Hardin & Shain, 2005). While sports women were granted their rights to play through federal legislation over 30 years ago, videogaming women have recently been actively courted in the marketplace by industry leader Nintendo as the company attempts to grow the home console market through the addition of new consumers (2008n; McLaughlin, 2008).

Even though women have made great strides within sports itself, gaining both national and international acclaim for their achievements (Sandoz, 2000), sports journalism has been slow in treating women with equal time and with equal respect, oftentimes relegating them to “also-played” mentions in print and broadcast, if they are mentioned at all (Eastman & Billings, 2000; Theberge & Cronk, 1986).

Research has shown that even when female athletes are given equal amounts of coverage to that of male athletes (statistical representation), that coverage of women athletes often bears little resemblance to the coverage of men athletes (gender representation). Women athletes are referred to as “girls” (Sandoz, 2000), their childhood sporting endeavors are called “cute” (Sandoz, 2000), and the coverage frequently emphasizes the female athletes’ attractiveness (Eastman & Billings, 2000; Kane, 1996), including prioritizing their hair, nails, and clothing over their actual athletic accomplishments (Knight & Giuliano, 2001).
Part of this journalistic attitude toward female athletes stems from an overall newsroom culture that devalues women’s sports and by a PR apparatus within men’s sports that places a great deal of information within a journalist’s easy reach. Men’s sports programs on average enjoy greater resources for advertising and promotion than do women’s sports programs, and those increased resources make them more attractive to the media (Theberge & Cronk, 1986). Journalists also approach sports programs with the (debatable) assumption that the general public has a greater interest in men’s sports programs, and the journalists therefore see it as their duty to provide the content that they perceive is most sought by the public (Theberge & Cronk, 1986). Eastman and Billings revealed that a 13-percent proportion of sports coverage devoted to women’s sports in two nationwide newspapers (USA Today and The New York Times) was considered a high number worth noting, even if a 2011 letter to the editor complained there was not enough coverage of women’s sports overall (Loerch, 2010). That 13-percent proportional coverage is especially impressive when contrasted against a 5-percent coverage of women’s sports by one cable sports broadcaster, ESPN (Eastman & Billings, 2000). Reinforcing those findings, a study that looked at 15 years of coverage of women’s sports, from 1989 through 2004, showed that overall television coverage of women’s sports remained almost constant at about 5 or 6 percent throughout those years (Messner, Duncan, & Willms, 2006). Even though many media organizations have made strides toward recruiting women sports writers, those women often report job dissatisfaction, including condescension by their colleagues, fewer opportunities for advancement, the receipt of more menial assignments than their male counterparts,
feelings of tokenism within the sports departments, and being the targets of sexist language by their colleagues and readers (Hardin & Shain, 2005; Kane & Disch, 1993; P. Miller & Miller, 1995; Smucker, Whisenant, & Pedersen, 2003).

Even if sports journalism might be making small strides toward incorporating women into the newsroom and publicizing some women’s sports programs, the athletic structure itself has shown itself quite resistant to female journalists involved in any aspects of sports reporting at all. In 1990, sports journalist Lisa Olson was sexually harassed by members of the New England Patriots football team while interviewing one team member in the locker room (Kane & Disch, 1993). While the players claimed the sexual harassment was justified because they said Olson spent as much time admiring their bodies as she spent conducting her interviews – a claim not supported by the team’s general manager at the time (Kane & Disch, 1993) – the incident opened up discussions about the role of a woman in a typically male space, in this case the team’s locker room. According to Kane and Disch (1993):

“Symbolically, Olson represents women’s power during a time when females have made significant inroads into areas once exclusively reserved for men. In the context not only of women’s entrance into sports reporting but of the renegotiation of gender roles in society at large, the locker room becomes contested terrain. If men are to reassert control of that terrain, the female sportswriter must be displaced from her position as a critic of male performance and reassigned to the more ‘appropriate’ role of sexualized object. Thus, we argue that the fundamental issue underlying the Lisa Olson incident is women’s power...” (p. 333, emphasis in the original).

While Olson’s physical harassment was blatant and severe in nature, including the team members allegedly fondling themselves in front of her, it illustrates well the larger point
that spaces once considered sacred for men may not always be considered that way, and that causes gender conflict.

Returning to the discussion of a more virtual reality, the realm of videogaming is currently undergoing such a gender debate, and men sometimes react quite negatively to the same kind of space invasion they see occurring in videogaming that has been occurring in sports. Tyler Bleszinski, older brother to Xbox 360 game “Gears of War” developer Cliff "Cliffyb" Bleszinski, observed an older woman, whom he believed to be a grandmother, buying the Nintendo Wii games “Cooking Mama” and “Wii Play” (Croal, 2007). He described his initial reaction as disbelief, commenting that it was “cute” to see a grandmother plunk down her Social Security money so she could cook virtual meals (Croal, 2007). However, he soon realized the horror of the situation when he considered the possibility of videogame publishers abandoning hardcore (male) gamers in favor of casual (female) gamers:

“How soon will it be before we gamers are using the [Playstation 3] Sixaxis to chop up onions within ‘Metal Gear Mama’? How long before we're frantically swinging [Nintendo Wii] waggle remotes for tennis, bowling and golf in ‘Halo Sports’?” (Croal, 2007).

The fear of emasculation runs throughout the entirety of Tyler Bleszinski’s comments as he reassures the reader that he really believes that encouraging casual (female) gamers to play videogames is a good idea, even as he prophesies the death of in-depth, cinematic experiences such as Gears of War or The Legend of Zelda specifically because of the long-term influence those casual (female) gamers will have on the videogame industry (Croal, 2007).
Female Representation in News Journalism

Similar to the gender discrimination that has occurred within sports journalism historically, frictions have also occurred in news journalism. Pushed forward by the 1964 Civil Rights Act and by the rise of the women’s rights movement in the 1970s, more American businesses began hiring and promoting women within their organizations (Ogan & Weaver, 1979). Title VII complaints and class action lawsuits against media companies in the 1970s also pushed companies to alter their hiring and promotion policies to include more women (Ogan & Weaver, 1979), and this also happened within media companies. In the six-year span from 1975 to 1981, women saw a jump in media employment from 32 percent to 38 percent of media employees (Ogan, 1984). The big three networks, CBS, NBC, and ABC, used men to report 73 percent of their stories in 1987, but by 2007 had men reporting 48 percent of their stories and women reporting 40 percent of the stories, with the remaining 12 percent being team-reported stories (Ryan & Mapaye, 2010).

While the numbers of women employed in the media have increased over the years, partly as a result of external pressures (Ogan & Weaver, 1979), those women working in news organizations, much like the women working in sports journalism, have often found the conditions hostile specifically because of the fact they are women. Women are more likely to be employed by less prestigious news organizations and are therefore less likely to get the opportunities to cover more prestigious stories involving the bigger names in crime or politics, partly because of a lack of access to the sources
necessary for writing such stories (D. Lynch, 1993). Even when women get the
opportunities to cover larger news events, their male counterparts are still given priority
in handling the stories because safety, time away from spouses and children (Rhodes,
2001), or a lack of sufficient news contacts (D. Lynch, 1993) are provided as reasons for
funneling such stories away from women.

Research of reported events has shown that women tend to have their own unique
experiences both underreported as well as misreported, such as in the areas of war
reporting (del Zotto, 2002) or the reporting of labor movements (Muir, 2000), and that
this misrepresentation can exist to a greater degree when the media are influenced by
cultural ideologies that encourage discrimination against women (Alat, 2006).

Hegemonic Masculinity and the Media’s Influence on Cultural Ideologies of Men and
Women

“Hegemony” is defined as “leadership or dominance, especially of one state or
culture over others” (Agnes, 2004). It is further defined as “the process of moral,
philosophical, and political leadership that a social group attains only with the active
consent of other important social groups” (Artz & Murphy, 2000). Taken in context with
the nature of this research, these definitions can be interpreted to mean that since men
have always been the majority in videogame spaces and are assumed to remain the
majority in videogame spaces, their leadership or dominance is simply the way things
exist, and little questioning of that state of existence needs to happen. That concept is
referred to as “Hegemonic Masculinity.”
Hegemony itself, however, is about power relations. It is about the dominant group exerting some power-driven influence over the subordinate group. For example, dominant speech communities being held with more prestige than subordinate ones; the city being held in higher esteem than the surrounding countryside; the “standard” language upheld above the dialect; the dominant socio-cultural group valued above the subordinate one (Gramsci, 1991a). While “power” is often associated with strength of arms or with military might, that is not always necessary in the perpetuation of hegemony. The Theban hegemony of the 360s BC, when Thebes created a loosely-aligned confederation of states, although formed through military intervention, was maintained primarily through diplomacy and allied policy decisions, not by brute force nor by levied tribute (Buckler, 1980). Power can be – and often is – granted by consent of one group to another, a system at work for much of the above Theban example. It is also shown in America’s political system of governance by the way in which Americans “consent” to receive news of the world, of commodities, and of culture(s) through the media, especially television (Artz & Murphy, 2000). That is not to say that all forms of hegemonic control are divorced from the use of force, as evidenced by the way in which the Theban hegemony mentioned previously was established – a series of wars and skirmishes with Sparta (Buckler, 1980) – and by the way in which the George W. Bush administration pressed the United States’ position of leadership in the world through the use of military force (Chomsky, 2004), but the power necessary to the maintenance of that hegemony need not always be physical force.
Hegemonic Masculinity merges Gramsci’s analysis of class and power relations with feminist research about the ways in which gender relationships shape societies (Connell, 1995; Levy, 2007). It is a theoretical perspective that explains how some men make it appear normal, natural, and necessary that they remain in a position of power over other men and most women because they have always been in that position of power (Levy, 2007). It is “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell, 1995). Hegemonic Masculinity takes as its basic foundation that women exist as potential sexual objects for men – they provide men with sexual validation – and that men compete with each other to attain those sexual objects. Furthermore, when it comes to “important things” in society, men matter more than do women in understanding, analyzing, and dealing with those big, important things; women take care of the “little” things (Donaldson, 1993).

While it might be easy to say that men are a “problem” with regard to Hegemonic Masculinity, Whitehead proposed that men themselves are not always the issue in forging hegemonic relationships with women and with other men regarding areas of their lives; that it is the idea of “masculinity,” what it means to be a man – and, by implication, what it means to be a woman – that is really at the heart of Hegemonic Masculinity (Whitehead, 1999). Indeed, it has been argued that if anyone wants to challenge any detrimental effects of Hegemonic Masculinity, those challenges must begin with the embedded ideologies and practices that went into creating the Hegemonic Masculinity in
For Hegemonic Masculinity to fully take root, there must be an originally-established cultural ideal in which men have been in a position of dominance for some period of time, as well as an institutionalized way in which that dominant position is legitimized and propagated within the social community (Connell, 1995). The dominant position of men is not necessarily maintained by direct violence – though violence of some kind might exist in the background – but is maintained by the presence of the institution that has legitimized the men’s position of dominance and by the societal acceptance of the status quo (Connell, 1995). It is a pattern of repeated practices by men within that institution that results in an overall understanding and acceptance of how the world is organized (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Additionally, because men do not represent one complete, homogeneous bloc, Hegemonic Masculinity approaches the issue of power relationships as both a dominance over women as well as a dominance over subordinate masculinities (Demetriou, 2001; Kaufman, 1994), essentially saying that a particular form of masculinity is the only form legitimized, accepted, and propagated.

While it has been argued that the underlying theories related to Hegemonic Masculinity should be restricted only to political mechanisms of a hierarchical order (C. Beasley, 2008), there are many texts discussing the ways in which dominant and subordinate groups interact and the ways in which dominant groups gain and maintain their dominance, whether those groups are nation/states, organized campaign groups, or smaller groups of individuals, and whether those groups do so as a conscious effort to gain and maintain control or they do it as a means of simply making money. For
example: when Greece ruled over a vast territory around the Mediterranean, the Greek leaders did so by negotiating that dominance over their colonies by presenting that dominance as the most beneficial arrangement for those subordinate colonies (Artz & Murphy, 2000). Today, the United States has been described as a hegemonic entity as it seeks to lead and dominate the world through military and cultural means (Chomsky, 2004). Culturally, ideas of masculine and feminine beauty have varied widely around the world and across time, but those ideas of beauty today are being transmitted to a willing public by print and broadcast media in the United States as simple descriptions of the way things are, the current state of existence for men and women (Artz & Murphy, 2000). One such notion of masculine and feminine beauty is the use of the colors blue and pink to represent boys and girls, a notion that was introduced by fashion marketers in the early 20th century and has become ingrained in American culture in the decades since (Orenstein, 2011), so much so that a Reuters journalist reporting on color-preferences research stated as unassailable fact that men are biologically drawn to blue and women are biologically drawn to pink (Anonymous, 2007b), a fine point that the actual research on which the article was based did not specifically prove (Hurlbert & Ling, 2007). It is not just modern America, however, in which these ideas of masculine and feminine have played out. Men in the Middle Ages were judged “manly” based on their ability to have (or not have) an erection, by how many children they had, and by how well they satisfied their sexual partners (Bullough, 1994). In some societies, men “become” men based on some specific achievement in their lives or by passing some particular test; in some societies, men are men because of the ways in which they relax or are passive; and in
many societies, men are men by displaying a degree of hardiness or self-discipline (Gilmore, 1990).

The media have a prominent role in spreading ideologies, and they are noted for most often spreading the dominant group’s (or groups’) ideologies (Gramsci, 1991b), such as the example above about color preferences between men and women. As another example, sports, so many years dominated by men and perceived as a masculine activity, developed as an arena of hegemonic masculinity, and sports that were perceived as more feminine or sports in which women dominated, such as ice skating or gymnastics, were perceived to not be “real” sports (Bryson, 1987). The ways in which women are portrayed in professional sports as sex objects or as objects of ridicule, the amounts of coverage they do or do not receive, the ways in which many women’s sports are excluded from television broadcast; these all portray a certain perspective on women athletes, that even when their sports are comparable to men’s sports, a sexist bias against women exists that does not exist against men, even if that bias is not directly stated (Duncan, Messner, Williams, Jensen, & Wilson, 1990).

That some activities, such as sports, are perceived as male activities while others are perceived as female activities owes much to how the society’s culture constructs those activities (MacNeill, 1988), but it is the media, through presentation and routines and the ideologies of journalists and executives, that determine how those activities will be framed to the audiences (MacNeill, 1988; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Theberge & Cronk, 1986). That women in sports might be either denigrated or trivialized helps to reinforce the notion that women do not belong in some sports (Theberge & Cronk, 1986).
Taken together, this idea that men have traditionally been the “real” sports athletes, that men are currently the “real” sports athletes, and that men should continue to be the “real” sports athletes creates an ideology of hegemonic masculinity, and that ideology gets retransmitted by the media.

Hegemonic Masculinity applies as a theoretical foundation of this research for several reasons. First, as previously discussed, men were the early researchers and developers of videogame technologies and of many of the earliest games. Second, as a hobby that has traditionally been played mostly by men, those men were also some of the first to begin working as journalists writing about videogames. Third, the magazines that have grown up around videogames over the years have primarily been staffed by men writing about a male-centric activity and have been sold to a demographic (videogame players) that was primarily men but has now grown to include a surging population of women. And fourth, the concepts of Hegemonic Masculinity can be especially useful in analyzing the ways in which small peer groups – such as the groups proposed by this research, videogame journalists and the articles that they write – experience a uniformity of response to situations in which those groups are dealing with the public and with public perceptions (Moller, 2007). The institutionalized magazines that have existed throughout the years have been dominated by men, and those men are writing from the perspective that they are now and will forever be the dominant group of people in the videogame space – a perfect example of Hegemonic Masculinity at work.

In terms of the overall media’s influence on cultural ideologies about women – not just within videogame media – researchers who have studied the content of both
reporting and media advertising have found a long history of gender discrimination against and misrepresentation of women. It has occurred in print advertisements (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971) and television commercials (Lull, Hanson, & Marx, 1977), in the words journalists use to describe women’s accomplishments (Billings, Halone, & Denham, 2002), and in the comparative amount of total coverage that accomplished women as opposed to accomplished men receive by journalists (Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf, & Hardin, 2002). With the proliferation of computerized technologies for work and play, similar studies have shown that women are more often than men portrayed by and within electronic media in stereotypical roles of secretaries, nurses, or teachers (Dyrud, 1997), and that when stereotypical or negative portrayals of women show up in videogames, men are more likely than women to find those negative portrayals acceptable (Brenick, Henning, Killen, O'Connor, & Collins, 2007).

This history of misrepresentation of women appears to continue today in the journalism focused solely on videogames and videogame players, and that is the focus of this study: videogame journalism. While the 2007 “Conan” game by THQ contained numerous NPC woman clothed in nothing more than thongs, a review of the game that had few positives to say in regards to the gameplay pointed out that the topless women were the only “bright spot in what is otherwise a run-of-the-mill brawler” (Goldstein, 2007).

To promote the then-impending release of the game “Kane & Lynch: Dead Men,” the videogame news and review site IGN partnered with the game’s manufacturer, Eidos, and with Playboy to promote a photographic contest called “Are you hot and crazy
enough to be the one?” in which women were encouraged to show their love of gaming (and of the game “Kane & Lynch: Dead Men” in particular) by submitting racy photographs of themselves (2008b). The contest was won by a moonlighting California model whose posted biography made no mention of her ever having played “Kane & Lynch: Dead Men” or any other videogame (2007a).

As another example, a posting to the website CollegeHumor.com was billed as “7 Sites Redone, if Girls Ruled the Internet Instead of Boys” (Michaels, 2008). The posting included a revamped ESPN page in which a baseball pitcher is described as “This guy is pitching for the blue team who are facing the boys from Baltimore with the really ugly jersies,” and the caption comment reads “He’s pretty cute, I guess. Like, I wouldn’t just go up to him but he’s not bad” (Michaels, 2008). In that same humor article, the news aggregator site Digg.com was redone, and the top story with 10,020 diggs is “Puppy yawns. Twice. 😊”; the second most popular story with 138 diggs is “Egg White Diet Shows ‘Speggtacular’ Results!,” and the person describes a diet consisting purely of egg whites that dramatically decreased fat, muscle, and organ tissue in mice and is declared to produce “super fabulous bodies!” (Michaels, 2008). The official “World of Warcraft” website also was redone for the sake of humor and contains two headlines: from September 2001, the site proudly announces the online game’s release to the market; and, from March 2008, the site reveals that the 100th copy of the game has finally been sold (Michaels, 2008). The implications of these “humorous” images are clear: thank God women are not in charge of technology, because if they were, sports would be reduced to “the blue team” vs. “the ugly jersies team” and would be overflowing with rampant male
objectification; women’s grasp of the news would deteriorate to cute puppies and unhealthy eating habits; and the wildly successful “World of Warcraft,” with over 12 million worldwide subscribers in 2010 (Anonymous, 2010q), would be a financial disaster with a mere 100 total copies sold after several years on the market. The overriding theme from this posting is that sports are important, the internet is good, and “World of Warcraft” is a success only because men are in charge – in other words, the world is good because of Hegemonic Masculinity.

While it could be argued that nobody truly “rules” the internet, American perceptions throughout the years have historically shown a certain amount of gender-related technology discord, as discussed in previous sections, and that discord seems to have worked its way into perceptions of both the internet and of the videogame industry. That technology discord in the videogame industry, however, has resulted in a certain perception of male predilection toward technology and male hegemony within certain technology spheres. Hegemonic Masculinity research has shown that male dominance in an arena of life is upheld through the subordination and marginalization of both power as well as access to positions of power for women to that particular arena of life (Whisenant & Pedersen, 2004), and that men use systems of coercion and overall consensus to maintain their hegemony (Schell & Rodriguez, 2000). As an example of Hegemonic Masculinity, sports in the United States has a long history of prioritizing male athletes instead of female athletes (Hardin & Shain, 2005); and spaces associated with sports, such as the sports complexes, the locker rooms, and even cable sports channels have therefore been perceived as males-only spaces in which men can exhibit a variety of
behaviors, including hostility toward trespassing women (1992; Eastman & Billings, 2000; Hardin et al., 2002; Kane & Disch, 1993; Michaels, 2008; P. Miller & Miller, 1995), especially displayed by the previously-mentioned sexual harassment against journalist Lisa Olson in the New England Patriots’ locker room in 1990. Beyond the physical space of the locker room in that incident, however, was the underlying tension between the sexes that women simply do not belong in the professional field of sports journalism (Hardin & Shain, 2005; Meân, 2001; Miloch, Pedersen, Smucker, & Whisenant, 2005), that they do not have the authority to intrude into a designated male space (both the locker room and male-dominated sports in general), and that they do not have the right to pass judgment on those men’s performances, a duty that had traditionally been performed by male sports journalists (Kane & Disch, 1993).

In the case of videogame journalism, men who traditionally have perceived gaming to be an arena for men only have been displaying subtle and blatant coercion against women that is associated with Hegemonic Masculinity. While their actions may not appear as blatant as the sexual harassment that Lisa Olson experienced in the New England Patriots’ locker room, the Hegemonic Masculinity displayed appears no less real. For example, the Xbox 360 game “Mass Effect” (2007) was a groundbreaking role-playing game (RPG) when it was released (Erik Brudvig, 2007; Curthoys, 2007), allowing players to choose a variety of options for playing the game, including to play as a paragon of virtue or as a bend-the-rules renegade, to play as an embittered soldier whose parents were killed years earlier or as a hero of the fleet, and to play as either a man or a woman (Anthony, Stratton, & Stratton, 2007) – an option that is somewhat rare
in top-rated videogames (Fisher, 2008). The plot of “Mass Effect” shifts slightly depending on the player’s choices, offering different in-game dialogue and plot options depending on how the player chooses to play the game (Anthony et al., 2007). However, while much was made of the game’s range of plot and dialogue options, some reviews of the game barely mentioned in passing that it gave players the option of playing as a man or a woman (Erik Brudvig, 2007; Curthoys, 2007), other reviews did not mention this option at all (P. Kolan, 2007; Vaughn, 2007), and the game was frequently reviewed only from the male protagonist’s perspective (Erik Brudvig, 2007; Curthoys, 2007; P. Kolan, 2007; Vaughn, 2007) – except for one preview of the game in which both the paragon and renegade roles were played as women, and the reviewers highlighted the female protagonist’s option to engage in homosexual relations, complete with an online video posting of one of the game’s two sex scenes (Goldstein & Brudvig, 2007). The reviewer seemed as concerned with the best way to get “a little free nookie time” (Goldstein & Brudvig, 2007) as he was with the mechanics of gameplay in “Mass Effect.”

This push/pull of men and women within disputed spaces is part of a larger picture in which one group gains a position within a ruling class and then works to maintain that position by promoting ruling-class ideas. The people in the ruling positions produce the ideas that become accepted by the people over whom they attempt to rule through the regulation and distribution of the ideas themselves (Marx & Engels, 1976). Just as the humorist on CollegeHumor.com expressed his idea that, of course, men rule the internet (Michaels, 2008), so does a ruling class perpetuate a universality of ideas related to the ruling class (Marx & Engels, 1976), a cyclical exercise in which the ruling
class perpetuates an ideal in which the only possibility is for the ruling class to continue ruling.

Researchers have also shown that hegemony does not always exist solely on the basis of one group dominating another, but the ruling group reinforcing its hegemony through the consent – what may alternatively be considered the docility (E. M. Wood, 1998) – of the ruled (Artz & Murphy, 2000; Ives, 2004; E. M. Wood, 1998). For example, dominant forces in 1776 brought subordinate social forces on board with the American revolution by promising the ratification of the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution (Artz & Murphy, 2000), an arrangement that led to the subordinate group, small farmers and traders, directly consenting to the leadership of a dominant group, landowners and businessmen (Artz & Murphy, 2000). This process has continued in American politics as members of the political parties have inserted populist language into their political candidacies as a means of securing the consent of those they rule (Artz & Murphy, 2000). While this consent of the ruled goes under the heading of representative government within the United States, it is still the consent of one group to be ruled by another, a foundational block of Hegemonic Masculinity and its theoretical grounding in the perpetuation of men’s dominance over women in social spheres (Connell, 1995). It also relates to false consciousness, a concept that will be discussed in more detail in a later section.

The media play an important role in supporting this hegemony by consent. President Bush, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, was portrayed in the media as a bold hero, someone who was firm, strong, and able to lead his troops into
battle (Lippe, 2006). That portrayal helped create a new, mythical ideology of a “remasculinization” in the United States that was reminiscent of heroic war movies, what has been called a resurgence of Hegemonic Masculinity within United States’ leadership (Lippe, 2006). President Bush promoted a rationale for invading Iraq based on the potential threat of weapons of mass destruction, and that threat helped his administration manage the ideological frame surrounding the call to war (Patrick & Thrall, 2007).

During the days leading up to and the early days of the U.S. war in Iraq, the news media promoted the ruling-group ideology in support of the war, prompted in part by their owners’ own support of the war (Demaske, 2005) as well as by the ideological frame put forward by the Bush administration (Patrick & Thrall, 2007). That ideology of support translated into pro-war coverage as well as reprimands of media personnel who participated in anti-war activities (Demaske, 2005). Essentially, the media became complicit in promoting an overriding ideology first promoted by the ruling groups, the president and his administration.

This study into videogame journalism takes as its first theoretical premise that Hegemonic Masculinity is at the heart of videogame journalism’s apparent promotion of a male-centric point of view. Predominantly, men play and produce videogames; men have always played and produced videogames; and men – according to the predominant view, even in the face of statistics that show a shifting demographic – will continue to be the predominant players and producers of videogames. Therefore, the institutionalized media coverage of videogames has been, is now, and forever will be framed from the men’s point of view.
Propaganda Model of Mass Media (Herman & Chomsky)

A second theoretical premise, the Propaganda Model of mass media, progresses from the proposition that a group of people maintain power structures to keep themselves in power (as previously stated, Hegemonic Masculinity). According to the Propaganda Model of mass media, the media adhere to the special interests that control the state (nation) in which they operate, serving to mobilize the people’s support for that state’s activities. Unique to the Propaganda Model, however, is the idea that the information the media present to the public first goes through the following five filters (Herman & Chomsky, 2002):

1) Size, ownership, and profit orientation.
2) Advertising.
3) Sourcing.
4) Flak and the Enforcers.
5) Anti-Communism.

The messages presented by the media travel through these five filters, and dissidents, disorganized groups or individuals, or those with a message contrary to the media’s overriding ideology or interests have their messages filtered out or severely revised prior to presentation to the general public. For example, during the 1999 and 2000 meetings of the World Trade Organization, people from around the world protested in Seattle and Washington, D.C. The media, however, adhering to an overriding ideology of free trade promoted by corporations and by the Clinton administration, portrayed the protesters as violent, out-of-control, fringe threats to civil order even when reports existed that contradicted those potentially distorted characterizations (Herman & Chomsky,
Specifically, the “sourcing” filter most directly affected the reports regarding those protesters because the media relied on official government sources, including the police and city government officials, for information regarding the “terminally aggrieved” (p. xliii) and “anti-globalization” (p. xliii) protesters instead of seeking out the economists and social theorists who were also known to be participating in the protests. Essentially, instead of producing fully-informed, well-rounded reports from a variety of sources, the media produced biased reports of out-of-control protesters disrupting reputable business people trying to secure free trade for the world (Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

As another example, the media rely primarily on advertisers to pay their bills instead of on the people who consume the media. That reliance, however, means that the media must deliver an audience that appeals to the advertiser, an audience with money to spend on the products being advertised (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). As such, audiences who have little money to spend or little interest in the products being advertised are not considered quality audiences to the advertisers, and content that is light-hearted and more prone to promote good feelings in the audience, such as comedies and ideologically-safe dramas, are more likely to be sponsored by advertisers than programming that requires deep thought or introspection on the part of the media audience (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Programs like “Mr. Rooney Goes to Dinner” are more likely to be produced, for example, than programs that critically examine the United States (Herman & Chomsky, 2002).
The media are similarly affected by issues of size, ownership, and profit orientation. The 1996 Telecommunications Act loosened many regulations regarding cross-media ownership and the size of media conglomerates (Napoli, 2003). Even prior to that, however, media conglomerates were trying to decide how best to diversify and expand their market and influence, with some discussions causing rifts in the families leading some of the media empires about how best to proceed into new markets and new opportunities (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Specifically, the media giants have branched directly into new areas of interest, at times creating content in one sector to be transmitted in another, such as the integration of News Corporation that now contains cable broadcast channels, television and movie studios, newspapers, and entertainment and news websites (2008i). The Walt Disney Company offers another example, as that company owns movie production companies, theme parks, the ESPN sports network, and ABC, including ABC News (2008d). This media conglomeration and expansion puts added pressure on the various media entities to deliver greater profits, to create less controversy, and to produce a product that can be marketed across different segments of the corporate structure (Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

The media are also influenced by what Herman & Chomsky called flak and the enforcers. Simply explained, “flak” is the negative comments the media receive by phone, mail, or email, and the enforcers are the people or entities that produce those negative comments (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Flak can originate from average citizens, corporate entities, or from the government, but the intention is to make the media uncomfortable and to either change the way the media operate or get the media to
leave something alone. For example, when Justin Timberlake tore off part of Janet Jackson’s onstage costume, inadvertently revealing her breast during the Super Bowl XXXVIII half-time show, the FCC and CBS received complaints from across the country, resulting in an FCC investigation into indecency, fines levied against CBS, and changes to the way in which live broadcasts are presented to the public.

Herman & Chomsky list anti-communism as the final filter impacting the media. The premise behind this control is that American democracy is good, communism is evil, and if the media produce a message sufficiently critical of America, they can be accused of spreading a Communist message (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). These accusations of pro-Communist and anti-American agendas keep people on the defensive, justifying their actions to a public doubting their patriotism; this has the effect of keeping the media in line with government expectations for fear of having to defend themselves from such attacks (Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

This research takes Herman & Chomsky’s Propaganda Model of Mass Media into account when analyzing videogame journalism. While it appears on the surface that anti-Communism would play little role in videogame journalism, videogame journalism will be evaluated with all five filters in mind to see what effects they have on the coverage of videogames and gamers, especially on potential misrepresentations of women in the games and in the market. Furthermore, the Anti-Communism filter has been debated since the fall of the Soviet Union, and the beginnings of the “War on Terror” – a term that goes back to 1982 and President Reagan’s administration’s worldwide war on terror – and a likely candidate for a more modern perspective on that nationalistic/political
filter, especially following President Bush’s War on Terror after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Chomsky, 2002).

Influences on Content (Shoemaker & Reese)

A third theoretical premise progresses from the notion that the media are influenced by filters. According to Shoemaker and Reese (1996), the following five levels of influence act upon mass media (p. 64):

1) Individual influences
2) Media routine influences
3) Organizational influences
4) Extramedia influences
5) Ideological influences

Like outwardly-expanding rings on a target, each level of influence is progressively more encompassing and progressively less immediate. For example, individual writers directly produce the immediate stories. However, those writers have only singular impact on the way their stories are written. On the other end of the target-like spectrum, ideologies do not produce the kinds of immediate results that reporters produce with their daily articles, but ideologies heavily influence the ways in which the reporters perceive the world around them and decide what should be written about and how they should do the research and writing.

Specifically, the individuals influence the media by the nature of who they are: their gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation; their choice of career paths; their education; and their personal beliefs, values, political attitudes, and religious affiliations (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Each of these factors influences the writers, and who the
writers are at their core influences the articles they write and the way in which they write them. For example, when the *Washington Post* ran an article describing followers of the Rev. Jerry Falwell and the Rev. Pat Robertson as being predominantly poor and easy to command, the reporters were basing those statements not on any information they gathered about the followers but on the reporters’ own outdated stereotypes (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). The newspaper had to run a correction (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

Routines, the second ring in the analogy, influence the media both from within and from without. For example, reporters operate within a routine of objectivity in which the news must be presented to the public without any perception of bias. As such, research has shown that “mobilizing information,” such as publishing information about where people may go for health screenings or to participate in a political rally, is routinely kept out of newspapers so as to avoid accusations of partisanship (Lemert, Mitzman, Seither, Cook, & Hackett, 1977). This is an example of internal media routines directly affecting the way in which information is presented to the public. Those same media routines can also be used against the media. For example, when politicians want to maximize the coverage of a press conference, they often schedule it early in the day to ensure the message will appear on the evening news programs (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

Media are also influenced by the ways in which they are structurally organized, the third ring of the analogy. For example, as media conglomerates continue to expand, they have begun to focus more heavily on profit margins (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). *Mother Jones* magazine is one such example of the impact that the structure of the
magazine can have when its tobacco advertisements were pulled following the publication of an article that was critical of the tobacco industry (Bagdikian, 2004). This is one example of how the organizational structure of the media industry, reliant as they are upon advertising revenue, makes them vulnerable to this kind of economic pressure; while the loss of tobacco advertising likely impacted the magazine’s balance sheet, the fact that the tobacco advertisers tried to use it to sway editorial content shows the structural relationship that advertisers have on magazine content.

The media are also influenced by a fourth ring of the analogy, extramedia forces. For example, the makeup of the community in which the media operate, such as that community’s ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or its physical location, can affect the media that operate in that community and their financial success (Davison, Boylan, & Yu, 1982). These are forces that influence the media, but they are not forces that the media have any direct control over.

The final level of influence outlined by Shoemaker and Reese is the ideological level. This is a societal level of influence, far removed from and likely subconscious to the individual reporter and his/her personal beliefs as outlined above. In the United States, the ideological influences on the mass media are such things as “capitalism,” “free market,” “democracy,” “individual achievement,” and “private ownership” (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Similar to the largest ring in a target, this ideological level influences everything that has been discussed up to this point: the extramedia forces, the media organization, the routines within mass media, and the individuals working within the media (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).
Taking these five levels of influence into account, I sought to discover the levels of influence that have the greatest impact on videogame journalists.

**Ideology and False Consciousness**

The concept of ideology, the idea of looking at the world from a certain point of view unique to one’s self, can be traced back hundreds of years to Francis Bacon, the pioneer of the scientific method (Pines, 1993). Bacon described the false beliefs and understandings on which people lived their lives, setting the foundation on which people would begin analyzing false ideas, or false idols as Bacon called them. As opposed to the scientific analysis of understanding something in the natural world – an analysis based on observation and unbiased analysis and reasoning – the ideological understanding of that same something can become akin to a false understanding based on what people consider “common sense” ideas of the way things work in the world. When people hang on to those false understandings, those false idols, even in the face of contradictory evidence, they deceive themselves into believing they truly understand something when they do not. They have set up for themselves a false understanding, a false consciousness.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels wrote along those same lines 300 years later (Marx & Engels, 1970; Marx & Engels, 1976; Pines, 1993). As one example, when thinking of the term “democracy,” two different ideas come to people’s minds, depending whether they are looking at that term from a bourgeois or proletarian perspective, a radical or a conservative perspective, or – in the language of modern America – a left- or a right-leaning perspective. The term could inspire notions of legal and judicial equality,
or it could inspire notions of social and economic equality. Either interpretation – each usually espoused by one particular group more than the other – represents a particular perspective on the term, on the political landscape, and on the future of America, but more than that, each interpretation represents a certain ideology. The idea of a false consciousness enters into the equation when either group moves beyond that ideology of belief to layer on top a level of perfection unique to those particular beliefs. It is no longer simply a matter of two competing interpretations of a particular term, but it has become every perfect thing about society – from a moral perspective, from a philosophical perspective, from a religious perspective, or from any number of other perspectives one wants to imagine. The perfected ideology grows to a level of consciousness in which it takes on a life of its own, one in which to disagree is to not only be wrong but to also look at the world from a false perspective. Bacon used the term false idols in his day to describe these “common sense” ways of looking at the world – the way things “are,” the way things “must be,” etc. – but they are the foundations of false consciousness. When, as Marx said in his “The German Ideology” (Marx & Engels, 1970), the ideas of the ruling class filter their way into the consciousness of the people of a society, those ruling-class ideas become the ruling ideas.

When the ruling ideologies run counter to what would be best for the people espousing them, especially for the people who are not in the ruling class, a discord develops that must be addressed. That discord is addressed in one of two ways: either the people truly are not aware that the discord exists (they are kept in the dark about their situation) or they disregard the discord in favor of a consciousness that represents
something larger than themselves – a false consciousness. That was argued to have happened in the 2004 election in which record numbers of new voters in the United States voted for Republicans whose stated economic policies were not in the best interests of those poor, working-class voters (Frank, 2005). The Republicans instilled in the voters an ideology based more on cultural issues, such as abortion and gay marriage, and on a fear of war that led people to disregard the economic discord they may – or may not, it has also been argued (Wiener, 2005) – have been feeling when they voted. That false consciousness led them to believe in something greater than their own personal, economic interests.

Those ideas that form the basis of how people perceive the world are promoted by many people and societal institutions, but most notably for this research, they are promoted by the media (Gramsci, 1991a) and enforced through non-violent, “discipline” measures (Foucault, 1977). For example, modern political discourse happens daily on American television and radio networks as celebrity pundits expound on the virtues of their chosen ideological view of the world. While competing views are espoused on competing networks, those pundits each gain followers who adhere to their particular views. Those followers attempt to disseminate those ideological beliefs to their friends and relatives, and anyone who does not agree is disciplined. While the word “discipline” often conveys the notion of physical violence, discipline in Foucault’s sense of the word and in this particular example can just as easily be interpreted to mean the loss of a friendship, the shunning or excommunication of a societal member, or – if applied to an ideology at an extreme from the mainstream of society – an intervention by an
institutional authority who might range from a teacher to a counselor to a law enforcement officer. The discipline must be the result of both observation and the internalization of the ideology, or the molding of the individual.

These themes will continue throughout this study as I analyze the representations of women that appear in the magazines; seek to understand the ideologies to which the journalists subscribe; attempt to uncover any false ideologies present in the journalists’ thinking; and understand the disciplinary threats and actions and the measures of observation under which the journalists do their work.

Social Responsibility in Journalism

While Hegemonic Masculinity, message mediation, and the Propaganda Model of mass media are the underlying theoretical perspectives upon which this research is based, the researcher also places this research within the overall framework that journalism is about more than the simple reporting of the facts and that journalists have a responsibility to the public. In 1942 various members of the press organized the Hutchins commission on freedom of the press to analyze what it meant to be a free press in a democratic society, publishing their report, “A Free and Responsible Press” (Hutchins, 1947). The members analyzed and debated press theories, exchanged views as far reaching as the marketplace of ideas as well as extreme regulations of press freedom. The report presents a dual ideal of the press’ freedom from government intervention and the public’s freedom to receive a wide variety of information and opinions (McIntyre, 1987).
Between those two ideals was a list of various press responsibilities, including such things as the following:

- Media should accept and fulfill societal responsibilities by setting high or professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, and balance.
- Media should be pluralistic and reflect the diversity of peoples and opinions within the society as a whole.
- Media should be accountable not only to the employers and the marketplace but to the entire of the society they serve. (Hutchins, 1947)

While modern media operate primarily from a marketplace perspective that says that what defines the public interest is whatever it is that interests the public (Napoli, 2003), Henry Luce, then editor-in-chief at *Time* magazine and one of the founding members of the Hutchins commission, saw significant problems with providing to the public nothing more than what the public seemed to want (Bates, 1995). Luce said that particular practice would promote vulgarity and sensationalism, create a market for triviality and mediocrity, and be a failure of the press to promote democracy within society (Bates, 1995). The Society of Professional Journalists codified standards of reporting, including the statement that journalists must “tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so” (Journalists, 1996), to “support the open exchange of views” (Journalists, 1996), and to “avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status” (Journalists, 1996).

Taking these precepts of social responsibility and applying them to the theorized current state of videogame journalism, the case can be made that if women are being misrepresented as a portion of the total audience, as has occurred in mainstream journalism and in sports journalism of the past, then videogame journalists are failing to
live up to the expectations placed upon them. Assuming that to be the case, then this research would serve well to shine a light on this potential area in which the media might improve. If videogame journalists are promoting the misrepresentation of women through the use of propagandistic media filters, then they are not upholding their social responsibility to reflect what the Hutchins commission called the diversity of peoples and opinions that has been growing within the videogame medium (Anonymous, 2011a; Entertainment_Software_Association, 2008; ESA, 2010; Eyles, 2008; GamerChix, 2008; The_Nielsen_Company, 2007, 2009; WomenGamers.com, 2008). Furthermore, if it can be shown that videogame journalists subscribe to an ideology of Hegemonic Masculinity in deciding how to frame their stories, in other words if they choose the sources, quotations, information – the overall perspectives of the writing – based on the notion that men have always been their sole audience, that men are their sole audience at the moment, and that men will remain their sole audience for the foreseeable future, then those journalists are not approaching their craft with the pluralistic balance the Hutchins commission sought.

The representation of women in the videogame magazines is of further importance when considering the ways in which people learn what it is to be a part of society. The media shape people’s perceptions of the world around them and the people they meet, both by actively encouraging specific behaviors – advertisements encouraging people to buy products, for example – but also by the ways in which the media portray people or things. For example, when the media portray through example that
“blondness” increases a woman’s social desirability, more women go out and buy blond hair dye (Bandura, 1986).

Those types of attitudes and behaviors in people can be learned by observation and retention, and those attitudes and behaviors can be reinforced or changed more successfully over time by repeated exposure and by multiple methods of learning. For example, early learning in children is often accomplished through observation and repetition, and it can be made more successful if those processes are paired with various mnemonic devices (Bandura, 1977; Bandura & Walters, 1963).

Research has shown that behaviors portrayed by the media – most especially by television – have an influence on people and can actually teach people to behave in certain ways. George Gerbner’s work on Cultivation Theory and his involvement in the Cultural Indicators Project have shown that repeated exposure to violent images can cultivate in people a greater acceptance of the violence and a greater willingness to participate in more violent actions than those people who do not have repeated exposure to such content (Signorielli & Gerbner, 1995). Research has also shown that the more time exposed to the content, the stronger a person’s feelings will become toward attitude judgments on subjects such as marital problems, owning expensive products, or how much people should be trusted (or not) (Shrum, 1999), and that repeated exposure to media stereotypes of people by sex, age, or race can cultivate similar attitudes in the people exposed to those media stereotypes (Busby, 1975; Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

Knowing these potential effects of mass media content on behavior and attitudes of audience members, it could be assumed that the audience could be learning definitions
of who and what women are in the gaming world from portrayals of women by
videogame magazines that treat woman as one-dimensional objects who exist only for the
sexual satisfaction of the audience and do not exist as fully-realized people – whether
real-life women who play games or digital women who exist as avatars within the games.

To summarize, this research uses Hegemonic Masculinity, message mediation,
and the Propaganda Model of mass media as its theoretical foundation, and Social
Responsibility in journalism underpins the entire reason for understanding those
theoretical issues as they apply to videogame journalism.

Frame Analysis

When analyzing a culture or some aspect of a culture, a person must be careful to keep in mind the different interpretations of an event that could be presented. While studying India for a semester in college, a country I have never visited and had rarely read about prior to the course, the class viewed an Indian-produced film about a woman experiencing marital stagnation. She and her husband grew apart, she began enjoying the chaste company of another man, but at the close of the film she and the second man parted ways, and the wife reconciled with her husband in a cinematic still-shot of the two of them reaching toward each other but never quite touching. From my American point of view, the film had a good, happy ending – possibly not a Disney ending in which everyone lived happily ever after, but at least I was consoled by the idea that the husband and wife were reaching toward each other and would eventually come to love each other again. From my classmates’ perspectives, however – several of whom were from India
or studied India as part of their collegiate training – the film did not end on that same uplifting note. The concluding still-shot in which the husband and wife reached for each other but never quite touched was the conclusion of their marriage. Indian culture, Indian values, would never allow the two to fully reconcile with each other, and they would forever remain in that frozen, stagnant pose of reaching toward each other without ever again touching, at least not on any emotional “love” level that my American sensibilities – trained as they were by those Disney films of true love conquering all – told me must exist.

Similarly, the media are forever interpreting the world around them and forwarding that interpretation on to the audiences that read, view, and hear their words and pictures. How the media interpret and present that information is similar to the way I viewed and interpreted that Indian film, making use of the history and experiences that we have to present our best guess about what the information means. An anonymous Reuters reporter did just that in 2007 when he/she presented the findings of a biology study from England. According to the Reuters report, researchers had conducted a study on color preferences between men and women, discovering that there is a biological reason – grounded in evolution – for why men and women choose the colors they do (Anonymous, 2007b). The article was headlined “Women really do prefer pink, researchers say,” and the article’s lead stated “Boys like blue, girls like pink and there isn’t much anybody can do about it, researchers said on Monday in one of the first studies to show scientifically that there are gender-based color preferences.” The reporter then continues to describe a research study in which people were presented with color choices
on a computer screen, and the men tended to choose the blue colors and the women
would “gravitate towards the pinker end of the blue spectrum.” According to the article,
the research proved that women have always liked pink because ancient women had to
choose ripe fruit when they were gathering food in the wild, but men simply had to
distinguish dark, moving shapes when they were hunting animals. The reporter
concluded with:

“As for Eve, [researcher] Hurlbert added, there was a different reason she picked
that apple. ‘Red was the color of a good ripe fruit,’ Hurlbert said” (Anonymous,
2007b).

The actual research article, however, did not specify that women like the color “pink,” as
the reporter claims, but that women from England – the majority of subjects in the study
– tended to gravitate toward the redder end of the blue color spectrum (Hurlbert & Ling,
2007). The statistical means published in the same report showed that a minority group
in that study – Han Chinese living in England – did not appear to have as great a
statistical difference in color preference as did their European-born majority subjects in
the study (Hurlbert & Ling, 2007), yet that information was omitted from the Reuters
report published in London. Instead, the reporter chose to present an interpretation of the
information that would reinforce a Western belief that men like blue and women like
pink, completely ignoring – possibly through ignorance – the Chinese cultural
interpretation of red as a color of good luck for all people, men and women alike.

The theory of Frame Analysis as a method for understanding and interpreting the
world has its origins in mid-20th century work in biology and anthropology, specifically
the ways in which complex structures of social (or biological) organization can be
reduced to their basic functions and made analogous with one another (Bateson, 1972), as well as psychological research into how people make decisions (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). It is to step back and observe first, then to attach meanings to what is being observed, to test the assumptions of what those meanings really are, and to then collect those interpretations and assigned meanings into collective groups that can be codified and presented for further analysis and comparison (Bateson, 1991). It is to make sense of a pattern of information presented to the public, to interpret the texts as the audience might be expected to logically interpret those texts, either consciously or unconsciously, and to present those interpretations as groupings of textual information that, when combined, portray one particular image of the information or event (McKee, 2003). It is a way to organize the experiences that people have into primary and secondary meanings or frameworks, to understand how people are most likely to interpret information and what ways other people might produce alternate – possibly minority – explanations to the same groupings of information (Goffman, 1986). It is a method grounded in theoretical understandings of the world.

To understand the way in which information is presented to the world, especially media information, Frame Analysis has been described as looking at the world through a particular view out a window (Tuchman, 1978). While that analogy is outdated in regards to Frame Analysis as a method of interpretation, it provides a useful hook on which to hang a grouping of rather abstract ideas that combine into the method’s underlying theory that framing facts produces a shared construction of reality (Scheufele, 1999). Frame Analysis is both the ways in which the media present information as well
as the ways in which individuals interpret the information they receive (Scheufele, 1999). Frames are used by journalists all the time to reduce complex issues to more manageable levels for an audience that may not understand – and possibly may want to take the time to investigate in depth – the complex issues that surround them on a daily basis (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). On a macro level, journalists use frames as a convenient way to present complex information to the public, and on a micro level, individuals use frames to interpret the complex messages they receive (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Frame Analysis explains that the Indian film I viewed in my class presented a certain worldview, a perspective that was interpreted one way by the majority audience for which it was intended (Indian), but was also interpreted in a secondary, minority way by me – an American who was never the intended primary audience and who brought his own cultural perspective to a piece of art that was not meant to be interpreted from that American perspective. The film portrayed a certain Indian point of view – a certain frame – on the world, and the intended audience understood and interpreted the provided information from that same perspective.

In this way, basic facts that might exist take on interpretive meanings based on how the information is presented to the public (Gamson, 1989). Reporters constantly engage in what Harold Lasswell called surveillance, correlation, and transmission of information (Wright, 1959), and it is possible to tell many different stories from the same basic pieces of information (Gamson, 1989). Indeed, Frame Analysis is the interpretation of information (Gamson, 1989). For example, while the Reuters reporter discussed
earlier chose to present – or frame – the biology study about color preference as a reinforcement of Western values about men liking blue and women liking pink, a different article, published by NewScientist news service, focused instead on the biological evolutionary implications for understanding how humans even developed color vision in the first place (Khamsi, 2007). Similarly, a study of media reports on nuclear power through much of the 20th century showed that the ways in which the media portrayed nuclear power – the way they framed the issue to the public – influenced the public’s perception of the issue as reported by various polls throughout the decades (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Another study about the ways in which the media portray events was a comparative research study between the United States’ portrayal of terrorist attacks and various European countries’ media portrayals of terrorist attacks. In the United States, most news agencies portrayed – framed – those terrorist attacks from a military perspective while the European media portrayed those attacks with an orientation toward the diplomatic evaluations of terrorist attacks (Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2008).

To study the media through this paradigm is to say that the media portray the world through certain frames that highlight particular pieces of information while disregarding or downplaying others (Entman, 1993). According to Entman (1993), it means making certain “information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences” (p. 53) and that the “frames call attention to particular aspects of the reality described” (p. 54). For illustrative purposes, if a weather reporter on television described a winter blizzard, that reporter could portray the blizzard as good or bad, as something good for farmers’ fields or bad for cities’ businesses, as something good for overworked
school children needing a break or bad for overworked parents dealing with one more inconvenience in their daily lives. The reporter could go on to describe the beauty of the snow or the dreariness of the low-hanging clouds. Those descriptions, those presentations to the public, would all be examples of different individual frames the reporter could use to describe a singular piece of nature, a blizzard. A description of the blizzard as a blessing from God that arrived just in time to prepare the farmers’ fields for the spring planting season would be one particular frame; a different description of the blizzard as a capricious act of a hostile Mother Nature, a storm that must be dealt with by highly paid and overworked snowplow drivers so that people could finally go about their business would be a completely different frame from which to deal with the weather. Even describing one storm as a loving act of God while another storm is a hostile act of Mother Nature is presenting a certain frame through which to view the relative “goodness” and “badness” of simple winter weather, based upon certain assumptions – certain other frames of reference – about the things that God does for people vs. the things that Mother Nature does for people and the inherent religious assumptions – frames – that go along with those descriptions.

Separate from the media, from a more sociological point of reference, frames have been described as schemata of interpretation of events or actions (Goffman, 1986), much as that snowstorm is either a benevolent or capricious act. These frames, or primary frameworks, allow people to locate, perceive, identify and label any number of everyday actions or occurrences that happen around them (Goffman, 1986). As an example of this kind of interpretation of actions, Goffman uses practical jokes. A
practical joke, the kind of joke perpetrated by one person on another, requires that the person who is the brunt of the joke be willing to go along with the joke, to be a good sport about the joke when it is finally fully revealed. The frames that are placed around the practical joke key in the participants and the person on whom the joke is played to view the entire episode as a joke. Without those frames in place, or if the frames are misinterpreted by the people involved – especially by the person on whom the joke is performed – serious offense or injury could result. As another example, Goffman discussed the play-activities in which people and animals engage, either by themselves or with each other. Play, when initiated, carries certain rules and expectations about behaviors – certain frames from which the play activities will be experienced. While animals will bite and scratch, those bites and scratches will not be hard and will not result in serious injury. Certain playthings, such as balls or stuffed toys, will be used in the play experience and are part of the framing of the play. When one participant is through playing, that participant will signal to the other that he/she wishes to withdraw. All of those actions place the play activity in a certain frame in the minds of those playing.

As an example of frames in the media, the news departments of the early and mid-1970s portrayed anti-nuclear power activists as riotous, if the media did not completely ignore the protesters, which also frequently happened, while the corporate heads and governmental regulatory agencies overseeing nuclear power were portrayed as trustworthy, sound business people (Gitlin, 1980). The frames presented were that nuclear power was safe and any protests were irrelevant or were brought about by troublemakers. Following the partial core meltdown of the Three-Mile Island nuclear
plant in 1979, however, those anti-nuclear power protesters were presented as far more trustworthy sources, people who could be looked to for authoritative, educational material about the dangers inherent in nuclear power (Gitlin, 1980). The frames changed to portray the protesters as people who had legitimate arguments, while the frames around the nuclear power plant personnel and governmental regulatory agencies changed to portray those people as hiding important pieces of information from the public (Gitlin, 1980).

As another example, researchers analyzed the portrayal of elder abuse published in newspapers. Through content analysis of eight newspapers’ coverage, they revealed that newspapers portrayed the abuse of the elderly as most often perpetrated by individuals acting outside the norm instead of as any sort of societal problem; that it was most often portrayed as an episodic event instead of an ongoing problem; and that most abuse was portrayed as having occurred in domestic settings even though it occurs more often in long-term care settings (Mastin, Joungwa, Barboza, & Post, 2007). The dominant frames through which the media portrayed the abuse downplayed the possible interpretation that the abuse is a societal problem warranting societal solutions, instead portraying the abuse as deviant individual behavior when that may not completely reflect reality (Mastin et al., 2007).

A five-country study about the coverage of the United States war in Iraq in the early 2000s revealed that newspapers published from non-Muslim countries tended to portray the Iraq War positively, supporting the American and British efforts in Iraq (Maslog, Seow Ting, & Hun Shik, 2006). Articles published in newspapers from
Muslim-majority countries, however, tended to be more supportive of the Iraqis in the war. That is an example of people from different countries and from different religious backgrounds framing the same event from slightly different perspectives.

As another example, and one more closely related to the study of videogames, researchers conducted a content analysis on news magazines’ coverage of videogames from 1970 to 2000. Their results showed that videogames were portrayed in the early years as something that required defense for those who participated in it as a pastime, especially with relation to children’s time playing them; videogames were an activity defended as being safe for children and time well spent (Williams, 2003). Later news articles, however, dropped the frame of defending videogames as the writers presented the games as simply one more entertainment option that people might consider when deciding how to relax, an alternative to movies for example. The researchers argue that as videogames grew up with the people who played them, and as videogames became a more commonplace feature of people’s households, the frames around those videogames also changed to better reflect their more common, everyday place in society.

Frames can also be shaped by the newsmakers themselves and then passed along by the media reporting them. For example, during the early days of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, President Bush’s administration framed the rhetoric around that military action as a case of good vs. evil (C. M. Smith & Dionisopoulos, 2008), with the good Americans going in to oust the evil dictator. That frame, however, seemed to break with the release of photographs of prisoner abuse from the Abu Ghraib prison where American soldiers were seen torturing and humiliating Iraqi prisoners. The Bush administration then
presented an alternative frame through which to view the event, that of the lone, isolated soldiers acting on their own to disgrace the good works of the entire military, and those individual soldiers were then punished for their actions.

Research has also shown that the media, in the face of few explanatory frames, can create frames equally powerful to any truth that might exist. Soon after the crash of TWA Flight 800 just off New York City in 1996, the media sought to properly frame the event for the public as an accident or a terrorist attack or some other cause (Durham, 1998). The investigators looking into the crash, however, could provide no definitive explanation for the crash, and they spent months combing through wreckage that stretched far out into the ocean. The journalists’ overriding concern for placing the event into some kind of a frame meant that even though the investigators could only speculate about the cause of the crash, that speculation was coupled within the media narrative with past histories of why planes crash and became the dominant frame through which to report the event. Instead of being able to provide an explanation for the crash, the story became that the explanation would be forthcoming, and that became the overriding frame through which to view an event that took months to conclude.

As explained in previous sections, videogame journalists adhere to an ideology regarding the place of women within the gaming industry. That ideology is promoted through years of hegemonic masculinity operating within the industry, and it perpetuates itself because of the filters placed upon the videogame journalists. All of these in turn guide the videogame journalists into presenting information regarding the games and the
gamers through a particular frame that promotes gender discrimination. That is the underlying thesis of this research.

In-Depth Interviews

Qualitative research is lengthier, more focused, and more in-depth than quantitative research. It is focused on the retrieval of quality information dealing with subjective issues of emotions and attitudes (Bartos, 1986). While samples may be smaller than in quantitative research and research gained may be less representative of the overall population under study – although that, too, has been disputed (Tauber, 1987) – qualitative research, such as in-depth interviews, has been seen as a valuable tool in a researcher’s arsenal for retrieving information that may be more difficult to quantify (Bartos, 1986) or that may require more time and open-ended discussion to uncover (Tauber, 1987).

For example, research into constructed versions of reality on South African television news made use of qualitative research methods such as textual analyses and in-depth interviews to investigate communicative frames through which the South African media presented information to the public. The researcher concluded that “reality” and “presentation” of news to the South Africans did not always match up, and that much of the cause of the disparity was the result of contextual aspects of news processing, such as the marketing of news and the impact of South African mythic tales upon news presentation (Venter, 2007).
Researchers also looked into a potential glass ceiling preventing women from obtaining promotions and higher pay in public relations and communications management positions. Using a combination of in-depth interviews and focus groups, the researchers asked various women in public relations and communications fields open-ended questions that sought their opinions about and approaches to dealing with any real or perceived glass ceilings. The researcher concluded that women perceived five specific categories that contributed to a glass ceiling, and that they used various strategies for dealing with those categories (Wrigley, 2002).

In-depth interviews have further been used, in part or in whole, to investigate such issues as the impact of the television news magazine show “Entertainment Tonight” on hard-news programming (Magee, 2008); the differences in intercultural communication competencies most valued by American vs. Russian managers (Matveev, 2004); the motivations and strategies of community journalists at small daily and weekly newspapers to pursue issues that resulted in the Pulitzer Prize in the 1970s (Hatcher, 2007); and the influence of mass media on teenagers’ perceptions of love, sex, and relationships (Steele, 1999).

**Synthesized Theoretical Foundations**

As outlined in the previous section, several theoretical perspectives served as the foundation upon which this research was built, including the Propaganda Model of mass media, Message Mediation, Ideology and False Consciousness, Frame Analysis, and Hegemonic Masculinity. On top of all of those theoretical perspectives, however, is an
ideal way in which journalists should be doing their jobs, and that is the Social Responsibility model of the press.

While it is easy to say that journalists should boldly tell the stories of all peoples in their audience, including those actively pushed aside or unconsciously underrepresented, as the Social Responsibility model of the press promotes, it can be much harder to live up to that ideal in the face of various competing pressures. It is unlikely that any journalist – no matter his/her background, beat, or academic degree – would disagree that people need to be as informed as possible; that journalists have a responsibility to gather as much information as possible from as wide a variety of sources as possible; or that their publications should be serving as many people as they can possibly reach within their particular genre of content. However, the theoretical perspectives put forth by Herman & Chomsky – that all journalistic content must first move through five different content filters – and the theoretical perspectives used by Shoemaker & Reese – that all journalists have five layers of mediating effects operating on them at all times – point to the reality that in the real world, journalists are not nearly as free or responsible in their reporting as they would like to be – or that we would hope they would be.

The theoretical perspectives of Herman & Chomsky and of Shoemaker & Reese overlap in several areas, but they also contain significant key differences and warrant a structured comparison to specifically point out which areas seemed most relevant to this research project. Two areas that bear a resemblance between the two theoretical perspectives are the Advertising filter (Herman & Chomsky) and the Organizational
mediating effect (Shoemaker & Reese). According to Message Mediation, the Organizational level includes those parts of the journalistic business model that relate to the entire structure of the organization, especially the influence of the Advertisers, as proposed by the Propaganda Model. Since the inclusion of advertising in magazines in the 1800s, advertisers began to exert influence on the editorial content of those publications they supported – or did not support. The modern business model for most printed media includes a mix of paid subscriptions, newsstand and e-reader sales, and paid advertising, with the bulk of money coming from the sales of those advertisements. That business model that places such a premium on the inclusion of so much paid advertising to support the publication means that advertisers are able to put pressure on the magazine and its editorial content simply by threatening to withdraw monetary support. Shoemaker & Reese view that as one part of a structural problem within the entire organization of the press, and Herman & Chomsky specifically single out the sometimes heavy-handed influence of the advertisers, but either way, it points to the potential filtering or mediating of content before it reaches the audience.

The two theoretical perspectives are also similar in the areas of Routines (Shoemaker & Reese) and the use of both Advertisers and Sources (Herman & Chomsky). As discussed above, it is part of the media routine to use advertisers to support a publication, a practice that can impede the journalistic integrity of the information presented, but journalists also have a routine of using the most easily accessible and the most often available sources for routine coverage of information. A source used once can easily become a source used on a regular basis for information
related to the same or a similar topic, whether or not that source is the best for each particular article. That routine of using the same sources repeatedly can create a homogeneity of content when more diversity would better serve the public by providing a wider variety of perspectives on the topics covered.

Another area of correlation is between Shoemaker & Reese’s Extramedia filters and Herman & Chomsky’s Flak and the Enforcers. Both imply a certain amount of content mediation based on the influence of outside people and organizations, especially those organizations, either loosely structured or institutionally arranged, that can create enough noise through organized protest to make it difficult for the journalists to do their jobs in an unbiased manner. While it would be easy to say with a knee-jerk reaction that the influence of outside groups is always detrimental to the work of the journalists – such as when outside groups attempt outright censorship of content – it must also be acknowledged that outside groups can bring attention to ways in which the media are lacking in their coverage of people or events. For example, it is just as possible for an extramedia group to try to suppress the media coverage of minority groups and their issues as it is for an extramedia group to draw attention to underreported minority groups and their issues. Whether society perceives the suppression or publicity of the individual causes as positive or negative correlates to the societal perception of those causes.

To look at the world from a certain perspective is to look at it through a certain Ideology, the fifth layer of mediating influences proposed by Shoemaker & Reese. Herman & Chomsky specify that Ideology to be Communism/Anti-Terrorism and suggest that journalists must frame their work around an opposition to either Communism or
Terrorism. According to the Herman & Chomsky model, journalists strive to present a narrative in which democracy and democratic ideals are good, Communism is evil, and we are in a fight for the hearts, minds, and souls of the world. That has shifted to an Anti-Terrorism narrative in a post-Cold War and post-9/11 world, but the essence of the narrative presented by the media remains the same: “We” are good, and “they” are bad, whoever “they” are. Shoemaker & Reese do not specify a particular Ideology that all journalists will follow, but they propose that journalists will be influenced by various environmental, educational, socioeconomic, etc., factors that will impact how and what they write on a subconscious, ideological level.

In addition to their similarities, the theoretical models proposed by Herman & Chomsky and by Shoemaker & Reese also display some key differences. Some of the specifics of Herman & Chomsky’s Propaganda Filters model imply a certain value judgment on the process of mediating content that is not implied by the Shoemaker & Reese model. Simply using the term “flak” – which means antiaircraft guns or exploded shells – to define outside individuals and groups impacting media content introduces militaristic connotations into the discussion. Using such metaphorical concepts as theoretical terminology, journalists are “under fire” by outside groups on the battlefield of public communication. That type of “us vs. them,” “under fire” implication is far less prevalent in the Shoemaker & Reese theory, which presents those outside influences as any kind of extramedia – or “outside media” – individuals or groups who attempt to influence content. The influence might be positive or negative based on the societal
perceptions of the influence, but the act of influencing is not metaphorically labeled as a militaristic assault on journalists.

Similarly, the Herman & Chomsky model uses Communism – and later Anti-Terrorism – as one of its five main filters, which again lends a militaristic air to the discussion and suggests a fairly narrow filter that has only limited usefulness to this research. The Communism/Anti-Terrorism filter points to one specific ideology that colors journalists’ presentation of war and politics. However, there are far more topics than just war and politics that are covered by the wide variety of media available to people. A filter of Communism/Anti-Terrorism has little, if any, impact on the majority of sports, fashion, entertainment, weather, etc., reporting that is done by journalists around the world every day. Instead, the Shoemaker & Reese theory of an Ideological Influence on content is far more elastic, especially to this discussion of the presentation of women by videogame journalists and magazines. An overriding ideology (or ideologies) that influences journalists is at the core of both theories, but where Herman & Chomsky specify that the ideology will be Communism/Anti-Terrorism, Shoemaker & Reese acknowledge there could be multiple ideologies and that those ideologies could grow organically from the mores of any group of people who use mass communication. For the purposes of this research especially, the ideology of Communism/Anti-Terrorism was expected to have little influence on the videogame journalists’ or magazines’ presentation of women. However, it was anticipated that an ideology of Hegemonic Masculinity would be uncovered. Because of that, the theoretical work of Shoemaker & Reese on Ideological influences was expected to have far more relevance to the
concluding discussions of this research than was the Herman & Chomsky filter of Communism/Anti-Terrorism.

Although the Herman & Chomsky filters were more limited in this research because of the specific nature of the filters described earlier and because of the implication of a more adversarial and political undertone to media work, those filters offered more flexibility in their application than did the Shoemaker & Reese model of media influences. Shoemaker & Reese ground their media influences in a target motif that casts each outlying ring as having an encircling effect on each successive ring within it and little or no effect on any ring further out from it.

Figure 1: The target motif used by Shoemaker & Reese.

For example, the Individual level of influence is at the center of the target motif, influenced by every ring extending from it. Ideologies influence Extramedia groups.
which influence the media Organization which influence the media Routines which have an impact on how the Individual journalist does his/her job. While that target diagram creates a simple, easily understood framework on which to hang the theory, it also limits the potential interactions that each of those individual layers could have on one another. As created, the target diagram downplays the impact that any individual journalist might have on the routines the media use, the ways in which media are organized, the ways in which those journalists might also impact extramedia groups, and the ways in which journalists might begin movements that create ideological shifts in societies. It is certainly difficult for any individual journalist to impact an entire society on an ideological level as Shomaker & Reese define that ideological level, but the target metaphor – with the tiny Individual at the center of a bull’s-eye encompassed completely by Ideology – makes that potential impact appear virtually impossible. In that regard, the individual filters proposed by Herman & Chomsky are more flexible in that each can influence the others as well as influence the individual journalist.

Besides the lack of movement between the layers of the model is the fact that the Shoemaker & Reese model is based on a foundation of print journalism from the time of its mid-1990s publication. That approach was applicable to the three physical magazines analyzed in this research, but it was not always applicable to the internet-based publications because of their lack of established routines (Keith, 2011). It could be assumed that those publications will develop more established routines as they move forward, and it could be assumed that the online publications that employ editors and journalists with a strong background in print journalism would follow routines similar to
those print publications, but when online magazines and online-only journalists grow up in the business with no background in print journalism, it cannot be assumed, as Shoemaker & Reese assume, that those people and publications will base their work routines – or even their ideologies of journalism – on the practices of print publications.

While the two theoretical perspectives proposed by Herman & Chomsky and Shoemaker & Reese individually were of limited value to this research, taking the most potentially relevant parts of each and combining them into a new whole produced a stronger foundational perspective from which to evaluate the work being produced by videogame magazines and videogame journalists. From the Herman & Chomsky theory, the following aspects were either removed from the analysis or were prioritized at the lowest levels in the analysis because they seemed to offer little benefit to the research: the political and militaristic undertones, because the vast majority of work going on in videogame journalism has little to do with politics and even less to do with real war; the Communism/Terrorism filter, because even though some videogames might deal with the two topics of war, politics, and a fight between Democracy and Communism (or terrorists), most videogame journalism itself has little to do with either Communism or Anti-Terrorism; and the inherent violence associated with disciplinary measures some journalists might encounter, because most of the work done in videogame journalism requires journalists to seldom put themselves in the way of physical harm. However, emotional and psychological disciplinary measures were considered in the analysis because videogame journalists might be expected to experience those types of disciplinary measures from internal or external forces.
From the Shoemaker & Reese theory, the following aspects were either removed from the analysis or prioritized at the lowest levels because they seemed to offer little benefit to the research: the implied one-way nature of mediating influences from one level of the target to the next, because the possibility exists that mediating influences could flow in either direction or between non-adjoining layers; and the predilection to treat all publications as following established routines and ideologies based on print journalism, because three of the six magazines analyzed for this project were internet-based publications that employed journalists who may not be familiar with the long-established traditions of print journalism. While that lack of history with print journalism was considered as a potential mediating influence on the work of the online journalists, it was not considered to be a valid excuse for those online magazines or online journalists who portrayed women avatars or women gamers from a misogynistic perspective; a background in journalism and journalistic practices is not a prerequisite for people to treat women respectfully.

While those aspects of the two theoretical perspectives were discarded or prioritized at the lowest levels for analysis purposes, there were several more areas in which the two theories overlap and that aided the research and analysis. First, the two theories overlap in the area of Ideological Influence and Communism/Anti-Terrorism. Even though the specifics of Communism/Anti-Terrorism were not anticipated to have been primarily relevant to the discussion of the portrayal of women (as outlined above), the influence of some kind of Ideology on the work of the magazines and the journalists was hypothesized at the start of this research, specifically the influence of Hegemonic
Mасculinity (discussed in more detail below). As such, the first aspect that was considered relevant to the research was “Ideology.”

Second, Shoemaker & Reese’s areas of Organizational Influences and Extramedia Influences overlap with Herman & Chomsky’s Advertising Filter. Those three areas were combined into a single descriptor, “Economic Influences.” The term Economic Influences had a broader scope than Advertising Filter to include more than just the advertisers; that was done to acknowledge that some videogame journalism outlets, especially those online that can operate with far less overhead, might have other economic influences placed upon them than simple advertising. The term also placed more definition on Shoemaker & Reese’s Extramedia Influences to clearly state that the extramedia influences under consideration for the descriptor were those specifically related to the economy of operating a videogame magazine, not to anything else; and it placed more structure on the Organizational Influences to specifically point to the reliance that magazines have on some sort of economic support. While those influences were anticipated at the start of the research regarding the economy of operating videogame magazines either physically or on the internet, it was not anticipated that this particular area of research would lead to the discovery of an “Ideology of Anxiety,” which is discussed at length in the Conclusions chapter. Operating as both an Ideological Influence and an Economic Influence, the Ideology of Anxiety was discovered to have a predominant influence on much of the work the journalists were doing on a regular basis. The Ideology of Anxiety was at the forefront of their thoughts, and the journalists often described their own anxiety about the articles they wrote and the potential for personal
and economic backlash from those articles as having a mediating effect on the types of articles they wrote and the scores they might potentially give to games from certain developers or publishers.

Third, Herman & Chomsky’s Flak & the Enforcers overlaps with both Shoemaker & Reese’s Extramedia Influences and Media Routines Influences. The flak that journalists receive can be brought about by any number of extramedia groups. The flak can also come from the people that journalists contact on a regular basis as part of their routines, especially the sources who might be used on a regular basis. As such, this area of potential influence was reduced to the descriptor “Routines & Contacts,” which was a broader form of Flak & the Enforcers but a more defined compilation of Extramedia Influences and Routine Influences. As such, the three areas prioritized for research into videogame magazines and the work of videogame journalists were the areas of Ideologies, Economic Pressures, and Routines & Contacts, all of which were based in part on the theoretical foundations of Herman & Chomsky and Shoemaker & Reese.

However, without any standard by which to hold the journalists and this research, there could be no discussion of whether the videogame journalists were actually producing a positive or negative portrayal of women. Because of that, the ideals promoted by the Society of Professional Journalists and by the Hutchins commission on a responsible press were used to measure the success or failure of videogame journalists in their presentation of women videogame players and women avatars. As the professional organization representing most journalists today, the Society of Professional Journalists defines a responsible, professional journalist just as the American Bar Association or the
American Medical Association define a responsible and professional lawyer or doctor. Instead of those types of organizations, it was likely that journalists were being influenced in their presentation of women by far more than the Filters and Influences proposed above, that they were not living up to professional expectations because of many different factors. As such, while the theories of Herman & Chomsky and of Shoemaker & Reese were used to make the analysis, so too were the theoretical foundations of Hegemonic Masculinity, Frame Analysis, and Ideology/False Consciousness. Specifically, they were used to explore the potential impacts of any specific ideologies (especially that of Hegemonic Masculinity) and the ways in which those ideologies might be impacting both the journalists’ subconscious thought processes and the articles they wrote.

As discussed in more depth in a previous section of this Literature Review, Hegemonic Masculinity is a melding of theoretical perspectives that puts forth the idea that, because men have been in positions of power historically and because men currently hold positions of power, it is perceived to be a natural state of reality for men to remain in those positions of power. Hegemonic Masculinity has been identified in other forms of journalism, including hard-news and sports journalism, and this research proposes that it will be found in the work of videogame journalists. As with the proposal that media content is mediated through content Filters and Influences (Herman & Chomsky and Shoemaker & Reese), specifically those listed above, the proposal that Hegemonic Masculinity underpins much of the work going on in videogame journalism indicates videogame journalists may not be living up to the standards set forth by the Society of
Professional Journalists or by the recommendations put forth by the Hutchins commission on a free and responsible press.

Herman & Chomsky and Shoemaker & Reese both assume in their theories that journalists will be influenced by ideologies that mediate the work they produce. I proposed that Hegemonic Masculinity would be that ideology at work in the videogame magazines’ and journalists’ presentation of women. Unfortunately, such an adherence to an ideology helps to blind journalists to alternative ways of presenting information to the public. Even when journalists might consciously believe they are living up to the ideals proposed by the Society of Professional Journalists and the Hutchins commission, they are perceiving the world through an ideological lens, a certain point of view that colors all else. When their perceptions of the world are based on such an ideology, they are more likely to frame the articles they write around that same ideology. An example is the previously-discussed Reuters article in which the reporter stated that research had proven women are biologically drawn to the color pink (Anonymous, 2007b). The ideology of blue and pink color preferences between men and women is ingrained in modern society, and research that reinforced (however tenuously) that ideology was presented by the media as unassailable fact.

While the color preference article mentioned above is a somewhat amusing and rather innocuous example of an ideology being reinforced by media, the theoretical works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Francis Bacon point to the potential harm that can result from a false ideology (or false consciousness or false idol) becoming ingrained in people and reinforced by mass media. If a ruling-class ideology is promoted as the
only logical way to interpret some event or the only possible course of action in some endeavor, then that ideology – no matter how false or how detrimental to those being ruled – becomes the “best” ideology. That ruling-class ideology becomes ingrained in the journalists who perceive the world through the prism of that ideology and then produce articles based on that ideology to people who may never question the logic of the presented frame. For example, research on color preferences between men and women reveals it was clothing manufacturers and marketers in the early 20th century (arguably part of the ruling class of people in the United States) who began promoting the colors blue for boys and pink for girls (Eliot, 2009); that ideology has become ingrained in Western society; journalists accepted the ideology as the natural order of the world; and when research was produced that seemed to confirm the assumed worldview already present in the ideology, a journalist produced an article that framed the event through the prism of that ruling-class ideology. A responsible journalist would have better served the public by stepping back from the preconceived notions of reality (the ideology of color preferences) and asking the scientific researcher some difficult questions about the nature and details of the study instead of theological questions about the Biblical Eve eating an apple from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden.

While that example illustrates a problem with journalists framing stories for the public, the framing of information can also assist readers in understanding complex ideas quickly and easily. By using pre-existing frames that the public understands, the journalists can convey their information more succinctly. These pros and cons exist for the journalists, but there are also positive and negative aspects of using the theory of
Frame Analysis to decode articles for research such as this. One negative aspect is that, because Frame Analysis is based on the foundation of the researcher decoding meanings from the text, there is the possibility that a researcher may misinterpret the texts being analyzed. For example with a historical study, a researcher might mistakenly apply modern values and judgments on a text when that text meant something different within its historical context. A researcher might also tie together disparate ideas gleaned from the texts and call them a frame when they are, in fact, nothing more than coincidence. Although those are all potential problems for Frame Analysis research, the potential benefit of the method is that researchers can cull meanings from the texts that the original writers may not have even realized they were encoding into them. This research into the representations of women in videogame magazines aspired to search for such a finding.

The premise of this research was that Hegemonic Masculinity is so ingrained in videogame journalism that it has become an ideology; videogame journalists perceive the world through that ideology; and when new information threatens to expose that perception as false consciousness (for example, more women are playing videogames and having an impact on the kinds of games produced and enjoyed by the public), that new information is subjected to disciplinary action (in the Foucault sense of the term) by misrepresenting the women gamers as clueless or the women avatars as nothing more than sex objects to be ogled or mocked.

Though Hegemonic Masculinity has been discussed in depth in a previous section as a theoretical foundation of this research, it must also be noted that the theory has shortcomings. Specifically, it is a merging of ideas from two disparate backgrounds,
Gramsci’s work on class and power relations and feminist research about the ways in which gender relationship shape society. While the resultant pairing of the two theoretical perspectives has provided a unique perspective from which to analyze society, it is the time and distance between the two that makes them somewhat uncomfortable with each other. Gramsci was writing from a distinctly political perspective, but modern feminist research, while at times dealing with politics, also includes such apolitical issues as gender discrimination, women’s historical positions in society, or, as in the case of this research project, portrayals of women by magazine journalists. Rather than a proper evolution of theoretical thought, Hegemonic Masculinity is more akin to a grafting of one idea onto another to produce something unique. Such a varied history of the theory is offset, however, by the potential impact it can have to illuminate what is potentially happening in videogame journalism. As previously stated, Hegemonic Masculinity impacts hard-news and sports journalism, and it is proposed to also impact videogame journalism. It is for that reason that the theory is part of the foundation of this study.

Again, holding the videogame journalists up to the ideals set forth by the Society of Professional Journalists and the Hutchins commission, the videogame journalists should be telling the full and complete story of what it means to be a gamer in modern America, but this research proposes that instead, the magazines and journalists will misrepresent those women. The theoretical foundation of Herman & Chomsky and Shoemaker & Reese say that journalists mediate their work under multiple pressures from various groups and institutions; Hegemonic Masculinity has shown up in other forms of journalism, and it is also proposed to show up in videogame journalism; and because it is
easier for people to adhere to a false consciousness than to deal with the potential of being wrong, videogame magazines will tell a story of women that is outdated, misogynistic, and potentially harmful to the overall perception of women videogame players.

In summary, this research proposed that videogame magazines and journalists were portraying women avatars only as sex objects no matter what role those women played in the games themselves. This research also proposed that videogame magazines and journalists were portraying women videogame players as second-class people in the gaming space, that even if lip-service might be paid toward those women gamers that the women were not welcome in what had traditionally become known as a man’s space. Those portrayals of women avatars and women gamers were based on an adherence to an ideology of Hegemonic Masculinity, the theory that because men have traditionally been in positions power and because men may currently hold positions of power that it can be assumed men – and not women – will continue to hold those positions of power. The Frame Analysis of the magazines and the In-Depth Interviews of the journalists were conducted with three primary focuses in mind, based on the theoretical foundations of Herman & Chomsky’s five filters of mass media and Shoemaker & Reese’s five mediating influences in mass media. Those three primary focuses were the following: 1) Ideology; 2) Economic Influences; and 3) Routines & Contacts. Though those factors were expected to be found by the research, the magazines and the journalists were also held to the standards proposed by the Hutchins commission on the responsibilities of journalists and to the standards sanctioned by the Society of Professional Journalists.
Those standards were used in analyzing how well (or not) the magazines and journalists were doing in their representation of women avatars and women gamers.

Hypotheses

Based upon the previously discussed thesis statement and review of literature, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

Based on previous literature regarding gender representation, online and offline videogame journalism (the magazines and e-zines produced regarding the videogames and the players) will portray women videogame players with hostility toward them as a group regarding their game-playing abilities, experience with the games, and ability to play what are considered “real” games (i.e. those games played by men and by self-described “hardcore” gamers). These misrepresentations of women videogame players will also include portrayals of female videogame characters (either playable or NPC) that focus more on how they look than on what they do. The exception to that will be any instance in which the action may include the activity of sex, in which case the women avatars’ actions and the presentations of those actions will be of equal importance. This misrepresentation will occur both actively through the text that is written and the pictures that are portrayed as well as through the omission of women from areas in which they could be portrayed positively. All of these elements will be presented by the particular frame the videogame journalists use to present the information about the gaming content to the consumer. This hypothesis contains four sub-parts and is as follows:

H1) That online videogame journalism will present women videogame players through the following frames presented to the public:
Frame A) By focusing on representations of the videogame women’s looks instead of their actions within the game – unless those actions involve sex.

Frame B) By focusing on representations of the women gamers’ supposed inability to play the games well.

Frame C) By ignoring women playable characters in the games.

Frame D) By ignoring women gamers in favor of highlighting male gamers.

Based on previously discussed ideology of Hegemonic Masculinity literature (that men have been in a leadership position, remain in a leadership position, and will continue in that leadership position into the future), an ideology exists within videogame journalism that videogame journalism best serves male constituents since they are, have been, and will remain the dominant group within the videogame industry, both as designers and as players. These hypotheses state the following:

H2) That an ideology exists within videogame journalism that all (or almost all) videogame players are men, have always been men, and are almost certain to remain men.

H3) That an ideology exists within videogame journalism that videogame players desire titillation and misrepresentative language and images regarding women.

H4) That ingrained ideologies within videogame journalism fuel attitudes of Hegemonic Masculinity (that men have been the predominant players/insiders, that men are the predominant players/insiders, and that men will remain the predominant players/insiders) within the videogame journalism industry.

Based on previous literature regarding Herman & Chomsky’s Propaganda Model of mass media and Shoemaker & Reese’s model of media influence, the ideology that feeds into the prevalence of hegemonic masculinity within videogame journalism is supported by media filters or media influences. This research will examine the role of filters or influences in videogame journalism that support an adherence to the ideology of
Hegemonic Masculinity. This hypothesis also contains several sub-parts. Hypothesis 5, based around the work of Herman & Chomsky, contains four sub-parts and states the following:

H5) That videogame journalists are influenced by propaganda filters of their own making or of the making of outside organizations/people in their portrayals of women in the videogame market, either the women appearing within the videogames themselves as playable or non-playable characters or of the women who play videogames.

Part A) That videogame journalists are influenced in their portrayals of women by the size, ownership, and profit-orientation of the medium in which they work.

Part B) That videogame journalists are influenced in their portrayals of women by the advertisements and the companies that advertise within the medium in which they work.

Part C) That videogame journalists are influenced in their portrayals of women by the sources they use.

Part D) That videogame journalists are influenced in their portrayals of women by the pressure of outside flak and the people who enforce it.

Hypothesis 6, based around the work of Shoemaker & Reese, contains five sub-parts and states the following:

H6) That videogame journalists are affected by level of media influence of their own making or of the making of outside groups/people in their portrayals of women in the videogame market, either the women appearing within the videogames themselves as playable or non-playable characters or of the women who play videogames.

Part A) That videogame journalists are influenced in their portrayals of women by the journalists’ own individual preconceptions about women within videogames and women who play videogames.

Part B) That videogame journalists are influenced in their portrayals of women by the routines associated with their jobs as journalists, such as the journalists’ day-to-day operations in creating their stories or the ways in which the journalists perceive their audience.
Part C) That videogame journalists are influenced in their portrayals of women by the media organization in which they work, such as the push for corporate profits, the attitudes of the people with whom they work, or the perceptions of their editors or publishers.

Part D) That videogame journalists are influenced in their portrayals of women by extramedia attention, such as the sources they use to construct their stories or the advertisers who help drive perceptions of female gamers.

Part E) That videogame journalists are influenced in their portrayals of women by their own ideology, their own system of values when it comes to videogames, who they believe should play videogames and what constitutes the thing they perceive to be a “real” videogame.
CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Frame Analysis

To evaluate the presence of the hypothesized gender misrepresentative portrayals in videogame journalism, the researcher engaged in frame analysis of select online and offline videogame journals. Frame analysis was conducted on previews and final reviews of current-generation (Microsoft’s Xbox 360, Nintendo’s Wii, and Sony’s Playstation 3) videogames featured in magazines dedicated to those consoles (Official Xbox Magazine, Nintendo: The Official Magazine, Playstation: The Official Magazine) as well as select e-zines (GamesRadar.com, GameSpot.com, and IGN.com) dedicated to the promotion and review of videogames released for current-generation consoles.

Official Xbox Magazine, Nintendo: The Official Magazine, and Playstation: The Official Magazine were chosen because they are physical magazines produced specifically to promote the consoles for which they are named. The selection of e-zines was based on their affiliations to larger-known corporate entities, giving them a more solid grounding in traditional journalism than any random, independent sites that might be maintained by videogame fans or by the games industry itself. GamesRadar.com was chosen because the company, Future US, Inc., also publishes physical magazines such as PC Gamer, Guitar Legends, and Pregnancy (2008f). GameSpot.com is a publication of CNET Networks, an affiliate of CBS Interactive (2008l). IGN.com is part of IGN Entertainment, a unit of Fox Interactive Media (2008k).

Frame analysis was conducted on previews and reviews of the top 10 games that featured male protagonists as playable avatars and the top 10 games that featured either a
female protagonist as a playable avatar or that allowed the player the option of playing as either a male or a female protagonist-avatar. Those parameters and the use of the aforementioned magazines established a pool of 266 articles from online magazines (79 from Games Radar; 80 from GameSpot; and 107 from IGN) and another 142 articles from the physical magazines (38 from *Nintendo Power*; 56 from *Official Xbox Magazine*; and 48 from *Playstation: The Official Magazine*) for a total of 408 articles coded for the research. Another several dozen letters to the editor and online forum postings were also coded when the pertained to the same videogames, and they were used to gain the perspective of some of the readers.

The researcher evaluated the content of the articles and accompanying photographs, looking for such things as:

- the presence of male/female perspectives portrayed in the text describing the protagonist
- the presence of males/females within the screenshots from the games
- the tone used within the text to describe the gameplay, especially regarding the portrayal of male or female characters within the games or the audience for the game
- the tone used within the text to specifically describe the protagonist, especially regarding the portrayal of that protagonist within the game’s narrative, including that protagonist’s interactions with non-playable characters (NPCs) and whether those NPCs are male or female and portrayed positively or negatively

Those indicators were used to document the themes and focuses of the articles and give an overall indication of the frames that were used in presenting the information.
Those indicators were noted by the researcher, categorized into their respective areas of concentration, and organized around the central themes portrayed by the content of the articles to create thematic categories for analysis and discussion (McKee, 2003).

The selection of the top 10 games to be analyzed was done by means of a three-step process:

Step 1: Used the online videogame sales/reviews rating charts at www.vgchartz.com to find the top-selling current generation videogames for home consoles within the United States within 2008 that featured distinct male or female protagonists (or that offered the player the option of playing as either a male or female).

Those were games that presented a storyline for the player to follow, such as action games (such as “Call of Duty”), role-playing (RPG) games (such as “Mass Effect”), fighting games (such as “Soul Calibur IV”), or platforming games (such as “Prince of Persia”). Games that presented generic avatars, such as a pattern of light or a generic blob (such as “de Blob”) were not considered. Music and rhythm games, such as “Guitar Hero” or “Wii Fit,” were considered as long as the avatars were easily identifiable men or women who were available to the player as playable avatars or who are integral to the overall structure of the game.

The following videogames were selected for inclusion in the frame analysis:

Playstation 3, male-only avatars:
1) Grand Theft Auto IV
2) Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots
3) Call of Duty: World at War
4) Madden NFL 09
5) Resistance 2
6) MLB ’08: The Show
7) Devil May Cry 4
8) SOCOM: US Navy SEALs Confrontation
9) Army of Two
10) Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six: Vegas 2 (later recoded as male/female)

Playstation 3, Male or Female Avatars:
1) Little Big Planet
2) Guitar Hero: World Tour
3) Fallout 3
4) Rock Band 2
5) Soul Calibur IV
6) Sid Meier’s Civilization Revolution
7) Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe
8) WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2009
9) Saints Row 2
10) Guitar Hero: Aerosmith

Wii, Male-only Avatars:
1) Madden NFL 09 All Play
2) Star Wars: The Force Unleashed
3) House of the Dead 2 & 3 Return
4) Dragon Quest Swords: The Masked Queen and the Tower of Mirrors
5) No More Heroes
6) Sonic Unleashed
7) Iron Man
8) Incredible Hulk
9) Go Diego Go! Safari Rescue
10) (Unable to find a 10th best-selling game released in 2008 that showed up in the top 100 games for this system. Nine games used for analysis.)

Wii, Male or Female Avatars:
1) Mario Kart Wii
2) Super Smash Bros. Brawl
3) Wii Fit
4) Rock Band
5) Guitar Hero: World Tour
6) Wii Music
7) Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures
8) Animal Crossing: City Folk
9) We Ski
10) Guitar Hero: Aerosmith

Xbox 360 Male-only avatars
1) Grand Theft Auto IV
2) Call of Duty: World at War
3) Gears of War 2
4) Madden NFL ‘09
5) Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six: Vegas 2 (later recoded as male/female)
6) Army of Two
7) Star Wars: The Force Unleashed
8) Devil May Cry 4
9) Battlefield: Bad Company
10) NCAA Football ‘09

Xbox 360 Male or Female avatars
1) Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures
2) Kung Fu Panda
3) Fable II
4) Sega Superstars Tennis
5) Rock Band 2
6) Guitar Hero: World Tour
7) Fallout 3
8) Left 4 Dead
9) Saints Row 2
10) Soul Calibur IV

Step 2: Selected preview and review articles of the games from Step 1 from the aforementioned online and offline videogame magazines, as well as any letters to the editors or forum postings related to those same videogames. As the most basic types of articles in the magazines and the articles most likely to be read by the largest number of people interested in potentially purchasing games, the previews and reviews seemed the most likely articles to be read by the most gamers who would buy the magazines. Combined with the fact that most videogame magazines are comprised primarily of previews and reviews instead of hard news or investigative features, these parameters allowed the most number of articles to be included in the research. Including the letters to the editor and the forum postings allowed for some of the voices of some of the readers to also be heard in the analysis.
Step 3: Used the frame analysis process to evaluate the content of the articles for the presence/absence of indications of sex bias or gender misrepresentation in the information provided in the videogame magazines regarding the top-selling videogames.

The texts were evaluated with the following questions in mind:

In what ways were women portrayed in videogame magazine previews and reviews of top-selling games? Specifically, in what ways were women portrayed as videogame players that may produce misrepresentations of who they were as individuals in reality? And how were women within the videogames themselves (both playable and non-playable character avatars) portrayed within the articles written about those games? Specifically, what did videogame magazine portrayals of women videogame character avatars highlight or focus upon, and how did those portrayals that were presented in the magazines measure up to the full options of portrayals available within the scope of all characters within the game?

The magazine texts were evaluated with respect to the overarching research question as outlined above, and frames were constructed based on those texts. Broad categories, or “Meta-Frames” (Morgan, Harrison, Chewning, Davis, & DiCorcia, 2007), were constructed around those items that broadly encompassed as many of the articles as possible. From within those Meta-Frames, Secondary and sometimes Tertiary Frames (Morgan et al., 2007) arose to help further answer the questions under investigation.

Once the videogames and magazines were selected and the content coded, the analysis proceeded through a three-step process. First, the researcher went through the notes looking for the repetition of themes, ideas, or treatments – whatever those might be
and with no set agenda. Second, the researcher gathered those repetitions together into inductive categories for review and comparison to the researcher’s proposed thesis and hypotheses. The categories that did not relate to the proposed thesis but were still repeated often were kept for analysis; those that did not repeat or did not repeat often were discarded from the analysis. Once the remaining categories were either directly related to the thesis of the research or occurred with enough frequency to warrant their inclusion even though they were not thesis-related, the third step was to fold smaller categories into larger ones to create larger meta-frames that included as many individual frames as possibly fit within them. Those frames are discussed in Chapter 4.

In-Depth Interviews

The basic process when conducting in-depth interviews first involves the creation of open-ended questionnaires focused around the overall thesis of the research (Luck & Rose, 2007). Unlike random samples for quantitative research, subjects for in-depth interviews are chosen based on select criteria related to the specifics of the research question(s) (Wrigley, 2002). As such, the researcher selected subjects within the industry under investigation for focused, in-depth interviews (Wrigley, 2002). Specifically, the researcher sought out interviews with the following types of people (however, the final interviews were held with a wider variety of people than initially sought; the demographics of the interviewed journalists are listed on the next page):

- Editor(s)-in-chief of both online and offline magazines being researched
- Managing editor(s) of both online and offline magazines being researched
- Senior writer(s) of both online and offline magazines being researched
- Staff writer(s) of both online and offline magazines being researched

- Freelance writer(s) of both online and offline magazines being researched

Potential sources were first culled from the list of authors who wrote articles included in the Frame Analysis portion of this research. Contact information for those sources was gathered from the magazines, from magazines’ websites, and from any personal websites that showed up during Google searches of the writers’ names. Using an Institutional Review Board-approved recruitment document, the researcher contacted all potential sources for whom such information was available. At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher also asked the sources to recommend him to other potential interview sources and to help initiate contact with those people.

Out of the initial 51 potential subjects identified, contact information, either direct or indirect, was uncovered for 32 (63 percent) subjects. Of those sources contacted through cold calls, three subjects (nine percent) agreed to be interviewed. In an unforeseen development, one magazine, *Nintendo Power*, adhered to an unwritten policy (as expressed by the public relations representative) of its staff and interns never granting interviews, and no replies were ever received for interview requests made directly by email or indirectly through the public relations representative to journalists at that magazine.

Once the interview process began, subjects were asked to suggest other videogame journalists as potential interview sources and to recommend the researcher to those people in a snowball technique that garnered another 14 potential subjects. Out of the initial 14 subjects identified through this technique, 12 (86 percent) agreed to be
interviewed. The final number of subjects interviewed was 15 out of a potential 65 identified, resulting in a total response rate of 23 percent. Of the 15 sources interviewed, 14 sources were men, and two sources identified themselves as black. Per IRB guidelines for this research, the sources’ comments will be reported anonymously to better protect their identities and the sometimes delicate nature of the information they reported to the researcher.

Of the journalists interviewed, 10 (66 percent) identified themselves as approximately 40 years old, give or take a couple years, and as having a love of videogames that began in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a time period often referred to as the Golden Age of videogames (Kent, 2001). The remaining five (33 percent) identified themselves as being in their mid- to late-20s and growing up during the more modern rise of the home videogame consoles of the 1990s, such as the Super Nintendo, Sega Genesis, Playstation and N64. A couple of the oldest videogames mentioned as favorites or as highly influential to the journalists were Pong (Anonymous, 2010a, 2010i, 2010o), an arcade game that was originally produced in 1972, and Zork (Anonymous, 2010c), a home computer game that was originally released in 1980. While most of the journalists mentioned they had been playing videogames since their early teen years, one said that he had been playing since he was 4 years old (Anonymous, 2010m).

Eleven of the 15 journalists interviewed were not formally educated as journalists. While most claimed a college education, their majors included areas such as English literature, political science, new media, landscaping and various other fields. The journalists interviewed included freelance writers for magazines (such as Playstation:
The Official Magazine), websites (such as GameSpot) and major news networks (such as CNN and MSNBC); some were editors; some worked for smaller websites (such as co-optimus.com and hiphopgamer.com); and a couple had backgrounds in major newspaper markets such as Denver and Tucson.

Open-ended questions were created for the interviews with the purpose of investigating the main focus of the research (Luck & Rose, 2007), the presence or absence of the influence of an ideology of Hegemonic Masculinity or propaganda filters or message mediation in the researching, writing, and presentation of journalistic materials for consumption by the media audience. Once interviews were conducted, the digitally recorded interviews were transcribed, evaluated, and coded in a manner similar to that done for the Frame Analysis. The researcher sought to identify the themes and ideas repeated or highlighted by the subjects themselves (Couldry & Langer, 2005; Harker, 2003; Steele, 1999) in relation to the overall theories under investigation, therefore producing inductive categories for review and comparison to the researcher’s proposed thesis and hypotheses (Matveev, 2004). The three-step process included: 1) Going through the interview notes and transcripts to cull those items related to the thesis and hypotheses of the research, as well as any particular items that were repeated with enough frequency to warrant their inclusion even though they were not directly related to the thesis of the research; 2) Gathering those particular items into inductive categories based on related themes or ideas presented by the interviewed subjects; 3) Organizing those categories into primary and secondary texts and analyzing them through the lenses
of the different theoretical perspectives used for the research to best interpret the
information the subjects were discussing.

The researcher interviewed the subjects with relation to the theoretical
perspectives outlined above (Hegemonic Masculinity, Propaganda Model of Mass Media,
influences on content of mass media, and Social Responsibility in Journalism), using a
combination of open and closed questions that invited the subjects to elaborate from their
own experiences and with the least possible direction from the researcher (Luck & Rose,
2007). As such, an interview guide was constructed to guide the researcher and the
subjects through the various theoretical perspectives while also attempting to mask the
true nature of the study to avoid contaminating the sources’ responses.

The interview guide was organized into the following sections, and the complete
guide is available in Appendix A:

Section A: Personal history with videogames. These questions are ice-breakers,
to get the subjects talking and comfortable. At the same time, they provide context about
the sources, who they are, why videogames are important to them, and what they enjoy
doing in and with videogames spaces. These questions also begin to raise issues of
“casual” vs. “hardcore” gamers, the influx of female videogame players into the market,
and the sources’ opinions of trends in the industry related to hardware, software, and
videogame player market segments.

Section B: Personal opinions of playing videogames with
family/friends/significant other. These questions are designed to dig deeper into the
subjects’ history with videogames, specifically how they interact with other people when
playing videogames. These questions are designed to uncover the subjects’ opinions of
the proper place of videogames within the culture. How they interact with videogames
and how they expect others to interact with videogames (or with the sources when they
play videogames).

Section C: Personal history with journalism. These questions are designed to
investigate the subjects’ personal experiences with the ways in which videogames and
journalism come together. They seek to understand the subjects’ histories with both
videogames and journalism, to understand how the subjects combine the two, and to
uncover any potential influences that might be related to Herman & Chomsky’s
Propaganda Filters or to Shoemaker & Reese’s media influences.

Section D: Clearance question. This question allows the subject to say anything
he or she wants to say about anything we have discussed. This question might bring
about some new insights, and it also allows the subjects the opportunity to feel they are
more in control of the interview process at one point during the interview.

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Because human subjects were involved in the in-depth interviews portion of this
research, Institutional Review Board approval was required for the protection of the
researcher and the subjects. The researcher completed online training and examinations
in basic human subject protections. Following that training, the researcher submitted the
study for exempt review by the Ohio University Office of Research Compliance, noting
that the study subjects would remain anonymous, any identifiable data would be kept
private and secure, and the subjects would not be expected to come to any more harm
than would normally be associated with the jobs they perform on a daily basis as videogame journalists – that is, they were not expected to be harmed in any way by the interviews. Final approval by the Ohio University Office of Research Compliance was granted May, 2010 as a year-long research study under proposal number 10X091, and the researcher began recruiting human subjects in the first weeks of June, 2010.

Initial recruitment of subjects occurred by mass email of identified videogame journalists. Following the successful recruitment of the initial subjects, the researcher requested the subjects recommend other potential sources to interview. All subjects were given a copy of the study Consent Form (attached in Appendix A) and were given opportunity by email and at the start of the telephone interview to ask any questions they might have regarding the study or their participation in it. Any questions the subjects had prior to the interview were answered to the extent that could be done without revealing the complete nature of the study so as to protect the integrity of the data that was being gathered.
CHAPTER 4: FRAME ANALYSIS FINDINGS

Overview

After analyzing the previews and reviews of select top-10 videogames for 2008 as portrayed by the six magazines, the following three meta-frames emerged:

1) Overall, videogame magazine articles present a negatively-biased portrayal (frame) of women both as gamers and as avatars within the games.

2) Contrary to the majority of materials analyzed (and standing out primarily for that reason), a select few portrayals within the magazines of women gamers or women avatars within the games seemed to be presented with a more evenly-balanced discussion of men and women. One outlier article even seemed to criticize the apparent negatively stereotypical portrayal of a specific female avatar within one particular game.

3) Additional themes arose within the texts that do not fit into a particular meta-frame that can be defined as anything except “other.” Those themes include:

a) People being snobbish toward other systems (PS3 vs. Wii vs. X360, etc.).

b) Writers analyzing what is “fun,” what makes a videogame a “game,” and whether children’s or casual games are entertaining for adults or hardcore gamers. This is especially seen in some of the articles related to games such as Wii Fit (Wii) and Little Big Planet (PS3).

c) People, especially magazine writers, discussing how much fun they have playing dress-up with their in-game avatars, whether those avatars are male or female. This appeared most prevalent in those games that also featured a large amount of violence, such as the Tom Clancy war games.

The discussion of the three overall meta-frames will begin with the negatively-biased portrayals of women by the videogame magazines.
Meta-Frame A: Negatively-Biased Portrayals of Women

As predicted by the literature review and as anticipated in the hypotheses, many of the magazine texts analyzed for this research contained negative portrayals of women as gamers or negative portrayals of women avatars within the games. For the purpose of this research, “negative” refers to those portrayals that include one or more of the following:

- Ignoring women avatars when previewing or reviewing those games that include women avatars.

- Highlighting what the writer appears to believe to be stereotypically male activities within the games (such as killings or sexual conquests of women) while ignoring or denigrating those activities within games that do not seem to meet the writer’s view of what are stereotypically acceptable male activities (such as exercising).

- Portraying women avatars as static in-game characters while portraying men as active in-game characters.

- Portraying women only as hypersexualized objects.

- Portraying women only as objects of sexual conquest for the player/avatar.

- Instructing the reader/gamer on how best to coax the above-mentioned hypersexualized or sexual-conquest images or scenes of women from the game(s).

- Denigrating through words or images the women that appear as in-game avatars.

- Denigrating through words or images the women who play videogames.

The researcher uncovered four distinct frames within the magazines’ texts that portray women in those negatively-biased ways. Those frames are: 1) Highlighting men more than women in those games that include both; 2) Portraying women as pinups; 3) Portraying hardcore gamers (“men”) as “real” gamers while casual gamers (“women”) are not “real” gamers; 4) Focusing on the violent action-hero aspect of the games.
Frame 1) Highlighting Men Instead of Women

Many modern videogames feature story-driven gameplay that in many ways mirrors the narrative elements of novels or short stories. The player-avatar protagonist(s) is introduced early in the game and is set up against an antagonist of some kind, often another person, but the antagonist could be animals or the environment. For example, “Fable 2” (X360) begins by placing the player in the role of a young child whose sister is murdered by the ruling king. The player then spends the remainder of the game seeking vengeance for the sister’s murder.

Unlike novels or short stories, however, videogames place the player into that protagonist’s role, often allowing the player to choose many of the protagonist’s traits, including whether the protagonist will be male or female. Almost immediately after beginning to play Fable 2, the player is asked to choose whether the protagonist is a little boy or a little girl, and the remainder of the game is altered in both subtle and obvious ways depending on that immediate choice.

Other games include both male and female playable characters that are more static but have unique characteristics. For example, “Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures” contains dozens of characters from the original Indiana Jones film trilogy (“Raiders of the Lost Ark,” “Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom,” and “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade”), including Indiana Jones, Short-Round, Willie, and Elsa. Each character has unique positive and negative characteristics, such as Indiana Jones’ whip that he uses to get across gaping holes in the ground, Short-Round’s small stature that
allows him to crawl through small tunnels, and Willie’s ability to break glass with her high singing voice. That particular game not only encourages players to play as different characters but it contains puzzles that require the player to use different avatars at different times and in different ways to proceed in the game.

While it is to be expected that articles written about games that feature only a male or only a female protagonist (such as “Gears of War 2” that features only male playable avatars or the “Tomb Raider” series that features only a female playable avatar) would focus primarily on those male or female protagonists, it could also be expected that articles written about games such as “Fable 2” or “Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures” that feature both male and female playable avatars would include discussions of the opportunities (or limitations) available by playing as those different avatars.

*Official Xbox Magazine*’s feature preview (Sept. 08) of “Fable 2,” however, contained 15 pictures from the game, and every in-game shot featured the male avatar. Women were mentioned only as a brief aside related to co-op play and their relative attractiveness within the game:

“Suddenly being the pretty girl’s ugly best friend is the sort of novel social drama that Fable II co-op seems poised to unleash.” (Gillen, 2008)

*Official Xbox Magazine*’s final review of the game (Dec. 08) ignored women completely as the reviewer discussed gameplay strictly from the male avatar’s perspective. The articles written by GamesRadar writers ignored the option of playing as
a female avatar, and the IGN and GameSpot articles only mentioned the option in passing, downplaying the female-avatar option as almost irrelevant.

As another example, several articles about “Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures” either completely ignored the player’s ability to play as female characters or mentioned them as peripheral to the overall game, even though several in-game puzzles require the use of the female avatars. Many pictures did not contain female avatars, and while writers often discussed Indiana Jones’ special abilities and phobias, the female characters were often lumped together for only their ability to jump higher than their male counterparts. One preview from IGN declared Willie’s character “useless” (Roper, 2008) because of her fear of spiders – even though Indiana Jones displays a similar fear of snakes and can become equally unplayable at various points in the game when snakes are present on the screen.

One particular game’s coverage in the media so ignored the player’s ability to play as a female avatar that this researcher labeled it a “Males Only” game at the beginning of the research. The researcher first learned that the game included female avatars when Official Xbox Magazine’s January 2008 edition mentioned that “Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six: Vegas 2,” a game of military stealth and sharpshooting, allowed the player to create a female avatar, something that is discussed in fewer than a dozen sentences from 10 articles across the six magazines:

“In an interesting ‘for the ladies’ twist, [game developer] Montreal is going the Deus Ex: Invisible War route of letting you play as either a male or female character.” (McCaffrey, 2008d)
“This character is fully customizable with both male and female gender options, which means you can go all GTA [Grand Theft Auto] and send your elite terrorist-killah [sic] onto the strip sporting a tank top and chaps (no word on pink Mohawks just yet, but we’ll keep you posted).” (C. Lynch, 2008a)

“Once you’ve custom-built your all-American hero, he (or she) is your character throughout both the single and multiplayer modes.” (Hartup, 2008b)

Other games articles in which the female avatars were ignored in either the text or the photographs accompanying the text include the following: “Animal Crossing: City Folk” (Nintendo Power, GamesRadar, GameSpot); “Civilization: Revolution” (Playstation: The Official Magazine, IGN, GamesRadar, GameSpot); “Fallout 3” (Official Xbox Magazine, Playstation: The Official Magazine, and GamesRadar); “Guitar Hero: World Tour” (Playstation: The Official Magazine, IGN, Gamesradar, and GameSpot); “Kung Fu Panda” (IGN and GameSpot); “Little Big Planet” (IGN and GameSpot); “Mario Kart Wii” (Nintendo Power, IGN, Gamesradar, and GameSpot); “Mortal Kombat vs. D.C. Universe” (Gamesradar and GameSpot); “SOCOM: Confrontation” (Playstation: The Official Magazine, IGN, Gamesradar and GameSpot); “Super Smash Bros. Brawl” (Nintendo Power, IGN and GameSpot); “We Ski” (GameSpot); “WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2009” (Playstation: The Official Magazine and Gamesradar).

Frame 2) Portraying Women as Pinups

Unlike the previous frame in which women were simply ignored in reviews or previews of those games that feature female avatars, the women in this frame were often displayed or discussed quite prominently by the magazines and writers. Those portrayals,
however, most often portrayed women as sex objects, and the portrayals often focused solely on women’s physical characteristics. For that reason, this frame refers to those women as “pinups,” which the dictionary defines as “a large photograph, as of a sexually attractive person, suitable for pinning on a wall” (2009c).

Many of the photographs of the female avatars and NPCs contained little or no explanations through cutlines or through references within the text of the articles, but those pictures were simply positioned around the pages. Occasional references to the pictures within the text often contained mixed messages regarding the lethality and sexuality of the women pictured, such as a reference in a “Metal Gear Solid 4” article referring to a group of female fighters as “…this gang of beautiful beasts” (R. Smith, 2008c). Other references within the text to those pictures also contained some potentially insulting remarks, such as a “Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe” screenshot of Wonder Woman as she entered “Rage Mode” that contained the cutline “Time of the month, dear?” (Reid, 2008).

Because of the various ways in which women are portrayed and positioned within the texts as pinups, this frame also contains the following four sub-frames that will be discussed individually: 1) Dangerous Women; 2) Inactive Women; 3) Annoying Women; 4) and How To Coax More Titillation from the Game.

An example of women appearing as pinups in general, however, exists in the coverage of the Xbox 360 and PS3 game “Devil May Cry 4.” The game features a pair of avatar brothers, Dante and Nero, battling hordes of ghouls and mythological monsters, and it is often praised in the magazines for things such as its “intense, ghoul-bashing
action and goofy, almost slapstick, tongue-in-cheek humor” (Shamoon & Reyes, 2008). The player plays as Dante for half the game and as Nero for the other half of the game, and while a handful of women show up in the game as either aids along the journey or as enemies to be overcome, no women are mentioned in the texts as being prominent in the storyline and no female avatars are available as playable characters.

Official Xbox Magazine’s January 2008 preview of “Devil May Cry 4,” however, prominently displayed two women. The brunette, known as “Lady,” was portrayed as a cutout taking up approximately 1/5 of the first page of the preview article. She wore dark sunglasses, red gloves, and a pinstripe suit jacket buttoned once at her midsection. The jacket’s lapels flared out across her bare chest, highlighting her rounded breasts that seemed poised to slip out of the fabric. A leather belt at her waist held up the pinstripe shorts that bunched up at her crotch, revealing long, bare thighs and a pair of highwayman boots that went up to her knees. The woman wrapped her arm around a rifle/cannon that stood as tall as she and had a serrated saw blade attached beneath the barrel to act as a bayonet. The blond on the second page of the article took up approximately 1/6 of the page. While carrying no weapon, she was dressed in a leather corset, leather pants, leather arm bands, and a black choker around her neck.
Figure 2: “Lady,” from the videogame “Devil May Cry 4.” Aside from the fact the character has no real name, the videogame magazines never bothered to mention the name she is known by, “Lady,” through photograph cutlines, and they rarely ever mentioned her in the text of the articles. Her purpose on the page was nothing more than eye-candy to the (assumed) male reader.

The photographs contained no cutlines to introduce the women or to describe their function within the game, and the article’s writers never mentioned any female characters within the game.

Another example of the magazines portraying women only as pinups is the coverage of the game “Saints Row 2.” The game allows players to play as either male or female avatars and to progress as the leader of a gang seeking to control the city’s neighborhoods through a series of missions that involve fighting, shooting, explosions,
and the general accumulation of wealth and respect earned by the successful completion of those missions. During character creation, the player can even make use of a slider bar that defines male and female gender as a percentage of either. Coverage of the game, however, is predominantly from the male avatar’s perspective with only occasional references to the ability to play as a female avatar. All in-game screenshots show men as the playable avatars, and the few women shown are, with the exception of one screenshot from GamesRadar’s Aug. 4, 2008, preview, either hookers or strippers.

For example, *Playstation: The Official Magazine*’s May 2008 preview of “Saints Row 2” featured a collage of screenshots of men running, shooting, and blowing up cars and boats. The one woman shown in any screenshot is a red-headed woman dancing around a pole in what appears to be a home living room. She’s wearing a small, black mask around her eyes, a black bikini top, black thong underwear, lace gloves up to her elbows, and lace-up, high-heeled boots. Three men stand nearby watching her dance. The writer mentions in one sentence the option to play the game as either sex, then highlights the fun aspects of the game, such as the “necessities of pimp-daddyhood, including the stripper pole” (R. Smith, 2008e).

One of the most elaborate examples of magazine coverage portraying women as pinups is the extensive coverage in almost every magazine, both online and offline, of the game “Soul Calibur IV” for the Xbox 360 and PS3. “Soul Calibur IV” is a fighting game in which one player controls one avatar that fights against another player-controlled avatar. As with “Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe,” fighting games like “Soul Calibur IV” often involve some sort of plot involving world championships, centuries-old evils or
rivalries, or simply the thrill of the competition. Aside from the standard roster of characters from the previous three iterations of the game, “Soul Calibur IV” also includes three playable avatars from the “Star Wars” universe: Darth Vader, Yoda, and the Secret Apprentice from the videogame “Star Wars: The Force Unleashed.”

While several of the avatars available in the game are scantily-clad women, they make up only a portion of the total number of fighters available to play. Those scantily-clad women, however, comprised a majority of the coverage of any of the female fighters, both within the written text as well as the screenshots and cutouts scattered throughout the articles. For example, the avatar Ivy is a fighter who goes into battle sporting a thong, thigh-high heeled boots, and a string-bikini top that barely contains her (by all appearances DDDD-sized) breasts. Her outfit is held together by leather straps that wrap around her belly, back, and inner thighs, and her lips are slightly parted on her small – especially in comparison to her breasts – heart-shaped head. Yet her single avatar is featured as one of only seven fighters in screenshots from GameSpot’s July 30, 2008, review; she has the second largest screenshot in the *Playstation: The Official Magazine* June preview article; and she has a close-up in one of only two screenshots from IGN’s July 15, 2008, preview, along with the cutline “She’s ready for battle…or something” (Clements, 2008a).
Figure 3: The character “Ivy” from “Soul Calibur IV.” Dressed in her standard “armor” for battle, she appears in almost every article about “Soul Calibur IV” with little mention of her name, fighting attributes, or weapon. Combined with near universal praise for the other women fighters’ similar armor and body proportions, the fighting mechanics of the game can sometimes feel secondary in the articles to the digital skin on display.

In-text and cutline references to the female fighters of “Soul Calibur IV” almost universally praise them for their physical appearances while also often downplaying or completely ignoring their fighting abilities:

“Speaking of proportions, it’s hard not to notice that many of the female characters have been given a physiological upgrade, like the bodacious Taki, who appears to have been reimagined with the gravity-defying Itagaki-san physics from ‘Dead or Alive Xtreme 2’ in mind. Cassandra is a bit more reserved in the bosom department, but hey, she fights in her undies, so we’ll cut her some slack” (C. Lynch, 2008b).
“Hildegard (Hilde for short), a full armor-wearing knight who wields a long spear for distance attacks and a short sword for close-up stabs. Hilde’s visual design is interesting in itself since she’s so fully clothed!” (R. Smith, 2008f).

“’Huh? Was that a flash of a pink thong I glimpsed beneath that stern swordmistress’s black skirt? Let me try to make her skirt fly up again, just to make sure.’ And suddenly, your opponent is more fixated on your expertly crafted character’s undies than on beating you to a pulp, and you’ve got an edge in battle” (Dun, 2008c).

“Special attention has been given to the physics impact of unsupported bosoms jiggling and flopping with each leap, slash, and thrust!” (R. Smith, 2008f).

“I was swept away by the stunning, hi-res backgrounds and character models. (I believe the more testosterone-fueled gamer would amend that statement to read as ‘stunning, hi-res, scantily clad, undressable-down to their underwear, big-breasted chicks,’ but I won’t delve into that)” (Dun, 2008b).

“She’s [Ivy’s] ready for battle…or something” (Clements, 2008b).

“…Taki, who seems to be, ahem, falling out of one of her two outfits during every battle. As a spectator, that can be a little distracting (and may be a useful tactic in the online battles” (R. Smith, 2008f).

While the preceding articles focused mostly on women as basic sex objects, this overall frame also contains the following four sub-frames: 1) Dangerous Women; 2) Inactive Women; 3) Annoying Women; 4) and Coaxing More Titillation from the Game. With the exception of the Inactive Women sub-frame, most of those categories of portrayals of women did not appear with enough frequency to warrant discussion of them as their own predominant frames. They all, however, fit within the Women as Pinups frame because of the frequency with which these women were portrayed out of context.
from the games in which they appeared, and that will be discussed within each of the following sub-frames.

*Sub-Frame 1) Dangerous Women*

When women were highlighted by the videogame magazines, those women were often shown holding or wrapping themselves around weapons and presenting themselves in both violent and sexually suggestive poses. The women from “Soul Calibur IV,” often pictured with few, tight-fighting clothes, always wielded weapons of some kind. For example, Xianghua and Sophitia each carry swords, Ivy twirls a whip embedded with metal spikes, and Setsuka has a sword hidden up the shaft of her umbrella.

Articles about the game “Devil May Cry 4” often featured NPC women posing with guns, and several writers described the playable avatar riding a giant snake that later transformed into an evil woman/spider he had to fight. Most articles about the game “Fable II” focused on playing the game as a man, but one GameSpot reviewer played the game as an evil woman and snapped screenshots of her walking around with horns growing from her head and wrapping around her face. Articles about “Left 4 Dead,” a survival-horror game that pits the player(s) against hordes of zombies, often highlighted the lone woman fighting alongside the men. *Playstation: The Official Magazine’s* review of “Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots” opened with a two-page spread of four women in full mech-armor and the following caption:

“Brilliantly, this gang of beautiful beasts acts like bosses but don’t necessarily conclude each of the last four of the game’s five Acts. … If you think they look good here, just wait until you see them out of their armor.” (R. Smith, 2008c)
And most articles about the game “Star Wars: The Force Unleashed” highlighted a woman Jedi who is often shown in a bikini top and form-fitting pants and holding two nightstick-style light sabers. While containing few points of reference within the “Women as Pinups” frame, this particular sub-frame is important for the way in which these women are portrayed as and often praised for being sexy women flaunting dangerous weapons.

Sub-Frame 2) Inactive Women

A common activity for the women portrayed in the videogame magazines is inactivity. For example, in *Official Xbox Magazine*’s January, 2008 preview of “Devil May Cry 4,” three women are pictured: two women posing for the camera and an in-game screenshot of Dante talking to “a super cranky lady-snake” (Shamoon & Reyes, 2008), the woman who transforms from a snake into an antagonist who must be killed. The two women posing are cutouts striking poses, and the snake woman is standing and talking. Those pictures are especially noticeable compared to the screenshots of Dante or Nero fighting in almost every other screenshot. Even the single posed shot of Dante shows him with fists raised, striking out toward the camera.

Another example of inactive women is in previews and reviews of the Nintendo Wii game “Animal Crossing: City Folk.” While men (and the occasional woman) are often shown fishing, digging holes, gardening, performing on stage, or catching butterflies, women are often portrayed sitting on the beach, waving, or cutting/styling hair. In articles about the game “Fallout 3,” a post-apocalyptic RPG that allows players
to play as a man or as a woman, men are often portrayed shooting, killing, or interacting with the game’s NPC dog while women are mentioned for their ability to flirt (Eric Brudvig, 2008), their ability to write (Barratt, 2008), or their ability to prostitute themselves (Barratt, 2008). Articles about the game “Left 4 Dead,” while often mentioning the ability to play as a woman and showing pictures of that woman avatar in action, also often defined that woman avatar differently than they defined the men avatars in the game, such as these character descriptions from IGN’s two articles on the game in which the woman is defined by her modesty and the color of her hair, while the men are defined by what they actively do or their job descriptions:

“There’s Zoey, the demure brunette, Bill the grizzled military man, Francis the foul-mouthed biker and Louis the snappy professional.” (Geddes, 2008c)

“There’s Zoey, a young woman; Bill, the grizzled veteran; Louis, the middle-class office worker; and Francis, the biker.” (Ocampo, 2008b)

While men in all of these articles are portrayed through the text and through pictures as performing active roles in the game, women are portrayed just as often posing for the camera or are defined in text simply by their physical appearance.

Sub-Frame 3) Annoying Women

Some people use the discussion of women appearing in videogames as an opportunity to denigrate all women or to express their frustration with women even playing videogames. For example, following a review of the Wii game “Dragon Quest Swords: The Masked Queen and the Tower of Mirrors,” many readers got into a
message-board debate about the merits (or not) of the game. Two of the earliest readers, however, used the forum as an opportunity to somewhat incoherently complain about the Wii’s core audience of casual gamers, which includes many children and women:

“SE [Square Enix] is just trying to rip people off by releasing a half-assed game at full price, because they know Wii userbase is composed of idiots and children.” (FroBro3000, 2008)

“The Wii has sold over five million units. You think all of these are decent gamers? or are they the popcap [sic] loving housewives who used to just sleep with the pool boy but have somehow developed a love of half assed games with pretty colors. I work at a GS [GameStop] and 90% of every Wii shipment we get is bought by women who need it for their 12 year old daughters and sons. Yes, the Wii owners are filled with idiots and children. Because there are more of them. Yes, I do have a Wii. It’s not a personal attack on you..even if it was…who cares… you have Dragon Swords….better go get that helmet. Mommy wants to go shopping!” (Tietsu218, 2008)

Similarly, readers engaged in much discussion regarding the release of Nintendo’s “Wii Fit,” a game in which people are led through various exercises, including jogging, push-ups, and yoga, while being instructed in exercise techniques by onscreen avatars.

Within the first couple hours of the online review being posted at IGN.com, the following exchange took place:

“This is stupid.” (Seba501, 2008)

“Then don’t buy it Seba 501. Get used to it though, there are literally millions of people who disagree with you. The game has sold more than 2 million in Japan alone, and more than million [sic] in Europe if memory serves right. And before you make some comment about the Japanese people, think of this: Japanese have the longest life expectancies, Americans are known for being obese, they [sic] must be doing something right.” (MrMcLargeHuge, 2008)

“stfu [shut the fuck up] seba501 go die” (kewldood313, 2008)
“how dare you Seba501 have your own opinion! god, the nerve! don’t you know silly fangirls are on the rag at this time. unbelievable! seriously people lighten up it’s just one person’s POV [point of view].” (hemlocksage, 2008)

Videogame journalists sometimes express similar attitudes toward women NPCs and avatars who appear inside the games. While playing “Grand Theft Auto IV,” players have an in-game telephone they use to coordinate various aspects of their lives, including dating:

“The phone is also used as an organizer to remind you of critical events (dates with slutty online girls) and can be customized with new ringtones and wallpapers. And just as in modern life, the phone can become a nuisance. Date Carmen and she will constantly be ringing your digits and sending texts checking in to make sure you aren’t sleeping with some other girl. Yes, there are needy people even in Liberty City.” (Goldstein, 2008a)

“Left 4 Dead,” a co-op game in which four playable avatars fight their way through hundreds of zombies, offers players the opportunity to play as either of three different men or to play as a woman. While one interpretation of the woman avatar’s inclusion in the game would be that she allows women an entry point into playing the game, one reviewer instead chose to complain about her:

“Plus, you don’t always get to choose which of the survivors to play as, and someone’s always going to get stuck playing as the girl. Not that there’s anything wrong with that, as the differences between characters are 100 percent cosmetic, but the lack of choice is a bit surprising in a modern game.” (Stapleton, 2008)

While men who appear in these games or who play these games are often portrayed as fully-rounded characters or players, the women who appear in these games (or, in the case of the reader’s complaint, the women who play these games on the Wii)
are described by professional writers and by online forum participants in sweeping generalities as needy, overly emotional, or promiscuous. In a word, these women are “annoying.”

Sub-Frame 4) Coaxing Titillation from the Game

A handful of games articles highlighted opportunities for the player to coax more titillation from the game. For example, in the game “Grand Theft Auto IV,” players have the opportunity to pick up women, including prostitutes, and for their avatars to engage in virtual sex with the NPCs. While the game puts the action off-camera, one writer described how to see more from the encounter:

“Prostitutes are back, and for $20, $50, or $70, they offer various services. There’s no nudity, but if you swivel the camera, it’s pretty easy to see what they’re doing.” (Cohen, 2008)

Following an online review of Nintendo’s “Wii Fit,” one reader posted the following:

“If Zero Suit Samus was on-screen doing the workout with me this would be in the bag.” (InvincibleAgent, 2008)

Zero Suit Samus is a variation on the “Metroid Prime” videogame character Samus, a playable avatar who has battled aliens in games since her debut in the mid-1980s. While normally appearing in full battle armor that completely hides the fact that she’s a woman, the Zero Suit variation shows her in a skin-tight, blue body suit. While the suit first appeared in “Metroid: Zero Mission” (2009b), the Zero Suit Samus variation is also available as an unlockable character in other “Metroid Prime” games. The reader quoted
above is suggesting that Zero Suit Samus would make a better avatar than the two, more realistically portrayed – and more realistically clothed – avatars already available in “Wii Fit.”

![Image of Samus in standard and zero suit armor]

*Figure 4:* The bounty hunter “Samus” from the “Metroid Prime” series of games [L in her standard armor; R in her “Zero Suit Samus” armor].

The game “Soul Calibur IV” is a fighting game pitting one playable avatar against another (or against an NPC in single-player mode). Although many of the women fight in few, tight-fighting clothes (see the preceding “Women as Pinups” section), the game also incorporates a character-creation menu that allows players to create their own characters, including choosing the outfits they will wear:

“Choose your character’s body type (muscularity and “physique,” which really should be called “breast size”), equipment skills, hair color, fighting style, and most importantly, clothing. Yes, you can dress them in bikini type “armor,” and yes, you can change the color to make it blend into the characters’ skin…. Ya’ll go have fun trying to make your characters look naked. I’ll have fun trying to
make the clothing match and look stylish. (Hey, I don’t judge you.)” (Dun, 2008b)

“Fashion is the key to victory. Distract your opponent. ‘Huh? Was that a flash of a pink thong I glimpsed beneath that stern swordmistress’s black skirt? Let me try to make her skirt fly up again, just to make sure.’ And suddenly, your opponent is more fixated on your expertly crafted character’s undies than on beating you to a pulp, and you’ve got an edge in battle” (Dun, 2008c)

“That’s nothing but a minor gripe in a game brimming with great content, including a deep character creator that allowed us to fashion a female fighter wearing only undergarments, a Viking helmet, and a monocle. Just don’t ask why.” (Cabral, 2008)

While it was relatively infrequent that writers discussed how to coax more titillation from the games, it was significant for the fact that it appeared in the research only in discussions of the gamers attempting to see more of the women’s digital bodies, never the men’s, even though those opportunities could also exist, especially in the case of a game like “Soul Calibur IV” that allows players to manipulate the outfits of both the male and female avatars.

Frame 3) “Men Are Real Gamers; Women Are Not”

This third frame demonstrates an attitude most commonly presented by online readers as they posted comments about the reviews or previews of various games, but it also showed up within the text of various articles written by the reviewers themselves. As this frame’s name suggests, an attitude surfaced several times that men are real gamers and women are not. For example, in a review of the Wii game “Madden NFL 09: All Play,” the reviewer wrote the following:
“Madden NFL 09: All Play for the Wii is for the person who thinks ‘Bump and Run’ is an R. Kelly song. It’s for your girlfriend who thinks the tight end is the player that looks best in his uniform pants.” (Thomas, 2008b)

Or, from two readers’ comments following the review of the Wii game “Dragon Quest Swords: The Masked Queen and the Tower of Mirrors”:

“SE [Square Enix] is just trying to rip people off by releasing a half-assed game at full price, because they know Wii userbase is composed of idiots and children.” (FroBro3000, 2008)

“The Wii has sold over five million units. You think all of these are decent gamers? or are they the popcap [sic] loving housewives who used to just sleep with the pool boy but have somehow developed a love of half assed games with pretty colors. I work at a GS [GameStop] and 90% of every Wii shipment we get is bought by women who need it for their 12 year old daughters and sons. Yes, the Wii owners are filled with idiots and children. Because there are more of them. Yes, I do have a Wii. It’s not a personal attack on you..even if it was…who cares… you have Dragon Swords….better go get that helmet. Mommy wants to go shopping!” (Tietsu218, 2008)

Unlike the previous reader’s comments, however, few of the comments in this section specifically targeted women by using the word “women” in their criticisms. Most comments were written by or in defense of “hardcore” gamers and targeted at “casual” gamers. That terminology, however, likely masks a male-vs.-female undercurrent that was blatantly described by Tyler Bleszinski, older brother to Xbox 360’s “Gears of War” developer Cliff “CliffyB” Bleszinski:

“My brother Cliff and I have been into games long before he ever created Gears of War. … But the times, they are a-changing. If Nintendo has its way, young males will no longer be the dominant segment of the console audience--and this transition appears to be happening faster than I expected. … The NPD sales figures since November have been troubling to me as a hardcore gamer who loves new IPs and in-depth experiences. … There have been umpteen stories about the scrappy little Wii wooing non-gamers and bringing in hordes of new converts to
worship at the altar of Mario. … Will games like Halo and Gears of War ever go away? Hell no. But publishers aren't stupid. They're going to go where the majority of the money is and if people want to play the WarioWare mini-games more than the meaty experiences that hardcore gamers love, you're inevitably going to see a corresponding shift in development. … So while the business of the Wii has great [sic] for Nintendo--surprise, surprise--and a handful of risk-takers like Ubisoft, it's thus far been ugly when it comes to the experiences beloved by core gamers like myself. … Some will likely argue that these more casual games are a gateway drug for new users. … I find it hard to believe that something like Wii Play could lead to someone like the little old lady I saw in the store playing Metroid Prime 3. I just don't see it happening. These same people didn't jump into hardcore games before the Wii, but they're suddenly going to do it now because they had some fun playing virtual bowling? I seriously doubt that. She's not going to go from creating a meal in Cooking Mama to saving Zelda. She's never going to defend Sera, guide Reggie Bush into the end zone, or venture into Liberty City. And should the product portfolios of major publishers become a zero-sum game, her tastes will represent a direct threat to my longtime hobby.” (Croal, 2007) (emphasis added)

His language specifically sets up the correlations of “hardcore = male” and “casual = female.” So while overall women make up a sizable minority of the people playing videogames, anywhere from 40 to 42 percent of the total number of videogame players (Brand, 2007; Entertainment_Software_Association, 2008; ESA, 2010; The_Nielsen_Company, 2007, 2009), and while many of those traditionally non-gaming women are being targeted by Nintendo’s Wii (2008g; 2008n), the Wii console itself, the games produced for the system, and the people who play it have become associated with the term “casual gamer,” and the casual gamer is being defined as “women” by self-described hardcore gamers. For example, from an online editorial discussing whether the Wii has anything to offer to the hardcore gamer:

“I'm using the term [hardcore gamer] to describe gamers who expect visuals that punch their retinas into the back of their skull, alongside booming surround sound effects that can shake a building to its very foundations. It's somebody who would much rather frag random strangers over the Net than watch simplistic Mii
characters interact. These gamers spend more on their gaming system, with its multiple HD displays, next-gen consoles and near-sentient PCs, than many small countries turn over in their GDP. They have ‘gaming dens’ and ‘home theatres.’” (Ring, 2006)

And after discussing his time playing with the Wii interface and the game “Wii Sports,” the writer transitioned into what he defined as a hardcore game after sending his girlfriend – ostensibly the one more interested in the casual experience of “Wii Sports” – to bed and putting in a game more to his liking:

“We were soon bored with Wii Sports, so it was time to put the girlfriend into bed and [the videogame] Zelda into the Wii.” (Ring, 2006).

The videogame review site IGN reviewed the Nintendo Wii game “Animal Crossing: City Folk,” giving the game a score of 7.5 out of 10. While the reviewer described it in a couple places as a more casual game, several people posted positive and negative comments in the online forum directed at both the game and the reviewer, mostly depending on whether the particular reader liked the game or not. Two of those posts in particular, however, took direct aim at the people who play the game, the first implying that fans of the game are childish, and the second stating that people who play the game do not play real videogames and do not have standards:

“I loved the GC [GameCube] one. I hated the DS one. I grew up.” (-spikerkid-, 2008)

“stupid wii promotes laziness in game development because it appeals to people who don’t play videogames, and those people don’t have standards because they’ve never played originals” (samiamscogin, 2008).
When the Wii game “Mario Kart Wii” was released, the following comments appeared in written reviews of the game:

“Supposing you’re new to the phenomenon [of the Mario Kart franchise] – hey, this is Wii after all; you might come from that coveted ‘blue ocean’ corner – ‘Mario Kart Wii’, like its predecessors, is a pick-up-and-play racer drenched in Mushroom Kingdom characters and overrun with outlandish track designs. … The concept may seem downright childish as you read about it, but the end experience is both charming and fun.” (Bozon, 2008b)

“Why the wimpy pace [in the 50cc Grand Prix]? It’s likely due to the wheel peripheral – speed and new controls are going to take the precious ‘expanded audience’ time to grasp.” (Castle, 2008a)

The Nintendo exercise game “Wii Fit” produced consternation from some writers and hostility from many online forum participants about the impact of what many considered to be a non-game. Building on the way in which some women were considered annoying by some gamers, as discussed in Sub-Frame 3 above, the fact that those annoying women were playing games that were not really games (as those people defined “game”) also proved how annoying those casual/women gamers really were.

Reviewers:
“Perhaps more than any other game, Wii Fit is likely to appeal to the coveted casual audience. … But for a title that is so geared toward the everyman, it clings onto one hardcore fundamental – unlocking challenges. … That being true, we’re quite sure that players unfamiliar with unlockables will find the undertaking daunting, time-consuming and altogether frustrating.” (Casamassina, 2008b)

“We’re sweating bullets – and we haven’t even stepped onto the board yet. Of all Nintendo’s wacky lifestyle experiments there are none that skirt as close to the game/non-game border as this. … The main sweat-maker? The idea that Nintendo may be resting on their laurels – they’re creators extraordinaire, not in the idea-repackaging business.” (Castle, 2008c)
Online forum participants:

“This is stupid.” (Seba501, 2008)

“how dare you Seba501 have your own opinion! god, the nerve! don't you know silly fangirls are on the rag at this time. unbelievable! seriously people lighten up it's just one person's POV.” (hemlocksage, 2008)

“Wii fit has arrived, bringing the apocalypse of gaming with it. This is it folks, all gaming as we know it is coming to an end.” (thapsyborg, 2008)

“hurray nintendos last first party game of the year. im sure glad i got a wii they have such a strong lineup this year. oh wait no they dont. one of there biggest games was an exercise machine. what a waste of 250 bucks. im not gonna by [sic] this if i want to lose weight i will go get real exercise not pay money to do pushups.” (Guttingham, 2008)

As another example, a reviewer who wrote about the Wii game “No More Heroes,” a violent, third-person action game, commended it as one among very few reasons to play the Wii.

“On a system now home to a ton of uber-casual experiences and lots of ‘me too’ shovelware products, it can be pretty rare to find something made specifically for the more hardcore, mature gamer. Since the very beginning, Wii has had a wrap for being a family console, and while games like Godfather, Scarface, and Manhunt 2 beg to differ, the more serious products out there are still outshined by the wave of Wii Sports clones and Mario Party look-alikes. Well, score one more for the hardcore. No More Heroes isn’t the most polished game out there, and it certainly has its fair share of quirks all around, but it deserves to keep a place in the libraries of the more serious Wii gamers just the same. [Game developer] Suda 51 promised a violent, stylistic spectacle, and he delivered.” (Bozon, 2008c)

This strict division between the “hardcore = male = good” and “casual = female = bad” terminology can also become confusing to the writers when they encounter games that seem to go against what appears to be preconceived notions of what makes a good or
a bad game. Both the preview for and the final review of the Playstation 3 game “Little
Big Planet” blurred that line for the writers as they expressed their growing surprise at
how much fun they had playing what they kept trying to define at different times as either
a casual or a hardcore game – or as a game that was both casual and hardcore at the same
time:

“By the time you read this, you might have already beaten ‘Grand Theft Auto IV’
and you’re close to tearing into ‘Metal Gear Solid 4’ – arguably two of the biggest
Playstation 3 games yet. … [‘Little Big Planet’ is] cute, fun, cooperative – yet still
a platformer.” (2008j)

“It’s fascinating, then, that with each iteration ‘Little Big Planet’ displays features
and functions deeper, more complex, more ‘hardcore’ than its initially prescribed
simplicity. … Were you really expecting to see pole-dancing meerkats? We’re
not kidding. An objective to rescue baby meerkat and return it to momma
meerkat might seem overtly cutesy, but it’s not without danger to your sack boys
and girls. … ‘Little Big Planet’s’ cute style disguises some keen gameplay
challenges. … The speed [of a level in Russia] is intense, and the replayability is
surprisingly subtle as you’ll whizz past fluff that you know you’ll be able to
collect…but how?” (R. Smith, 2008b)

Similar divisions between the “good/hardcore” game and its player and the
“bad/mediocre/casual” game and its player appeared in reviews and online forums about
several other games, including “Go Diego Go,” “Guitar Hero: Aerosmith,” “Saints Row
2” and “Wii Music.” Individual comments and forum posts expressed varying degrees of
sarcasm or even outright anger, but taken as a whole these individual comments amount
to an entire frame through which these games are presented to the audience, a frame that
clearly defines which games “real” gamers (the men) play and which games “non-
gamers” (the women) play.
Frame 4) Focusing on Movie Action-Heroes

Another common frame through which the writers presented the reviews and previews of videogames was by making frequent references to action movies, movie stars, or fame. For example, from reviews of the PS3 and Xbox 360 game “Army of Two”:

“Yet all this is tolerable – fun, even – when you play with a friend. … When you’re in this silly plot together, the annoyances melt into a testosterone-fueled buddy-action movie.” (Amrich, 2008b)

“If Call of Duty 4 is a John McTiernan (in his prime) movie, then Army of Two is a straight-to-DVD Steven Seagal flick – it manages to be almost as entertaining in places, but there’s still a nagging sense that they spent most of their budget on just one helicopter explosion.” (Hamblin, 2008)

References to such film icons as John McTiernan, Steven Seagal, and Quentin Tarantino pepper these articles, and they are frequently presented as positive traits within the games, especially games that the writers otherwise already consider excellent:

“Vault’s quaint 1950s vibe is merely a distraction for the fountains of blood and gleeful amounts of gore that highlight Fallout 3. ‘I think it’s more in the Tarantino fashion, which is to have some fun with it,’ says [Fallout 3 executive producer Todd] Howard. ‘It keeps it almost surreal. All these posters and the music are winking, but when guys die, it’s over-the-top. It’s rendered really nicely, so on some level, it’s believable – but it’s ridiculous. That’s the point.’” (Amrich, 2008a)

Even when no direct reference was made to any one movie, writers still threw in occasional film and action-hero references and plot summaries to remind the readers that particular games were just like being in the movies. For example, from a preview of the PS3 game “Resistance 2”:
“Resistance 2 starts just after the original ended. Nathan Hale, a man seemingly named by machines designed to grind out action movie hero monikers, had fought through the Chimera invasion of Britain. He’d rescued Parker, been abducted and tested on, and had escaped from an alien processing facility after being tainted with an alien infection that enabled him to recharge his health. The single-player campaign ended with him surrounded by sinister masked agents who abducted him by helicopter and flew him to a secret base in Iceland. Thankfully a plot device has been used in which Hale’s chopper is shot down, enabling him to make his way to the United States where he joins up with the American resistance and settles into a special unit of hard nuts known as The Sentinels.” (Johnston, 2008)

Similarly, while not specifically mentioning the idea that a player is starring in his own action film, some writers point out the style without actually making direct comparisons to any particular movies. For example, from the Wii game “No More Heroes”:

“Our hero, Travis Touchdown, is a motel-dwelling, action figure-collecting, anime-obsessing gamer who wins a lightsaber in an online auction and sets off on a mission to become the world’s number one hitman so he can get the girls. From minute one, you’re cast into the thick of the action, where a whistle-stop cutscene brings you up to date on the story so far and a click of the A button drops you straight on the front doorstep of Hitman #10.” (Michael Gapper, 2008)

One particular preview of the Wii game “Rock Band Wii” highlighted people’s desire to be famous, a recurring undercurrent throughout this frame’s obsession with movies and movie stars:

“Hip-hop group Cypress Hill once posed the question, ‘So you wanna be a rock superstar?’ The answer for many – regardless of musical ability – is a resounding yes. And that’s a major reason why developer Harmonix and publisher MTV Games have had such success with Rock Band.” (Cheng, 2008e)

As with the previously discussed second frame (“Portraying Women as Pinups”), this frame contains multiple sub-frames. While the above examples specifically reference the positive aspects related to the writers’ and players’ connections with action
movies, movie-stars, and fame, most of the articles in this frame highlight certain aspects of action-movie behavior. These sub-frames are: “Fun to blow up stuff”; “The Lone Warrior/Soldier”; and “Violence and Humor.”

Sub-Frame 1: Fun to Blow Up Stuff

Recurring throughout many of the previews and reviews of the videogames was the idea that it is fun to blow up stuff, shoot stuff, and use handheld weapons of every variety to hit, hurt, and maim people and things. This sub-frame is placed within the broader context of the “Movie Action-Heroes” frame because many of the references to blowing up stuff occurred within the context of articles that also praised the games for giving the players the perception of participating in movies, including articles about “Army of Two,” “Fallout 3,” “Metal Gear Solid 4,” and “Iron Man.” For example, from a review of the PS3 game “Metal Gear Solid 4”:

“MGS4 operates on so many levels, it’s easy to forget the dumbest of all – as a beautiful-looking, gung-ho shoot-'em-up. On one hand, it’s a game where a likeable, ageing soldier shoots countless enemies in some of the most exciting console action sequences ever; on the other, a meditation on war, society, politics, technology and, well, everything.” (Dawkins, 2008)

Some writers, however, offered abundant, almost joyous, praise for the ways in which the games allowed players to blow up people and things. For example, from articles about the PS3 and Xbox 360 game “Saints Row 2”:

“We also held the [controller’s] right bumper when near a foe, sampling the new hostage-taking mechanic. (Yes, you can execute them or even throw them through a window when you’re done.)” (McCaffrey, 2008g)
Comments like that continue in other articles about “Saints Row 2” (McCaffrey, 2008h; R. Smith, 2008e). Or, from articles about the PS3 and Xbox 360 game “Call of Duty: World at War”:

“Any concerns about World at War being a paint-by-numbers, blood-free, soldiers-who-say-“Golly gee!” Call of Duty cash-in were put to rest in the opening moments of our demo, set near the beginning of the game. Captured by the Japanese following a nighttime raid, you and a fellow soldier are bound and bruised inside a hut looking out at a rainy village. Pressed for information by your ruthless Japanese captors, your compatriot refuses to break. So, as you watch, the interrogator takes his cigarette and extinguishes it in your ally’s eye. Following a blood-curdling scream, the Axis foe asks again and receives the same silence. Mercilessly, the American’s throat is cut, sending an arterial spray jetting from his neck as his lifeless body falls limply to the dirt floor. Just as you’re about to suffer the same fate, the cavalry rides in and saves you, lets loose a profanity or two at your newly dead hosts, hands you a rifle, and the action begins.” (McCaffrey, 2008f)

“’It’s like walking around with a 70-pound bomb strapped to your back’ is how Lt. Col. (Ret.) Hank Keirsey, the longtime military advisor for the Call of Duty series, describes World at War’s most unique and can’t-wait-to-try-it weapon. Because of the flamethrower’s short range (roughly 12 meters, says Keirsey), the soldier wielding it would be flanked by four guys with BARs to protect him. It’ll work this way in the game, too; you’ll (of course) be the lucky bastard that gets to play pyromaniac, while you’re A.I. pals will be the Kevin Costners to your Whitney Houston. It’s dubbed the ‘Blowtorch and Corkscrew’ tactic.” (McCaffrey, 2008f)

“The use of fire figures big. The flamethrower is a particularly effective weapon against spider holes and tree-perched enemies, so [development studio] Treyarch focused on pushing the [game’s graphics] engine to do a realistic job of handling it. The result is an incredibly dynamic flame effect, which actually spreads on an ever-changing wind vector and leaves visible scars on the earth. (Of course, getting this weapon within range will also require quite a bit of strategy; carrying a 70-pound weapon and tank of propane through enemy lines – especially with snipers in the trees – is no mean feat.)” (Shamoon, 2008)
Other examples include the writers heaping praise on the realism and fun, destructive power of the flame thrower, how fun the blood-soaked single-player campaign is, and how effective it is to rush into a firefight with grenades and a shotgun (Butterworth, 2008; Hartup, 2008a; McNeilly, 2008; Ocampo, 2008a)

While those are forthright ways in which the writers highlighted the fun of blowing up things and people, some articles were far more subtle. The game “Sid Meier’s Civilization Revolution,” released for both the PS3 and Xbox 360, features multiple paths to victory as players lead their civilizations from approximately 4000 B.C. to well into the 21st or 22nd century A.D. Players can choose to play the game as one of various ethnicities, including as an American, Russian, Egyptian, or Greek, and the player can choose to pursue victory in any one of four paths, either through military, scientific, economic, or cultural means.

While all of those options are available to the player, a majority of the articles about the game either focused on the military path to victory while giving the other three only slight mention or they completely left out the other three paths to victory. As examples, a preview of the game prominently displayed a general in the only picture shown that contained an avatar (Nelson, 2008); a review of the game begins with the line “World domination comes to those who wait” (Dun, 2008a) and contains two pictures, both of which show armies of soldiers surrounding cities; an article revealing strategies for winning the game highlighted a military strategy in three of the six tips and prominently displayed military tactics in five of the seven pictures (2008c); a reviewer proudly wrote that “Within a few turns, our fledgling Japanese city was razing Barbarian
villages and stomping across the plains in search of new resources and trading partners (whom we quickly betrayed and later destroyed, but we’re getting ahead of ourselves)” (Geddes, 2008a); in that same review, a picture is captioned “For us, diplomacy is a last resort” (Geddes, 2008a); and in a separate review of the game the same writer used one paragraph to discuss the three non-military paths to victory and the following full paragraph to explain how to win militarily:

“There are four ways to win the game – Domination, Technology, Economic and Cultural – each adapted to different play styles. If you enjoy building vast armies and rolling over your neighbors, you'll find plenty of joy pursuing Domination victories in Civ Rev. Each civ has unique fighting units, which helps keep the single-player mode entertaining even after a handful of wins. Joining three units together at the touch of a button creates an army, which receives status upgrades as it wins victories. Destroying an enemy city with a Ninja Catapult Army is right up there among the best feelings in gaming.” (Geddes, 2008b)

While that reviewer acknowledged there are different play styles for different players, this sub-frame shows that many writers prefer to focus on the fun of blowing up people and things.

Sub-Frame 2: The Lone Warrior/Soldier

A second sub-frame emerged within the overall “Movie Action-Hero” frame, and that is that the writers highly praised those games that allowed them to become soldiers, super-soldiers or lone-warrior types of characters. For example, from a review of the PS3 game “Resistance 2”:

“Fortunately, [player avatar] Hale joins the SRPA, a secret governmental agency that deploys super soldiers known as Sentinels into battle. Sentinels are much more than their name implies; these warriors have blood infused with strains of the [alien] Chimeran virus, giving them heightened abilities like super strength
and health regeneration. America will need all of their abilities, because new monsters have been roaming its cities, forests and waterways.” (Haynes, 2008b)

Or, from a preview of the PS3 game “Metal Gear Solid 4”:

“What we played was in the game's opening level, set in some dusty, unnamed town in the Middle East warred over by keffiyeh-wearing militiamen (who all spoke unaccented American English) and high-tech mercenaries from the Praying Mantis private military company. And although you're all probably sick of seeing it by now (since it's been the setting for almost every trailer up to this point), those sandy streets and ruined buildings offer lots of opportunities for hiding, sneaking, fighting and exploration, all of which were a lot more enjoyable than the washed-out look of the place might lead you to believe.” (Reparaz, 2008)

War and combat titles such as “Army of Two,” “Battlefield: Bad Company,” “Call of Duty: World at War,” and the already mentioned “Resistance 2” and “Metal Gear Solid 4” made up a majority of the titles lauded for their ability to immerse players into the world of the military and to allow players to become lone, virtual soldiers. However, one title in particular stood out in this sub-frame because it was not a military-based game. The PS3 and Xbox 360 game “Fallout 3” is a post-apocalyptic role-playing game about a player searching for his or her father in the nuclear wasteland of what was once Washington, D.C. While the game contains many elements of military action games (it is, after all, a first-person shooter), the core of the game is exploration, dialog, the player’s quest to find his/her father, and the ramifications of choices the player makes within the game’s various quests and side-quests. For example, in the first few hours of playing the game, players are given the option of defusing a nuclear bomb sitting in the middle of one of the last surviving enclaves or of detonating the bomb and killing everyone within the city (Barratt, 2008). The game does not reward players for choosing
either option but simply opens up different gameplay choices for the player depending if the enclave and its citizens exist within the game world, a choice that the player must accept and then deal with for the remainder of the game (Barratt, 2008). Player choices such as that are woven throughout the entire narrative of the game, a narrative that continues for over 100 hours of play time (Kelly, 2008).

Many of the articles written about “Fallout 3,” however, focused on the lone warrior – who was also always portrayed as a man – fighting to survive in a hostile land in which the best weapons were improvised ones. For example, one preview of the game began by highlighting the things the player would do by himself, with little or no help from non-playable characters:

“The ruins of Washington DC and the Capital Wasteland can be a daunting place: raiders, ghouls and mutant wildlife roam the landscape looking for victims. The few survivors, leery of outsiders, are potential threats with a careless word or pistol drawn. Even worse for a character that's never seen this harsh world after the nuclear war of 2077, trying to track down your father is like searching for a needle in a radioactive haystack buried in rubble. However, in Fallout 3, players will have the opportunity to explore this post-apocalyptic world, making their fate in a vast, expansive adventure.” (Haynes, 2008a)

As another example, one reviewer discussed the moral quandaries he encountered as a lone warrior making choices in the game:

“Such pressure could make even a good man do bad things. For those who are already bad, it provides the excuse to do great evil and take advantage of the weak. You will have to decide where you fit in this world. … If you haven’t figured it out yet, this is not a game for kids or anybody with a developing moral compass. … The world is filled with twisted people who do nasty things and you yourself are often presented with the option to perform terrible, terrible acts. Several times while playing as an evil character I found the situations so extreme and wholly wicked that I had trouble taking the low road.” (Eric Brudvig, 2008)
As another example, a review of the game highlighted the player’s ability to craft unique weapons out of items found throughout the game:

“Fallout 3’s other combat highlight is the vast, creative arsenal you can deploy. From the devastating mini-nuke launcher to the reliable hunting rifle to the built-it-yourself Rock-It Launcher (it uses environmental junk like bottles, plates, and even teddy bears as ammo), you’re bound to find something you love and cherish.” (Curthoys, 2008b)

While the text of the articles often mentions the things the lone-warrior player will do by himself or herself, the screenshots from the game are striking for the many times in which the lone player is shown fighting – as opposed to all the other things the player can do in the game, including exploring, talking, bartering, thieving, etc. For example, one online preview of the game contains eight screenshots, five of which are the avatar shooting somebody or something, and one of which shows the avatar crouched down with his rifle in front of him as he faces an enemy at the other end of a dusty street (Barratt, 2008), a shot reminiscent of a Western’s high-noon gunfight.

*Figure 5: The protagonist/avatar from “Fallout 3” as he prepares to fight.*
Similarly, the first screenshot from an IGN preview of the game shows the avatar crouched down on a road by himself and staring into the desolate landscape ahead, his rifle held high against his shoulder (Haynes, 2008a), and the prominent screenshot from a *Playstation: The Official Magazine* preview of the game shows the avatar and his dog walking away down a dusty, deserted street (Craddock, 2008), the lone warrior and his faithful companion.

While this sub-frame comprises only six total games previewed and reviewed, the frame is significant for the total number of pages written about these particular games – especially for “Fallout 3,” which was a Game-of-the-Year contender (and winner) in several of the magazines covering it – as well as for the way in which this lone hero/warrior theme figured so prominently in the coverage of the games and the praise given to the games.

*Sub-Frame 3: Violence and Humor*

This sub-frame exists within the overall context of the “Movie Action-Hero” frame because the articles in which it occurred were often the same articles in which the writers praised the games for allowing them to feel like action/movie stars. This sub-frame also bears a striking similarity to the “Lone Warrior/Soldier” and the “Fun to Blow Up Stuff” sub-frames, primarily in the way in which violence and player interaction were praised by the writer, often for the realistic way both were portrayed but also for the amusing effects of that on-screen violence.
Articles that included this sub-frame emphasized how funny violence could be, either by mentioning how the writer or the audience outright laughed at the violence or by lightheartedly writing about a violent moment or about the overall violence within a game. For example, from the PS3 and Xbox 360 game “Saints Row 2,” the writer is amused by the violence he achieves in the game:

“But it was the satchel charges that were the highlight. Blessed with an infinite supply, we spent a good 20 minutes glomming them onto people and other moving cars. We peppered one poor [voodoo-worshipping] Samedi with at least five charges, allowing us to juggle his flaming corpse by detonating the next bomb just as he’d start to descend after being catapulted by the last one. It was oh-so-wrong, but it felt oh-so-sadistically-right.” (McCaffrey, 2008g)

As another example, from a preview of the PS3 and Xbox 360 game “Grand Theft Auto IV,” a writer achieves a spectacular crash with his avatar after a violent romp through the city:

“After throwing Molotov cocktails at Coney Island hobos … and watching beaned-by-our-Bimmer pedestrians go flying as we stole cars and barreled down the sidewalk, we … snagged the Turismo, an exotic sports car. We peeled around a few corners … and then found a straightaway, floored it, and bailed out of our ride, eager to see the new Euphoria physics-driven animation system at work. The result was stomach-churning. We bailed out, all right – directly into an oncoming delivery truck, which tore the open door off the Turismo and slammed its grill into [player avatar] Niko before he even hit the ground, sending him soaring into the air, back onto the side of the street on which we were driving. He careened into the brick building adjacent to the sidewalk, then crashed onto the sidewalk with a horrifying crunch, barely alive (somehow).” (McCaffrey, 2008c)

This mix of violence and humor was also praised in a preview of the PS3 and Xbox 360 game “Devil May Cry 4”:

“For those of us who haven’t followed Dante’s gun-slinging pursuits in earlier chapters, Devil May Cry is known for two things: intense, arcade-style ghoul-
bashing action and goofy, almost slapstick, tongue-in-cheek humor. It’s not for
everyone, but its corny action hero clichés (why else would Dante use a spiked
rose to carve a monolith in the shape of a heart after defeating a hulking boss?)
lend a chuckle or two to the otherwise very serious – and very gory – kill-
everything-sight proceedings.” (Shamoon & Reyes, 2008)

Or, from a review of the Wii game “No More Heroes”:

“Characters are serious in artistic design, but almost cartoon-like in nature, many
of them feeling like they were pulled from top-tier anime productions such as
Ninja Scroll, Cowboy Bebop, or the Animatrix compilation. Of course they are all
original designs by Suda himself, but each one has such an exaggerated style and
mood that it really does feel less like a game, and more like a living comic book.
Cheesy voiceover and script work (perhaps translated poorly on purpose?) tops
off in-game scripted sequences that feel larger than life, again often the reason for
pooling groups of people around our desks. … You'll win battles by the skin of
your teeth, put everything you have into a boss fight that you swear you'd never
beat, and enjoy every second of it. This is where No More Heroes shines.
Between those two main aspects of the game, players will have to decide for
themselves if this is really a game worth purchasing at full price. There's a ton of
hilarious content added to truly make the world come to life, as you'll wander
around Travis's apartment, pet his cat, rent movies to watch on your TV, upgrade
and customize your weaponry, find wrestling masks to learn new grapple moves,
train at the local gym to strengthen your stats, and essentially level Travis up with
new moves and techniques found scattered throughout the world in a GTA-
inspired ‘package’ system.” (Bozon, 2008c)

While this sub-frame comprises only a handful of the total number of articles reviewed
for this research, it is significant for the connection that the writers make between
violence and humor and because articles that contained this sub-frame most often also
contained the movie action hero frame, a frame that did not ever include women as the
action heroes being discussed, whether the game allowed female avatars or not.
Meta-Frame B: Positive Portrayals of Women

While this research shows that a large majority of the articles in these particular magazines that were written about the most popular videogames of 2008 presented either a hostile attitude toward women or completely ignored women as a key demographic, it is also important to note that several of the articles also portrayed women positively in their own right or on a somewhat equal basis with the way in which the men were portrayed in the articles. A writer of one particular article even expressed mild offense at the way in which a woman avatar’s appearance and voice were treated within the construct of the game in which she appeared, “Dragon Quest Swords: The Masked Queen and the Tower of Mirrors.” Beneath a picture of Fleurette, a French magic user who accompanies the player’s avatar, the cutline reads “Inserting a bird’s nest in your hair is all the rage in Paris these days” (VanOrd, 2008), which can be read as a jab at the game’s designers:

![Figure 6: The character “Fleurette” from the game “Dragon Quest Swords: The Masked Queen and the Tower of Mirrors.” Her portrayal in the game was criticized for bad voice acting, a silly looking hat, and her inability to fight with anything but magic.](image-url)
Later in the same review, the writer complains about some of the sound effects in the game, specifically the voice acting done for Fleurette:

“The sound design has a few bright spots, but it too is unpredictable. … The voice acting helps pick things up because most of it is rather good--just be prepared to wince from time to time at the sound of Fleurette's clichéd French accent.” (VanOrd, 2008)

At another point in that same review, the writer complains about the lack of opportunities to make full use of the side characters during battles, including Fleurette, because those side characters are restricted to only casting magic and not to using swords (VanOrd, 2008).

While those comments in defense of a female avatar are almost as forthright as the comments that prompted the five frames previously discussed in this research, most of the equivalent or positive treatment of women by the writers of the articles was far more subtle and was most often expressed in the somewhat equal number of pictures of women vs. the number of pictures of men that accompanied some of the articles; occasional praise for a woman avatar’s special abilities within the game; and the somewhat equal presentation of activities for men and women in the pictures accompanying the articles.

For example, in many of the reviews and previews of the Wii role-playing game “Dragon Quest Swords,” the woman NPC, Fleurette, is shown in screenshots fighting alongside the men and participating with them in cutscenes (Cheng, 2008c; Glasser, 2008; Harrison, 2008; VanOrd, 2008); in previews and reviews of the Wii fighting game
“Super Smash Bros. Brawl,” women are shown in many of the screenshots fighting against each other and against men, and they show up frequently in photographic rosters of the various fighters (Lark Anderson, 2008; Casamassina, 2008a; Elston, 2008; Master, 2008; Sinfield, 2008; Slate, 2008a, 2008b); in the Xbox 360 role-playing game “Fable 2,” the female avatar – while not shown nearly as often as the male avatar – frequently appears in screenshots as she jumps, shoots, runs, and fights, and female NPCs appear quite often in story-related screenshots (Luke Anderson, 2008; Gillen, 2008; Houghton, 2008; McCaffrey, 2008a, 2008b; McShea, 2008a); and in articles written about the Xbox 360 co-op shooting game “Left 4 Dead,” screenshots often show the one woman avatar as she runs and shoots her way through hordes of zombies alongside the three men avatars on the team (Amrich, 2008c; Geddes, 2008c; Ocampo, 2008b; Stapleton, 2008).

Articles written about music games also tended to show screenshots of several women avatars on stage as singers and musicians either by themselves or with male band members, including “Guitar Hero: World Tour” (Amrich, 2008e; Cheng, 2008b; Dean, 2008; Thomas, 2008a); Rock Band Wii (2008h; Cheng, 2008e); Rock Band 2 (Amrich, 2008d; Curthoys, 2008a; A. Kim, 2008b; McCaffrey, 2008e); and Wii Music (A. Kim, 2008a; Thomas, 2008d).

Some writers also praised the women avatars and NPCs in the games for their specific contributions to the gameplay, especially when those women had special abilities that were lacking in the men avatars. For example, the women in “Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures” are praised for their high-jump ability, something the men cannot do (Ramsay, 2008; Roper, 2008; Shea, 2008), and the avatar Willie is also praised
for her “piercing scream attack that can shatter glass” (Ramsay, 2008). In the PS3 game “Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots,” a nanomachine-powered team of NPC women warriors, known as the Rat Patrol, are commended for their timely assistance of the male avatar throughout the game (R. Smith, 2008d). As an alternative reading of that particular text, though, the criticism could be made that the praise is not very praiseworthy when it amounts to “Good assist!”

One particular fighter in the PS3 and Xbox 360 game “Soul Calibur IV” is commended, not for her skimpy outfit like so many of the other women fighters, but for the effectiveness of her armor and for her fighting ability, especially with weapons:

“Hilde is awesome. Her design is fantastic, considering the incredible detail in her armor and the regal style of her wielding both a short sword and a lance. The personality of her character, mixed with her flashy yet effective move set, make her one of my favorite characters out of the whole ensemble. Even after considering all the unlockable characters, I still have to go with Hilde.” (Clements, 2008b)

And one writer included a quotation from a woman wrestler, WWE’s Maria, for his article on the PS3 and Xbox 360 game “WWE SmackDown vs. Raw 2009” (G. Miller, 2008a).

Unfortunately there were far fewer examples of the writers of the articles praising women as avatars or as players than there were examples of the writers being rude to women, putting down women avatars or women gamers, or treating women only as objects of sexual desire or conquest. The articles already cited make up the vast majority of those that were positive toward women in one way or another, notable especially for the ways in which these examples were often far more subtle in their praises than the
aforementioned articles were obvious in their denigrations of women as either avatars or players. Some of the praises could also be considered more paternalistic in nature, much like words such as “the best man in the business” (Anonymous, 1941) were once considered a valid commendation of women in journalism. Those kinds of words carry expectations that women can only do “surprisingly good” work on their own. Overall, the prai ses of women that were presented in the magazines were few and faint.

Meta-Frame C: “Other” Themes

While the two previous meta-frames form a strictly dichotomous presentation of what the writers were discussing about women as avatars or as players when the writers previewed and reviewed the most popular games of 2008, a few frames also appeared frequently enough to warrant discussing within their own rights, even though they were unrelated to the hypotheses proposed at the beginning of this research. The first such “Other” frame is “Snobbery toward other systems.” That frame appeared frequently during discussions of cross-platform games – those that appear on all three systems, the Playstation 3, the Xbox 360, and the Wii – and it almost always involved a writer commending either the PS3 or the Xbox 360 and denigrating the Wii version of the same game – or denigrating the Wii system itself. The second “Other” frame is writers asking the question “What is fun?” This frame appeared frequently in discussions of games that the writers considered to be “casual” or “children’s” games – but that they also said they enjoyed. This often produced written commentaries on the question of “What is fun?” as the writers tried to work out for themselves why a game that was not considered
“hardcore” would be so much fun for them to play. The final “Other” frame that appeared throughout the texts was “Playing dress-up.” This frame involved games that allowed the players to “play dress-up” with their avatars, swapping out clothes, hair styles, and even body types either at the very beginning of the game during the avatar-creation segment or throughout the entire game as new clothes and hair styles were acquired.

Frame 1) Snobbery Toward Other Systems

Writers frequently compared multi-platform games, those games released for multiple systems, with each other to show off the merits of one system’s game over another system’s game, or one system’s controls over another system’s controls, etc. When those comparisons occurred, however, the writers frequently framed the discussions as one of “PS3 and Xbox 360 vs. Wii.” For example, from a review of the Wii game “Madden NFL 09: All Play”:

“On the 360 and PS3 front, another giant leap has been made into the next true generation of Madden, with the new Madden IQ system and a laundry list of over 75 new tweaks and feature upgrades to make sure players are getting the best balling experience out there; and nobody's really stepping up to try and stop them. On the Wii front, things are taking a bit of a different turn, but not one that's overly bold this reviewer's opinion [sic], or one that's out to alienate anyone from the game of football.” (Bozon, 2008a)

Some of the comparisons could be justified based on the specifications of the three machines, most notably the fact that the PS3 and Xbox 360 internal architectures are so similar to each other while the Wii is dramatically different from the other two (Thurrott, 2007). That kind of a discussion, however, may fall under the same categorization as
research that showed men enjoyed comparing the internal workings of hi-fi machines and
their specifications, which would frequently leave out women who were not as concerned
with tearing apart, or even discussing, the internal workings of the machines (Keightley,
2003).

While direct comparisons of the videogame consoles could be justified based on
the internal architectures of the machines, the writers also relied on “hardcore vs. casual”
comparisons that went beyond the machines’ internal specifications, put down Wii-
centered player-avatar creations, the “Miis,” and criticized game-design choices the
developers made that played to the Wii’s strengths. Again, from “Madden NFL 09: All
Play”:

“Play calling has been changed up again, taking pieces from the first Wii Madden
(IR control to call plays) and mixing them with a ‘best of both worlds’ system that
works for the hardcore, and for All-Play rookies; we really do believe that. In fact,
it really isn't all that different from something like the 360's play calling system,
though you're getting a more ‘everybody friendly’ view of it all. … The hardcore
users can still go in there, select plays by type or formation, and find exactly what
you're looking for so All-Play isn't stepping on any toes in the play select section
of the game. Where it does though, is the Mii integration, which will always make
use of the Refer-Miis (with some pretty lame cut-out portraits, rather than on-
screen officials), Madden's Mii, and your own Mii face for all in-game
celebrations and icons. You're not going to shake those in any mode of Madden,
so if that's a deal breaker for you, we'll go ahead and apologize on behalf of EA
right now; it's in there, and it's everywhere.” (Bozon, 2008a)

While the writers couched these kinds of discussions in somewhat moderated
language, reader comments were not as subdued. The following user comments appeared
after the “Madden NFL 09: All Play” review:

“God, the wii is a joke.” (SoCalsFinest1, 2008)
“Let’s get the real madden reviews out for 360, and ps3. (wii sucks wish I never got one [sic])” (halosniperBeggar, 2008)

“Putting madden on the wii is just EA messing around its [sic] all about the 360/Ps3” (daquan3000, 2008)

“I’m gonna get the Xbox 360 version because it will be 100 times better than the wii version. I am tired of all the new games being directed towards the casual gamers.” (Mr_Toilet3, 2008)

Some readers expressed their own outrage at those who would criticize the Wii and its “Madden NFL 09: All Play” game, creating a bit of dialogue on the message board:

“I think [videogame review site] IGN should just get rid of comments. Every article on the Wii site is filled with complaints and biased comments about how the Wii sucks or it’s a joke. It’s fine if you think so, but we don’t need to hear about it.” (Demented_Dude, 2008)

[Following a harsh criticism of the Wii…] “then get the **** off the wii page” (ice-grip, 2008)

[Following “ice-grip’s” above post] “yeah. then get the hell outta here!” (samspuddy, 2008)

Other examples of writers harshly criticizing the Wii and its games include “House of the Dead 2 & 3 Return” for the Wii:

“Ports. By the end of the year, you’ll be able to fill a warehouse with Wii titles transplanted from other platforms.” (Antista, 2008)

The following reviews of “The Incredible Hulk” emphasizes the technical limitations and poor design decisions that went into the Wii version of the game, especially when compared with the PS3 and Xbox 360 versions:
“The bad news for Wii owners is that Edge of Reality perhaps bit off more than it could chew. EOR tried to take the exact same design as on PS3/360 and cram it into the Wii. … Climb to the top of the Empire State Building and you see nothing but a haze below you. While you can destroy every building you see, it isn't all that impressive. SEGA would have been better served to craft a game specifically for the Wii rather than trying to scale down the PS3/360 version. The same can be said of the controls. Rather than making use of the Wii remote, Hulk tosses moves onto buttons and hopes it all works.” (Goldstein, 2008b)

“Hulk and his adversaries are nicely detailed. New York City looks especially great in the PS3 and 360 versions of the game, where the streets are bustling with people and traffic. The insane view distance also lets you sit atop skyscrapers and see forever. Unfortunately (and expectedly), the graphics aren't nearly as impressive in the PS2 and Wii versions. They feature less traffic, weaker explosions, and fog that limits the surrounding view to roughly the end of the street.” (Provo, 2008)

While a discussion of the technical limitations of a game on a particular system are certainly within the scope of a complete and thorough game review, it sometimes came across more as system-bashing than as simple critique:

“From a blind man's perspective, the Wii version of The Incredible Hulk is a mirror image of its Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 counterparts. You control the giant green monster in a free-roaming, fully destructible version of New York City. The repetitive missions and devil-may-care structure make the transition intact, letting you wreak havoc on the streets if you feel like shirking your duty to save the city. Though the core mechanics are identical, what little fun that could be had by mindlessly terrorizing the people of New York has been lost in translation. The rudimentary graphics and cumbersome controls eradicate even the simple joys of causing massive chaos. By trying to cram the same sandbox experience onto a system with far less power, the Wii version loses what little charm The Incredible Hulk had. This abject mess should be avoided by even the most diehard comic-book fans. … The Wii version of The Incredible Hulk is a travesty. What little fun that could be had in the other versions of this game has been destroyed here, only to be replaced with glitchy graphics that won't even let you see the city, unwieldy controls that are neither responsive nor intuitive, and a desolate city that somehow makes destruction boring. Stay far away from this game.” (McShea, 2008b)
Or, from reviews of the Wii game “Iron Man”:

“Unfortunately, indoors or out, Iron Man is not a pretty game. Enemy models and explosions are a half step above two-dimensional, and draw distances for bigger environments are woefully short. … The graphics are most effective when you're flying at high speeds, largely because that's the one time that the pervasive blurriness is actually a positive thing. It's hard to feel like much of a superhero with such lackluster visuals. … Halfhearted pretty much sums up this version of Iron Man. Enough effort was put into the gameplay and graphical design to keep it from crashing and burning, but not enough to inject it with any sort of life or appeal. Superheroes are meant to inspire you to do great things, but Iron Man will barely inspire you to finish the game.” (Watters, 2008)

“This is also a good time for us to mention that the Wii version's controls are a special breed of hellish. You'll learn that early on when you realize that the camera points wherever you aim the Wiimote - which would be fine if you didn't need to shake that same Wiimote in order to punch. See the problem? Add to that a camera that seems determined to take odd swoops at the worst possible time (when you've hit the afterburners, for instance), and you've got a mess. … You'll notice that this version has a lower score than any other version - that's not a typo. It's a reflection of the fact that the Wii Iron Man does everything wrong that the other versions do, but tosses in apallingly bad graphics - we know this isn't a 360, but this is seriously awful - and the gimpiest controls. Iron Man is so jerky to control, he’s totally without grace. Much like the game as a whole, in fact.” (Towell, 2008)

Or, from a review of the Wii game “Sonic Unleashed”:

“Technically, [the player’s avatar, the Werehog’s] acrobatics copy Prince of Persia’s, only the Werehog will release his grip if you take your finger off the button. Pressing the jump button while pressing the grip button? Sega, you're spoiling us with these intuitive controls. Or at least that’s the case when playing with the GameCube controller. We would tell you how it works with the Wii’s waggle tech, but flailing around to fight, climb, swing and open doors hurt our wrists so much that they ended up talking the rest of the body into drop-kicking the remote into the nearest furnace. Hammering the GameCube’s shoulder buttons to fight isn’t much better – our index fingers now resemble two tiny muscular arms – but it had to do.” (Castle, 2008b)
Most of the harsher critiques of the Nintendo Wii and games produced for the system came from the online magazines instead of the traditional, paper magazines. *Nintendo Power* writers might mention a slight preference toward a certain style of control or even a writer’s inclination toward a different version of a game, such as this comment about the Wii game “Super Smash Bros. Brawl”:

“The Wii remote and nunchuk – while cleverly implemented – are a clumsy fit for a series that was designed from the start around a more traditional controller.” (Slate, 2008b)

The harshest criticisms of the Nintendo Wii and of the games produced for the system, however, stemmed from the online message boards where a couple of rude comments would quickly devolve into a flame war between nearly anonymous message board members. For example, from the reader comments section of a review of the Nintendo game “Wii Music”:

“One more nail in the noble Nintendo coffin. I wonder how long before it turns from making games to making toys full-time.” (Diamondis, 2008)

“Maybe their [sic] working back to their roots or something .. eventually turning all the way back to making playing cards.” (Gahmah, 2008)

“And then the digression [sic] of the video game started. Video game apocolypse [sic] anyone?” (thor0997, 2008)

“How ironic would that be. Nintendo causes the very apocalypse it helped avert back in the 80's” (Gatastrophe, 2008)

“lol, This reminds me of these ‘gamers’ i [sic] knew as a kid; they hated games like Metroid because it didn't have a score! Grow up - any real gamer knows exactly how to play this game! Bummer that the learning curve's a little too steep
for these ‘core’ - hahaha. Sorry that Wii Music kicked your ass ;-) I won't tell your friends. (nah, i [sic] probably will)” (applezap, 2008)

“any one notice that half of the games on the Wii are mini-game games?? on the other note this game sucks” (georgeguy, 2008)

Discussions like that appeared often in reader comments sections of the online magazines. While the user names changed from one message board to the next, the discussions tended to read with a fair amount of similarity with one another.

This frame is important to the overall discussion of the treatment of women by videogame magazines and online videogame spaces because the majority of these kinds of criticisms were leveled at the Nintendo Wii, the system that has specifically positioned itself as being for the non-hardcore gamer (2008g; 2008n), the more casual gamer who is more often interested in shorter mini-games and who is more often associated with the women videogame players than with the men videogame players (Croal, 2007). By so frequently criticizing the Wii and its games as things such as “rudimentary” (McShea, 2008b), “cumbersome” (McShea, 2008b), “appalling” (Towell, 2008), “gimpiest” (Towell, 2008), “seriously awful” (Towell, 2008), or “clumsy” (Slate, 2008b), the videogame journalists create a clear delineation between what is good – the hardcore, male PS3 and Xbox 360 – and what is bad – the Wii, its controls, and all of its games that do not fit into the loose definition of what is “hardcore.” The online forum posts by readers were far less subtle, basically stating that anyone who plays the Wii and likes casual games is a fool.
Frame 2) “What is Fun?”

When presented with something that did not fit into apparently pre-conceived notions of what a game should be, either casual or hardcore, some videogame journalists were left to simply ask the question “What is fun?” For example, when the Nintendo Wii game “Wii Fit” hit the market, a game that presents players with a series of exercises that supposedly lead to healthier weights and lifestyles, several writers of previews and reviews of the game expressed dismay at how they should judge it – or whether they were even qualified to judge it since it was not what they perceive as a proper videogame. For example, from a review of “Wii Fit”:

“We’re sweating bullets - and we haven’t even stepped onto the board yet. Of all Nintendo’s wacky lifestyle experiments there are none that skirt as close to the game/non-game border as this. Nintendo’s previous jaunts into the realms of mental and ocular betterment have always had gamey connotations - we cannot, after all, pull homemade eye and arithmetic tests out of thin air. But exercise? That’s free to anyone willing to whang around a few cans of baked beans as impromptu dumbbells. Not only does it sit on the edge of what we understand as gaming, but it challenges our way of life to boot. It states in our contracts that all games must be played slumped in a chair with at least one can of Pepsi within grabbing reach. We’re not part of the National Union of Journalists, but aligned with the National Union of Sitters. In fact, our standing on the balance board elicited gasps from our sister mags’ teams, so shocked were they to see we actually had legs.” (Castle, 2008c)

While that opening to the overall review is peppered with amusing self-deprecation, it does not mask the overall tone of the review, that games are supposed to be “fun,” and this game – if the reviewer is even willing to call it that – is not fun:

“Stepping on and off the board for some step aerobics and boxercise shows more hidden depths, even though these games play like Dance Dance Revolution redesigned for the fun allergic. Problems are more evident in the iceberg tilting penguin challenge and tightrope task. Angling the ’berg to slide your Mii towards fish and teetering to stay atop a wire are both technically fine, but the fun is soon
exhausted. Contrary to popular belief, your face in a penguin costume is only so funny. Difficulty levels add new obstacles, but the skill that wobbled you through the first iteration is rarely challenged. This isn’t to mention the god-awful ‘sit still and stare at a candle’ task, one of the laziest ‘games’ since Ninja Reflex asked us to stare at a pause, sorry, meditation screen.” (Castle, 2008c)

The writer concludes that Nintendo is simply lazy by repackaging an exercise program as a game:

“You can look at Wii Fit in two ways. On one hand it’s a pretty comprehensive selection of exercises, cleanly presented and given a novel twist thanks to the board. Alternatively, you can see it as a series of lacklustre [sic] tasks that beautifully demonstrate the technical abilities of the board, decorated with the silly lifestyle trappings we’re willing to overlook as long as Nintendo keep delivering the proper gaming goods.” (Castle, 2008c)

Other articles were more succinct in their discussions of whether “Wii Fit” was actually a “game”:

“So, when is a game not a game? Well, when it's not fun, probably. Collective sighs of relief then for Wii Fit because, yes, it's fun. That's not to say we’d suggest every single one of you rush out and buy it though. In much the same way you probably already knew whether Brain Training was likely to be your thing prior to release, there's a good chance you've already – accurately – made your minds up about Wii Fit. Wobble board or otherwise, it's firmly in the realms of a – erm – life enhancement tool, which just happens to have Nintendo's amazing propensity for unmatchable polish daubed all over it.” (Wales, 2008)

“Nintendo, a company once focused exclusively on the art of making traditional videogames, is on a health kick. First, Wii Sports, a game that challenged players to get off their couches and make sporty movements to simulate the acts of playing tennis or going bowling. Not exactly a workout, but compared to the level of physical exertion required for most videogames, the bundled title might as well have been mountain climbing. And yet, it was just a baby step when leveled side-by-side against legitimate exercise. That is a point, though, the Big N is hoping to address with the release of Wii Fit, an ambitious and refreshingly different project that is only barely a videogame; here, for the first time, is an effort that could be used as a weight loss and management tool and unlike your recent trip to your
local gym, you might have some fun between the repetitions.” (Casamassina, 2008b)

Several other articles continued with similar discussion, focused on whether doing push-ups was fun, whether “Super Smash Bros. Brawl” is just as much fun as exercise, and whether casual gamers can figure out how to work with hard-core concepts like “unlockable” features in games (Casamassina, 2008b; Thomason, 2008).

While a discussion of “What is fun?” can make some sense when writing about an exercise-based videogame, similar discussions arose in articles about a few other games as well. For example, from a review of the PS3 baseball game “MLB 08: The Show,” the writer expresses his frustration that the game was too much like real life and therefore not fun enough to continue playing:

“Eventually, frustrated at having played every at-bat in more than 130 games (including spring training), we simulated the rest of the season and got called up [to the major leagues] on the last day because of an injury, but we didn't get an at-bat. Going into the next spring, we declined our option because we were making only $30,000 a year and wanted some more cash. We went back to camp with the Cubbies, and after simulating spring training, we found ourselves back in AA. Yes, this is a somewhat plausible situation in real life, but people play video games to escape from the everyday grind, not to experience more of it.” (Thomas, 2008c)

Here is another discussion of fun from a preview of “Animal Crossing: City Folk,” an everyday-life sim for the Nintendo Wii:

“The original Animal Crossing proved to gamers that you don’t need to save the world or rescue the princess to have fun – you can have a blast just decorating your home, designing new fashions, buying furniture, looking for seashells, catching bugs, or simply relaxing with friends during a holiday get-together.” (Cheng, Hoffman, & Thomason, 2008)
One particular game, “Little Big Planet” for the PS3, produced quite a bit of discussion about the nature of “fun” and its relation to videogames. A platform game at its core, “Little Big Planet” is about far more than jumping around the screen and collecting items; players are encouraged to interact, play co-operatively, create their own levels, and then upload those levels to play with other people around the world. While not a new concept in gaming, it is one of the most successful games at implementing the formula, and it prompted one writer to begin his entire review with a discussion of “fun”:

“What is fun?” Good question. A very, very good question to ask if you’re working in the game space. Of course, it’s been oft-asked and seldom satisfactorily answered. But it formed the basis of new studio Media Molecule’s pitch to get their creative game concept signed, funded, and ultimately published.” (R. Smith, 2008b)

Later in the same article, the writer seemed amazed at how much fun he had with such a seemingly simple game:

“It’s fascinating, then, that with each iteration Little Big Planet displays features and functions deeper, more complex, more ‘hardcore’ than its initially prescribed simplicity. … Manipulating the character’s arms using the Left and Right triggers, moving the head around with the Sixaxis control (now with added hip controls, so you can shimmy from the waist) was a simple joy in itself. Jumping through the English Garden level, collecting the world’s currency of sponge (if you felt like it), grabbing objects (and each other) in four-player co-operative fun-ness caused gamers of all ages and stripes to grin like kids. I know, because I was one of them, beguiled by its simple charms.” (R. Smith, 2008b)

The idea that a “cute” or a “children’s” game – possibly even a “casual” game, although that term was not used to describe “Little Big Planet” – could be so much fun seemed a revelation to other writers as well:
“It’s easy to presume that with all of Sony’s hype, LBP [Little Big Planet] is a game solely for closet level-architects and game-builders, but with just the content on the disc, Little Big Planet is already a bumper-sized chunk of fun. Once you crack into the online space, LBP becomes a game without end – often one of dubious quality – but an endless game nonetheless. … Even if nobody buys it, the file servers remain empty, and the co-op space stays a barren wasteland, it’s still a rock-solid platformer with enough levels and fun to justify your money. If you loved LEGOs and never lost that love for building and creating, you’ve got a lifetime of experimentation and play ahead of you. And if, as we suspect, the world falls in love with it, LittleBigPlanet is absolutely the best game on the PS3, the best game of 2008 on any console, and the best toybox you’ll ever get to play with.” (Mike Gapper, 2008)

“There’s nothing quite like Animal Crossing’s chilled-out, surprisingly addictive and potentially endless non-game gameplay. Having felt compelled to play the DS version, Wild World, almost every single day for the better part of three years, we can confirm that the only surefire way to break a chronic Animal Crossing habit is to take the cartridge on holiday and lose it.” (2008a)

Other games that the journalists seemed surprised to find fun included “Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures,” “Kung Fu Panda,” and “Animal Crossing: City Folk” (Cheng, 2008d; Kitts, 2008; Roberts, 2008; Shea, 2008)

As with the previous frame, “Snobbery Toward Other Systems,” this frame remains significant to the overall discussion of videogame journalism because of the writers’ expressed attitudes toward games that do not fit within their apparently preconceived notion of what is a good game, or what is a “fun” game, namely one that is considered “hardcore.” If supposedly casual games are repeatedly described as “surprisingly” addictive (2008a), “classic non-games” (Kitts, 2008), “good alternatives” to other, more interesting games (Roberts, 2008), “entertaining enough” (Shea, 2008), “silly” (Roberts, 2008), “of dubious quality” (Mike Gapper, 2008), or “deeper, more complex, more ‘hardcore’” than originally thought to be (R. Smith, 2008b), then it
becomes clear that little is expected from the casual games, that they are forever to be relegated to second-best. If a game is described as being “of dubious quality” but is still enjoyable to the reviewer, then that writer must ask “What is fun?”

Furthermore, words do not even have to be said to show that some casual, more family-friendly games are not fun in the minds of the professional writers. “Go, Diego, Go! Safari Rescue,” based on the children’s television show, was one of 2008’s top-selling games on the Wii that featured a male-only protagonist, but there was only one review of the game uncovered for this research (Hatfield, 2008), and that review was not even in Nintendo’s own magazine, *Nintendo Power*. According to VGChartz.com, “Go, Diego, Go! Safari Rescue” sold over 182,000 units in 2008 (2008m). While that sales figure may not be spectacular in terms of overall videogame sales, “Go, Diego, Go! Safari Rescue” sold only 3,000 fewer units on the Wii than “The Incredible Hulk” (2008m), a game that was reviewed by all three websites and by *Nintendo Power* magazine – even though none of the reviewers said the game was of very high quality (Cheng, 2008a; Goldstein, 2008b; McShea, 2008b; Provo, 2008). As another example, “Sega Superstars Tennis” was one of the top 10 bestselling games on the Xbox 360 in 2008 that featured both male and female avatars, selling over 1.2 million units (2009d), but the game was never previewed or reviewed in 2008 by *Official Xbox Magazine*. By comparison, “Devil May Cry 4,” which sold 400,000 fewer units in 2008 (2009d), received a three-page preview in *Official Xbox Magazine’s* January issue (Shamoon & Reyes, 2008) and a two-page review in *Official Xbox Magazine’s* March issue (Nutt, 2008). Even a game like “The Incredible Hulk,” which received mediocre reviews, could
be perceived as more “fun” than a game that received no reviews, such as “Go, Diego, Go! Safari Rescue,” simply on the basis of which games were covered and which games were not.

*Frame 3) Playing Dress-Up*

An interesting frame that appeared in a small number of the articles about videogames is the idea that it is fun to play “dress-up” with one’s avatar. While research has shown that gender differences in play activities are highly influenced by societal norms (Eliot, 2009), popular-press notions of gender state that there are girl preferences and boy preferences (Eliot, 2009; Shapiro, 1990), and that playing dress-up with dolls is distinctly a girl preference (Block, 1984; Shapiro, 1990). Most people learn from society what is expected of them as men and women, and most people adhere to those gender expectations (J. T. Wood, 2007). As boys and girls grow up, they typically learn, both consciously through books and play and subconsciously by simple observation and repetition, which behaviors are “boy” behaviors and which are “girl” behaviors, and they will even rebel against those behaviors that do not adhere to their perceptions of proper gender roles (Brooks-Gunn & Matthews, 1979). “Girl” behaviors that have been observed in research settings often include imitative and dress-up behaviors such as doll playing and dressing up like other people (Block, 1984).

It is intriguing that avatars, which could be perceived as nothing more than digital dolls through which the players interact with an imaginary world, were so much fun for
the writers to dress in different digital clothes. For example, from a review of the PS3 and Xbox 360 game “Grand Theft Auto IV”:

“You can also save between missions at any one of your safe houses across the city, change clothes there, and even watch TV….” (R. Smith, 2008a)

Or, from articles about “Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six: Vegas 2”:

“This character will actually be fully customizable with both male and female gender options, which means you can go all GTA [Grand Theft Auto] and send your elite terrorist-killah [sic] onto the strip sporting a tank top and chaps (no word on pink Mohawks just yet, but we’ll keep you posted).” (C. Lynch, 2008a)

“Instead, you'll obtain new pieces of armor and camouflage as you earn new ranks. Just as that golden desert eagle in Call of Duty 4 is the mark of a player who's put a lot of time into the game, you'll know you're up against a pro in Vegas 2 if you see someone with night-vision goggles on. The highest rank will actually allow you to create custom camouflages for your character.” (Rorie, 2008)

Even when other features of a game were being criticized, a dress-up option was considered a bonus to a game, such as this comment from a review of the PS3 game “WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2009”:

“The tried and true create option is back, but it's pretty much the same thing we've been seeing year after year -- which is a good thing in terms of the ability to manipulate face and body parts as well as the massive amount of clothing options (26 jackets, 50 tops, 43 bottoms, 37 boots/shoes, and a whole lot more) but bad in terms of the old problems this series can't seem to shake.” (G. Miller, 2008b)

The idea of “dress-up” even goes so far as dressing up the avatar in different faces and body types, such as this comment from a review of the Xbox 360 and PS3 game “Saints Row 2”:
“The character creation tool is quite extensive. You can drastically change the weight and age of your character, pick from four different races, mold facial features in whatever manner you desire, and even choose if you want a male or female protagonist. With only six different voices to choose from, it can be difficult to accurately match one to whatever look you happen upon, but it's a small price to pay for the wealth of creative options. You can visit a plastic surgeon at any time to tweak your features, but the process is so in-depth, it's easier just to choose a look at the beginning and stay with it.” (McShea, 2008c)

Similar references to dressing up player avatars showed up in discussions of games such as “Fable II,” “Fallout 3,” and “Rock Band 2.” While this was not a frame prevalent in the vast majority of articles, it was noted specifically because of the popularly held stereotypical gender bias associated with the idea of “playing dress-up,” something that the researcher found surprising in discussions of games that would likely otherwise be considered “hardcore/male” games, and because this aspect of the gameplay was always considered by the professional writers to be positive. No writer ever discussed “dress-up” as a negative aspect of a game, and no writer ever called it a “casual” or a “girl” feature of a game. Charitably, this could be considered a step forward in gender equality regarding play activities that are open to men and women, but it could also be perceived as the writers appropriating an activity and recasting it as male-only within the sphere of “hardcore” games. It is beyond the scope of this research to focus more in-depth on this particular frame, especially since it showed up so infrequently in the overall scope of the articles analyzed, but it is an area in which more gender research could be conducted.
CHAPTER 5: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Overview

During the course of the in-depth interviews, four areas were discussed at great length by the journalists. Those areas were the following: the definition of “hardcore” vs. “casual” gamers and games, including the influence of women on the videogame market and on the reporting of the games; the differences between videogame journalism and other forms of journalism, as well as various definitions of exactly how to define videogame journalism; exploitative portrayals of women and discriminatory portrayals of minorities by the videogames themselves and the subsequent reporting (or lack thereof) by the videogames magazines; and the influence of public relations personnel and corporate pressures on the articles the journalists write. Each of those areas will be dealt with individually.

Furthermore, because of the unique findings from the first half of this research regarding potentially gender-biased portrayals of games that contain the functionality to dress and undress avatars – creating a “virtual doll” – the researcher questioned each subject on that topic, and the results, while dealing with a limited total of the overall number of released games, will also be discussed.

Interview Guide and IRB

As discussed in the Method chapter, the researcher put together an extensive interview guide to use while conducting the in-depth interviews. The guide contained 41 distinct questions divided among four different categories, sometimes with branching
paths within each question or category that allowed subjects to take their responses in different directions. The interviews averaged approximately 50 minutes each, with the shortest taking approximately 35 minutes and the longest taking approximately 95 minutes. The length of the interviews was determined by the participants and by the responses they gave to the questions. Two participants stated before beginning the interview that they could only grant 30 minutes of time for the interview – even though their interviews still went longer – and the researcher asked those two subjects as wide a variety of questions from as many categories as the subjects were willing to take the time to answer. The remaining subjects spoke for as long or as short a time as they preferred, and they did not request condensed interviews nor did they ask to stop the interviews early. As much as possible, the researcher strove to ask the interview questions in the same order with each subject. Some subjects, however, answered multiple questions at once while completing their answer to one question. In such cases, the researcher pursued the additional questions related to the source’s chosen topic until such time as the interview could be comfortably returned to the researcher’s chosen topic of discussion. All attempts were made at keeping the interviews conversational in nature for the comfort of the sources while still remaining true to the layout of the interview guide. The subjects were told they could stop the interview at any time and for any reason, but – besides the two sources who requested the shortest possible time for the interview – no source asked to stop the interview before its natural conclusion.
Journalists’ Perceptions of “Hardcore” vs. “Casual” Games/Gamers and of Women in Gaming

Although the terms “hardcore” and “casual” were shown in the first half of this research to be used often in articles, letters and online forums to define different sets of gamers, including Tyler Bleszinski’s assertion that hardcore gamers were men and casual gamers were women (Croal, 2007), the journalists themselves had difficulty defining the two terms. When discussing hardcore gamers, some journalists said those gamers were the ones who treated gaming like a hobby (Anonymous, 2010d, 2010e, 2010i). Other journalists, however, when defining a casual gamer, also said that casual gamers were people who treated gaming as a hobby (Anonymous, 2010g, 2010i, 2010k) – leading to more of a confusion about the true definition of the word “hobby” than to any serious definition of either a hardcore or a casual gamer.

Journalists often perceived hardcore gamers as the people who bought multiple videogame titles every month (Anonymous, 2010a, 2010i, 2010k); who bought those games before most other people bought those same games (early adopters) (Anonymous, 2010c); who treated the games as if those games were jobs or vocations, meeting other people online at certain times and spending a certain number of hours each week to accomplish certain tasks in the games (Anonymous, 2010d, 2010e, 2010i, 2010m); or who took pride in their knowledge of sometimes trivial details regarding the games (Anonymous, 2010g, 2010h). While two journalists said that most hardcore gamers were men (Anonymous, 2010d, 2010o), no one used the term “hardcore” to define male gamers, and two journalists pointed out professional women’s organizations Frag Dolls
and PMS Clan that employ or recruit women gamers who professionally compete in videogames as proof that the term “hardcore” did not have to mean men (Anonymous, 2010b, 2010m).

The journalists defined casual gamers as the people who played videogames just to have fun, to pass the time or who played games when they were bored (Anonymous, 2010d, 2010e, 2010g, 2010k, 2010m). Casual gamers were the people who preferred smaller, more easily accessible games with simpler rules and a more often-repeated gameplay mechanic (Anonymous, 2010d, 2010f, 2010h, 2010i, 2010j, 2010l). An example of that kind of simple gameplay mechanic is the straight lines, predictable patterns and simpler rule set employed in a game like “Plants vs. Zombies,” in which rows of plants shoot at shambling rows of approaching zombies (Anonymous, 2010j), or the accessible approach to farming that is put forth in the online game “Farmville” in which seeds are planted, crops are harvested, and farms are expanded (Anonymous, 2010e, 2010h, 2010o).

Unlike the definition of a hardcore gamer, more journalists seemed comfortable applying gender-based definitions to the term casual gamer, more often portraying the casual gamer as a woman than as a man (Anonymous, 2010e, 2010f, 2010h, 2010i, 2010k), including this comment from one journalist who saw clear delineations between the types of games enjoyed by the different types of gamers:

“The Sims or Farmville has more appeal to women than to men who like to blow things up and kill people and race cars – more visceral action. That’s a stereotype, and I have no stats to back that up, but I’m certain there’s some element of truth to that.” (Anonymous, 2010f)
While that “casual=women” definition was hinted at by various journalists’ use of the term casual gamer, most journalists expressed strongly negative reactions to the phrase “a casual gamer is always a woman” when that phrase was presented to them by the researcher as something said by some other source, either by a fellow journalist or by an average gamer. That someone else might define a casual gamer solely as a woman gamer was declared to be an outdated definition (Anonymous, 2010a) that “speaks to the immaturity of the author” (Anonymous, 2010a); a ridiculous and outdated definition (Anonymous, 2010d); “insanely absurd and sexist” (Anonymous, 2010g); “stereotyping” (Anonymous, 2010i); “immature” (Anonymous, 2010k); and “bullshit” (Anonymous, 2010m). As one journalist succinctly described it, “The association that women don’t play anything more complicated than that is kind of insulting” (Anonymous, 2010l).

While the journalists could put forth no standard, consistent definition of either a hardcore or a casual gamer, their definitions of a hardcore or a casual videogame were much more consistent. Hardcore games were described as those games that incorporated complicated gameplay mechanics and nuanced rules; that required the player to learn new skills to beat or begin playing the game (Anonymous, 2010d); that contained more depth to the overall game or were more completely immersive and satisfying experiences (Anonymous, 2010f, 2010l); and that contained richer graphics and pushed the technological limits of the home consoles on which they were being played (Anonymous, 2010f, 2010j). A couple journalists even stated that hardcore games were the games primarily targeted at men (Anonymous, 2010d, 2010m).
Casual games, however, were the games that were easily accessible, easily controlled, and easy for anyone to pick up and play with few instructions, and they could be completed – or, at the very least, one level of the game could be completed – in fewer than 15 minutes (Anonymous, 2010e, 2010h, 2010j, 2010l). While casual games were not necessarily targeted at women, women and children were seen as the people who most often played casual games (Anonymous, 2010e, 2010i, 2010k, 2010m, 2010o). Several journalists, however, pointed out that a casual game did not necessarily exclude men (Anonymous, 2010c, 2010d, 2010g, 2010h, 2010i, 2010j). One journalist explained that he believed the appeal of the different games was related to the way men and women interact with the world because of their different biological makeups:

“[Hardcore and casual games are] different, and [they are] aimed at different people. The hardcore stuff is usually aimed at the man because we’re more the brutes of the world…and the woman is more soft like a flower, like a dove, more gentle, so that [type of game] appeals more to them.” (Anonymous, 2010m)

Some games were also described as both hardcore and casual, as appealing to both the hardcore and casual gamer. Music and rhythm games such as those in the “Guitar Hero” series were described as both casual and hardcore (Anonymous, 2010f). While the journalist who mentioned that game did not cite specific examples of what made “Guitar Hero” both a hardcore and a casual game, he explained that games like “Guitar Hero” were a great way for parents and children to bond (Anonymous, 2010f), implying that the dividing line between the terms hardcore and casual might be age-based.
The game “Peggle,” in which a ball is shot from the top of the screen and bounces its way to the bottom of the screen, clearing pegs as it falls down, was also cited as a game that was both casual and hardcore (Anonymous, 2010l), although the journalist who cited that particular game had trouble articulating exactly why it was both casual and hardcore except that everyone, including his mother, also played the game “Peggle”:

“You think of casual gaming, and you think of simple things like Peggle or Bejeweled. But if we’re going to stick with labels, I think that falls into the hardcore category. That’s something my mom plays, and she’s pretty into videogames. She plays complicated stuff too. The association [of the term ‘casual gamer’] with women I find really strange because it’s something that everybody does – everyone plays Peggle and Plants vs. Zombies – and I think the association that women don’t play anything more complicated than that is kind of insulting.” (Anonymous, 2010l)

Overall, the journalists seemed to have great difficulty defining the terms “hardcore” and “casual” as they pertained to either the videogames or the people who played the games. The videogame industry was described as being “Janus-headed” (Anonymous, 2010h), or two-faced, about the terms because the industry both created the terms and now mocks people who fall into one category or the other. The terms were described as a way for videogame marketers to make games more appealing to people who did not previously play videogames (Anonymous, 2010h, 2010k). And they were described as labels people use to describe how much they care about videogames:

“If anything, I think it becomes a keyword for how much do you care. If you’re not hardcore, it means you don’t care that much, you don’t care as much as me.” (Anonymous, 2010h)
While no one could succinctly define the terms, every journalist offered opinions about what was a hardcore or a casual game or a hardcore or a casual gamer, many times offering examples of specific videogames that fit into one category or the other.

The most often repeated, common thread running through the journalists’ attempted definitions of “hardcore” and “casual” was the idea that the terms were actually created by the games producers and publishers, not by the journalists or by the gamers (Anonymous, 2010a, 2010c, 2010d, 2010e, 2010h, 2010i, 2010k, 2010m), and that the journalists had not done enough to evaluate those terms or to critically analyze them – but that the journalists had simply adopted the terms without any thought as to the terms’ literal definitions or their actual usage by the gamers:

“I mean some of the most interesting attempts [to get women into gaming] have been to say girls can play hardcore games too, you know. [Game developer and publisher] Ubisoft’s [professional game clan] Frag Dolls is a great example of that. ‘Look, cute young women who like to play first person shooters.’ And again this is so much driven by the industry in an attempt to kind of define these infinity groups that people can fall into. I think journalists have reacted to that and willingly been implicit in the creation of these categories. I don’t see any of these categories really ever having been considered by a journalistic concern.” (Anonymous, 2010h)

The results of this particular line of questioning seem to imply that the videogame journalists are not doing enough to critically analyze the ways in which they are defining videogame players and the ways in which they are portraying the videogame industry through their magazines, websites, and articles. While this research has shown that the terms are being thrown around in articles, letters, and online forums, the journalism professionals who should know the most about the industry do not have a clear understanding of the terms or how they should be used, or even if the terms should be
used at all. In the absence of any clear definitions presented by the journalists, the terms become almost meaningless when used in the journalists’ articles, or, even worse, take on the meanings that have been proclaimed by the loudest people.

According to the journalists, the definitions come from games developers and publishers (Anonymous, 2010a, 2010c, 2010h, 2010k, 2010m). According to information gathered from the first half of this research, the definitions of the terms presented by the journalists in casual usage in articles or in photograph captions are fairly unambiguous regarding who are hardcore or who are casual gamers and what kinds of hardcore or casual games are enjoyed by different groups of people. Casual games were those games that appealed more to women and children, and they were the casual gamers. The journalists do not agree among themselves, however, on any standard definition of the “hardcore” and “casual” terms, and therefore those definitions are likely coming from either the journalists’ own attitude toward games and gamers or definitions they hear from the videogame publishers and developers.

Games Journalism vs. Other Forms of Journalism

The journalists were asked to describe their work as videogame journalists and to compare their work to that of journalists working in other fields, such as sports reporting or hard-news reporting. They were also asked to describe their backgrounds as journalists, such as how they got into the field and whether they were professionally- or academically-educated as journalists, and how they perceived the future of games journalism.
Most of the journalists interviewed were not journalism majors in college. While two people said they majored in English literature or in writing (Anonymous, 2010c, 2010k) and one said he had a minor in journalism (Anonymous, 2010e), the other people who went to college had majors in fields as near to journalism as new media and political science (Anonymous, 2010e, 2010j, 2010l) and as far as landscaping (Anonymous, 2010d). Most of the journalists interviewed had never worked professionally in journalism prior to doing videogame journalism, but a few had worked for newspapers in Denver, Tucson, and New York City (Anonymous, 2010g, 2010h, 2010o). Several of the journalists interviewed said they had written videogame review articles in high school or college to earn money, to gain publishing credits, or simply because they thought it was fun to write the articles (Anonymous, 2010a, 2010b, 2010d, 2010j, 2010l). While most of the videogame journalists interviewed were making a full-time living doing the work, some said there was not much money to be made in the field, and one said that he only made enough money from his freelance writing to take his wife out to dinner once a month (Anonymous, 2010j).

Coming from these varied backgrounds, the journalists expressed equally varied definitions of what it meant to be a “videogame journalist.” While a few of the journalists interviewed said that videogame journalism is similar to other forms of journalism (Anonymous, 2010a, 2010c, 2010m, 2010n), their expressions of that similarity were quite different. One writer compared the similarities based on the end result of the reporting:

“Video game journalists have tried to say that what we do is different. And it’s not; it’s finding out a story. It’s hopefully verifying that story, which, with some
of the blogs out there that’s not necessarily part of the practice, but I think that’s true of blogs of any nature. Whether it’s videogames, politics, or anything like that, it’s delivering the news to readers. There are reviews, of course, previews, but those are things that I think you find in pretty much any form of entertainment journalism these days.” (Anonymous, 2010a)

Another journalist compared the similarities based on the process of gathering the information and presenting the writers’ opinions regarding the products:

“For me I think it’s closest to like entertainment writing or entertainment, where, you know, the people are covering movies. The more investigative work and more kind of hard-line writing as far as the different entertainment mediums. For the most part it’s very product-based or personality-based or kind of event-based as opposed to paper journalism or investigative journalism where they cover different angles to make the story. You come up with the story, you find the angle, and you investigate.” (Anonymous, 2010c)

One other journalist said that videogame journalism was similar to other forms of journalism because it adhered to similar ethical structures of journalism such as information gathering and an adherence to facts instead of opinions:

“Videogame journalism is real journalism. It is not press release regurgitation. It is not fanboy rant. There’s enough work out there that is either philosophically investigative or factually investigative…that this shouldn’t even be a question.” (Anonymous, 2010e)

Similarly, another journalist compared videogame journalism to what he called “enthusiast journalism” similar to journalism focused on outdoor recreation and boating (Anonymous, 2010n), and another journalist said that all journalism is about capturing the audience’s attention with immediate, accurate information, and that aspect made videogame journalism similar to other forms of journalism:

“It’s not really too much different because I see a lot of similar tactics. Everyone wants their shock value. If I have a journalist wanting to get the scoop first, get it
out there. A journalist is a journalist no matter what the industry is. A journalist is a journalist. You want to get the news, get quality news, be the first to get it out there. And if you’re not the first, you want to be the best, no matter what the topic is.” (Anonymous, 2010m)

While those journalists saw the similarities, however, several other journalists said that there were so many differences between videogame journalism and other forms of journalism that the two were almost different professions – if videogame journalism could even be called a profession. Some videogame journalists were said to have entered the profession simply because they wanted to receive free games (Anonymous, 2010a, 2010f, 2010h), and a few of the journalists interviewed said that they happened upon the profession when they were just looking for something to do next and not necessarily looking for a career (Anonymous, 2010b, 2010c, 2010j, 2010l, 2010m).

Videogame journalism was seen as dissimilar to other forms of journalism because of videogame journalism’s reliance on the product reviews and previews and because of a lack of overall depth to the writing (Anonymous, 2010a, 2010c, 2010e, 2010g, 2010i, 2010o). Too often, the journalists said, videogame writers use the term “journalist” as a label to describe themselves when they are doing nothing more than blogging to a larger audience (Anonymous, 2010a); covering the immediate news and long-term trends instead of launching in-depth investigations such as the Watergate investigations (Anonymous, 2010c, 2010f, 2010l); or when the journalists themselves are too young, too uneducated in journalism or too inexperienced to produce quality journalism (Anonymous, 2010a, 2010k). One journalist summed up the lack of experience in videogame journalism overall:
“Let’s just be practical about the demographics about game journalism today. Seventy-five percent – I’m making up the stuff off the top of my head – but 75 percent of people that are writing about games, whether they are getting paid to do it or not, whether they’re writing for a giant website or whether they’re writing for their own little website, whether they’re on a press list or not – but 75 percent of people who are writing about games weren’t writing about games five years ago, don’t have any background in journalism writing. They just decided they’d write about games because they could. So 25 percent maybe have any practical claim to a professional background, and when the professional background is [that the journalist] came up through more traditional outlets, writing for magazines or newspapers, whether they actually went to journalism school, whether they’re actually a professional game journalist outlet now, whether it’s Game Informer, whether it’s Kotaku, or whether they’re writing a column for their local newspaper so they’re actually getting some professional guidance from people who actually have a professional background. And in that 25 percent, most of those folks, they probably haven’t been doing it for more than 10 years. There’s not a lot of people who have been around a long time; most of the people who have been around writing about games for more than 10 years are gone.”

(Anonymous, 2010h)

The source went on to explain that most of the more qualified journalists left videogame journalism because of a sense that the readers were too immature and that the readers were too focused on the games reviews and on the impending feature sets of upcoming videogames to read about anything more in-depth (Anonymous, 2010h). A lack of journalistic training among the videogame journalists themselves and a reliance on videogame publishing companies for all their information were cited as faults within the profession:

“I would make the claim that video game journalism is the most pure expression of contemporary journalism for the simple matter that it grew up in the middle of the internet. It never really had established roots prior to the internet and so in a way it’s been very quick to respond to all the various influences internet has brought about that have torn newspapers apart, have torn political reporting apart, that have torn apart the traditional news organ. So to that end you’ve got this broad continuum of smart, non-professional writing on one end all the way up to more professional looking, kind of like online journalism and then back on the amateur. You also have a whole lot of stuff that I would equate to poor
journalism. But it is unbelievably dedicated, where people are turning time into product and there’s a lot of these sites that really don’t produce any interesting criticism, don’t produce any interesting reporting, aren’t really very well written, but they’re so consistent in producing that they exist and they’re kind of this mirror of [videogame news and review websites] Kotaku or of Joystiq or of Rock-Paper-Shotgun. You end up with this crazy mix of stuff, and as a result it’s difficult to characterize a journalist attitude because a journalist attitude ranges across the levels of professionalism, experiences, and orientation. But that being said I really [believe] that one common denominator you could say is that all levels of game journalism have been completely guided and controlled in extreme fashion by the [videogame] industry.” (Anonymous, 2010h)

Videogame journalists as a whole were criticized for not standing up to corporations, for not pursuing big stories, and for not reporting on every facet of the videogame industry:

“There is no news gathering apparatus in the games business. There are some exceptions, but there are no news gathering apparatus, no news gathering organizations that just gather news about videogames. And when I say news, I don’t mean rewriting press releases, I mean really, actually trying to cover things, talking about stuff that the publishers don’t want you to be talking about: talking about games that are in development that aren’t announced, that no one is supposed to talk about; talking about the reason why Developer A left; following cases like this big Activision case and really doing some meaningful reporting on it, not just some kind of cursory, read-the-court-documents and be done with it. It’s a huge story. [Videogame publisher] Activision suing [videogame developer and former Activision subsidiary] Infinity Ward is a huge story in the video game business. In a normal news organization that would be a story that a beat reporter would follow over time and continue to follow. But in the video game business, it’s time to move on. So there’s a court decision, we’ll write it up and move on.” (Anonymous, 2010h)

Often when the people who thought of videogame journalism as a profession apart from other forms of journalism referred to those other journalists, they used the words “real journalists” or referred to their work as “real journalism” (Anonymous, 2010e, 2010g, 2010i, 2010l), as if the work they did or the work that is primarily done by
videogame journalists was artificial journalism. One journalist even went so far as to say that those real journalists are the ones who cover the “newsy stuff” (Anonymous, 2010l), and another journalist expressed a similar sentiment by pointing out that videogame journalists are not reporting on the Middle East – they’re attending trade conventions like E3 in Los Angeles (Anonymous, 2010b). The work of videogame journalism was called “ghetto journalism” (Anonymous, 2010e); and the general public, it was said, perceived videogame journalists as not even being in the same profession as other journalists (Anonymous, 2010i).

Whether the work of a videogame journalist was perceived as similar to or different from other forms of journalism, however, many of the journalists interviewed said that videogame journalism is fun, especially when compared to other forms of journalism that require the journalists to write things they might not enjoy:

“The interesting thing about the videogame press is that everybody is really into what they’re doing. There isn’t a single person who doesn’t enjoy a videogame who writes about them. You’ll find that across the board, and I think that’s one of the unique things about videogame journalism. Because it’s so easy to get into [the profession] that everyone enjoys doing it. As opposed to someone who’s looking to be a journalist [who] has to work sections of the newspaper he’s not totally thrilled about, but he’ll do it so he can eventually transition over. I think that’s one of the very unique things about videogame journalism.” (Anonymous, 2010j)

“I didn’t] go to school for journalism because I realized the last thing in the world I wanted to do was write bad stories for Newsweek.” (Anonymous, 2010l)

While the journalists seemed split on whether videogame journalism was similar or dissimilar to other forms of journalism, they all had similar stories to share regarding their own experiences in the profession. Many of the journalists started writing
entertainment articles and reviews, such as music and movie reviews, in high school or college and then moved into writing videogame articles and reviews from there (Anonymous, 2010a, 2010b, 2010d, 2010f, 2010j, 2010l). The articles they write must be sent out fast, sometimes with little – if any – opportunity to analyze the information they are presenting to the public – a practice exacerbated by the speed of delivery of the internet and the perceived appetite the public has for immediate gratification (Anonymous, 2010f, 2010h, 2010m). As such, however, some of the information presented was not always perceived to be accurate, especially as journalists raced each other to be the first to provide that immediate information to the public (Anonymous, 2010j).

While the bulk of the articles the journalists wrote were previews of forthcoming games or reviews of just-released games (Anonymous, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d, 2010e, 2010g, 2010h, 2010k, 2010o), some journalists wrote longer, more feature-driven articles or industry analysis pieces (Anonymous, 2010e, 2010l, 2010o). While the practice of rewriting or reprinting industry press releases was perceived as a bad thing for journalists to do and while no one admitted to having done it, it was said to be a common practice for some other videogame journalists, websites, and magazines to do just that (Anonymous, 2010a, 2010m, 2010o). Some former videogame journalists were even said to be working for companies that wrote mock reviews of games for the publishers to review prior to a game’s release to the general public (Anonymous, 2010d).

While a majority of the journalists interviewed self-identified themselves as being in their late 30s or early 40s, they perceived the videogame journalism profession as a
whole as being a very youth-filled profession. A majority of the journalists working the field, they said, were thought to be in their 20s — or possibly younger — mostly men, very tech-savvy, and more interested in presenting information quickly than in presenting information accurately:

“If you look at this thing called game journalism, it’s vastly unprofessional, it’s vastly populated by young people who are eager - and in many cases talented and smart - and it’s vastly populated by people who are doing it for fun or for free games and are certainly not doing it for a living. So you get this weird thing about game journalism, it’s kind of like there’s not a lot of classical, professional journalism working in it.” (Anonymous, 2010l)

“[The] videogame industry as a whole is relatively young, and videogame journalism is even younger. It’s still a maturing process, I think, especially because not only is the business young but the participants are pretty young. A lot of the bloggers and games journalists have been doing this for the past few years, and they’ve been doing it fresh out of high school or college. It’s not necessarily like you have experienced journalists who have been doing this for decades like you might see in the movie business or in the sports world. So it’s still pretty young.” (Anonymous, 2010k)

There was also a perception that videogame journalism will become more mainstream as videogames themselves become more mainstream and that the pace of videogame journalism will simply increase as more journalism migrates away from being a print-based medium to an internet-based medium:

“One thing I see recently, I see the death of long-form criticism. I see the death of, you know, a 500-, 600-, 1,000-, 2,000-, 3,000-word game review. I think that a lot of complicated things are happening in games, I think you need more space to explore what those complicated things are. And I don’t think you can just sum up, you know. We’re living in a grim time. We’re living in a time in which twittering is very…. [sic] And that worries me. That worries me. I like to go on, I like to write, I like to talk. I feel like there’s lots of things to be discussed and we’re reducing things to ‘Buy this and don’t buy this,’ and I think that’s a problem. I want to read other people’s
thoughts on things. I don’t want to read 140-character description of a game. I want to read a 1000- or a 2000-word review. I want people with strong voices to survive.” (Anonymous, 2010b)

“Videogame journalism is getting younger because of the blogger movement. I suspect that more and more reporting will go online. It’s very easy to do it, you can do it from your parents’ basement, you can do it from your college campus, you can do it from a park bench on your cell phone. So I think that videogame journalism will stay young. Even though the folks who are playing games are getting older, I think a lot of people who are getting in the industry are young, and that will stay the same. I feel that we’ll get a lot more multimedia, we’ll have a lot more TV shows devoted to videogames on all the major networks because it’s such a huge and exciting industry so that might even help legitimize it as an entertainment medium. So we’ll see more mainstream-ization of games and games journalism. Even 10 years ago when I was still trying to break down doors and to convince the likes of USA Today and CNN and Playboy that they should consider the likes of gaming, now it seems like it’s a no-brainer. They all have games columnists, and I think that will continue where so-called formal or old-school publications will take gaming more seriously.” (Anonymous, 2010f)

While many of the journalists expressed optimism regarding the overall future of the state of videogame journalism, no one had much to say regarding the future of women in videogame journalism. When the journalists discussed women in videogame journalism, they said there are few women writing about videogames today, but that there are more women writing about videogames today than there were 10 years ago (Anonymous, 2010b, 2010c, 2010g, 2010k). People in the videogame developing and publishing corporations as well as the newer editors of videogame magazines have become more accepting of women videogame journalists over the years (Anonymous, 2010c), and the publishers and developers are employing more women as game designers, programmers, and public relations personnel (Anonymous, 2010f).

Gender discrimination and race discrimination were said to not be felt by videogame journalists (Anonymous, 2010b, 2010c, 2010f, 2010g, 2010j, 2010k, 2010m),
and there exists none of the sexual harassment claims that have resulted from women participating in sports journalism (Anonymous, 2010k). Even so, women have not been taken seriously as professional journalists by videogame companies (Anonymous, 2010c, 2010k) or by the readers of the magazines or websites, many of whom are more interested in how the women look than in what they write in their articles (Anonymous, 2010k). Some of the women writing for online publications have begun publishing their work without accompanying photographs specifically so that people will focus on the writing instead of on how they look (Anonymous, 2010k).

Beyond stating that there are more women working videogame journalism today than there were 10 years ago, no one seemed to know how many women work in videogame journalism. While women were said to be on the staffs of various publications (Anonymous, 2010d), it was guessed that nine out of every 10 videogame journalists were men (Anonymous, 2010f).

Even though discrimination and sexual harassment were said to not be prevalent in videogame journalism, many of the journalists interviewed then went on to tell stories of incidents they had heard about or witnessed in which a person was discriminated against or sexually harassed, even though no one named specific people. Those anecdotes ranged from generalizations, such as that discrimination was a problem 10 to 15 years ago (Anonymous, 2010c) or that a chilling effect exists within videogame journalism because of the lack of diversity of the journalists (Anonymous, 2010e), to specific incidents, such as that of a videogame journalist who was seen sexually harassing a hostess before being thrown out of a party (Anonymous, 2010l) – but again, the
journalist did not name the person or cite the specific place or time. One journalist explained that any incidents of discrimination or harassment that might occur merely mask professional rivalry or jealousy among the journalists, especially coming from those who might not have become as popular as other games journalists – something he said he had experienced in his short career because of his sudden rise in popularity (Anonymous, 2010m).

Overall, the journalists portrayed videogame journalism as an industry that is young, naïve, and quite enthusiastic – but with few of the skills necessary to properly critique or evaluate the industry on which they report.

Women, Violence, and the Videogame Magazines

In the first half of this research, it was shown that hypersexualized images of women were abundant in the videogame magazines, often printed without context and sometimes including potentially stereotypical or derogatory accompanying texts. As the interviewed journalists explained, those images are provided to the magazines by the videogame publishers and developers (Anonymous, 2010l), and it is up to the individual editors to decide how best to use the artwork and screenshots provided, but they rarely request changes and simply do the best with what the videogame publishers provide:

“You’re writing about videogame characters, you’re using character art or screens from the game, so if the character is in a tight outfit or a skimpy outfit – which they frequently are because, as we’ve discussed, they’re often male fantasies – we don’t make an effort to cover them up, we don’t call up and request a custom piece of art where the gal is wearing a jacket or something like that. So I wouldn’t necessarily deny it. We do a lot of Maxim type stuff. I shouldn’t single out Maxim, but the laddie magazine type stuff. Whether or not it’s uncomfortable
to females, I don’t know. I think there’s a way to do it where it’s sort of as tasteful as such a thing can get.” (Anonymous, 2010d)

Videogame journalism should not be singled out, one journalist said, for promoting that kind of hypersexualized imagery because similar imagery can be found in other mediums and is a staple of advertising to a particular demographic, specifically advertising to the young males in the audience (Anonymous, 2010c). Even booth babes, attractive women hired to staff convention booths and attract men to the product on display (Ramblings, 2006), exist in other industries and are used in those industries as well as in the advertising that happens at videogame conventions (Anonymous, 2010g).

The interpretation of that imagery as it is portrayed in the games and in the magazines, however, is open for debate. For example, one journalist recalled the debate that occurred when the videogame “Tomb Raider” was released in 1996:

“I remember when Tomb Raider came out and people were complaining about that look. And people were like, ‘Well, she’s a strong capable female,’ and then the other camp’s like, ‘Well, she’s got giant breasts and impossibly small waist and blah blah blah.’ It’s hard to say, you know, because the game was good. It’s kind of hard to explain, [but] a lot of it was tongue in cheek.” (Anonymous, 2010c)

Another journalist explained that the interpretations of the images and of the content of the games must be placed in the broader context of the videogame medium that is producing fantasy games and fantasy imagery. In that context, neither women nor men have reason to complain about hypersexualized content appearing in games or appearing in videogame magazines:

“Most of the women I know in the videogame industry find it perfectly fine to see a game where a woman has disproportionate curves or there’s some hottie in
there. I’ve never run into anyone who’s been vocal about it to me about ‘Why is it that every videogame character looks like Pamela Anderson and she’s wearing a short jean skirt.’ I’ve heard the opposite, that it’s a game and they [the women] may like it as well. And all the guys are these big beefy dudes. Videogames are all about being a virtual getaway, a suspension of disbelief. Games are all about escapism so why wouldn’t you want to look at an attractive character? Does she need to look like a slut? No, but I think we’ve seen over the years some videogame characters that don’t look like they’re street walkers. They’re hot, and women don’t seem to mind that from what I can tell. But, sure, I can understand that some might, on the surface, think that women are being unfairly sort of…what’s the word?…being portrayed in a sexual manner. But then again, Barbie dolls were designed for little girls, and they’ve got the same dimensions as videogame characters, and that was 50 years ago.” (Anonymous, 2010f)

Another journalist explained that, given the parameters of the presumed target audience demographics – young men – there are ways to appeal to the audience while still maintaining a certain level of taste in the portrayal of women, and that women on the staff of the magazines can be instrumental in helping to portray other women in a tasteful manner, whether those women are real or digital:

“I’ll give you an example. We had a story a couple years ago that was posted during Breast Cancer Awareness Week, and it was torso shots of a bunch of different female characters in games, and you were trying to guess who they were by looking at their chests. That sort of was conceived and written by one of our female staffers who sort of had an interest in promoting breast cancer awareness and thought this was a fun way to do it with our audience in a fun way that they would actually read. And so we did it. You could easily look at that and say it was tasteless because we were doing, essentially, a whole story on pictures of fake boobs. But we did it, and we thought [we did it] in a tasteful way.” (Anonymous, 2010d)

One journalist questioned the entire premise that videogames or the articles written about the games promote hypersexualized imagery of women, discriminatory portrayals of women and minorities, or violent imagery. Those accusations leveled against the games, the journalist said, come instead from major news networks or from politicians, all of
whom are acting hypocritically (Anonymous, 2010m). The major news networks are hypocritical because they portray violent, overtly sexual images every day without offering content disclaimers or ratings of any kind, unlike the videogames this particular journalist writes about that are rated and contain parental content controls (Anonymous, 2010m). The journalists also singled out former California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger for his roles in such films as “The Terminator” and then for his backing of a bill that would have banned the sale of ultra-violent videogames – a pair of moves that the journalist viewed as hypocritical because both the “Terminator” films and the videogames Schwarzenegger sought to ban could be accused of glorifying violent imagery (Anonymous, 2010m).

In conjunction with discussions of how the magazines handle the portrayal of violence and women, the journalists said they are simply providing the content the magazines’ audience is assumed to want. Since that audience is assumed to be young men, the content appeals to those young men, and since the majority of the journalists covering videogames are assumed to be young men, they are more than willing to provide that content.

“This is a very male-driven industry, at least it has been historically. We’re starting to see things even out a little bit. And [videogames are] often designed by people who are very young and have not really had the chance to live very much, and so, you know, you’re going to get some of the transgressions of youth with that. As far as the journalists who write about it, I think a lot of the people aren’t trained in journalism. They don’t know inverted pyramid. They don’t have training to double-check sources. Their writing skills are meant to appeal to a much younger audience. I think sites like Gamespot and IGN skew younger in their readership demographics than, you know, a mainstream outlet, and ultimately you write to your audience. And if that’s what they’re seeing a lot of in forums, you have to go down to that level just to maintain your graphic levels and
to maintain your readership. Is it right? No, absolutely not. Is it necessary? Sometimes.” (Anonymous, 2010a)

“[The] videogame industry as a whole is relatively young, and videogame journalism is even younger. It’s still a maturing process I think, especially because not only is the business young but the participants are pretty young. A lot of the bloggers and games journalists have been doing this for the past few years, and they’ve been doing it fresh out of high school or college. It’s not necessarily like you have experienced journalists who have been doing this for decades like you might see in the movie business or in the sports world. So it’s still pretty young.” (Anonymous, 2010k)

One journalist also mentioned that the issues that warrant coverage will often get covered, whether those issues are a videogame’s playability or a videogame’s abundance of sex and violence:

“I mean usually we’ll address [issues of sex, violence or discrimination in the games], usually in the reviews because that’s when we’ve been able to play through the whole game. You know if there is something that is particularly offensive we’ll address it in the review of the game. And for the most part maybe make a call-out for it.” (Anonymous, 2010c)

Overall, the journalists expressed three main points regarding any hypersexualized, violent, or discriminatory images or texts that might exist in the magazines and that might come through their coverage of various videogames: First, those issues exist in all mediums, and videogame journalism cannot be singled out; second, the meanings people take from the images and texts are open to interpretation, and those interpretations can be as positive or as negative as the people making the interpretations want them to be; and third, the magazines are simply providing the content that the audience (young men) wants.
PR/Corporate Pressures

Beyond the definitions of “hardcore” vs. “casual,” beyond the history and the current state of videogames journalism, and beyond discussions of potentially stereotypical or potentially derogatory portrayals of women in the magazines, the journalists themselves were most interested in discussing the pressures they feel from videogame publishers and the publishers’ public relations personnel. While the journalists said they experienced no pressure from government entities or from religious groups or from the general public – outside groups that have been theorized to pressure journalists and the articles they write (Herman & Chomsky, 2002) – the journalists said they often felt pressured by public relations personnel from the videogame publishing and development companies. For example, the public relations personnel who often work with mainstream media such as magazines and websites not devoted exclusively to dealing with videogames were said to be “better behaved” (Anonymous, 2010o) with the videogame journalists than those public relations personnel who worked almost exclusively with videogame journalists. Those public relations personnel who did not have much contact with mainstream media were said to require videogame journalists to sign non-disclosure agreements regarding the content they would see or the information they would learn, restricting what information could be included in the final, published articles (Anonymous, 2010o); they would play favorites with the journalists, providing better content to some journalists or to some videogame news organizations than they would provide to others (Anonymous, 2010m). They would request make-up stories from editors, asking editors to publish a so-called “good” article to make up for an article
that was negative or that broke a non-disclosure agreement (Anonymous, 2010k), and they were perceived to be discriminating against female journalists in the amount and kind of information they provided (Anonymous, 2010f).

The relationship between the journalists and the videogame publishers was said to be weighted toward the publishers and their public relations personnel:

“It’s a system of relationships where one side has most of the power, the publisher. They decide who they invite to events, they decide who they invite to parties, they decide, you know, do you get to interview the lead developer or do you get to interview a PR person. I mean, they get to make all these kinds of decisions that you have no control over.” (Anonymous, 2010h)

One journalist interviewed for this research acknowledged that the public relations personnel also had a job to do and were likely doing that job to the best of their abilities (Anonymous, 2010a), another journalist said he enjoys meeting and chatting with PR reps (Anonymous, 2010l), and a third journalist said he has become friends with many of the public relations personnel he meets at industry events such as E3 (Anonymous, 2010j). Several of the other journalists, however, described the relationship between the videogame journalists and the public relations personnel in less favorable terms, such as a “negotiation” (Anonymous, 2010c) in which the journalists sometimes gets what they want and sometimes do not; as “favoritism” (Anonymous, 2010c, 2010m); as a “chess match” (Anonymous, 2010d); or as a “tug of war” over information (Anonymous, 2010e).

At a basic level, the journalists did not like the way the public relations personnel attempt to control the flow of information. They act as a gatekeeper for the flow of information to the press, much as one country might use public relations to control the
flow of information going out to the press in foreign countries (J. Y. Kim & Yang, 2008). The public relations practitioners are the people who provide game art and screenshots for use in the magazines (Anonymous, 2010d, 2010l). They are the people who provide free-of-charge early copies and final-review copies of the new games (Anonymous, 2010d, 2010f, 2010h, 2010i). They are the people who pass along to the journalists the release dates of the new games (Anonymous, 2010j). They are the people who provide access to the videogame developers, the programmers, and the artists (Anonymous, 2010g). The journalists said they do not get much of a chance to write things the videogame publishers do not want written (Anonymous, 2010h).

“We rely on public relations firms because they are the ones that represent these game companies, and they control the information. So if a game company has shots of a new game, you are reliant on them to give you the shots of the new game because no one else has them. If you want to try to set up an interview with a company, you have to go through the public relations company. I don’t know the people’s numbers, and from what I’ve dealt with [at my publication], a lot of information and a lot of access to people is kept under tight wraps.” (Anonymous, 2010g)

“Probably the best way to portray it is this: What is the core of video game journalism? Game news, preview news, and game reviews. There’s a lot of other stuff out there, but at the end of the day that’s the bread and butter. Products. Write about products. So who controls the products? Publishers. Who controls the producers of the products? Publishers. It’s sort of like we write about an industry where we have almost no ability to gain inside knowledge.” (Anonymous, 2010h)

As an example of the tightly-controlled flow of information, one journalist described a press conference in which he participated by telephone with a group of videogame developers. He called in to a telephone conference line hosted by the public relations personnel. The developers and the public relations personnel were already on
the line, as were many other journalists (he did not know how many other journalists were on the line) and they were not allowed to speak directly with the videogame developers while those developers talked about their upcoming game:

“It was mainly, we were just listening in on the phone part of it. We could email the PR person while the interview was going on, and they would take some of the questions and forward them on to the developers who were talking at the time. So I had to get my questions past someone else, and of course the interview…. [sic] There was just a tremendous backlog of people asking questions that no one would be able to answer these in a reasonable timeframe. I didn’t think it was a really good way to get serious questions about what their product was, what they were excited about it, if there were other games they would make what would they do different, what were they changing. To me, it was a glorified press release. It was what they wanted to talk about, not about what I was asking.” (Anonymous, 2010i)

He said one of his questions made it past the public relations screening process, a question regarding the lack of a multiplayer element in the game:

“Basically the response was, ‘Well, we just didn’t have time. There was no way to do it right, so we chose not to do it at all.’ And that was it. It was frustrating to me because I didn’t think that was a very in-depth answer. I guess I can understand, but it just seemed like a cop-out way to answer it. That whole experience was not nearly as exciting or as interactive as I was expecting it to be.” (Anonymous, 2010i)

The videogame developers and publishers are quite concerned with the final review scores the games receive from the journalists, especially as those scores are compiled by Metacritic (Anonymous, 2010b, 2010h, 2010i, 2010j, 2010n, 2010o), a website that compiles the review scores granted by various entertainment reviewers into one single, average number (Anonymous, 2011e). The journalists also do not like Metacritic:
“Just about everybody complains about Metacritic in the gaming industry. Developers don’t like it because many times their contracts to develop a game for that company are tied to that score, and game sites don’t like it because it quantifies something that is unquantifiable. When you play a game for 20 hours, what’s a 10 out of 10…or a 5 out of 10? Games are at a point now where it’s a little more artistic, there’s a little more thought – not just a little more thought, there’s a ton more thought – put into these games, so it’s not like a technical checklist you can check off. So it agonizes a lot of reviewers, me included, that you have to attach a score.” (Anonymous, 2010j)

Because of the pressure felt by the influence of Metacritic scores, though, the public relations personnel will interact with the videogame journalists in a number of ways to try to influence the review scores those journalists give to the games, ranging from simply providing free products and junkets (Anonymous, 2010a, 2010f, 2010h, 2010i), to requesting to proof articles before they go to press (Anonymous, 2010d), to requesting make-good articles in exchange for negative articles or in exchange for low review scores that have already been published (Anonymous, 2010k).

Some journalists said that they had entered into videogame journalism or they had heard of fellow journalists who got into the business just to receive those free games provided by the publishers and by the public relations personnel, and those free games are a staple of the videogame journalism process, a way for the journalists to see and write about games early, long before their release dates, or to have reviews printed that coincide with a game’s release date (Anonymous, 2010f, 2010l).

“Everybody gets into game journalism to get free games. After time that just becomes like water, it flows through you.” (Anonymous, 2010h)

Even though the journalists stressed that their reviews are written with the readers and not with the free products in mind (Anonymous, 2010c, 2010n, 2010o), because the
journalists are receiving $60 games for free, those journalists can be made to feel like they should be appreciative of what has gone into the games and that they should be more positive about the games (Anonymous, 2010i). There’s also an expectation that the companies that provide junkets are doing so because the product, the game that will be shown to them, is “very special” (Anonymous, 2010f), and the journalists go on the junkets with an expectation that what they will be seeing will be very good (Anonymous, 2010f, 2010h). Sometimes the journalists will not receive a free game, and in cases like that they “know” the game is not good, and their expectations are lowered because of the lack of a free product (Anonymous, 2010f). Other times, if a journalist writes a positive review about a company’s hot, new game, that company will very quickly forward on a “crappy kid’s game” (Anonymous, 2010h), and the journalist will feel an obligation to be more positive about that second game because of the positive feelings still lingering from the review of the previous game (Anonymous, 2010h).

One journalist estimated that, from his time working at a daily newspaper, hard-news coverage is as much as 90-percent negative news, and he contrasted that with the videogame journalism he currently writes that is “overwhelmingly positive” (Anonymous, 2010h). When videogame publishers or their public relations personnel are unhappy with the text of an article after it has been published, however, especially if that article or if a particular review was not positive enough, they have several ways to express their displeasure. In those cases, the journalists expect to receive telephone calls from public relations personnel or, less often, from the videogame developers themselves (Anonymous, 2010d, 2010k, 2010n). Although some magazines will not cut deals with
publishers or with public relations personnel because of a negative review (Anonymous, 2010n) or because information was released to the public that the company did not want released to the public (Anonymous, 2010k), that has happened:

“They’ll try [to get a journalist to write a positive article in exchange for a negative article]. I think it’s up to the individual journalist whether that happens or not, or the individual editor in charge, but I’ve certainly seen it happen before. My magazine when I got started was involved in something like that. I quoted a producer at a game company who said he wasn’t happy with a product at that point, and he told this to me over the phone and I wrote that into my story, and he got really upset because he sort of had this understanding that I wouldn’t write something like that – I don’t know why. When the article came out he made a big stink about it and was really mad about what I wrote and complained to the editor-in-chief, and we gave them – I didn’t, but my editor did – gave them another two-page article as makeup and had someone else write it.” (Anonymous, 2010k)

One journalist said that his editor simply preferred to omit negative reviews than to deal with potentially negative communication:

“I’ve never been blacklisted in the States, but I did have a developer write and say ‘I worked on this game for three years, and how dare you play it for a few hours and slam it.’ My biggest column, my syndicated column, my editor would rather I omit a game that’s horrible rather than give it the real estate.” (Anonymous, 2010f)

A second technique used to influence the coverage of a game or a company is to pull advertising from a magazine or to simply threaten to pull advertising from a magazine. The money from advertising is a big concern to the videogame magazines, and most of that advertising comes from the videogame publishers and developers, the very companies on which the journalists are reporting (Anonymous, 2010b, 2010d, 2010k, 2010o):
“This happened years ago when Next Generation magazine, you know, they got in a row with Nintendo, and Nintendo pulled their advertising from their magazine. I don’t think it was a good thing for either side, but it sort of shows that at the end of the day if everybody doesn’t play nice, then the knives come out and the reality is exposed, which is publishers are like, ‘Hey by the way guys...we buy all the ads in your publication so you kind of can’t screw with that, and we control the product you need and we control all the access to things that you need so you better not do anything to really piss us off or there will be consequences.’ And they don’t say that, they’d never say that, but it gets out the same.” (Anonymous, 2010h)

A third technique that is used to control the flow of information, a technique mentioned by a couple of the recent quotations above, is for the journalists to be blacklisted by the public relations people or by the videogame publishers and developers. As a list “containing the names of people to be barred from employment because of untrustworthiness or for holding opinions considered undesirable” (Dictionaries, 1996), the practice of blacklisting can influence how the journalists gather information, whether or not those journalists themselves have even experienced blacklisting:

“Yeah [videogame journalists fear being blacklisted], because coming from a newspaper background, reporting on the government, you can be sort of attack-dog. But here, it’s not the same because you don’t want to piss these companies off because you rely on them for information about games and stuff your readers are interested in. So you have to have somewhat of a civil working relationship. Whereas at a newspaper it’s easier to play hardball.” (Anonymous, 2010g)

“Any journalist who tells you that they have not run into [the practice of blacklisting] is lying or is desperately confused. It’s well known it happens.” (Anonymous, 2010h)

While the journalists said that blacklisting could occur for a variety of reasons, they also said that blacklisting could take a variety of forms:
“Blacklisting could include, on the PR side, they don’t send you product, they stop inviting you to press conferences, they don’t let you preview or review their products in the early stages when you don’t have access to it other than through them. It could mean on the advertising side, I’ve had companies pull advertising.” (Anonymous, 2010k)

“If you try to do some investigative piece, a company’s not going to let you near them, and not only that but they may just bar you from ever covering them again.” (Anonymous, 2010g)

One example of a possible direct backlash against a videogame journalist that was discussed by several of the journalists interviewed was the 2007 termination of Jeff Gerstmann, the former Editorial Director of videogame news and review website GameSpot. Gerstmann posted a review of the game “Kane & Lynch: Dead Men” in which he gave it a “Fair” rating of “6.0” and posted a “less than glowing” (McWhertor, 2007) video review of the game. At the same time, “Kane and Lynch” videogame publisher Eidos was advertising heavily on the GameSpot website (McWhertor, 2007). While GameSpot posted an official response to the controversy that included a denial that Eidos influenced GameSpot’s decision to terminate Gerstmann (Staff, 2007), other journalists and bloggers at the time posted that Gerstmann had been fired specifically because he had angered a big advertiser (Kennedy, 2008; Kuchera, 2007; McWhertor, 2007; Orland, 2007). The speculation continues into today, as the second paragraph of Gerstmann’s current entry on internet encyclopedia website Wikipedia is devoted entirely to his termination from GameSpot, and while the entry does not say he was fired because of the score and review he wrote for any particular game, the paragraph discusses no other legitimate reason to account for his dismissal than the controversy surrounding his “Kane & Lynch” review (Anonymous, 2010p). Whether or not Gerstmann was fired for
his review of “Kane & Lynch,” the videogame journalists interviewed for this research looked at that incident as having a chilling effect on the articles they wrote and on the reviews they posted:

“That’s when Jeff Gerstmann got fired, after writing a negative game review. That’s when it comes to the surface, right? One tenth of a percent of the time when it actually gets to that point because most of the time that never happens.” (Anonymous, 2010h)

One journalist said he had never experienced blacklisting because of the force of his personality, because he had such a large fanbase that the companies would not dare to blacklist him (Anonymous, 2010m), and he said that he would put up a fight if anyone tried to blacklist him:

“The only reason these companies take advantage of you is because you’ve got no balls. Because you’re afraid to stand up to them. So if you aren’t going to stand up to them, they’re going to keep blacklisting you and treating you like garbage. That means they don’t respect what you do. They only do what you allow them to do, and I don’t allow shit.” (Anonymous, 2010m)

He went on to explain that his job as a journalist meant that he had to simply report information, not to repeat any company line:

“Journalists need to understand that they’re a lot more valuable than they think they are. When you are a corporate mouthpiece, you don’t feel valuable because that corporate mouthpiece can tell you to get the fuck out of here. Don’t talk. When you’re your own mouthpiece, you have to stay strong by yourself. You’re your own mouthpiece, you have to stand strong.” (Anonymous, 2010m)

One journalist summed up the relationship by explaining that it depends on the level of experience the videogame journalist has in the business. A more experienced journalist will not be bullied by big corporations but will simply report what he or she

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uncovers, a practice he encouraged with his writers when he edited a popular videogame magazine (Anonymous, 2010n).

Playing Dress-Up

In the first part of this research, one outlier frame rose to the surface that was striking not for how often it presented itself but for how often it appeared as a potentially hypocritical aspect of presenting a certain characteristic of playing videogames: the ability to play dress-up with in-game avatars. Certain games, such as “Fable II” or “Saints Row 2,” allowed the player to alter his or her avatar by more than simply choosing the avatar’s sex. The player could change clothes, alter body types, change haircuts, etc., basically treating the avatar as a digital paper doll. As discussed in the “Findings: Frame Analysis” portion of this research, playing dress-up with dolls is stereotypically considered, especially by the popular press, an activity for girls, not for boys (Block, 1984; Shapiro, 1990). The inclusion of a dress-up functionality to the videogames was especially notable because, while this was not a frame prevalent in the vast majority of articles, it seemed contradictory to the popularly-held stereotypical gender bias associated with the idea of “playing dress-up.” Games that would likely otherwise be considered “hardcore,” “male” games but also contained a dress-up aspect were always portrayed in the articles as positive features in the games. No article reviewed in the first half of this research discussed “dress-up” as a negative aspect of a game, nor was it ever called a “casual” or a “feminine” feature of a game.
Because of the findings from the first half of this research regarding the magazine portrayal of people playing dress-up with in-game avatars, the journalists interviewed for the second half of this research were asked to discuss this particular aspect of gameplay. While many of the journalists’ initial reaction to the potential contradiction was to laugh, and while several of the journalists acknowledged that there might be a seeming contradiction (Anonymous, 2010a, 2010d, 2010e, 2010k, 2010l, 2010m), that seeming contradiction was quickly dismissed most often as either self-expression or as simple character customization (Anonymous, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010e, 2010m).

“At [videogame convention] E3 there were a couple of MMO’s [massively multiplayer online games] that were being shown, and they were showing the character creation and personalization [part of the games]. But you’re right it’s a dress-up doll, and I think the industry’s answer - and I don’t think it’s a wrong one - is this allows you to put your personal stamp on your character. You can create something that is very individual to you. And so that customization is something that’s appealing. But that said, just yesterday, I was at a Disney event and they were showing off a Tinkerbell game where you can, you know, put your fairy in any costume you want. And it’s the same thing I’ve seen in every MMO. And there’s a dichotomy there, and I don’t quite get it. I think really probably the audience doesn’t quite realize that they’re playing dress up, and if you pointed it out to them they would quickly come up with a reason. ‘No, no, this is not dress up; this is me expressing myself.’” (Anonymous, 2010a)

A few of the journalists also said that the so-called “dress-up” aspect of the game is more centered around what men and women do in the different videogames they play. Men play videogames to do more than dress up an avatar while women can be content to simply play dress-up in a videogame, even if there is more to the game than that one aspect:

“That’s kind of funny [that outfitting avatars is like playing with a virtual paper doll], that’s a good point, and I never thought of it that way. To some extent, yeah, and this could be because I’m a male and I’m looking at this from a male
perspective and I don’t want to be classified as doing something kind of girly, but I think it seems a little bit different because – in those kinds of games where you’re customizing your character, it’s something you’re doing initially that you might touch upon once in a while, but it’s not the focus of the game. So let’s look at a male playing ‘Rainbow 6,’ customizing his character, he’s going to set up his character how he wants it to look, he’s going to dress how he looks, and he might open up additional things and then go in and dress his character, but that’s about it. They don’t spend a lot of time doing that, and it’s not really fleshed out. So unlike a game like ‘The Sims,’ which is a very popular game among the female population, now there you might be a female gamer spending a lot of time getting the look of her character just right, shopping for clothing, and kind of outfitting her apartment, her house, and things like that, where that is more important to her – or as important to her – as playing the game itself. It’s like getting the makeup just right, getting the shirt down just right, designing the patterns for the clothing itself. You don’t find that sort of activity, that level of customization, in these more male-oriented games where there is that kind of customization. [pause] But I do like what you said; that’s funny.” (Anonymous, 2010k)

Journalists tried to explain the differences by citing inherent, psychological differences in the ways that women play games vs. the ways that men play games:

“I guess it is a bit of a disparity. I don’t really know how to answer that exactly, I mean, I think that it could be argued – and I have no stats to back this up even though I’m certain I’ve read them at some point – that women might be more into construction than destruction, so games like The Sims - you talked about dressing up avatars and things like that, or building things like Farmville, building a farm or building a home has more appeal to women perhaps than [to] men.” (Anonymous, 2010f)

“A woman will buy a videogame, but the only thing to the videogame is playing dress-up. All you do is change the outfits, you do nothing but change the outfits. That’s not really exciting. In ‘Ghost Recon,’ you’re changing outfits, but there’s a whole adventure after that. There’s a whole story. You’re flying helicopters, you’re going invisible, you’re going in stealth, you’ve got cover systems, you’ve got storylines and adventure. You add that element to all that outfit swapping, you can’t compare that to a game that’s only based around playing dress-up. I don’t think anyone, even you, would buy ‘Ghost Recon’ if all you could do was swap outfits and just see how good the soldier looked and call it a day. If you don’t have that adventure, you’re not buying the game.” (Anonymous, 2010m)
Throughout all of this discussion, the first journalist interviewed, Source A, seemed to have said it most succinctly when he said that “if you pointed out to [people the potential contradiction of praising a hardcore game that contains stereotypically ‘girly’ aspects], they would quickly come up with a reason. ‘No, no this is not dress up; this is me expressing myself’” (Anonymous, 2010a). The journalists who discussed this aspect of gameplay essentially did just that, acknowledging the potential for contradiction and then quickly finding a way to explain to the researcher why it was not an actual contradiction.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Summary

This research began with two underlying premises: First, the market for videogames is expanding to include a wider demographic of players, especially women, but the videogame magazines are misrepresenting those women as less than legitimate players while also portraying the women avatars that appear in the games as only one-dimensional sex objects even when the videogame developers portray them as multi-faceted characters on par with the men avatars. Second, that the journalists covering videogames were influenced in their coverage of women by certain media filters, such as personal ideology and the corporate sponsorship of their work, as suggested by theorists Herman & Chomsky and by Shoemaker & Reese.

While both premises held true throughout the course of the research, two additional findings arose that were unexpected. One is that the journalists really did not know how to define their own roles within the mass media landscape. Some saw themselves as journalists in the traditional sense of the word, researching issues and presenting their writings to a mass audience; others, however, disputed the notion they were journalists, instead choosing to self-identify as writers more akin to commentators or even bloggers. The other finding was that no matter how the journalists chose to see themselves, most seemed to be quite stressed about their work environment, mostly because of the corporate and public relations influences on their work. While a certain amount of give-and-take exists between journalists and sources in most forms of journalism, the videogame journalists were especially concerned about outside influences.
on their writing, most prevalently from disgruntled corporate sources and public relations representatives who would scrutinize every article and review and could possibly blacklist the journalists for any perceived slight.

This anxiety is examined from two perspectives. The first perspective is that the anxiety exists as a result of the theorized filters at work within the journalists’ lives, specifically how much the journalists are influenced by the previously-mentioned corporate entities. The second perspective is that the anxiety exists as an entity of its own, an ideology that is becoming part of the journalists’ lives and is being used to rationalize how the journalists interact with corporate sources, how they write their articles, and how they often seek to avoid conflicts with those industry representatives that have the potential to hold power over them. This produced in journalists an Ideology of Anxiety – that the videogame journalists were anxious about their writing and about the influence of those corporate entities, and they mediated their work in a variety of ways based on that underlying ideology.

This chapter deals in depth with that Ideology of Anxiety. This chapter also includes a discussion of the presentation of women in the videogame magazines and the influence that Hegemonic Masculinity has on those presentations. As predicted by the various theorists, the journalists are also mediating their work according to certain filters, and those influencing filters are discussed later in the chapter. And finally, this chapter includes a discussion of what is a “videogame journalist,” from the perspective of the journalists themselves and from the researcher’s perspective after analyzing the articles and interviewing journalists.
First, however, all research, including this research, contains certain limitations based on the chosen methods and sources. I begin with a discussion of the limitations of this research and continue after that to present potential opportunities for future research on this and similar topics.

Limitations of the Research

First proposed in 2008, this study began a year later and continued into the early months of 2011. While that time frame had little impact on the articles that were analyzed because they had already been published and were a part of the public record, the delay in interviewing the videogame journalists until almost two years after some of the articles were written may have impacted some of the responses the journalists gave.

Part of the delay in conducting the in-depth interviews resulted from the unexpected difficulty of recruiting subjects who would agree to go on record. Institutional Review Board approval, while necessary for studies involving human subjects, took surprisingly longer than anticipated, and, once obtained, resulted in the researcher beginning the recruiting process less than a week before the primary videogame convention of the year, E3. Even those journalists willing to be interviewed would not agree to an interview until well past the conclusion of the E3 event to allow time to write their articles about E3. Future studies of this kind would do well to recruit subjects at a point of time when they are least likely to be distracted by major conventions or media events.
Because of this study’s focus on a select group of magazines and a select group of videogame journalists, the results are not generalizable to the entire population of videogame magazines or journalists. To obtain such generalizable results, a random survey of some kind should be employed. However, that potential limitation was accepted by the researcher in exchange for the depth of data obtained about those magazines and from those particular journalists. It is important to understand how certain magazines present certain segments of the population of videogame players, and it is important to gain an in-depth understanding of how some videogame journalists do their jobs. Now that a deeper understanding has been gained about these particular portrayals of women and about these particular videogame journalists, further research can be done to see how widespread their experiences are within the entire industry. The tools used for this particular study are merely one set of tools in the entire repertoire available to researchers, and these tools have uncovered important results. Other tools will likely uncover other, equally important results that will further the overall understanding of the videogame journalism industry.

Similarly, the sampling technique used to obtain the journalists for this study could potentially limit the results gained. The researcher used a two-step process to recruit subjects, a mass email request sent to targeted journalists working the videogame beat, and, once initial contacts had been made, snowball sampling by requesting current participants to introduce the researcher to other potential participants. Between the two, the snowball sampling was the more effective because one videogame journalist would recommend the researcher to other videogame journalists who would agree to be
interviewed and then recommend the researcher to others. Because of that sampling technique, however, the possibility exists that the researcher obtained sources from a limited pool that does not effectively represent the entire population of videogame journalists, or that all of the journalists who agreed to participate in the study and who all knew each other through their personal or professional associations may all have similar beliefs that affected the results of this research. A further study that takes these results and questions a random group of videogame journalists would help to clarify this particular point. This study is similar to other studies that employ a select group of participants, such as a focus group or a non-random selective sampling survey, and the results of this research should be evaluated from such a perspective.

Most unfortunate to the study was the journalists who were contacted but specifically refused to participate, especially since they represented specific demographics that would have benefited the research. No one from the videogame magazine *Nintendo Power* responded to requests for interviews, and two people who worked at the same publishing house as those *Nintendo Power* journalists explained that the people working at that magazine simply refuse all requests for interviews. Another journalist who refused to participate was Teresa Dun, a former *Playstation: The Official Magazine* assistant editor. Her involvement in this research would have been valuable specifically because of two humorous and frequently referenced articles about the videogame “Soul Calibur IV” that she wrote while employed by the magazine. She no longer worked for the magazine, however, and after several responses to the researcher’s questions and attempts to convince her to participate in this research, she simply declined
and stopped responding, even to emails that requested her assistance in contacting other videogame journalists she might know. The refusal to participate by an entire magazine’s staff was unanticipated at the beginning of the research, and it is potentially limiting to the conclusions reached because one entire segment’s voice is missing from the findings.

This research also would have benefited from a clearer presentation of Hypothesis 3, “That an ideology exists within videogame journalism that videogame players desire titillation and misrepresentative language and images regarding women.” While the methods employed in this study were a good fit to uncover much information related to the other hypotheses, that particular hypothesis was impossible to prove by the structure of the research. To investigate the ideologies of videogame players, the researcher should have recruited people who self-identified as videogame players, not people who self-identified as videogame journalists. While the journalists were all also videogame players, their professions put them in contact with videogames on a different level than how the average videogame player would experience those same videogames. Furthermore, specific questions should have been prepared to get at the heart of this hypothesis. The questions that were asked of the journalists, while good to understand the journalists’ perceptions of the games and of the industry, were not targeted enough to uncover their thoughts on what the average videogame players wanted from the videogames they played. Another study that specifically looks at that question would be beneficial.

Again related to the long time frame of this study, the changing nature of videogame development puts a limitation on the results this research uncovered. While
this research analyzed what was being printed in 2008, and while the journalists discussed their experiences in 2010, the videogame industry and the magazines have continued to evolve. Some things, of course, have not changed at all, such as the dividing line between those people who call themselves “hardcore gamers” and the people who enjoy so-called “casual” games, as evidenced by the following letter to the editor published in an early 2011 issue of *Official Xbox Magazine*:

> “I fear the games I’ve come to love the most (“Halo,” “Modern Warfare,” “Gears of War”) may fall victim to [Microsoft’s controller-free add-on] Kinect. At a minimum, Kinect will divert precious development resources away from the games we love. Microsoft had developed a loyal following of hardcore gamers, and I hope they understand this is not the experience we are looking for. Of course, the true test will be to see how the economics of this experiment ultimately play out for Microsoft.” (Richard, 2011) (emphasis added)

While that letter specifically highlights “Gears of War” as one of the games that hardcore gamers like him love, and while the brother of “Gears of War” developer Cliff “CliffyB” Bleszinski might have lamented only a few short years ago the problems that arise from women playing videogames, that game’s sequel, “Gears of War 3,” released in late 2011, for the first time in that game’s series included women soldiers on the battlefield (Clements, Goldstein, & Steimer, 2010). Is that the kind of circumstance that hardcore gamers such as the one above had feared?

In another example of how attitudes may be evolving even as this research is completed, online zine IGN.com in 2011 published an article called “Bringing a bikini to a sword fight: Gaming is growing up. But why are women getting left behind?” that specifically pointed out the unrealistic portrayals of women contained in many videogames, highlighting as its first example the fighter Ivy from the game “Soul Calibur
IV” who fights in a bikini and tagging her picture in that article with the text “That outfit does not look battle ready” (N. Kolan, 2011).

Two letters to the editor published in videogame magazine Game Informer in 2011 criticized videogame developer Team Ico for opting not to include a woman avatar in its game “The Last Guardian” because, as the developer stated, young women were too weak to wield swords and because the women’s skirts would get in the way when climbing rocks (Catherine, 2011; Howe, 2011). Online zine IGN.com posted an editorial in which the writer said he, too, experienced some “discomfort” when discussing with “The Last Guardian” director Fumito Ueda the issue of a woman avatar being excluded from Team Ico’s game because of the weak-woman/skirt issue (Clements, 2011).

As another example of the potentially positive impact that videogame journalists can have on the portrayals of women, a 2011 review of the game “Knights Contract” in Official Xbox Magazine included the following critique of the game’s treatment of the woman avatar:

“One of the strangest parts of ‘Knights Contract’ is [female avatar] Gretchen’s special combat ability, ‘Witch’s Embrace.’ When she uses it, the screen goes black, only to reveal her giant naked body illuminated in white and blue light. Gretchen then typically destroys nearby enemies through means like crushing them between her thighs or sitting on them bare-assed. We don’t mind nudity in games if it has a clear purpose, but we can’t find a single reason this strong female lead has to disrobe to be effective. Coupled with [male avatar] Heinrich’s holding her to heal her, it makes the game feel more sexist than sexy.” (K. W. Smith, 2011)

It is encouraging to the future of videogame journalism and videogame development that women are being included in significant ways in some games, even if others, such as “Knights Contract” and “The Last Guardian,” still present women from
sexualized frames or do not present women at all because the developers say they believe women simply cannot do the actions required of the game. It is also significant that some members of the public and some videogame journalists are beginning to express their displeasure both to the videogame developers and within the magazines’ reviews at the negative or stereotypical ways women are sometimes treated in the games.

Future Research Opportunities

During the course of this study, several opportunities for additional research presented themselves, some related to this research’s findings and others related to this research’s limitations. Several opportunities for further research have already been mentioned in the context of those conclusions or those limitations and some will be mentioned in context later in this chapter, but the following opportunities also could be pursued.

Because of the potential influence that advertisers may have on the content of videogame articles, as shown by this research, and because of videogame advertisers’ influence on the financial health of the magazines, it would be important to analyze the advertisements bought in the magazines specifically to see how the videogame companies themselves portray women when marketing their work directly to the players.

Similarly, the journalists interviewed frequently referenced professional videogame associations Frag Dolls and PMS Clan when discussing women who love to play videogames. It was beyond the scope of this research to speak with members of those organizations, but a study that looked at the attitudes, history, and demographic
makeup of members of those kinds of women gaming associations would be instrumental in finding out more about the women who participate in them.

While the journalists interviewed for this research were mostly negative in their descriptions of interactions with public relations representatives from the videogame companies, it was beyond the scope of this research to get those representatives’ perspectives on similar issues that were discussed by the journalists. A study that examines the work of the videogame public relations representatives would be valuable as a companion piece to this research, in order to provide an alternative perspective on many of the same issues that the journalists saw as compromising their integrity or making their jobs more difficult.

Finally, because of the prevalence of dress-up play in games that was uncovered in this research, a more in-depth look at the perspectives of people who “customize” or “play dress-up” with their avatars would be interesting. This particular issue arose during the Frame Analysis portion of the research, and a question was added to the in-depth interviews to see what the journalists had to say, but a more in-depth study that looked specifically at this issue and sought alternate perspectives would be revealing about the ways that men and women perceive and interact with their avatars.

Ideology of Anxiety

The frame analysis portion of this research uncovered evidence that the videogame magazines objectified women avatars and ignored women gamers. While more will be said about that in the “Presentation of Women” section of this chapter, this
section will deal with the anxiety the journalists feel while doing their job and how that impacts the stories they pursue, the articles they write, and the ways they portray women.

As predicted by the theories of Herman & Chomsky and of Shoemaker & Reese (and covered in more detail later in this chapter), the journalists were pressured by many people and organizations on a frequent basis as they performed their jobs. Access to their corporate sources was mediated by public relations personnel; the journalists’ routines and the small size of the industry meant that the journalists returned to the same sources again and again as they tried to mine for more information regarding the same projects; the small size of the industry also meant that the magazines were primarily funded through advertising placed by the very companies being covered in the news and reviews sections of the magazines, a relationship that resulted in companies threatening to pull advertising when they disliked such coverage; journalists were blacklisted for poor reviews, for breaking information before companies were ready to release such information, or for seeming to be impolite in their correspondence with corporate representatives; and journalists were fearful that they might lose their jobs for something they wrote. The theorists used as a foundation for this research predicted those types of pressures on the journalists, and the result of such pressures was that most of the journalists interviewed expressed anxiety about their jobs.

Several of the journalists interviewed were so preoccupied by the external pressures placed on them by the corporations and by the public relations representatives that, when given the opportunity, they spoke at great length about them, far more than they did about many other topics suggested by the researcher. They worried about losing
access to sources, losing pre-release access to games, losing advertisers for their magazines, and even losing their jobs. Current editors said they would never throw their reporters under the bus (as they said had happened to them when they were reporters) and current reporters said they had confidence in their current editors supporting them as writers, even though former editors had not always been supportive of them in the face of external pressures for rewrites or make-good articles. And every journalist who brought up the firing of Jeff Gerstmann, the former Editorial Director of videogame news and review website GameSpot, said the firing was related to his review of the game “Kane & Lynch: Dead Men,” even if it was not a direct result of that particular review. That incident was seen as having a chilling effect on the work the journalists produced.

For these journalists the pressures were more than simple external issues they dealt with as part of their jobs. The journalists had become so preoccupied by these pressures that other issues presented by this research seemed to fall by the wayside for them. The hypersexualization of women in videogames, the evident lack of women journalists in the industry, the presentation of women in the magazines dismissed as simply a product of an industry overwhelmed by men, the “hardcore” vs. “casual” labels coined by the corporations, all were irrelevant compared to the overwhelming pressure they felt and had internalized as they went about their jobs on a daily basis.

That internalized pressure seemed to create in the journalists a sense that they would adhere to the will of the companies producing the games. As suggested by Michel Foucault, discipline to the will of an authority figure does not need to come from outright physical contact or assault but from the observation of the person and the internalization
by the person of certain thoughts or behaviors. In this case, the videogame journalists are constantly being observed and judged by multiple sources of authority as they do their work. They are observed by their editors and publishers, their readers, the public relations representatives who control the flow of information, and by the corporate sources who may or may not agree to go on record for current or future articles. The videogame journalists’ potential misdeeds are numerous, from breaking the street-date of information, to giving bad reviews to games, to quoting sources who do not want to be quoted (and who may or may not tell them the information they are providing is off-the-record), to appearing impolite in their communications with potential sources.

The observations of the journalists happen not only through the publication of their work, but also through the time those journalists spend interacting with sources during telephone and personal interviews. They happen when the journalists make contact with public relations representatives, and they happen when the journalists interact with sources and corporate representatives at the numerous conventions that happen around the world.

As for the internalization of thoughts and behaviors, the journalists displayed numerous times a reluctance to question the actions or statements of the videogame corporations. They said the “hardcore” and “casual” labels were marketing terms coined by the developers and publishers, and even though the journalists gave different opinions about what those terms meant, no one had questioned the creation or use of them. The journalists said that women videogame players today can be just as good at videogames as men, but they most frequently referenced Frag Dolls as their example of women
playing videogames – even though Frag Dolls is a professional association of women gamers and was created by videogame company Ubisoft. The journalists said that women were enjoying modern games as much as men were enjoying the games, but the frame analysis portion of this research showed that the games were portrayed from a male point of view. And even though the journalists said that women enjoy many of the same games that men enjoy and that women can play those games just as well as men can play them, the journalists often fell back on stereotypes when discussing what was a “man’s” game vs. what was a “woman’s” game, essentially reiterating the videogame publishers’ marketing of “hardcore” and “casual” without actually using those particular words.

By virtue of being constantly observed and judged by the people and companies the journalists are covering, and by internalizing many of the perspectives the videogame developers and publishers put on the industry, the videogame journalists were essentially being disciplined, in Foucault’s sense of the word, by the videogame companies. The videogame journalists were adhering to a pre-emptive obedience to the will of those videogame companies in the issues they covered, the ways in which they covered those issues, the perspectives they placed on the games, and, important to this research, the ways in which they portrayed women avatars and women videogame players.

That pre-emptive obedience grew out of the anxiety that the videogame journalists expressed toward their jobs, their daily work routines, and the companies they are supposed to be investigating, writing about, and judging for their readers. The freedoms the journalists should enjoy while doing their jobs are effectively taken away by the constraints they feel from the discipline imposed upon them. Rather than risk
losing the limited freedoms they have, such as the freedom to ask public relations representatives for interviews or the freedom to give a mediocre review to a bad game so they will continue to receive all of their pre-release games, they self-impose limits on what they say, what they write, and what they investigate to limit their exposure to the risk of offending the videogame companies. Those self-imposed limits, that pre-emptive obedience, has grown over time to become an ideology of its own, an Ideology of Anxiety to which the videogame journalists adhere.

That Ideology of Anxiety was evident in the interviews as the journalists expressed their desire to do more investigative features, but they did not have direct numbers for inside sources, only the names and numbers of public relations representatives who might consider setting up an interview. It was evident when the journalists said the pre-release games and junkets they received did not impact their coverage of the games or of the industry, but they feared losing those perks because they could not do their jobs without them. It was evident when the journalists said they always wrote the truth of their experiences with games and technology, but they feared offending corporate executives, and they worried about being blacklisted for what they wrote. And it was evident when the journalists said that the advertising departments at their magazines never influenced content, but the journalists felt a chilling effect on the reviews they could write because a former GameSpot editor had been fired after writing a poor review of a game published by one of the major advertisers.

The Ideology of Anxiety is being used to justify this pre-emptive obedience. If the videogame journalists make too many waves, they will lose the limited freedoms they
have, so they don’t make waves. If the videogame journalists print too many hard-hitting reviews, they will lose their access to pre-release games, so they limit their hard-hitting reviews to the “crappy kids’ games” (Anonymous, 2010h) that the companies already know are less respected. If the videogame journalists want to avoid being blacklisted, they rewrite press releases, they stay close to the marketing materials when discussing games, they don’t break the street dates of information, and they play the corporate game of favorites to their best of their ability.

The Ideology of Anxiety has become so much a part of the videogame journalists’ identity that they adhere to its structure while also using that ingrained anxiety as a way of denying responsibility for some of the things they write and for their role in maintaining the status quo. If not for their anxiety, they could conduct those Watergate-style investigative articles, write hard-hitting reviews with complete independence, advocate for a more equal representation of women and minorities, and accomplish myriad of other things unattainable within their current constraints. The current state of anxiety under which these journalists work is a condition that results from the filters and routines that Herman & Chomsky and Shoemaker & Reese predicted would exist, but it has grown into an overriding Ideology of Anxiety that pervades their daily work routines and the articles they write. As for the ways in which women are portrayed in the magazines, the Ideology of Anxiety means that the videogame journalists adhere to the stereotypes expected by their assumed male audience: women avatars in the games make great sex objects, and women videogame players are irrelevant.
Presentation of Women

The magazines analyzed for this research primarily portrayed women from two perspectives: they were either sex objects or they were ignored in favor of portrayals of men. While a few alternative portrayals existed and are presented in detail in Chapter 5: Frame Analysis Findings, the only relevant alternative portrayal was positive portrayals of women – and those positive portrayals were few and weak in their presentation.

Those presentations of women and the ways in which women were most often relegated to pin-up status or second-string options when people tired of playing the games as men are rooted in Hegemonic Masculinity. Men were the primary forces behind the development of early videogames, mostly because it was primarily men who worked in the laboratories and research facilities who found it fun and distracting from their work to design some of the earliest examples of videogames such as “Space War” or “Pong.” The socially inept, basement-dwelling teenage boy stereotype soon followed, and the preponderance of games machines touting speed and graphics statistics alongside games that focused on military shooters and men’s sports helped propel the notion that men were the only people interested in playing videogames. In the face of changing demographics, however, the videogames magazines have held on to that outdated stereotype.

As demonstrated by examples of games such as “Fallout 3,” “Fable II,” or “Tom Clancy’s Rainbow 6: Vegas 2,” women are irrelevant to gameplay. Even though all three games offer nearly equivalent play experiences when playing as a woman as they do when playing as a man, the option to play as either sex is presented at best as an “also-
can” experience, one that is secondary to the main gameplay experience, that of playing
the game as a man. Screenshots of the games almost always showed the man, the text
was almost always written from the perspective of playing the game as a man, and the
tone of the articles was that of a man playing the game and reading the article.
References to the player’s in-game wife or the player’s real-world girlfriend pointed to
the assumption that the only people reading about the games or who might be interested
in purchasing the games were men.

Women were so irrelevant to one particular game, “Tom Clancy’s Rainbow 6:
Vegas 2,” that this researcher did not even realize the game could be played as a woman
until the actual coding of the articles. Prior to the data collection, the games proposed for
review were researched to discover whether they could be played as only male avatars or
if they could be played as either male or female avatars. While the researcher was
personally familiar with several of the games prior to this research, there were many
games that had to be investigated by reviewing such online sites as the game’s website,
the game developer’s website, or even Wikipedia to determine the appropriate way in
which to do initial coding of each particular game. The researcher did not uncover an
option to play “Tom Clancy’s Rainbow 6: Vegas 2” was a woman, however, during any
of that initial coding. It was not until the actual magazine articles were being reviewed
and coded for final analysis that the option was uncovered when one journalist mentioned
in one sentence of one article the option to play the game as a woman avatar. It is one
thing to mention in passing an option to play a videogame as a woman, but it is another
thing entirely for a game’s feature to be so well obscured that it takes an in-depth analysis to uncover it.

While many articles ignored women or treated women avatars as secondary or tertiary game features, most times women avatars were treated consistently as pinup-style sex objects. Although many women avatars that appeared in the games (both the playable avatars as well as the NPCs) wore tight, revealing outfits, they also had names, backstories, or unique playable features, or they aided the player in some way or made the gameplay experience more complete for the player. To read the articles, however, was to see women avatars scattered around the pages or across the websites, but to rarely learn their names, rarely find out what function they served in the games, and to hardly ever learn whether the player could play as those avatars or even interact with them. Many times the women displayed in the magazines – especially those who wore the skimpiest outfits – were scattered across the pages to attract attention but did not include descriptions of the women, mentions of the women’s function within the games, or even the women’s names.

Some examples of this pinup-style treatment of women include articles about the games “Star Wars: The Force Unleashed,” “Devil May Cry 4,” and “Soul Calibur IV.” The fighter Ivy from “Soul Calibur IV,” in her string bikini and wielding her blade-infused whip, was a popular woman who appeared in almost all of the articles about that particular game, whether or not the text of the articles ever mentioned her avatar. The NPC Lady from “Devil May Cry 4” was also popular, with her plunging neckline, miniskirt, and her arm draped around a gun taller than she. Because this researcher had
never played the game, her character’s name was only learned after multiple searches on
the internet; her name never appeared next to her picture, and in the few times her name
appeared in the text of the articles, it was not obvious that the writer was referencing the
accompanying picture. Similarly, the character of Maris Brood from “Star Wars: The
Force Unleashed” appeared in many of the articles about that game, but her picture was
rarely referenced by the writers, and her name, while occasionally mentioned in the text
of articles, was never associated with the accompanying picture. As with Lady from
“Devil May Cry 4,” this researcher had to search various websites and online blogs to
actually confirm her identity.

The alternative portrayal of women, either equal to that of men or at least not
negative, was interesting for the fact that it was positive or equal in only some aspects.
For example, while nearly as many women appeared in pictures of “Soul Calibur IV” as
men appeared in pictures, any scantily clad men – such as Voldo who fights in an outfit
nearly as S&M-styled as does Ivy, or Mitsurugi who fights shirtless – rarely ever
appeared in the articles about the game. Numerically, men and women appear to have
parity, but that parity disappears when considering the nature of the pictures shown.
Similarly, “Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures” portrays both men and women
Lego characters from the first three Indiana Jones films, and those women avatars are
often shown in screenshots from the game. However, the text of the articles rarely
mentioned those women avatars. While that would be understandable from the
perspective that Indiana Jones is the star of his own videogame, the few times that the
women avatars were mentioned they were either praised only for their high-jump ability
or denigrated for being unplayable in certain portions of the game, just as Indiana Jones himself is unplayable during certain portions of the game, even though his avatar was not denigrated for that same fault. “Left 4 Dead” was similarly handled in many of the articles about that game. With four playable avatars, three men and one woman, the game’s screenshots frequently showed any or all of them in the middle of some action or posing in a promo shot. While the woman avatar, Zoey, appeared in many screenshots, the writers often relegated her character to that “also-can” play option used in so many games articles, with one writer going so far as to lament the fact that in a four-player match one of the players was always stuck playing the game as “the girl” (Stapleton, 2008). Furthermore, while all four characters have names and occupations that help define them, Zoey was frequently referenced as some variation of “the woman” or “the girl” with no mention of her status as a college student. That was most obvious when the writers would mention the men’s occupations as a Vietnam War veteran, a biker, and a district account manager.

While the articles portrayed women as sex objects or irrelevancies, the writers who were interviewed bristled at such descriptions when asked if women as a whole were irrelevant to gaming except as hot bodies for men to ogle. The journalists were quick to defend women gamers, pointing especially at such professional gaming organizations for women as the PMS Clan and Frag Dolls as evidence that women play games. Those examples seemed weak, however, when the journalists often went on to describe those women with words such as “GirlGamer 2.0” or as really hot women who also happened to be good at videogames. The implications were that the old “GirlGamers” needed an
upgrade or that it was surprising that hot women enjoyed and were any good at playing videogames. Some of the journalists completely dismissed the notion that any disparity existed in the presentation of women by the games media, one saying that such a discussion was nothing more than a generated controversy meant to disparage the egalitarian nature of the gaming community. While those may have been the stated opinions of some of the journalists interviewed, the evidence of the frame analysis reveals that such opinions rarely make it into print.

Taken as a whole, those examples illustrate how the magazines objectify or ignore women and how the journalists either do not observe that behavior or they ignore it, either consciously or unconsciously. While almost every journalist interviewed predicted that by 2020 any discussion of gender misrepresentation would be irrelevant, many of them saw gender misrepresentation as irrelevant now even when presented with evidence of its existence and even when they displayed some of the same prejudicial opinions of women gamers. While the evidence exists that men formed the foundation of the videogame world, the articles and the journalists analyzed for this research portray a present day in which women are still considered irrelevant and in which men are considered the dominant forces moving the industry (a point not held up by statistics) and men are expected to be the dominant forces for the foreseeable future. That is hegemonic masculinity.

While hegemonic masculinity is a primary theoretical foundation upon which this research rests, the theories of Herman & Chomsky and of Shoemaker & Reese are also
instrumental in analyzing the findings. The next section deals with those theoretical perspectives in more depth.

Underlying Theoretical Perspectives: Herman & Chomsky and Shoemaker & Reese

While Hegemonic Masculinity was an important theoretical foundation for this research, the mass media theories of Herman & Chomsky and of Shoemaker & Reese were also important to understanding how the journalists did their work. Advertising, corporate structures, sources, and outside interest groups are all seen by both sets of theorists as having a mediating influence on the work that journalists do every day, and this research project bore that out. While almost every journalist praised his/her own advertising department for remaining apart from the editorial content of the magazine, most complained about the potential influence of advertisers and of outside corporate executives threatening to withdraw advertising for content they disliked. As discussed in more detail in the Ideology of Anxiety section of this chapter, those threats to withdraw advertising, and even the potential of receiving the threats, produced anxiety in the journalists regarding what they could or could not write in their articles, what they could or could not investigate to produce more in-depth features, and even whom they could or could not contact within different corporations.

The recurring use of the same sources and the limited contact that some journalists had with their sources also mediated the kinds and depth of articles they could write. The journalists’ access to sources was routed through corporate public relations representatives or PR agencies, the journalists did not have telephone numbers to contact
their sources directly, and face-to-face meetings with sources were restricted to industry gatherings such as E3 where those interviews were doled out based on the whims of the coordinating representatives, or the interviews were coordinated through corporate junkets in which the journalists were sometimes requested to sign non-disclosure agreements in exchange for receiving insider information. Journalists said that telephone calls would be monitored for content, that sources would reveal information with the unstated expectation that the information would not make it into print, that journalists’ access to sources would be cut off by corporations for perceived and sometimes undisclosed transgressions. The journalists also said they risked being blacklisted or losing their jobs if they offended the wrong people, and they believed they would not always receive support from their editors who might cave in to industry pressures for requested rewrites or make-goods. While all of this outside influence was said to have little impact on the journalists’ presentation of women in the articles or in the magazines’ layouts, the journalists also said they never requested different artwork from the videogame companies, nor did they question the videogame companies’ underlying implications about casual gamers being women or hardcore gamers being men. They did not request art that was less objectifying to women, nor did they question any disparity in the portrayals of men and women.

This is also significant for the impact that it had on the journalists’ perceptions of how they could do their work, specifically their reluctance to conduct investigative research or to write articles that might in some way offend their sources or the companies that employed those sources. It is easy to see how an industry that produces so many big-
budgeted games ("AAA" games, as they are called) aimed at men would not appreciate journalists questioning the lack of resources spent on incorporating fully-developed women characters into the games, or on marketing campaigns that would make more egalitarian and less objectifying use of women. Coupled with the journalists’ fear of reprisals from industry insiders, it is also easy to see how any journalists who wanted to pursue such topics could be either discouraged from doing so by their editors or discourage themselves from beginning such research before they even propose it.

While those outside, corporate pressures influenced the work of the journalists, little evidence surfaced that any other outside group affected the journalists’ writing, either for the benefit or detriment of the presentation of women or any other identifiable groups of individuals. The journalists expressed disdain for online blogs, either those maintained by their own organizations or by outside fan groups, claiming to give those blogs cursory attention. The analysis of the physical magazines’ Letters to the Editor sections revealed mostly generic content related to games’ release dates, games’ special features, or games’ hidden objects or cheat codes. When asked directly about real or potential organizations of readers, such as WomenGamers.com, GayGamers.com, or ChristianGamers.com, the journalists said that any such organizations were irrelevant to their work. While such an attitude might be commended for showing the independent nature of the journalists and the articles they write, it is also important to this research that the journalists said WomenGamers.com, an organization that existed at the time of the interviews but has since disbanded, was irrelevant to their work.
Herman & Chomsky do not emphasize the individual attitudes and experiences of journalists as much as do Shoemaker & Reese, but those individual levels of influence on content were overwhelmed by the other influences affecting the journalists. The journalists interviewed said that men and women videogame players were equal in their eyes, but the articles analyzed for the frame analysis showed that neither equality of videogame players nor equality of representation is emphasized by the magazines. The journalists said that the players’ proficiency with the games was more important than their sex and that both men and women are excellent gamers, but they also said that the culture of masculinity that exists in the conventions and in the games developed by companies, as well as in the magazines’ layout that is tailored toward the male gaze, is simply a by-product of the unquestioned “fact” that men, not women, play and read about videogames.

Overall, Herman & Chomsky and Shoemaker & Reese predicted that the journalists would be heavily influenced by outside forces, advertisers, the corporate structure, media routines, and an over-reliance on the use of the same sources of information, and this research showed that to be true. While two aspects may seem surprising – the journalists’ reliance on and fear of public relations representatives and the journalists’ disregard for outside groups that did not fit the stereotypical perception of the average gamer – those findings do fit into the theoretical perspectives, especially considering Herman & Chomsky’s advertising filter and Shoemaker & Reese’s organizational and media routines levels of influence.
Through all of the discussions of an Ideology of Anxiety, Hegemonic Masculinity, and these mediating influences predicted by Herman & Chomsky and by Shoemaker & Reese, however, comes an interesting finding about the lack of introspection expressed by the journalists themselves: videogame journalists do not know if they are really journalists. That confusion is discussed in the next section.

Videogame “Journalism”

The term “videogame journalism” has been used throughout this research project to describe the publications of people who write about the videogame industry for professional online and offline magazines, whether that writing is in-depth features or straightforward reviews. The six magazines used for the frame analysis were all published by companies with affiliations to major magazine or news publication houses, and they represented some of the largest magazines targeted specifically at the home console market, the key market being analyzed in this project. Comparisons were made at the start of this research between work being done by videogame journalists and by journalists in the hard-news and sports fields, especially considering how women were treated by those branches of journalism. Part of the goal of the research was to determine how the videogame journalists perceived themselves. The answer, surprisingly, was that they did not know.

The videogame journalists were asked to discuss their routines, their work habits, and their perceptions of themselves as journalists, and while their answers frequently corresponded with one another on their daily routines and work habits, they did not
always agree that they should be called journalists. Those who saw their work as professional journalism tended to focus more on the gathering/analyzing/reporting aspects of their jobs. Although his name never came up in the conversations, those journalists adhered to Harold Lasswell’s definitions of the three functions of mass media – surveillance, correlation, transmission – in describing their jobs. They said that the audience expected timely, accurate information and that they provided that information. They compared their work to that of all other journalists: digging up information, gathering (preferably exclusive) sources and quotations, compiling the information into a coherent article, and beating their competitors to publication.

Those who viewed videogame journalism as unlike other forms of professional journalism focused more on the backgrounds of the journalists and on the end product of most of their work: the review articles. Most of the journalists interviewed did not have a background in journalism or reporting, most of them majored in some other subject in college (if they even attended college) and nearly every journalist said he/she was in the business because of an inherent love of videogames, not because of some inner drive to be a reporter or to uncover corruption. These journalists tended to mention the Watergate-era reporting and investigative features as evidence that what they did with videogames was not “real” journalism. They described the average videogame journalist as nothing more than an overgrown fanboy and said that the prevailing attitude was that videogame journalism was “ghetto journalism” that good reporters sought to escape for more prestigious and higher-paying beats. Finally, contradicting what the previous journalists said, those who did not view videogame journalism as professional journalism
said there was no investigation, no chasing down stories or quotations, and that the majority of the work involved was nothing more than rewriting news releases from the videogame corporations.

Taking those final arguments into consideration, the case can effectively be made that videogame journalists are a different breed of journalists from hard-news journalists. While some of the work routines are inherently similar – digging for bits of new information, tracking down leads, gathering quotations and non-human sources, etc. – the end results of all that work are rarely of any consequence to the world at large, often involve a significant amount of information strategically provided or even teased by the videogame developers and their public relations representatives, and is often written by people who have received junkets from the very companies, and possibly even the direct sources, on which they are supposed to be reporting without bias. While the argument can be made that not all hard-news journalism has broad consequence, the preponderance of videogame articles that fail to rise even to the level of hard-hitting critique make it difficult to argue that the two forms of journalism should be considered equivalent.

A comparison was also made at the beginning of this research between videogame journalism and sports journalism, and that comparison comes closer to describing the work of videogame journalists. Both involve enthusiast-journalists of the content being reported, both types of journalists offer critiques and analyses of the people involved (the players on the courts/fields and the videogame developers/manufacturers), and both involve a tight relationship between journalists and public relations representatives who coordinate access to sources and try to mediate content.
While both videogame and sports journalists analyze their respective players/developers, however, the videogame journalists are far more focused on reviewing and scoring the final product, the videogames, themselves. In sports, two teams or players compete against each other and determine a winner themselves; in videogames, one product is released, and the journalists score/review that product to determine for the industry and for the audience which product is a winner and which is a loser. Furthermore, while sports reporting is built around the star players and their actions when they perform, there are currently so few star developers in the videogame world and so much collaborative- and team-development of the videogames that a comparison between sports and videogames based solely on star-power is almost meaningless.

A comparison could also be made between videogame journalism and trade/enthusiast journalism, and a few of the interviewed journalists mentioned such a comparison. Trade journalism focuses on trends, new products, the business of the industry, etc., publishing the work of those who have received products specifically for review or who have a special insight into the product or service being analyzed. Trade publications are written specifically with the intent of informing the business leaders in an industry of the next big trends or analyzing what potential competitors are doing. However, trade publications already exist for videogame journalism similar to trade publications in other industries, analyzing trends and dissecting the health of the companies involved. For example, trade publication Gamasutra analyzes the videogame business for and from an industry-insider perspective (Anonymous, 2012a); print and
online trade publication MCV focuses on the professional and business sides of games development (Anonymous, 2012c); and website gamesindustry.biz focuses on the professional and business aspects of games development happening around the world (Anonymous, 2012b). Unlike the consumer magazines and the journalists interviewed for this research, the aforementioned publications are doing the work of trade journals.

Regarding enthusiast journalism, Carlson notes in her 2009 analysis (Carlson, 2009) that videogame journalism grew up directly from the work of fans and is primarily continued today by fans, a birth that speaks directly to its enthusiast-journalist nature. According to that argument, just as other enthusiast press, such as that aimed at sports fishermen or at guitar players, analyzes content primarily for the enjoyment of the hobbyist, so too does videogame journalism. Although the publications analyzed in this research have a decidedly enthusiast bent to them, videogame journalism is providing more information than free promotion for game developers. Games received review scores across the spectrum from great to terrible, the magazines contained some analyses of the games and of the industry, and the journalists interviewed all expressed a desire to produce well-researched, analytical pieces, whether those were investigative features or simple reviews. They loved videogames and they certainly enjoyed their jobs, but not one of them wanted to be seen as a simple “fanboy,” a term reserved for enthusiast publications like blogs or fanzines.

The best comparison suggested by a journalist is between videogame journalism and entertainment journalism. While both contain their small share of investigative pieces, they are both predominantly concerned with the reveal/preview/review cycle
associated with the creation and distribution of new products. A new movie/videogame gets teased, information begins to leak out (possibly coordinated by public relations representatives), a full reveal is announced, and the publications produce preview articles full of “insider information” from people working on the product’s development. When the product is finally released, the journalists are most often allowed to screen it early and for free, so that their final reviews can make it to press in time for the product to reach the theaters/store shelves. This style of journalism also accounts for the star power that some, but very few, insiders possess. In the entertainment industry, the journalists are focused on the stars and the directors while neglecting most of the day-to-day work done by hundreds of unnamed people who design sets, review scripts, cater lunches, etc.; in videogame development, the journalists are focused on the lead developers and studio heads – such as Sega’s Yu Suzuki of “Virtua Fighter” and “Daytona USA” fame or Lionhead Studios’ Peter Molyneux of “Fable” and “Black & White” fame – while neglecting the day-to-day work of hundreds of programmers and designers who bring those visionaries’ dreams to life. While there are far fewer of those celebrities in the videogame world compared to the numerous stars and directors who create headlines daily, the star mentality can be seen prominently when the journalists publish pictures of themselves at corporate parties or on the convention floor with those developers. Furthermore, just as there is little analysis in entertainment journalism about the films that Hollywood releases – what cultural impact does “Transformers: Dark of the Moon” have on American society? – there is little analysis or introspection going on in the games industry by the videogame journalists that goes beyond a simple rating scale that lets
consumers know the relative value of a videogame on a 5- or 10-point scale. Videogame/Movie A with its score of 9.5, for example, must be far superior to Videogame/Movie B with its score of only 6.5. (Note, however, that there is much research and analysis about the cultural impact of movies being done by other publications that do not cater primarily to a consumer market.)

Just as videogame journalism closely adheres to that entertainment journalism mentality, so too does it compete with the fan sites and the fan enthusiasts with their smartphones and their Twitter followers clamoring for immediate news and information. While the videogame journalists said they are doing their best to gather information, analyze it, and present a knowledgeable discussion about it, they are competing against those enthusiasts who relish being the first to press – whether their information is sourced, comprehensive, or even correct does not matter when they can produce a steady stream of information to a public hooked on getting the next trendy item. The online zines are able to compete on a slightly more even footing than are the print publications, but even those journalists who worked predominantly online complained that they did not feel they had the time to fully digest information before that information found its way to competing fan-sites or independent blogs. When journalists attend press conferences and take copious notes in preparation for a lengthy article to be written later that day, they see they are competing against enthusiasts sitting next to them who are posting moment-by-moment commentaries to their blogs, including poorly-framed cellphone pictures uploaded on the spot. This competition between videogame journalists who are trying to
produce a good product and the enthusiasts who are simply trying to scoop everyone is intensifying each year as newer technologies make the stream of information flow faster.

That intensifying competition is only one of the areas in which videogame journalists, just like entertainment journalists, are struggling to survive and to maintain their independence and integrity. Videogame journalists, just like entertainment journalists, should be gathering their information professionally and accurately, they should be comprehensively analyzing their sources and products, they should be evaluating the completed products ethically, and they should be publishing their work in such a way that it is accessible to the broad audience. What that means in reality is that videogame journalists should be sourcing the materials they gather, doing nothing illegal to obtain it, and doing nothing that either explicitly or implicitly leads a source to expect anything, such as a positive review, based on their affiliation. They should write articles that analyze a product or service comprehensively and not based solely on any one particular point, such as a movie that is deemed “great!” simply because of the person directing it. The final review of a product should be free of any bias based on the journalists’ personal affiliations with the sources and free of any external pressure from advertisers or from the magazines’ own advertising department. Most importantly, the publication of that material should be written with the current gaming audience firmly in mind.

While those guidelines are similar to the recommendations made in the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics (Anonymous, 1996) and recommendations made by the Hutchins’ commission report on freedom of the press (Hutchins, 1947), videogame
and entertainment journalists deal with slightly different problems on a daily basis than do other journalists, especially those working the hard-news beat. As outlined earlier, videogame journalists are concerned with the reveal/preview/review cycle of products, a cycle that has little comparison to other beats except to entertainment journalism. That cycle means that, just like the audience, the journalists are always concerned with the next big thing, whether it is the latest installment of an established series, a completely new IP, or the introduction of a next-generation gaming console. Industry news, like hard-news in other fields such as politics or sports, also happens at unexpected moments, but the bulk of the journalists’ work is concerned with that new-product coverage.

Videogame journalists are inconsistently living up to those previously-mentioned basic standards of journalistic integrity. First, regarding the way in which they gather information: The journalists interviewed stressed how often articles are published that contain nothing more than unsubstantiated rumors or rewritten press releases. In the rush to be first or to beat the blogging enthusiasts, gaming journalists, especially those online, publish as fact information that has not yet been corroborated. With the idea that anything incorrect can be corrected, or “updated,” quickly and easily, they post information as soon as they get it. Even if a correction is run soon afterward, however, that means that the initial publication was wrong unnecessarily. Second, even when they gather the information themselves and corroborate it, their information is still being mediated through the industry’s public relations representatives. Journalists make contact with the companies through public relations, they schedule interviews through public relations, and when the interviews happen, they are sometimes a three-way affair
between the journalist, the source, and the public relations representative. The journalists are invited to closed-door meetings in which they could be asked to sign non-disclosure agreements regarding information the companies do not want revealed, and they attend junkets that are designed to persuade them toward a favorable impression of whatever game or technology is being shown. In short, the information the journalists gather, when it is not simply a rewrite of a company’s press release, is coordinated, mediated, and colored by the videogame companies.

As with journalists who cover movies and filmmakers, the journalists who cover videogame production must also be willing to comprehensively evaluate the products being produced. While there are filmmakers who produce consistently worthwhile films, even the best among them misses the mark on occasion. Alfred Hitchcock, for example, is well known for films such as “Rear Window” and “Psycho,” but he also directed “Topaz” and “The Wrong Man,” two films that do not garner the same level of praise. Just as it is wrong to say that every Hitchcock film is excellent because Hitchcock directed it, so too is it wrong to say that every Clifford “CliffyB” Bleszinski-developed videogame is excellent because he developed it. Because proven track records can lead to certain, the journalists must take care to ensure the prominent person’s presence or personality does not unduly persuade them to evaluate the product based solely on those heightened expectations. This came through in the research when nearly every review of “Gears of War 2” (Clifford “CliffyB” Bleszinski), “Fable 2” (Peter Molyneux), and “Devil May Cry 4” (Hideaki Itsuno) had sometimes overwhelming praise heaped upon it when those games are simply the next third-person shooter, the next RPG, and the next
action/platformer respectively. Similarly, development houses gain their own star power, such as Bethesda (“Fallout 3”) and Valve (“Left 4 Dead”), again garnering quite a bit of praise for those particular games based on the perception that those companies would always produce excellence.

On the other side of that same equation, however, the journalists must endeavor to fairly and comprehensively evaluate those games and technologies they do not hold in as high regard. This bias was especially evident when journalists would cover the Nintendo Wii and discuss the new games being released for that particular system. An anti-Wii thread showed up frequently in the discussion of games released specifically for that particular system as well as in discussions of the games that were released for all three home consoles. The game “Wii Fit” created a great deal of consternation in the journalists previewing and reviewing it: they could not decide if it was a real game; they had fun with it, but it was exercise; and they enjoyed the unlockable features it contained, but they doubted the “casual” audience would even understand the concept of unlockables. Rather than insisting that games conform to the journalists’ interpretation of what a game should be, they should evaluate the games based on their own strengths, merits, and goals. Even Roger Ebert argues that a movie like “Speed 2: Cruise Control,” in which a terrorist hijacks an ocean liner, is a fun and silly movie that is simply trying to be a fun and silly movie (Ebert, 1997b); or that “Anaconda,” a movie about a giant snake eating and regurgitating people in the Amazon, is a “slick, scary, funny Creature Feature, beautifully photographed and splendidly acted” (Ebert, 1997a). Just as those films attempted and, according to Ebert, succeeded at entertaining their audiences, so too does
the game “Wii Fit” attempt and succeed at making exercise fun, something that gets the product only lukewarm praise from the journalists and outright scorn from the people commenting in the online forums.

As well as analyze the products comprehensively, the journalists must also be evaluate the products ethically. As previously mentioned, the videogame developers and publishers work hard at controlling the messages broadcast about their products. It is the journalists’ job to cut through that control and to critically analyze the product, especially without bias based on junkets they have received. Just as movie critics like Roger Ebert are allowed to see films early and for free, the videogame journalists are allowed to play games early and for free. The Federal Trade Commission issued clarifications in 2009 regarding what constitutes an endorsement of a product (Lordan, 2009), stating that any material connections between the advertisers and the endorsers that consumers would not expect to take place, including free products, must be disclosed. While the practice of receiving and viewing free films has been going on with entertainment journalists for decades, the practice may not be as transparent within videogame journalism, especially with online journalism, a special area in which the FTC specifically uses as an example a person who maintains a blog about videogames and his/her experiences using them must notify people that he is receiving those products for free (Anonymous, 2009a). Along that same line, as has been discussed previously in the section about the Ideology of Anxiety, the videogame journalists must evaluate the products they receive without consideration for the pressure they might receive from the games publishers and the advertisers. That is an easy statement to make, and according to many of the journalists
interviewed for this research, can be extremely difficult to practice, but nonetheless it is a guide for which all videogame journalists and their publications should strive to achieve.

Finally, the articles that are produced by these journalists should be published in a way that makes them accessible to the entire gaming audience. While it is understandable that both online and offline magazines would have specific target audiences for whom they focus most of their attention, it is not understandable how only three of the six magazines researched for this paper targeted young men (the three online magazines; *Official Xbox Magazine* boasts a readership of “influential and impassioned gamers” in their late 20s (Considine, 2011b); *Playstation: The Official Magazine*’s readers are “affluent, influential, and early adapters [sic] of digital entertainment and consumer technology” in their mid-20s (Considine, 2011c); and *Nintendo Power* is “written for gamers, for any age, demographic or skill level” (Considine, 2011a)) when so many of the articles analyzed in this research were aimed so specifically at men. The layout of the magazines was also contradictory to their supposed general target audience when they were targeted so specifically to attract a male gaze. So many of the journalists interviewed (some of whom worked at the publications analyzed) stated that the magazines’ designs, layouts, and articles were created with a laddie-magazine influence, again targeting young men. The market for games is growing and expanding, especially with a large influx of women gamers, but the magazines are not publishing with those expanded demographics in mind, even if the three physical magazines call their audiences early adopters, people of all ages and demographics, or impassioned gamers instead of outright stating they are young men.
In summary, while the videogame journalists are unsure how to define themselves, they are entertainment journalists writing in the reveal/preview/review format similar to how movie-industry journalists work. They are not, however, living up to the expectations that they will gather their information professionally and accurately, that they will analyze their products comprehensively and ethically, and that they will publish their analyses in such a way as to make them accessible to the broader gaming audience available in today’s expanding market.

Final Remarks

Overall, this research has uncovered several disturbing findings about videogame journalism and the presentation of women by videogame magazines. Videogame journalists adhere to an Ideology of Anxiety because of the numerous people observing and, in the Foucault sense of the word, disciplining them. Also, as the theorists Herman & Chomsky and Shoemaker & Reese proposed, the work the videogame journalists do on a daily basis is mediated by forces both within and outside the magazines, including the sources, the routines used to gather information, the impact advertisers can have when they threaten to pull their ads from the magazines, and the flak journalists receive from public relations representatives, videogame developers, and videogame publishers. As hypothesized at the beginning of this research, the videogame magazines objectify most of the women avatars who appear in the magazines, and women videogame players are mostly ignored by the magazines and denigrated by the online forums sponsored by the magazines. Finally, although the videogame journalists themselves are unsure how to
define themselves, they are following the reveal/preview/review cycle inherent in entertainment journalism. Unfortunately, because videogame journalism does not rely on a century of history and traditions that exist for movie-industry journalists, and because most of the people working in videogame journalism do not have journalism training, the videogame journalists are not yet living up to basic standards of news gathering and reporting.

Taken as a whole, this research shows that videogame journalism is in its infancy. Going from an organization of fan newsletters and corporate-sponsored organs to today’s numerous physical and online magazines in the span of 30 years reveals that the people who live the hobby are also very young. As evidenced by the interviews, the oldest journalists and editors were in their early 40s, remember playing the PC game “Zork,” and grew up playing games on the home console Atari 2600, both products of the 1970s and both only a decade removed from the birth of the game “Space War” on a laboratory oscilloscope. Most of the interviewed journalists had also fallen into the profession through their love of gaming, not because they planned to become videogame journalists, and many of their fellow journalists at sister publications or whom they see at conventions were said to have similar backgrounds. They started reviewing games for the fun of it or because it brought them a little extra income, and it grew into a profession. College majors that ran the gamut from English literature to landscaping show that journalism was not the main goal for many of the people interviewed.

There was also a lack of diversity in the people interviewed, with only one woman agreeing to go on record and only two of the 15 journalists/editors self-
identifying as black. Those who discussed the diversity of videogame journalists said that they saw mostly young, white men at the videogame conventions. Furthermore, looking at some of the most prominent women working as videogame journalists and who were not interviewed for this research, it must also be noted that they are equally well known (if not more so) for their looks as they are for anything they have written or broadcast about videogames. Google searches on Jessica Chobot, a writer at IGN and host of that site’s Daily Fix video program, brings up a list of her journalism credentials but also highlights her early modeling career in which she was made famous and got her job at IGN.com by licking a Sony PSP handheld videogame system (Anonymous, 2011d).

Figure 7: Videogame journalist Jessica Chobot licking a Sony PSP handheld videogame system.

Chobot’s name also comes up in the same Google search as one of the “top 3 videogame chicks I’d like to do” by a forum user on the GameTrailers.com website, along with two other well-known videogame journalists, Morgan Webb and Olivia Munn (boogfart, 2009).
When Googling Olivia Munn’s name, more hits come up about people debating her credentials as a videogame journalist than anything else. That is primarily because she made an appearance at the 2010 Video Game Awards show and announced that her Xbox 360 kept giving her a Red Ring of Death – an error message that means a significant problem has developed in the Xbox 360, usually resulting in the hardware failing to function – every time she popped in the game “Metal Gear Solid 4,” a game that only works on the Sony Playstation 3 (G. Staff, 2010). While that particular story, most likely a weak attempt at humor by Munn, takes up the first two pages of Google hits, the other stories that arise are her Wikipedia page (Anonymous, 2011i) and the early reveal of her 2009 Playboy cover (Aziz, 2009).

Morgan Webb’s Google search reveals much the same story, with the early hits being her Wikipedia page (Anonymous, 2011f), an AskMen.com listing of Webb as #81 in that site’s Top 99 Women feature (56 percent desirable because of her face and 28 percent desirable because of her body (Anonymous, 2011f)) and a 3.5-minute YouTube video collage of various pictures of her in bikinis (Anonymous, 2011k).

One forum that came up during the Google search of Olivia Munn seems to sum up the predominant online perception of women videogame journalists when the person wrote, “not to be misogynistic [sic] – but they’re [women in gaming journalism] kind of eye candy” (SoFreshAndSoClean, 2011). It is significant that online searches of these three prominent women, who are called “videogame journalists” on various websites, should bring up far more hits for them as models and actresses than for anything to do with what they have written. Olivia Munn is the exception to that, but the overall
consensus of Google hits on her is that her videogame credentials were weak before she
began working as a videogame journalist, and they simply got weaker with her failed
joke about mixing up the Xbox 360 and the PS3 (Anonymous, 2011i; C. Brown, 2010;
redditor7, 2011; Ryckert, 2010; videosift, 2010).

Those examples show the lack of diversity, the relative youth, and the lack of
formal training of many videogame journalists. They also show that the videogame
industry as a whole has remained relatively insulated from the mainstream press. While a
couple of the journalists interviewed did work with major outlets such as CNN or the
Wall Street Journal, all of the journalists said that the major news networks ignore
videogames and the videogame industry. Even for stories with potential crossover appeal
for hard news – such as the questionable firing of an editor following a poor review, or
the litigation going on between videogame publisher Activision and two of their former
lead developers, very little actually gets covered in the videogame magazines themselves
and even less makes it to the national press. One of the biggest controversies – and it was
a generated controversy – to make national headlines was a Fox News report that
inaccurately portrayed the Xbox 360 game “Mass Effect” as pornography because it
contained one sex scene (Anonymous, 2008e; rapture333, 2008). Coupled with the lack
of interest that the journalists expressed toward alternative media outlets such as
womengamers.com that seek to advance the discussion of videogames beyond the
“hygiene-deficient teenage boy living in his parents’ basement” stereotype, videogame
journalism and the videogame industry have developed a rut about how games are
covered. As discussed at the beginning of this research, videogame players today are
diverse in sex, age, and background, but videogame journalists neither represent nor portray that diversity.

Along with that lack of diversity portrayed in the media and the lack of involvement in videogame journalism by the mainstream press is the insular way in which the videogame magazines are funded. As described by the journalists, the videogame companies themselves are a large revenue source for the magazines, and that adds most of the pressure the journalists feel as they do their jobs. They are investigating an industry and reviewing the very games that are responsible for a majority of the advertising revenue coming in to the magazines. When the videogame developers and publishers do not like what is printed, one of the common reactions they have is to threaten to withdraw their advertising. When the magazine is primarily funded through such advertising, the pressure is substantial.

To avoid such pressure on the magazine and on the journalists, alternative sources of funding should be sought. While that is an easy statement to make, it is not an easy solution to implement. One such alternative that was discussed by the journalists was that used by the videogame magazine Game Informer. While it maintains a subscription base and receives advertising from the videogame companies, it also partnered with videogame retailer GameStop. Every person who signs up for GameStop’s in-store rewards program also receives a one-year subscription to the magazine, giving customers of each product a reason to use both. Videogame magazine @Gamer is similarly tied to the brick-and-mortar store Best Buy, even publishing monthly coupons the readers can use when they shop at the store. While such ties to retail outlets bring about a different
set of ethical considerations regarding industry news and reviews, it is certainly a model worth researching in a future study to determine its effectiveness and long-term potential.

Widening the demographics of videogame journalists and taking into account the overall market of videogame players, engaging the mainstream media outlets more with what is going on the videogame industry, and finding alternative sources of revenue for videogame magazines are all proposals that could alleviate the problems revealed by this research project, and more research into each proposal would be beneficial. Of primary concern, however, is the negative portrayal of women by the videogame magazines and the journalists’ Ideology of Anxiety. The first issue was hypothesized at the outset and discovered to be extensive, and the second issue was uncovered through in-depth interviews with the journalists about their work routines. Each deserves further study in the future to assess their continued effect on the state of videogame journalism.
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APPENDIX A: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

*Personal history with videogames.* These questions are ice-breakers, to get the subjects talking and comfortable. At the same time, they provide context about the sources, who they are, why videogames are important to them, and what they enjoy doing in and with videogames spaces. These questions also begin to raise issues of “casual” vs. “hardcore” gamers, the influx of female videogame players into the market, and the sources’ opinions of trends in the industry related to hardware, software, and videogame player market segments.

Q: What is your history with videogames?

Q: How long have you been playing videogames?

Q: When and why did you begin playing videogames?

Q: What are some of your favorite videogames, and why?

Q: What are some of your least favorite games, and why?

Q: What can you tell me about the history of videogames? When were they born, who were the big players, what people or companies most influenced videogames?

Q: What do you think of this generation of videogame consoles, the PS3, the Xbox 360 and the Wii? Which is your favorite and why? Which one do your friends most often play, and why?

Q: What is your favorite current-generation game, from any console, and why?

Q: Along that same line, do you have a favorite classic console, something from before 1998 (ten years ago)? And what would you say is your favorite game from before 1998?

Q: Reports are saying that “casual gamers” are becoming a much bigger part of the videogame playing audience. How would you define a “casual gamer” and a “hard-core gamer,” and are these reports accurate, or are they overstating the issue?

Q: Some reports about the influx of “casual gamers” into the market say that those casual gamers are women. How big of an influence do you think women gamers have on the industry, and where do you see women gamers fitting into the gaming audience?
**Personal opinions of playing videogames with family/friends/significant other.**
These questions are designed to dig deeper into the subjects’ history with videogames, specifically how they interact with other people when playing videogames. These questions are designed to uncover the subjects’ opinions of the proper place of videogames within the culture. How they interact with videogames and how they expect others to interact with videogames (or with the sources when they play videogames).

Q: How often do you play games alone vs. with friends or family?

Q: Who do you most often enjoy playing videogames with, and why?

Q: Who do you least often enjoy playing videogames with, and why?

Q: What is it like to play videogames with your friends?

Q: What is it like to play videogames with your family?

Q: What is it like to play videogames with your significant other (boyfriend/girlfriend/spouse)?

**Personal history with journalism.** These questions are designed to investigate the subjects’ personal experiences with the ways in which videogames and journalism come together. They seek to understand the subjects’ histories with both videogames and journalism, to understand how the subjects combine the two, and to uncover any potential influences that might be related to Herman & Chomsky’s Propaganda Filters or to Shoemaker & Reese’s media influences.

Q: When did you decide to pursue journalism, and why?

Q: Was it your goal to get into videogame journalism, or did you want to do something else in life?

Q: How did you get this particular job doing videogame journalism?

Q: How comparable do you feel videogame journalism is to other forms of journalism such as sports journalism or hard-news journalism? Why do you feel they are so close/far?

Q: Describe a typical day at work. What do you do, who do you see, where do you go?

Q: What is your favorite type of event to cover for videogame journalism, and why?

Q: What is your least favorite type of event to cover for videogame journalism, and why?
Q: Who are some of your favorite people to work within the industry, both in journalism and in videogame development, and why?

Q: Who are some of your least favorite people to work with in the industry, both in journalism and in videogame development, and why? (You need not name people specifically if that makes you uncomfortable. Titles or types of people will be sufficient.)

Q: How do you feel about the sources you use for the articles you write, specifically the sources provided by the game developers? How would you describe them as sources, specifically in terms of journalistic issues, like trustworthiness or bias?

Q: How much interaction do you have with the rest of your media outlet, such as the graphic design and layout people, the online/print people (if applicable), the advertising department, the senior editors and publishers, etc., and how do you feel about that interaction?

Q: How much pressure (if any) do you feel regarding content because of the corporate structure of videogame journalism? Do you ever feel as if the corporate environment impacts what you write or how you write it? Why or why not?

Q: Speaking of the corporate environment, how much pressure is there on your work as a videogame journalist to turn a profit of some kind? Do issues of profitability come up often, and how would you say that affects (or does not affect) your work as a videogame journalist?

Q: Other sectors of journalism (such as hard-news journalism) have had problems with government intervention, specifically with the government’s attempts to manipulate the media (such as hard-news journalists who questioned post-9/11 strategies then being accused of not supporting the United States). Videogames themselves have come under quite a bit of scrutiny by Congress for issues of sex and violence. How much of a problem is this type of thing for videogame journalism?

Q: Other sectors of journalism (such as hard-news journalism) have fought to keep the work independent, such as keeping the advertising departments isolated from the news departments. How do you perceive this in videogame journalism? Is it a problem? Why or why not?

Q: Do you as a journalist ever feel pressured by the game developers or advertisers? There was quite a bit of controversy over the firing of videogame journalists who gave a poor review to the videogame “Kane & Lynch: Dead
Men”. Is this type of thing a widespread problem in the industry? Why or why not?

Q: How much of an influence do videogame journalists have on videogame developers? Do your previews or reviews have any influence on what the designers and publishers are building?

Q: Following up on that, how much of an influence is the market itself on videogame designers and publishers? Are game sales the driving force behind game development and publishing, or are other factors involved?

Q: How much of an influence do you think the government or outside groups (such as women gamers or gay gamers) have on videogame development and publishing?

Q: Other sectors of journalism (such as both hard-news journalism and sports journalism) have had problems with issues of discrimination against women or minorities. How do you think videogame journalism is doing with handling issues such as this?

Q: Along that same line, many of the games you cover as videogame journalists have been accused of promoting hyper-sexualized images of women or of being discriminatory against women and minorities – think of the games “Conan” or “Grand Theft Auto IV”. What do you think of that, and how do you as a videogame journalist handle those kinds of issues when they are brought up?

Q: Other sectors of journalism have had problems with people from various extra-media groups, such as religious or anti-whatever groups, trying to influence content. What kinds of groups, if any, try to influence what you write, and how successful (or not) are they?

Q: Taking all of these influences into account (casual/hardcore gamers, female gamers, advertisers, game developers, corporate journalism entities, hardware manufacturers, the government, and videogame protesters), where do you see the industry heading? What will the videogaming market look like in 2018 (ten years from now), and what will videogame journalism look like?

Clearance question. This question allows the subject to say anything he or she wants to say about anything we have discussed. This question might bring about some new insights, and it also allows the subjects the opportunity to feel they are more in control of the interview process at one point during the interview.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add? Anything you wish I had asked you about that I did not?
APPENDIX B: STUDY PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it (by email) or verbally agree to its contents. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study
This study looks at the professional environment, personal experiences, social behaviors, and attitudes of videogame journalists. Part of this research involves interviews with journalists in this field. This study is being done because videogame journalism is a relatively new occupation, and to date, no such study has been done, while other fields, such as sports journalism, are fairly well researched.
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in an in-depth interview by phone with the researcher at a time convenient to both of you. The interview is estimated to take 30 minutes, but it could go longer (possibly up to 90 minutes) if you choose to answer at length on any or all questions. The interview will be digitally recorded for the sake of analysis and reporting by the researcher.
You should not participate in this study if you or a member of your immediate family is employed as a social science researcher.
Your participation in the study is estimated to last 30 (but could last up to 90) minutes.

Risks and Discomforts
Risks or discomforts that you might experience are minimal and are primarily related to your everyday work. You will be asked to comment on your job and the state of the journalism industry as well as your personal experience with videogames and journalism. Some people may feel uncomfortable talking about their work and their workplace, but please be assured that the researcher will not share your individual answers with your employer. We will also be discussing issues of sex and violence in videogames; please consider your level of comfort talking about those topics before agreeing to participate.

Benefits
This study is important to science/society because of the relatively recent addition of videogame journalism to the long history of journalism as a professional practice. This is the first (known) research of its kind into the opinions and practice of videogame journalists. You may personally benefit from participating in this study by achieving a better understanding of videogame journalists’ roles and practices.
Confidentiality and Records
Interviews will be digitally recorded. Your information will be anonymized and kept confidential by copying and editing out your name from the digital recording for research analysis purposes and by storing the edited audio file with an anonymous code. Raw interviews containing identifying information will be secured and stored in offline media for no more than seven years following the conclusion of this study or for no more than seven years following the conclusion of any additional research that may be conducted on the raw data prior to the expiration of the initial seven-year period.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:
* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU;
* Representatives of The University of Scranton (The U of S), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at The U of S;
* Members of the researcher’s doctoral dissertation review committee at OU: Dr. Bernhard Debatin (Chair); Dr. Joseph Bernt; Dr. Mia Consalvo; or Dr. Haley Duschinski.

Contact Information
If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Howard Fisher at fisherh2@scranton.edu or Bernhard Debatin at debatin@ohio.edu.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

By affirming by email or by verbally agreeing to participate, you are agreeing that:
* you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
* you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction
* you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study
* you are 18 years of age or older
* your participation in this research is completely voluntary
* you may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.