Cuties Killing Video Games:
Gender Politics and Performance in Indie Game Developer Subculture

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Introduction

In August 2014, Maya Felix Kramer, a public relations professional in independent game development, designed and sold a T-shirt featuring the slogan “Cuties Killing Video Games.” When asked about the meaning of the shirt, she explains that “There is a theory you might not be familiar with that has been circulating [in] the gamer community for quite some time: that some people have the desire to KILL VIDEO GAMES.” She then provides a list of the people who are allegedly destroying the medium, which includes “developers of games about ‘feelings,’” “people who write about games,” “feminists,” “casuals,” “people working to make games accessible to those with disabilities,” and “minorities.” In jest, she says that, if people like her are “killing” video games, then “I’m into it. If I’m killing video games, I may as well own it, and look cute doing it.”

In reality, there are few, if any, people on the political left in gaming culture who literally want to literally “kill” or “ruin” video games. However, the phrase, “Cuties Killing Video Games,” is an attractive metaphor for a cultural shift currently underway in gaming subculture – the evolution of gaming’s social norms as a result of social justice advocacy. “Cuties” want a greater diversity of voices in gaming, both among developers and players, and they also want games to capture a wider variety of human experiences, especially those of marginalized people. However, there are others in gaming culture opposed to such reform, insisting that gaming subculture is

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threatened by feminists and other social justice advocates. The struggle between these two factions is currently epitomized by the ongoing Gamergate controversy, which I will return to later in this introduction.

Videogames are capable of emulating a wide variety of human experiences, yet, collectively, they capture very few of them. As developer Anna Anthropy writes in *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, “Mostly, videogames are about men shooting men in the face.” (3). While her statement is exaggerated for rhetorical effect (there are, obviously, games without shooting), games about fantasy violence arguably dominate mainstream gaming culture. Even when accounting for all genres, there has been little exploration in mainstream games outside themes of violence, action, sports, racing, or abstract puzzle solving. Compared to novels, film, and most other entertainment media, there is less variety in the stories told through games. One can take Anthropy’s statement one step further and assert that most (non-abstract) videogames are about cisgendered,² heterosexual, and white men who shoot men in the face. Nonwhite protagonists are disproportionately rare, and women often play supporting or even submissive roles, both narratively and mechanically. Problem solving usually occurs through the (often violent) domination of other actors and the vast accumulation of wealth, perhaps reinforcing values of rugged individualism, exceptionalism, and consumerism.

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² Meaning that the one’s gender identity is identical to that assigned at birth.
The homogenous experiences portrayed in games are paralleled by the homogenous gender and race identities of game developers. As I will further discuss in Chapter 2, professional game developers are primarily white and male, and to secondarily Asian and male. While women are more present in player communities, their degree of engagement in these communities is often diminished or delegitimized. Mainstream game culture is dominated by men. This thesis is an exploration of how a more progressive and egalitarian gaming subculture can be achieved, a topic which holds implications for gender equality in a general societal context.

The Context of this Discussion: Gamergate

The “Cuties Killing Video Games” t-shirt was originally printed shortly after the beginning of the Gamergate controversy, a struggle about social identity, cultural criticism, and feminism within gaming culture. The following account I provide of Gamergate is by no means complete history of the movement. Providing an accurate account of Gamergate that considers every ideological shift, email campaign, dox, DDoS attack, rape threat, death threat, account suspension, and police report would be a massive undertaking in itself. Because of Gamergate, or one’s involvement within it, many people have abandoned social media, lost their jobs, and even fled their homes – its story is complicated, dramatic, and sometimes tragic. The account of

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3 Please keep in mind that when I talk about game developer identities as homogenous, I mean that they are homogenous relative to the rest of society. Obviously, technically skilled white men come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, and I do not intend to deny the variety of experiences among them. However, these experiences are still not representative of society’s experience as a whole.

4 Doxxing is practice of leaking a target’s personal information online, facilitating, among many things, the harassment of that target.

5 A DDoS attack, or distributed denial of service attack, is an attempt to make a website inaccessible to the general public, effectively shutting it down.
Gamergate I provide here is meant to serve as an introduction to the controversy, and is by no means attempting to be a complete and comprehensive history. I cannot properly express in this introduction alone how extraordinary the previous eight months have been.

Gamergate began in August, 2014, when Eron Gjoni, an ex-boyfriend of independent game developer Zoe Quinn, published a blog called *thezoepost*, in which, among many things, he accuses Quinn of cheating on him with five other people, including games writer Nathan Grayson, who currently writes for the video game news site *Kotaku*. From *thezoepost* emerged allegations that Quinn slept with Grayson in exchange for positive reviews of her game, *Depression Quest*. The allegations in what became known as the “Zoe Quinn Scandal” were quickly proven false, but it did not prevent self-identified gamers from accusing gaming journalism of being “corrupted” by “social justice warriors” (SJWs) – a pejorative term used for those concerned about social justice issues. In the weeks following the allegations, Quinn experienced a notable amount of online criticism and harassment at the hands of self-identified “gamers.” In response to this, games journalists and bloggers wrote a number of editorials condemning the harassment, a few of which declared the irrelevance and metaphorical death of the gamer identity. It was around this time that Quinn’s opponents began to organize and refer to themselves as Gamergate.

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7Grayson only mentioned Quinn and *Depression Quest* in two of his articles. Neither was a review of the game, and both were written before they were romantically involved.
Gamergate is an online movement, which originated from the use of the #gamergate hashtag on Twitter, first used by actor Adam Baldwin to refer to the Zoe Quinn Scandal, and soon adopted by gamers (the name of the movement is a play on the Watergate scandal). Many members have joined the movement to protest perceived journalistic corruption, while others contend that “SJWs” are censoring and disallowing opposing viewpoints in online spaces and the press. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, those who Gamergate accuses of engaging in journalistic corruption or attacking mainstream gaming culture are often also accused of being “SJWs.” Gamergate members argue that “SJWs” are trying to force a social justice agenda upon gaming culture, hijacking what they perceive as an apolitical culture for political ends.

Gamergate is a complicated political movement with no formal organization or leadership. Generally, members of the movement are opposed to what they see as “corruption” in gaming journalism, demanding transparent reporting and objective reviewing. They are generally opposed to feminist and cultural criticism in gaming press, referring to such articles as “clickbait,” sensationalized pieces of writing which only serve to generate internet traffic. Many members of the movement feel as though their identity as gamers is under attack from “SJWs,” and that “SJWs” are outsiders with no genuine concern about gaming or social justice, even though most active

8 “Corruption,” while perhaps not the best descriptor of the perceived problem, is one of the words most frequently used by members of Gamergate to describe it.

9 In popular discourse surrounding Gamergate, “Gamergate” is sometimes used as shorthand for “members of Gamergate.” For example, people often say “Gamergate thinks this,” and “Gamergate does that” to refer to what some or most of its members think or do. I too will use “Gamergate” as shorthand in this manner. When I do so, I do not mean to imply that Gamergate is monolithic.
opponents of Gamergate are game players themselves. Gamergaters are also opposed to what they see as collusion in the journalism, the independent gaming scene, and academia, with some even believing that each of these institutions has been taken over by a cabal of social justice advocates.

Following the creation of Gamergate, many of its critics, usually women, have been the targets of online death threats, rape threats, doxxing, and harassment. At the time of writing, two freelance female games writers, Mattie Brice and Jenn Frank, have ceased to professionally write about games as a result of online harassment from Gamergaters, and a third, Lana Polansky, almost did the same. Two months after Mattie Brice stopped professionally writing about games, she lost her position as a judge for the Independent Games Festival (IGF) due to pressure from Gamergate.\(^\text{10}\) Actress and gamer Felicia Day was doxxed within an hour of writing a blog post critical of the movement. Pop culture critic Anita Sarkeesian and game developers Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu fled their homes in response to threats of violence. A particularly severe threat was made against Sarkeesian when an anonymous person threatened to commit a mass shooting at Utah State University if Sarkeesian were to deliver a scheduled presentation there. As a result, the presentation was canceled. Women such as Brice, Frank, Day, Sarkeesian, Quinn, and Wu are not the only victims of threats and harassment, nor is their harassment limited to these examples.

\(^{10}\) In short, Brice made a joke in her Twitter feed about “nuking” any IGF entry that has “anything involving a man.” Gamergaters sent complaints of misandry to the IGF. The IGF responded by suspending Brice as a judge, but quickly issued an apology and re-offered her the position.
Gamergaters claim that their movement is neither a vehicle for harassment, nor opposed to social equality. Many of them instead insist that the movement is focused on ethics in games journalism, but their opponents argue that the roots and impact of Gamergate are clearly misogynistic. The movement emerged from the aforementioned “Zoe Quinn Scandal,” an event fraught with misogynistic undertones, and there is documented proof, in internet chat logs, that individuals sparked the movement with the intention of harassing Quinn and other women in the industry. Many argue that the Zoe Quinn Scandal was deliberately spun as an issue of journalistic ethics in order to garner support for the campaign of harassment against her. Even the movement’s mascot, fictional female gamer Vivian James, and much of the Gamergate’s imagery are marked by the colors purple and green, a reference to an internet rape joke.\textsuperscript{11} Despite attempts by some to insist otherwise, Gamergate is a political struggle, one between feminists and reactionaries over the future of gaming culture.

While the existence of feminist and reactionary individuals within gaming culture predates Gamergate, it is through Gamergate that individuals finally organize themselves and come into direct conflict over the online spaces that they share. The controversy raises numerous questions about social identity, gender, and gaming. What is it about gaming culture that has prompted the writing of feminist criticism about it, and what about it has prompted Gamergate’s backlash against it? What does

\textsuperscript{11} The colors are a reference to an animated image circulated on the image board website 4chan called “Piccolo Dick” in which one character from the anime \textit{Dragon Ball Z}, Piccolo, rapes another, Vegeta. Piccolo belongs to a fictional race of green people, and wears purple clothing. When 4chan moderators began to ban members who posted the uncensored image, other users responded by posting abstract green and purple images, in reference to it. The creators of Vivian James acknowledged that the green and purple coloration of her sweatshirt is a direct reference to the image. The usage of Vivian as a mascot will be discussed further in Chapter 3.
it mean to be a “gamer?” What does it mean to be a man or woman in gaming culture? Most importantly, how does patriarchy manifest itself in games, and how is it being challenged?

**Research Question and Methods**

As I will argue in the following two chapters, mainstream gaming culture is heavily patriarchal. Both the content of games and their mode of production is dominated by men. Feminist critics – the “cuties” or “SJWs” - are responding to sexism in the games industry, and Gamergate is responding to these critics in turn. If feminist critics are correct, then how does one challenge and dismantle patriarchy in gaming? It may be through an alternative mode of production, and through alternative community practices, that a more egalitarian gaming culture can be realized. For this reason, I am looking at the independent game development scene as a potentially progressive alternative to dominant game culture. Specifically, I’ll be examining the practices of the indie community of amateur, hobbyist, not-for-profit, solo, and activist developers, as opposed to the communities of for-profit indies, which are more similar to conventional game development communities.

My central research question is as follows: how does the indie game subculture challenge, and provide an alternative to, gender norms in mainstream gaming? More specifically, I will be examining three elements of the subculture and their political implications: the barriers of entry to development and consumption of games, the operation of the subculture’s community, and the form and content of indie games
themselves. As I conduct my examination, I will be asking the following questions: what are the barriers of entry to participating in the indie game subculture, as a player or a developer? How do they compare to barriers of entry in the mainstream culture, and how does this affect who participates in meaning-making through games? How do attitudes, institutions, and social norms affect identity consciousness within the subculture, and how do gender identities therefore adopt different meaning? Does maneuvering between gender roles occur in indie subculture, and if so, how? How do themes between indie games and mainstream games differ, how does the meaning given to certain gender identities differ, and how have different communities and modes of production produced different results?

In the first chapter, I will analyze the body of literature on gender representation and performance in gaming culture. I will begin by defining the gender roles in mainstream game culture and describe how they are performed through virtual behavior, discourse, and consumer habits. Then, I will examine how gender is portrayed in games and reflect upon how these portrayals reflect and reinforce real-world gender hierarchies. By doing this, I will argue that a gender hierarchy exists within gaming culture, and that the content of games reflects, and may even reinforce, the hierarchy.

In Chapter 2, I will conclude my literature review and examine how the history of game development has resulted in the construction of gendered gaming roles, gendered difference in play habits between men and women, and the exclusion of women from the creation of games. Then, I will re-introduce the indie scene as an
alternative to the dominant mode of the production and consumption of games, and I will develop a theory as to how its institutions make it a viable space to challenge dominant gender norms, allowing for and encouraging greater participation by women in game development and for more progressive game content. The institutions discussed will include social networking sites, forums, distribution platforms, curation sites, game jams, and free and accessible software.

The third chapter will consist of an in-depth examination of Gamergate and its community practices. I will argue that Gamergate is a reactionary defense of traditional gamer culture, making it serve as a valuable reference point to which to compare independent developer communities, as well as useful case study through which to verify claims made in the examined literature about gaming’s patriarchal nature. To do this, I created an anonymous Twitter account through which to observe and interact with the Gamergate community on Twitter in order to obtain gender demographic data, determine their state of political consciousness, and explore the adherence of Gamergate’s members to gender roles in gaming.

The fourth chapter will consist of my observations of the independent gaming scene from my own perspective as an amateur game developer. I will begin by discussing the interactions in a private, progressive indie game developer community called Games and Play, and then proceed to analyze the community practices and creative output of the queer games scene. The first half of the chapter is based on my personal experience as a member of Games and Play, while the second half will consist of an analysis of various games by queer indie game developers. Just as with
Gamergate, the purpose of my examination of Games and Play is to obtain gender demographic data, determine the political consciousness of its members, and explore their adherence to gender roles. The purpose of my examination of queer indie games is to analyze the political content of such games and understand the relationship between their content and their mode of production.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I will present a conclusion of my findings. I will further discuss the implications of my research for online activism, gender inequality, and democracy, and predict how gaming culture will continue to change in the coming years.

By immersing myself in this subculture, and inspecting it critically, I will demonstrate how the indie game subculture, through its virtual spaces, community practices, and accessible software, provides an alternative place for men and women to create and play games and discuss gender politics. The inclusive and democratic elements of this subculture, free from the expectations and market force of the dominant gaming community, may reduce gendered barriers of entry to game development. Not only does this allow for greater participation by female game developers, but it also allows developers of all genders to create and distribute games about gender and sexuality that simply could not exist any other way. The content of our media is deeply influenced by the identity of its creators. A free, democratic, and egalitarian society, therefore, depends on a diversity of voices, a diversity that dominant gaming culture, so far, has been unable to provide. I hope that my work will
not only suggest that a more inclusive, egalitarian, and, frankly, more interesting

culture is possible, but will also suggest how such a culture can be achieved.

If we’re going to kill video games, we should understand why we do it, how to
do it, and how to be as cute as possible as we grip the smoking gun in our hands.
Chapter 1: The Sad State of Gender Politics in Video Game Subculture, or, Why Videogames Need to be Killed

Before I discuss how one kills video games, I must first argue why it is that they need to be killed. In this chapter, I begin my literature review of research done on gaming and gender, focusing on research done on gender roles in gaming culture and the portrayal of men and women in games. I will begin by describing gendered performance within games and their associated online spaces, and based on this performance, define the gendered gaming roles which exist within mainstream gaming culture. Then, I will turn my focus to the quantitative representation and qualitative portrayal of men and women in games. I will argue that women are underrepresented in games and that both men and women are often portrayed in stereotypical ways. Throughout this discussion, I will suggest how hierarchical gender roles and the sexist portrayal of characters in gaming may hold problematic societal implications.

Gender Roles in Gaming

The political implications of pop culture are not limited to their ideological content and derived meaning. Questions of how meaning is made are political in themselves. They are questions about who gets to participate in culture, the roles participants embody within it, and the behaviors that are permitted in those roles. More generally, they are questions of how one’s social status affects their freedom to participate in the meaning making process, a process which, in turn, defines social roles.
Often, the cultural roles assigned to individuals are hierarchical in nature, and gaming culture is no exception. If one is to understand gender inequality in gaming subculture, one must first understand the gender roles within it. Based on scholarly literature, I will argue that the identity most often legitimized in gaming subculture is the “hardcore” gamer, who is symbolically defined by consumerism and heteromasculinity, while the most often delegitimized identities are the “casual” and “fake” gamers, the former of which is defined by ineptitude and ignorance, the second by inauthenticity, and both by femininity.

Collectively, the literature strongly suggests that “gendered identities do not simply pre-exist the act and location of game play. Rather, they are actively formed and constituted through particular instances of game play in particular contexts” (Beavis 3). In other words, it is largely through interactions in games and gaming communities that these specific gendered identities exist. It is not a new idea that gender is a set of performed behaviors, rather than a set of intrinsic traits (see e.g., Connell 1993). However, gender performance in online spaces differs from traditional performance due to the absence of a literal physical component. As Avery Alix writes, “While macho can be accomplished both physically and socially in face-to-face interaction, it is more difficult to demonstrate physicality in games. Slaughtering other players is only marginally macho” (2). Instead, “It is through discursive interaction that gamers achieve femininity, masculinity and sexuality in digital play” (2). While discourse is by far the most prominent method of gender performance in online spaces, it can also be performed through player action. For example, in “Attention
Whore! Perception of female players who identify themselves as women in the communities of MMOs,” Fortim et al. surveyed 120 female Brazilian players of MMORPGs. Nearly a quarter of those surveyed said they heard mentions or threats of rape in-game, but one player recounts a time in which rape was virtually simulated:

“I was playing Ragnarok with a female character. I was talking with some friends of mine (all female) in the game. There were four of us, sitting right at the main city, waiting for a special event. Four male players appeared behind us and started following us: every time we sat, they’d sit and get up repeatedly, trying to simulate rape, while making jokes” (7).

While the virtual simulation of rape in this manner is likely not a common occurrence, it does suggest that the performance of sexuality or sexual violence in video games is not always discursive. For another example, when I was a teenager, I played the first person shooter (or FPS) Halo. During online games, some players would often “tea bag” their opponent after killing them, crouching up and down over their corpse so that it appeared that the killer’s crotch was being forced onto the victim’s face. “Tea bagging” was most often used when one player was dominating another in a match, made an impressive kill, or successfully achieved vengeance. In this case, displays of dominance within the game were accompanied with displays of sexual dominance, constituting part of virtual masculine sexual performance within games.

Alternatively, according to Alix, there also exists a discursive performance of masculinity in games, which often consists of “the extensive use of vulgar,

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12 Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game. MMMORGs are games in which large numbers of players simultaneously inhabit a persistent online world.
misogynistic, [and] homophobic language by male gamers” as “a form of social in-grouping” (1). She details this performance of masculinity in her study “Beyond Sp34king L33t: How ‘Net Gladiators Discursively Construct Gendered Identity,” an analysis of how masculinity is defined and practiced through in-game messages in the online multiplayer FPS Counter-Strike. She observed and recorded text exchanges between players on one server, many of which demonstrate in-game gender performance. For example, consider the following exchange, a series of messages sent between players during a game of Counter-Strike:

34. FLAVA FLAV : morn can I join u?
35. moron : join me doing what
36. FLAVA FLAV : god like
37. moron : WHAT?
38. moron : YO UWANT SEX WITH ME?
39. *DEAD* FLAVA FLAV: um...
40. *DEAD* FLAVA FLAV : wtf
41. moron : YOU SICKO
42. *DEAD* FLAVA FLAV : ahaha
43. moron : WANTING TO SEX Me
44. *DEAD* FLAVA FLAV : stupid
45. *DEAD* FordMustang : ahaha
46. *DEAD* FLAVA FLAV : gay ppl these days
47. *DEAD* sanfran asian guy : lol
48. *DEAD* BILLIE : roiflkcopter (13)

We may never know in which way FLAVA FLAV intended to join moron, but what we do have is an example of in-grouping by using language to cast homosexuality as undesirable. In the majority of exchanges in a game like Counter-Strike, all players are assumed to be male unless given reason to assume otherwise. The assumption of gamer as male by default speaks to the symbolic maleness of
gamer identity. Additionally, the common use of gayness as pejorative, in this case by moron and FLAVA FLAV, indicates that homosexual masculinity is subordinate to heterosexual masculinity. In this exchange, the heterosexual male gamer is the subject and the homosexual gamer is the object or other. Additionally, if one associates male heterosexuality with being masculine, and homosexuality with being more feminine, then masculine superiority is implied through the language.

The language used in masculine performance in *Counterstrike* is not only homophobic. Alix provides numerous other examples of discourse in which players assert their sexual prowess and dominance (“I LIVE IN UR MOMS PUSSY… SO STFU,” (10) “Ive bet ive gotten more play then u,” (19)), as well as examples of overtly misogynistic and racist language. Such language, especially that professing sexual dominance, is frequently used by players to legitimize their own authority, and delegitimize the authority of others. While performing “gamer masculinity” is not identical to performing hegemonic masculinity, the former is greatly influenced by the latter.

As obvious as it may be to write it, gamers also often legitimize themselves by their competency at games. The competency aspect is a heavily gendered part of gamer identity. For example, consider Catherine Beavis’ study “Pretty Good for a Girl: Gender, Identity and Computer Games.” In the second part of her study, she
coincidentally analyzes the experience of an all-female *Counter-Strike* clan.¹³

Butterfly, the clan’s leader, says that, when she plays the game with male players

... *what these guys will do is the first thing is [assume] it’s a guy. If you play really well they think you’re a guy and they [you] are lying... ‘Girls can’t play CS’, you know. They start going ‘you girls should go and do girly stuff. Like cooking, cleaning.’ Stuff like that.* (9)

Later, she says that, “you’re right at the top, and people are going ‘oh the girl’s really good, you’re pretty good for a girl’... But what I really hate is that they always say ‘for a girl’” (9). Within *Counter-Strike*, and other games, the skill of female players is perceived as unusual. A similar trend between gender and perceived competency exists for the female MMO players in Fortim’s study. An alarming 43.5% of the women in her study stated that, in-game, “When I fail/make a mistake, other players relate that to my gender” (9). Both Beavis and Fortim’s studies strongly suggest that competency at games, and therefore gamer status, is associated with masculinity, while incompetency is associated with femininity.

Another key aspect of gamer identity, especially hardcore gamer identity, is the consumer aspect – a gamer is marked as someone who owns expensive gaming hardware, spends hours daily playing games, and has extensive knowledge of games. Alix notes that “high-level players tend to have more expensive computers and peripherals than casual gamers, and they have greater access to the technology” (7). Hardcore gamers are often differentiated from casual gamers by the amount of time each week that they spend playing games. For example, in Diane Carr’s study of

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¹³ A clan is an organized group of players for an online game. Clans can be large communities, or be a small, tightly-knit strike team.
young girl gamer preferences, “Contexts, Pleasures and Preferences: Girls Playing Computer Games,” she identifies the girls in her study as “casual, rather than hard-core gamers, in that they played for a couple hours a week, rather than hours a day” (2). Even though the girls belonged to an after-school gaming club, Carr still assigned them with what is effectively a subordinate gamer identity. Finally, it is not uncommon for gamers to dismiss the legitimacy of other gamers based on their lack of knowledge about games, especially if the other gamers are female. In Taylor’s “Gender in Play: Mapping a Girl’s Gaming Club,” a pair of boys disrupts the meeting of a girl gamer club. One of them asks the girls why they’re not playing the latest version of *Need for Speed*, “a speech act that asserts his superior knowledge of gamers and possibly, by extension, his status as a gamer” (306). As I will discuss further in Chapter 3, women are sometimes delegitimized as “real” gamers when they haven’t played, or have little knowledge of, certain specific games.

From these studies and examples, I have developed a working definition of the hardcore gamer identity. Gamers compare themselves and others to hegemonic heteromasculine sexual standards, regardless of the actual content of their sex lives. Since they usually cannot achieve the heteromasculine ideal through physicality in virtual spaces, whether it’s in a game or on Twitter, they instead often achieve it through discourse, often through the use of homophobic and misogynistic language. Hardcore gamers buy expensive gaming hardware, from high-end PCs to the latest consoles, buy lots of games, and spend hours every day playing games. Because they spend so much time consuming games, they develop wide knowledge of games and a
high level of competency playing them. The games played by hardcore gamers are generally PC and console titles belonging to “core” genres, such as FPSs, role-playing games (RPGs), and real time strategy games (RTSs). The literature discussed provides numerous examples of ways in which women are generally excluded from hardcore gamer status for failing to meet the criteria of competency and knowledge. Women are generally believed to be inherently less competent at games, being called “good for a girl” when they are competent, or being blamed for failure because of their gender. Women’s ignorance of specific games sometimes leads their identity as gamers to be called into question. Simply put, the gamer label is symbolically masculine.

If the hardcore gamer identity is masculine, what identities are left for female players in gaming? Those who don’t spend hours every day playing games, or those who don’t play the core genres are described as “casual gamers”. The symbolic casual gamer is generally understood as someone who does not dedicate much time or money to the acquisition or play of games. In their contemporary form, they usually do not own a powerful computer or game console, and generally play games on social media or on mobile devices. On these platforms, the casual games they play, such as Angry Birds and Candy Crush, tend to be easy to pick up, play for a short time, and be put back down.

During September of 2014, computer hardware company ASUS briefly ran the following advertisement through social media, perfectly illustrating the gendered stereotypes of “hardcore” and “casual” gamer.
The ad was quickly pulled. However, it conveniently illustrates some behaviors of the stereotypical (male) hardcore gamer: competency (“Your WASD keyboard keys look like they’ve been through WWII”), knowledge (“You know what the Red Ring of Death is”), and consumerism (“You spent a small fortune upgrading..."
your computer”). Meanwhile, just as femaleness is defined as relative to maleness, the stereotypical (female) casual gamer is defined in relation to the hardcore gamer. She is inexperienced, and therefore unskilled, ignorant of both game knowledge and pop culture knowledge (the one ring in *The Lord of the Rings* is never referred to as “The Ring of Death”), and not an active consumer of games, both in purchasing decisions and in terms of time spent playing them. When portrayed in these ways, the “hardcore” gamer is objectively superior to the “casual” gamer in almost every way, in the context of gaming culture.

However, the casual gamer identity is not the only alternative to the masculine hardcore identity. Those who fail to have exact knowledge of a specific game, or fail to meet any other arbitrary criteria established by male gamers, are established as “fake gamers,” “fake gamer girls,” or “non-gamers” altogether. Popular understandings of the fake gamer girl represent her as one who pretends to be a hardcore gamer simply to get the attention and respect of gamer men. According to the logic of the fake gamer girl scenario, all men who appear to play games must be “real gamers,” since a “fake gamer boy” counterpart does not exist. The fake gamer girl myth, in this way, not only delegitimizes women as gamers, but further legitimizes the status of men.

The gender roles in gaming bear remarkable similarity to those in rock music identified by Mimi Schippers in *Rockin’ Outside of the Box*, a study of gender maneuvering in alternative hard rock subculture in the 1990s. Schippers identifies the roles of musician and “true fan” are symbolically male, while the roles of groupie and
teenybopper are symbolically female. The male true fan of rock and roll, like the male true gamer or hardcore gamer, is defined by their authenticity and their deep knowledge and love for music. Renowned male musicians and professional male game developers are the most legitimate creators of cultural content. Meanwhile, female teenyboppers and female casual gamers are less knowledgeable and devoted fans than their male “true fan” counterparts, rendering them less legitimate consumers of culture, and female groupies and fake gamer girls aren’t actually interested in consuming culture, but instead in having sex with musicians and gamers. The gender role hierarchy present in gaming is not unique to it, and may be representative of the gender hierarchy in other contexts. In both games and music, men symbolically represent the content creators and consumers most capable of interpretation, while women produce content rarely and are delegitimized both as artists and as an audience.

It is worth noting that the game developer is a symbolically male identity, if simply by the virtue of an overwhelming number of game developers being male, as I will discuss shortly. However, the developer is largely removed from player culture, and not an active participant. With rare exceptions, nobody idolizes the game developer or knows his name, nor is he usually present when people experience his work. The mythical “fake gamer girls” don’t have sex with developers – they have sex with gamers. In this regard, the analogy between gender roles in rock and roll and gaming culture is inapplicable. In rock and roll, the male musician is king. In gaming, the male hardcore gamer is at the top of the gender hierarchy, as a consumer king.
Within mainstream gaming subculture, there exists a hardcore gamer identity that is clearly dominant and masculine, while there also exist casual gamer and fake gamer identities, which are clearly subordinate and feminine. A more egalitarian gaming culture may necessitate a de-gendering of these roles, gender maneuvering between these roles, or the destruction of these roles altogether.

**Representation of Gender in Games**

As we try to understand why game culture is structured the way it is, it is important to look at the form and content of the works themselves, for two reasons. The first is that the gender hierarchy in game culture may inform game content, and the second is that game content may, in turn, reinforce the hierarchy. The degree to which players of games are influenced by sexist game content is difficult to determine, as the political impact of pop culture is often ambiguous. Cultural theorists like John Fiske have argued that consumers often interpret pop culture critically, in spite of its traces of dominant ideology, giving pop culture a slight progressive edge. However, older theorists, like Theodor Adorno, were far more concerned with culture’s totalitarian potential to dupe consumers with ideology. Clearly, the meaning that is derived from pop culture is not only determined by the content and form of the texts (i.e. films, books, games) but also the intelligence, experience, and identity of the readers. Text content and reader identity interact in ways that make it difficult to make assumptions about the general impact of a text upon its audience. For example, if a game portrays the traditional gender roles of male hero and female damsel, one cannot say with certainty whether the game will influence viewers to question the roles, or
whether it will cause viewers to take them for granted. While Fiske clearly explains how pop culture can have a progressive impact, it would be a mistake to assume that it will have one more often than not.

Thus, the political ideology communicated through media, such as games, is not always adopted by their consumers, because they are capable of interpreting media critically. However, it is a reasonable assumption that progressive texts are more likely to have a progressive ideological impact on their readers, while reactionary texts are more likely to have a reactionary impact. Regardless of whether or not Fiske is correct about pop culture’s inherent progressive edge, the form and content of our cultural texts matter. To argue otherwise, that media has no affect on the beliefs and behaviors of those who interact with it, would be to disregard the influence and power of media such as advertising and propaganda. While sexist game content does not have a uniform effect on all who interact within it, it does have some effect on the beliefs and behaviors of many of them. Meaning making often occurs when one consumes media. The stories we tell ourselves can contain messages about what it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman, and what sort of social behavior is acceptable or normal under certain circumstances. Playing games in which women are repeatedly victimized by men does not necessarily result in male players emulating the behavior and victimizing women, but it can teach them that it is normal for women to be victims.

Research suggests that, while games provide mixed messages about gender, they tend to frequently portray gender in ways that may reinforce harmful stereotypes. An early study on the portrayal of female game characters was performed by Tracy L.
Dietz in “An Examination of Violence and Gender Role Portrayals in Video Games.” Researchers rented and played 33 of the most popular console games in 1995 and categorized each game on how they portrayed women characters. In her findings, she states that the most common portrayal of women was their complete absence.

Excluding games without human characters, 30% of the games in her sample did not include women at all. If women were included in games, it was often as a victim or a “damsel in distress.” Twenty-one percent of the games featured women in this manner. A significant number of games in the study also portrayed women as sex symbols, as “visions of beauty with large breasts and thin hips” (Dietz 435). Nine percent of games had women as villains, and 15% had women “as spectators or in other roles that were supportive to the main character” (436). While 15% of the games include women as heroes or action characters, she notes that “in many instances these heroes were dressed in stereotypical female colors and/or clothing” (433). She elaborates that “even when they occupy the role of a hero, [they] are often depicted as subordinate to male characters or are presented in terms of their sexuality” (438).

Overall, Dietz finds that “while there are instances in which female characters are portrayed as positive role models, in general, most of the games minimize the roles of females” (436). While Dietz does not take the opportunity to analyze the portrayal of male characters, it is clear that the portrayal of women in games, at the time of the study, was highly problematic.

Although the games in Dietz’s study were all dated from the late 1980s and early 1990s, and are not representative of games today, they are representative of the
historical context in which modern games are situated. Gender representation in games
may have improved, but it hasn’t by much. By the early 2000s, studies report that “Of
the 24 top videogames studied, 92% have male lead characters while 54% include
female lead characters” (Marketing to Women 10). These statistics, however, are
misleading, only indicate the inclusion of a single playable male or female character in
a game, and by no means indicate that women are proportionately represented in a
game that includes female characters. Overall, only “16% of human characters… were
females” (Off our Backs, 6). Even when women are playable characters, they are
often portrayed in a sexualized manner: “23% of the games with female lead
characters show them with significantly exposed breasts or cleavage, 31% with
exposed thighs, and 15% with exposed buttocks... Overall, 85% of the female
characters have disproportionately thin bodies, large breasts, and/or small waists”
(Marketing 10). Trends of the sexualization and overall absence of women from
games continued from the 1990s into the 2000s. While there are few comparable
studies on contemporary games, one frankly does not need to spend much time
playing games to notice that the majority of playable characters are male, and that
women are often portrayed in overtly sexual ways.

While studies like those done by Dietz draw upon a relatively large sample of
games, they don’t go into much specific detail about how women are portrayed in
sexualized or stereotypical ways. In contrast, Sarah M. Grimes, in “‘You Shoot Like a
Girl’: The Female Protagonist in Action-Adventure Video Games,” provides us with
strong examples of the phenomenon. In this study, she performs an in-depth analysis
of the female characters in three games released in 2002: *Metroid Prime*, *Resident Evil*, and *Eternal Darkness: Sanity’s Requiem*. The three protagonists of these games, respectively, are Samus Aran, an intergalactic bounty hunter, Jill Valentine, a cop, and Alexandra Roivas, a graduate student. Although “each heroine was described as excelling in a profession that directly challenged traditional Western gender roles,” most of them satisfied traditional gender roles in other ways (Grimes 5). While Jill is one of the playable heroes in *Resident Evil*, she is “frequently subordinate to the male characters around her” and is “portrayed in the additional – and highly stereotypical – roles of damsel in distress and battered woman” (Grimes 6). Even though Alex is the hero of *Eternal Darkness*, she “was often relegated to the passive role of witness” while “male characters… drove the majority of the action and engaged in most of the combat and exploration” (Grimes 6). Among all of these characters, Samus of *Metroid Prime* had “the most dominant role” as she “drove every aspect of the gameplay and was often the only character present on the screen” (Grimes 6). However, Samus is also the least defined of any of these characters, having no interactions with others or any spoken dialogue. Like many “silent protagonist” game characters, she serves less as a character and more as an avatar, “an empty vessel for the player to appropriate” (Grimes 6).

Interestingly, all three protagonists conformed to standard western beauty norms: “young and Caucasian, with beautiful, angular, and symmetrical facial features.” While Samus is usually fully covered in a suit of battle armor, hiding the shape of her body, Jill and Alex are “both portrayed as thin and petite with slightly
toned muscles. Although both women were also visibly curvaceous, Jill was the most overtly voluptuous” (Grimes 7). While Samus is often concealed in androgynous armor, and the game, as a first person adventure, is played from her literal perspective, Grimes argues that, through Samus, beauty ideals are neither challenged, nor reinforced.

Regarding in-game behavior, Grimes states that “Jill’s excessive displays of emotion and traditionally ‘feminine’ behaviours are what set her apart from the other characters in the game” (Grimes 9). Meanwhile, Alex “was portrayed as composed and forceful” but “much of [her] character development was defined by relationships with male characters” (Grimes 9). Samus, as previously discussed, is merely a blank slate filled by the player’s own emotions and behavior. She doesn’t demonstrate stereotypically feminine behavior, but for that matter, she doesn’t demonstrate much behavior beyond shooting things.

In these three examples of female game protagonists, some degree of feminine stereotyping is present. All characters conform to traditional standards of beauty. Grimes argues that this is problematic because “Without the musculature and size necessary to realistically perform the actions they are shown accomplishing, ultra-thin action heroines lack the authenticity required to transform them into credible and effective role-models” (12). The positive social effect the existence of these characters may not only be negated by their physique, but also by their adherence to gender stereotypes, their subordination to male characters, and in Samus’s case, her lack of characterization. While Grimes’ study obviously is limited in scope, it does suggest
that the problem of equal gender representation in games depends on more than the mere presence of women in games and as playable characters, but also upon how they are portrayed.

This isn’t to imply that the presence of sexualized or stereotyped women in games can only be socially harmful. Laura Fantone, in “Final Fantasies: Virtual Women’s Bodies,” notes that the heroine of Tomb Raider, Lara Croft, “has been appropriated by feminists and lesbians as a role model and heroine for women in videogames,” despite Croft’s overt sexualization as an attempt to cater to the tastes of young male players (65). She also suggests that the mere ability of a person to play as a character of another gender can have subversive effect, writing that “Virtual interactions affect our gendered subject’s self-perception and possibilities of experimentation, widening possible definition of our identity in empowering ways” (67). Even if female player characters in games are stereotyped into traditional gender roles, they can still possibly generate a progressive effect, in a very Fiskean sense. Female player characters may often contain traces of dominant ideology, but they often have traits that challenge traditional gender norms (for example, high proficiency with rocket launchers), and the mere action of playing the role of somebody else, especially someone of a different gender, can cause people to reevaluate their own identities, and understand the identities of others, in unexpected ways.

One of the few pieces of literature that explicitly discusses the portrayal of masculinity in games is Ewan Kirkland’s “Masculinity in Video Games: The
Gendered Gameplay of *Silent Hill,*” in which he focuses on the representation of men among the playable characters of the *Silent Hill* series of horror games. He notes that the little other literature mentioning masculinity in games usually argues that “video games contain regressive models of male behavior characterized by aggression, domination, and heterosexualized superiority to women” which “contributes to the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity” (177-178). While he agrees that “this may be a fair assessment of the games industry as a whole,” he argues that “such analyses do not acknowledge the complexities and contradictions in the images of masculinity on the screen, the narratives of masculinity in which they are situated, or the masculine positions game players adopt in relation to specific games, genres, or franchises” (178). For example, three of the heroes of the first four *Silent Hill* games are male. They satisfy traditional masculine stereotypes by engaging in combat throughout the game, as well as by rescuing and protecting “damsels in distress.” As Kirkland explains, “The original *Silent Hill* sees Harry searching the town for his adopted daughter… In *Silent Hill 2,* James returns to the town to rescue his wife from the underworld in which she is trapped. The entire second half of *Silent Hill 4* sees Henry retracing his steps through the game environment, leading to safety his dependent next-door neighbor, Eileen Gavin, whose injuries leave her less physically capable than the hero” (174). However, Kirkland argues that the hypermasculine stereotype is subverted. He writes that the men in *Silent Hill* are “ordinary, flawed, even neurotic to the point of psychosis,” “spatial expansion is frustrated by…”

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14 The games analyzed by Kirkland do not include the remake of *Silent Hill* analyzed in Grime’s paper – Jill is not a playable character in these four games.
deterministic game structure,” and “military activity is curtailed by meager resources, modest weaponry, and the protagonist’s own shortcomings” (178). Additionally, “Heroic quests often fail: Harry’s daughter is lost to the cult of Silent Hill, Jane’s wife remains dead, and Henry’s impotence is repeatedly underlined as more neighboring residents are murdered” (Kirkland 178).

However, I argue that these instances of subversion are mild and generally inconsequential. While Silent Hill’s player characters may struggle with spatial obstacles and a scarcity of ammo, so do the hypermasculine space marine heroes of shooter games like Doom and Halo. Even if Silent Hill’s protagonists are “ordinary,” the role that they play, and the impressive amount of violence they are capable of, parallel the hegemonic masculine ideal in many action games. The hero’s muscles and weapons in Silent Hill may be smaller, but the primary behavior is still the same – they are still an emulation, however imperfect, of the hegemonic masculine ideal. Even though the player characters fail to protect damseled women in the games, they are still cast in the role of rescuer and protector – failure to save the damsel does not alter the “damsel in distress” trope in a way that actually subverts gender roles.

While Silent Hill’s characters fail to meet the standard of hegemonic masculinity, it is not because they practice radically alternative forms of masculinity or femininity. They are still comparing themselves to the hegemonic masculine ideal. They are trying to emulate stereotypical behaviors and fail, rather than try to emulate alternative behaviors altogether.
While *Silent Hill* is obviously not representative of all games, it does contain elements that are common among most action games: the general tendency for action heroes to be male, their unusual amount of combat proficiency, and the damseling of female characters. Player characters in most action games, regardless of their gender, tend to be the most competent characters in the games, capable of killing entire armies single handedly and saving the day. This is often necessary for the sake of creating engaging game play. Similarly, non-player characters of both genders are more likely to be hostages, prisoners, victims, or supporters on the sidelines – also to be expected since these characters are not controlled by the player. However, when the majority of action game heroes are male, and most “damseled” characters are female, messages are constructed about gender difference in competency and dependence. Men are competent, independent, free economic actors capable of achieving great things; women are incompetent, dependent victims whose personal value is derived from their relationships to male actors.

Generally, the collection of literature demonstrates that games have a history of excluding and subordinating women in their stories. Considering that game developers are overwhelmingly male, and their creations are heavily marketed towards young men, this is not surprising. While even the stereotyped portrayal of the occasional female game hero can have some positive social effects, games as a whole have a potential to communicate harmful ideas about gender, not only by portraying women as passive, sexy, irrelevant, subordinate, or overly emotional, but also by failing to feature women at all. Additionally, an absence of female role models in
games, as well as the overrepresentation of male role models, further establishes games are products for men and boys. If one can derive any meaning from video games as a whole, it is that men, generally, are actors, whereas women, generally, are passive bystanders. This binary of men as active and women as passive is present in the symbolic gender roles – game developers and hardcore gamers are defined by competency and action (the creation and frequent play of games), whereas casual gamers and non-gamers are defined by incompetency and inaction (the infrequent or total lack of play of games). Unequal representation of women in games, therefore, is not only a byproduct of gaming’s gender hierarchy, but further maintains and reinforces it.

In this chapter, I have argued that hierarchical gender roles exist in gaming culture: the hardcore gamer and developer as masculine, and the casual gamer, fake gamer, and non-gamer as feminine. These roles are partially performed by simulated behavior in virtual spaces, but more so by player discourse and consumer habits.

Additionally, the literature analyzed so far strongly suggests that game content reflects and reinforces gender hierarchy. Women have historically been underrepresented as games characters, especially as protagonists. Female characters who are present in games are far more likely than male characters to portrayed in sexualized ways, and both male and female characters tend to conform to gender stereotypes.
While I have only begun to detail gaming’s gender inequality, its existence is already apparent. It is in this patriarchal context that the Gamergate controversy occurs. Gaming’s feminist writers are writing in response to a culture with hierarchical gender roles and unequal gender representation, while the members of Gamergate organize in its defense. In the next chapter, I will continue my literature review, describing how the history of game development has resulted in gender inequality within it, as well as how the degree and manner to which women participate in gaming differs from men.
Chapter 2: History and Manifestations of Inequality
and the Egalitarian Potential of Alternative Spaces

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated the existence and performance of unequal gender roles in gaming subculture, as well as the presence of sexist portrayals of gender in games. This chapter begins with an examination of how the history of the creation and play of games has resulted in gender inequality. It continues with an exploration of how gender inequality actually manifests itself within player communities and the industry, resulting in differing play habits between men and women and the effective exclusion of women from game development. After establishing how the institutions of the mainstream gaming community have produced gender inequality, the chapter concludes with an introduction of the indie gaming scene, focusing on how it may serve as an alternative space whose institutions may be more conducive to gender equality.

The History of Game Development

In *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, Anna Anthropy provides an account of the videogame industry that provides some insight into the creation and maintenance of gaming’s gender roles. Many of the earliest games were born out of university computer labs in the 1960s and 1970s. The only people with access to these computers, let alone the skills to even use them, were “generally white male engineers” (23). Many of the earliest games made by these programmers in the 1970s, like *dnd* and *Zork*, were set in fantasy settings. Anthropy asserts, perhaps inaccurately,
that this is because “The college engineer who programmed games in the mid-seventies had most likely been exposed to the role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons” (25). However, regardless of whether or not Dungeons and Dragons was actually the primary influence on mid-1970s desktop computer games, one can still assume that these early games “contain the values of the people who make them” (28). Violent Tolkienesque fantasy settings continue to be popular in modern games, such as Dragon Age and World of Warcraft. Male engineers still create most games, and their values continue to be expressed through them.

Mainstream culture first encountered video games through arcade cabinet, marking the moment at which “businesspeople gained their foothold (and soon stranglehold) on videogames” (29). The creation and distribution of physical hardware (arcade cabinets) on which games such as Pong and Space Invaders were played required capital, which software developers themselves generally could not provide. The eventual popularization of early gaming consoles, such as the Atari 2600, for domestic use only increased the dependence of game designers on businessmen. Console games could be longer than arcade games, but a “longer game requires more content, and hence bigger teams to design and create that content. Marketing, now that the games were sold directly to the player, became a powerful force, and began to make many of the creative decisions” (31). Essentially, as games became more expensive to produce, developers became more dependent upon publishers, restricting what was creatively possible within a game to what was perceived to sell well. Today, mainstream games continue to be created under a developer-publisher model in which
“The developer actually designs, programs, and animates the game at the behest of the publisher, who pays the expenses of distributing it” (34).

Because games have become increasingly expensive to create, they must sell well in order to make a profit. As Janine Fron et al state, “As the game industry has become more successful… it has become more risk averse, and more oriented to what it defines as its ‘core market’” – hardcore young male games (315). Because game marketers target one demographic to the exclusion of all others, “Many videogame advertisements tend to disenfranchise and alienate women, further contributing to the self-fulfilling prophecy that ‘women don’t play games’” (316). For example, a Sega magazine ad once ran that featured a naked woman covered in game screenshots. It reads, “There is a beautiful naked woman on this page, [but] when you’ve got Sega Saturn’s triple 32-bit processing power, nothing else matters” (316).

The history of games, as it pertains to gender roles can be briefly summarized as follows. In the beginning, early games were created by mostly male computer scientists, reflecting the values of their creators and establishing a precedent for masculine game content for decades to come. By the 1970s, games had become a consumer product, requiring large amounts of capital to produce and resulting in the dependency of male game developers upon publishing firms. As technology improved, games became increasingly expensive to produce, requiring each game to generate more revenue, requiring safe, conservative marketing decisions, namely the marketing of games primarily toward male core gamers. The end result is an industry that largely creates media made by men, for men’s consumption. While the marketing of
mainstream core games to men hasn’t directly prevented women from playing games, it has contributed to the construction of gamer identity as masculine, and, as I will demonstrate, it has produced gendered difference in play habits.

**Invisibility in Play**

Historically, women have been mostly absent from the playing of hardcore games. While the Electronic Software Association reported in 2014 that 48% of game players are female, this number fails to account for different gaming habits and preferences between men and women. The statistic indicates that half of all people who have played games are female – but it says nothing about how often women play games, how many games women play annually, what genres of games women play, what hardware they play on, or how women socialize in online games. The mere fact that half of gamers are female is no guarantee that men and women’s experiences in gaming culture are equivalent. For example, one study from the Pew Internet & American Life Project reports that 39% of the young boys they surveyed played games daily, compared to 22% of girls\(^\text{15}\) (Vermeulen 2). The readership of gaming magazines such as *Computer Gaming World* and *Electronic Gaming Monthly* is “5% or less female,” strongly indicating that women do not participate in the “hardcore” gaming culture to the same extent as men (Fron 316).

Some of the most recent studies on gender and gaming habits, on first glance, seem to suggest that there is at least equal gender representation among players of

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\(^{15}\) The age of the children was not provided in the source article.
games. A 2014 report by Superdata, a digital games market research firm, indicates that, “58% of mobile gamers in the US are women” and “50% of American PC gamers are women” (Llamas). Furthermore, 54% of the players of PC RPGs are female, and 40% of all MMO and console players are female. However, this data otherwise does not account for differences in game play habits such as time spent playing, genre preference (besides RPG and MMO), or the extent of social participation within games. One of the Superdata’s senior analysts, Stephanie Llamas, states that she doesn’t play online games with a headset because, whenever she tried, she was harassed by other players. Her experience is hardly unique: among female internet users age 18-24, “half… were called offensive names online, 26% were stalked and 25% were sexually harassed” (Llamas). Llamas herself says that “she was included in all three of those statistics, two of which were during activities related to video games.” Even if women are equally present in gaming, in some contexts, their online experiences may be more hostile than those of men.

Even though Superdata’s study tries to suggest that women are nearly equally present in core gaming, an older, but still recent study (2011) by Lotte Vermeulen and other researchers from Ghent University reveals that there is a significant gender discrepancy among hardcore gamers, and among casual gamers. In “You Are What You Play? A Qualitative Study into Game Design Preferences across Gender and their Interaction with Gaming Habits,” Vermeulen et al. surveyed 962 players of games. They sought to understand how player gender interacted with exposure to “core” game genres to produce individual player preferences. For their purposes, core games
included “shooters, fighting, action-adventure, sports, racing, strategy, survival horror, roleplaying and MMO games.” Meanwhile, non-core games included “platform, adventure, simulation, party, serious, classic, and casual games” (3). In the study, those who played core genre games at least once a week were designated as “core” players (CP’s), while everyone else was designated as “non-core” players (NCP’s).

Sixty four and two-tenths percent of their respondents were male. Eighty-five and nine-tenths percent of the men were in the CP group, compared to only 42.7% of the women. Everyone remaining was in the NCP group. Overall, 70.5% of all respondents were CP. After performing some extra calculation, the overall breakdown of the sample is as follows: 55.15% male core player, 15.29% female core player, 9.05% male non-core player, 20.51% female non-core player. In Vermeulen’s sample, male core players severely outnumber female players.

Vermeulen et al went further and attempted to determine if there were any correlation between one’s gender, their exposure to core games, and their attitudes towards elements of games such as violence, complexity of play, sexual representation of women, and narrative content. The found that, for the most part, “gender differences diminish among CP because of similar interests and experience” (17). This finding supports the notion that gender differences between male and female players have less to do with perceived inherent gender characteristics, and more to do with exposure and access to “core” games. Interestingly enough, “the preferences of male NCP were also similar to those of [male and female] CP, irrespective of their experience with core genres” (Vermeulen 17). Vermeulen et al provide the possible
explanation that “the group male NCP were also more experienced with gaming
technology than female NCP” (17), but it is also possible this is because core game
content is generally representative of hegemonic male cultural preferences. In either
case, Vermeulen’s work strongly suggests that men and women generally have
different game play habits, but also that these habits are socially constructed.

It is also possible, from Vermeulen’s data alone, to argue that it is not exposure
to core games which creates difference in preferences between female core players
and non-core players, but instead the difference in preferences that results in some
women becoming core gamers. However, such an interpretation makes little sense, for
it does not explain why there is great variety among the “natural” preferences of
women, and so little variety among the “natural” preferences of men. The lack of
differences in preference between CP and NCP men is not because men naturally have
less diverse tastes than women, but because, as I have demonstrated, games tend to
represent stereotypically masculine values. Whether boys play core games or not, they
consume media that is marketed toward boys either way, and therefore tend to develop
the same set of preferences. However, because core games are almost exclusively
marketed to men and boys, girls who play core games will develop more masculine
preferences, while girls who do not play games are more likely to consume feminine
media and develop feminine preferences. In this manner, what some perceive as
inherent gender differences are, in reality, socially produced.

A study by Aphra Kerr suggests that part of the reason for the perceived
absence of women from core gaming is partially because many women find the sexist
content of games alienating, but also because many women who do play games participate in a domestic gaming culture, rather than a public one, meaning that their participation in gaming culture is generally limited to the playing of games with their friends in physical space. In “Girls: Women Just Want to Have Fun – A Study of Adult Female Players of Digital Games,” Kerr presents her findings from interviews she conducted two professionals who market games, one male and one female, and ten female players. Interestingly, she found that “During the research period it became apparent that labeling oneself as a gamer and associating oneself with the range of meanings that people attached to that term was an issue for many females” (273). Kerr’s understanding of “gamer” as those “who played any type of digital game, on any platform, with varying frequency… did not seem to correlate with interviewees own perceptions of what a gamer was.” (273). In other words, regardless of the frequency at which the women in the study played games, they were reluctant to adopt the gamer identity themselves, possibly because of its masculine coding. Also of note was that, “For interviewees the fact that men dominated their games culture was not a problem… What was an issue for them was the blatant design and marketing of games for men or the crude attempts to ‘add-in’ female characters into games designed around the main character being a male” (Kerr 283). The marketing of games to men, as well as masculinized game content, can be a turn-off to female players and female potential players both, effectively discouraging women from joining the gaming community.
What is especially interesting about Kerr’s study are the stories told by the interviewed women about how they started playing games. Most of the women were recruited into the gaming community between 6-10 years of age, and, interestingly, “none were recruited in their teenage years or later” (Kerr 279). Kerr’s finding suggests that, if one is not a player of games, it becomes progressively harder to become one later in life. Of perhaps more importance, however, was Kerr’s finding that recruitment into gaming culture “was usually the result of having fathers, brothers or male friends who played… For these girls the fact that their female friends didn’t play was not an issue, it was something they did at home with their brothers, mainly, and sometimes with another sister” (279). Men continued to dominate the networks through which women played games throughout their lives. The gaming culture of these women was primarily “private and domestic and they selectively filtered out situations, content and media which made them feel uncomfortable or unwanted. From an outside perspective they were largely invisible” (Kerr 284). The dependence of women upon men in offline settings to maintain involvement in game culture could be reflective of the aforementioned dependence of female characters upon male heroes, but they could also be unrelated phenomena.

From her study, Kerr concludes that increasing gender diversity in gaming culture isn’t done simply by throwing women into it, but instead, by creating change “at the level of the games [content] and the advertising of the games” (284). Kerr also makes the important observation that female gamers, even of the “hardcore” variety, are relatively invisible in gaming culture. For them, gaming took place in a domestic
subculture, not a public one, further reinforcing the perception that women don’t play hardcore games.

Once a young girl is told early in life that mainstream core games are not for her, either through male-centric games marketing or hostile public play environments, it becomes increasingly difficult for her to become a gamer later in life. Core games require a serious investment of time to develop the skills necessary to play them. For example, the Xbox 360 controller has eleven buttons, two joysticks, and one navigation compass. To someone who has never played a game before, playing a game through such a device can understandably be overwhelming! Anthropy argues that “The amount of both manual dexterity and game-playing experience required to operate a game designed around the Xbox 360 makes play inaccessible to those not already grounded in the technique of playing games” (15). As someone who has watched his own parents attempt to play his video games and fail dramatically, I can confirm that the inaccessibility of many games due to a lack of play experience, or ludoliteracy, is a serious problem. Because “core” game genres, such as FPSs and RTSs, require high levels of skill to play, and because skill-based games become increasingly inaccessible with age, one’s inclusion or exclusion from core gaming is determined at a relatively young age, making any gender-based egalitarian reform of mainstream gaming a slow and difficult process.

Part of the reason that that the hardcore gamer identity is masculine is because women have historically been excluded, to a large extent, from core gaming. However, much of the perception that “women don’t play real games” also comes
from the fact that women are less visible in gaming’s public sphere. Online harassment and abuse, and the pre-existing male domination of online gaming communities, discourage women from interacting in public gaming communities. Kerr’s study suggests that women who are avid gamers instead interact in domestic communities, rendering them otherwise invisible in gaming culture.

**Exclusion from Creation**

While there exists a gender discrepancy in most player communities, that discrepancy is nowhere near as severe as the one in mainstream game development. A 2005 International Game Developers Association (IGDA) report revealed that “88.5% of all game development workers are male; 83.3% are white; 92% are heterosexual” (Fron 310). While game developers are predominantly white, they are “secondarily Asian” (Fron 309).

Janine Fron *et al* describe the phenomenon of exclusion of marginalized people from core gaming and game development as “The Hegemony of Play” (309). As Vermeulen’s study suggests, the absence of non-core gamers isn’t due to inherent differences between men and women. In reality, the causes of this exclusion are numerous and complex.

While the creation of games is no longer limited to male computer scientists, as it was in the earliest days of game development, the women who have broken into the games industry still “struggle with the prevailing culture” (Fron 311). For example, “Virtually all the women in the IGDA comments supplement complained of
the ‘boys-only’ ethos, and were well aware of game industry practices that are alienating to women. These include the use of ‘booth babes’ at industry expos… and a general locker-room attitude that pervades the workplace” (Fron 311). Additionally, one can also safely assume that the previously discussed gendered barriers to fully participating in core player culture translates to a lack of interest among women in becoming game developers. Negative experience or association with core gaming does not make one inclined to make games.

Unfortunately, many in the games industry fail to acknowledge the existence of gendered barriers to entry to game development, and instead think that the problem of gender inequality in game development can simply be solved by injecting women into the industry without actually changing it or its culture. In “Making a Name in Games: Immaterial Labour, Indie Game Design, and Gendered Social Network Markets,” Alison Harvey and Stephanie Fisher examine a Toronto-based incubator to help women create games, called the Difference Engine Initiative (or DEI). In 2011, twelve women participated in one of two incubators, DEI1 and DEI2. In each of these incubators, the participants created a game for the first time over the course of two and a half months, and then presented their work at public showcases.

However, the first incubator was, in many ways, a counterproductive attempt at achieving equality. The DEI workshop was “one actor in a much larger network of commercial, cultural, non-profit, for-profit, government, and educational interests and organizations,” and even though “DEI was marketed as an equality-focused initiative… ironically, the female participants are positioned at the bottom of the
network, with the least amount of power to shape the project, outcomes, or expectations” (Fisher 364). More interestingly, however, was incubator organizers’ usage of what Fisher et al. call “postfeminist” rhetoric. Generally, the organizers “did not see the value in acknowledging or discussing the barriers that the female participants identified as preventing them from achieving… success in this industry” (Fisher 371). For them, the main work of feminism is done, the playing field is level, and all that is necessary to achieve equality in game development is simply for more women to produce games. In other words, “it is ‘product’ not ‘process’ that is key to undoing marginalization” (371). As a result, what is achieved by the first incubator is simply the creation of games by women, not a change to the way in which games are made. For the most part, the workshop only benefits the participants, and in no way supports their endeavors as game developers beyond the incubator. Overall, positive societal impact is minimized. Many of the participants themselves took issue with the incubator, and complained that their experience was “‘problematic,’ ‘sexist,’ and ‘patriarchal’” (Fisher 374).

However, the second incubator, DEI2, was more successful. Two participants from DEI1 took it upon themselves to run DEI2, and ran an alternative curriculum that “did not prioritize the product over the process” (Fisher 374). While the original incubator has a more formal curriculum, the second was more focused on discovering and satisfying the wants and needs of its participants. As a result, the response to DEI2 was far more positive than to DEI1. By the end of the incubator, “the DEI2 group
were so overwhelmed with gratitude that they took a break from their debrief to call the organizers and thank them for their ‘amazing work’” (Fisher 374).

Fisher’s study raises a number of important implications. The first is the prominence of postfeminist rhetoric, particularly in game development. The argument that gendered barriers to entry are absent, and that all that is needed to create gender equality in game development is for women to make more games, is a common argument, notably among members of Gamergate. Postfeminist rhetoric itself serves as an obstacle to gender equality, as it denies that gender inequality is a problem that needs solved to begin with. The second implication is that it is, in fact, the alteration of the process by which games are made, and not merely the creation of products by women, through which equality is achieved. An egalitarian incubator, organized by women, that meets the specific needs of its female participants, had more benign outcomes than a patriarchal incubator, organized by men, that fails to even acknowledge its participant’s needs. The importance of process, not product, to equality in game development is what makes the indie scene so promising as a progressive force. The contemporary indie scene represents a distinct mode of production from that of mainstream game development.

Based on the body of literature, one can argue that Gaming culture was born out of an already male dominated tech culture, and through market forces, male domination was reinforced. The very first games were created in university computer labs mostly by white male computer engineers, and for white male computer engineers. While many early consumer games such as Pong and Pac Man appealed to
relatively wide audiences, the earliest creators of games also created works that catered to their own cultural preferences. Over time, it became a strongly entrenched notion that games were generally “boys’ toys.” Because of the high cost of mainstream game production, game developers are ultimately beholden to publishers, and publishers are inclined to make safe, conservative marketing decisions. What would become “core” games were almost exclusively marketed to young men, reinforcing the preexisting masculinity of gaming culture, artificially creating the hardcore gamer consumer identity. Advertising campaigns, game content, and general discourse have reinforced notions that gamers are young men and boys, discouraging girls from playing games at a young age. Historically, girls who become gamers have often done so because of their male family and friends. Those who play core games develop the skills and taste to continue to consume them, while those who don’t find it increasingly difficult to even begin. For women who are present in gaming communities, their experiences are hardly equivalent to those of men, as they often experience hostility, resistance and harassment in online spaces, both in and outside of gaming. Meanwhile, the women who are passionate enough about games to enter the games industry feel alienated by industry practices and sexism in tech culture, and others are discouraged from participation altogether.

The result is a culture in which women are discouraged from maximum participation in the creation, play, and discussion of games. Women are largely absent from game development, and to a lesser degree, game play, and those women who do play games are far less visible in public and online gaming spaces than men. This
reinforces the notion that the “real gamers,” or “hardcore gamers,” are generally men, while “casual gamers,” “fake gamers,” and “non-gamers” are generally women.

The culture surrounding the development and playing of videogames is pervasively unequal, especially in terms of gender. How then, might one create a more egalitarian culture? While many begin and end their pursuit of social equality with the implementation of equal rights, formal rights to the creation and consumption of culture are insufficient. The source of inequality often exists beyond patriarchal laws, rules, and procedures. The reason that women do not make games is not because of a lack of antidiscrimination law, nor is it because of natural difference between men and women. Rather, the problem lies with the system by which games are created, marketed, distributed, discussed, and played. Because an egalitarian distribution of power cannot be achieved through law, the system by which we make and play games itself must be altered. Thankfully, an alternative system already exists: the indie game scene.

The Indie Scene as an Alternative Space

Compared to the dominant industry, indie game developer subculture may serve as a more egalitarian model for game production and consumption. The processes by which independent games are created, marketed, distributed, discussed, and played often differs from those of the mainstream industry, suggesting the possibility for a more egalitarian culture. Felan Parker’s “Indie Game Studies Year Eleven” is a recent and comprehensive summary of the current state of indie game
literature, and from his synopsis we may gain some insight into indie game development’s progressive potential. He recognizes a number of trends in indie game scholarship, many of which are directly relevant to gaming’s gender politics.

The first of these trends is the difficulty in defining what an indie game is: “Indie games is not a fixed or stable idea… ‘Are we talking about a social movement, an art movement, a cultural scene, a fad, an ethics, a value orientation, a social identity, an assertion of authority, a cultural politics, an accident, a new form of capitalism…?’” (Parker 1). Parker does not provide a clear definition himself, but quotes indie game developer Paolo Pedercini, and suggests we conceptualize “indie as ‘not a status, but a tension and a direction to pursue’ in relation to the status quo” (Parker 2). What constitutes an indie game depends less upon its inherent characteristics, but more upon its relationship to the current, dominant mode of production. In this sense, it can be defined as any game that is not created under the (currently problematic) dominant mode of production.

Despite defining indie games so broadly, Parker defines categories of indie games more clearly. He writes of a popular “inclination to reduce ‘indie’ to small-scale development,” which serves as “a kind of farm team for the majors out of which the most talented (white, male, straight) designers are ‘discovered,’ their hard work and innovation rewarded with fame and fortune” (2). This is the most popularly reproduced conception of indie games.
Parker notes that, by contrast, “non-commercial, not-for-profit, activist, and amateur games,” are excluded from this popular narrative of indie games (2). There is a debate over whether the games Anna Anthropy has defined as “zinester” games (for example, “small, personal games produced by women, queer, and transgender people, often using accessible software”) are indie games (Parker 2). These sorts of games are produced in a generally non-commercial context, appear to be created by a more diverse body of authors, and tend to have more subversive and overtly political content. Because these types of games depend on such a radically different mode of production from the industry norm, they are of special relevance to this project. For the remainder of this thesis, when I refer to “indie games,” I am generally referring to non-commercial, not-for-profit, activist, amateur, punk, and zinester games, often made by individual authors instead of teams. If I need to differentiate between commercial indie games and the remaining categories of indie games, I will refer to the former as “dominant” indie games and the latter as “non-dominant.”

Mainstream game production and non-dominant indie production represent two different extremes: the former is conventional, for-profit, expensive, highly collaborative, and highly influenced by market forces, while the latter is unconventional, not-for-profit, cheap, independent, and mostly free from market forces. Dominant indie production resides somewhere in the middle. While dominant indie production is less expensive and depends upon smaller production teams, and, with a few ironic exceptions, is independent from publishing companies, it is still driven by profit motive, tends to produce more polished work than non-dominant
indies, and tends to more often reflect the themes and mechanics of mainstream games. Many authors cited by Parker are aware of this, saying that indie development is “precarious and all to-easily [sic] absorbed into the hegemonic capitalist structure of the mainstream games industry” and that “the current dominant conception of indie games fits very neatly within established economic structures, occupying a place alongside rather than in opposition to other commercial titles” (4-5). This is another reason that I am focusing on non-dominant indie game development – it is the mode of game production that is the furthest removed from the dominant norm.

The location of a game’s mode of production on the continuum described above can be described as a measure of that game’s independence. Parker agrees with Pedericini’s assertion that “There’s no absolute independence because you’ll always be constrained by technological platforms, protocols, hardware or infrastructures. Beyond gaming, you’ll be entwined in a web of power, privilege, exploitation, and dependency, as long as the current modes of production persist” (8). While this is true, it also means the extent to which a game is independent is a measure of the extent to which it is unconstrained by software and hardware limitations, power, and privilege.

The subculture of non-dominant indie game development is possibly the most independent of any game development subculture, because its participants are the least constrained by pre-existing patriarchal social networks, by skill-based barriers to entry, and by market forces. I predict that the greater degree of independence in non-dominant indie game production will allow for greater diversity both in who participates in it and what sort of content is communicated.
In recounting the history of indie games, Parker makes the important observation that, “In the early days of digital games, all games were independent, in the sense that there was no established industry or economic framework to be dependent on” (3). Yet, as we see in Anthropy’s account of the history, the earliest games we created in male dominated settings (such as computer science labs). It is from the production of these independent games that mainstream games, and the developer-publisher model, emerged. From this example, it is apparent that there is nothing about the independent, publisher-free mode of production that guarantees indie subculture to be more likely to challenge dominant gender norms. However, this mode of production, combined with accessible game making tools, alternative community practices, and a context in which games have disseminated into the mainstream, may produce more progressive outcomes.

The existence of a more progressive game development culture in the indie scene is indicated by the rise of the “queer renaissance in video games” (Parker 7). In recent years, there has been an influx of games dealing with topics of gender and sexuality created by LGBT game developers such as Anna Anthropy, Porpentine, Mattie Brice, and Merritt Kopas. However, much of the writing on the queer indie scene has been written by the game designers themselves – Parker states that “there is a pressing need for more research and interventionist work on the politics of sex, gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability in all their intersectionality, especially as these issues are addressed within gaming communities” (6). I intend, through this project, to contribute to satisfying that need, if in a small way.
Another aspect of independent gaming culture currently overlooked by scholarship is indie games’ player culture. As Parker states, “development cultures have been well-documented, but player culture less so” (7). There does not exist much literature detailing how indie games are “distributed, purchased, and consumed” (Parker 7). While I will briefly discuss the distribution platforms of indie games in this chapter, a detailed examination of indie game player culture will, unfortunately, have to be the subject of future research.

The Twine Revolution

A particularly strong example of how aspects of the indie mode of production can allow for a subversion of game development’s gender norms is the Twine community. Twine is a free authoring program for hyperlink-based interactive fiction games. Interactive fiction games are text based games with branching, nonlinear narratives determined by the player’s choices. Jane Friedhoff, in “Untangling Twine: A Platform Study,” notes that it has “quickly become the tool of choice for people who want to make games about topics like marginalization, discrimination, disempowerment, mental health, and LGBTQ issues” (2). She also notes that Twine games are characterized by a “consistently personal style”.

Friedhoff attributes part of the consistently personal and political nature of Twine games to Anna Anthropy’s promotion of the platform. Although Twine was originally released in 2009, it did not receive significant use until Anthropy wrote about it in 2012. That year, there was “a proliferation of Twine games” and a “flurry
of activity” within the Twine community (Friedhoff 2). Not only that, but “Anthropy’s game design aesthetic likely shaped the initial crop of games created with the platform” (2). For example, in a tutorial she wrote about the use of Twine, she recommended that users of the program make games about “your partner/family/cat/dog,” “an important moment in your life,” or “your fantasies or hopes or fears” (Friedhoff 3). These recommended themes for early Twine games have set a precedent for the content of Twine games to follow.

However, Friedhoff also says that “even with the strongest endorsement, a platform without Twine’s specific affordances likely would not have been able to support the creation and distribution of my works by marginalized people.” She also attributes the particular success of the platform to its accessible reference materials, its intuitive, friendly user interface (UI), and the ability to create and distribute Twine games for free and without the use of commercial distribution platforms. While most software programs have reference materials that focus on the software’s technical capabilities, Twine’s reference materials initially focus on “why creative people might choose an interactive medium in the first place” (Friedhoff 3). The reference materials were written with the explicit goal of including non-game developers into the Twine community. The target audience for Twine is not the experienced game programmer, but the person who has never made a game before, and whose voice is typically excluded from game development.

The program’s UI is similarly designed with the non-programmer in mind. Not only is it possible to make a Twine game without writing a line of code, but a Twine
file is arranged like “notecards on a table,” in which each written passage in a Twine story is laid out across the screen in a web (see fig. 2). The passages can be arranged in any manner “without altering the underlying logic” of the game, “which is rarely possible in traditional code” (Friedhoff 4). Creating a game in Twine is almost entirely a verbal and spatial process, and does not require hard technical skill, further dissolving technical barriers to entry to game development.


However, the simplicity of Twine makes it difficult to quickly generate lots of game content, and the branching narratives of Twine games “require a deceptively huge amount of content for a relatively small number of choices” (Friedhoff 5). This
means that most Twine games take the form of short vignettes, rather than massive stories. While this initially seems like a disadvantage to using Twine, Friedhoff argues that “the vignette can be used as a way for authors to create ‘critical play’” (6). Short Twine games can subvert game play and genre expectations without the subversion spoiling enjoyment of a game over a long period of time.

Finally, one of the most important aspects of Twine that make it viable as a tool for marginalized voices is the ability to create and distribute Twine games for free. The program is available for both Mac and Windows operating systems, and it creates games that are playable on a web browser. Twine games are small in file size and can be hosted on personal websites, or through sites that offer free Twine game hosting such as philome.la (Friedhoff 7). Effectively, nearly anyone with a computer and an internet connection can make and play a Twine game, free of charge, and without any third party distributor censoring games because of their content.

Twine may be one of the most accessible game authoring tools ever created. It was designed from the ground up to be used by the non-programmer, and to dismantle all professional and financial barriers to game production. The accessibility of Twine, paired with Anthropy’s endorsement of the program, resulted in a new community of developers marked by the diversity of their authors and the overtly personal and political themes of their games.

Twine is an important platform because it epitomizes nearly everything that can possibly make indie game production different from mainstream game production.
Twine has incredibly low technical barriers of entry to use, and Twine games are free to make, free to distribute, and free to play, are made by a diverse body of authors, and contain atypically personal and political content. Twine is, in many ways, an archetypal example of how the independent mode of production can result in a more feminist culture.

The Political Potential of Indie Institutions

Twine is only one of many game development programs used by indie developers. There exist numerous other programs, online spaces, and distribution platforms that make independent development possible. To determine the political potential of the indie dev scene, as a whole, one must determine the political potential of its institutions.

Twine, and its community, can provide as a useful model to which we can compare the rest of the indie scene’s institutions as political bodies. Every aspect of the Twine experience, from making a game, to engaging with the community, to distributing a game, allows and encourages marginalized people to make personal and political games. These traits of the Twine community that make progressive political speech through games possible are roughly as follows:

1) *Community imperative towards political and subversive speech.* In order for politically progressive games to be made, such games must at the very least be tolerated by the community, but such games are more likely to be made if their creation is encouraged, or even expected. In the case of Twine,
Anthropy’s endorsement of the platform, and her encouragement to create games with unusual and subversive themes led to the creation of a number of games with overtly feminist content.

2) Accessibility of software. In order for games to be made by those typically excluded from game development, technical barriers to entry must be lowered. This means that game development software has accessible reference materials, has a user-friendly user interface, and can be used without need of highly technical skills, such as programming or 3D modeling and animation. Twine is not only easy to learn, but only requires the user to be literate. No programming or technical art skill is required to use Twine.

3) Cheap or free development software for all platforms. Licenses for professional game development and animation software can cost thousands of dollars each. In order for games to be a viable means of communication for the masses, game making software must at least be affordable by the average person, if not all people. Additionally, that software must be usable on any operating system – otherwise, many potential users will be excluded. Twine is absolutely free to use on Windows and Mac operating systems, making it usable by almost anyone with internet access.

4) Free, uncensored distribution for all platforms. Because indie game developers don’t have publishing companies at their disposal to market and distribute their game, it is vital to have free and accessible channels through which to host downloadable software and share the game through word of
mouth. While there are a variety of online platforms through which to
distribute games, some, like Steam, require developers to pay a fee to use,
while others, like the App Store, curate their content and prohibit
controversial material. These restrictions limit who is able to distribute their
games, and what they are allowed to communicate through them. Twine
games can be hosted for free in a number of places, and without needing to
meet the standards of dominant distribution platforms, minimizing barriers to
distribution.

5) **Incentive to create vignettes.** The shorter a game is, the more feasible it is to
include subversive, experimental, and political content within it. If creative
risks through experimental work fail, it is less costly for a short game with a
short production time to fail than it is for a lengthy game with a long
production time to fail. Short, experimental games naturally lend themselves
to making brief, bold statements without demanding hours of investment.
Additionally, the more the creation of small games is accepted and
encouraged in a community, the more feasible it is for individuals, rather
than large teams, to make games. It is more likely that an individual will
make a political statement through a game than for a team of hundreds, all of
whom have conflicting political beliefs. The ability for a user to make a short
Twine game on their own, the difficulty in creating Twine games with large
amounts of content, and the acceptance of the vignette as the normal form for

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16 For example, in 2010, “Apple deleted over 5,000 iPhone games from its store overnight for being, in
Apple’s judgment, too sexual” (Anthropy 40).
Twine games, all encourage the creation of games with highly personal, subversive, and political content.

The ability of an online space, software development program, or distribution platform to meet the above criteria can give us a general idea of its ability to include marginalized voices in game development and permit subversive or political content in games.

**Development Software**

Among popular indie game development tools, one which is commonly used is RPG Maker. RPG Maker is designed to created 2D Japanese-style role-playing games in which the player controls a hero and a party of adventurers, explores a world, fights monsters, loots items and treasure, and progresses along a linear story. Although the latest version of the program is fairly expensive ($70), one can easily find a free pirated copy of an older version, RPG Maker 2004. Even though there is currently no legal way to obtain an English copy of RPG Maker 2004, it is still, interestingly enough, a very commonly used version of the program. The program is quite easy for inexperienced users to use – each version comes included with default character and environment graphics for the user, and doesn’t require any programming. Developers instead drag game elements onto a grid, and within those elements, select the game events that they want to occur. While it is possible to modify the game by writing code, it is entirely optional, and those users who can program publically share their code through online communities for non-programmers to use.
Although RPG maker is designed to make RPGs, it is also possible to create non-violent, non-challenging games in which the player simply explores a world, talks to characters, and progresses through a story. Such games may be more likely to focus upon socially progressive, experimental, or subversive content, as they are less likely to focus upon combat, looting, and high fantasy themes.

Another commonly used authoring tool by indie developers is the aptly named Game Maker. Game Maker is far more versatile than RPG Maker, being able to create games of any genre and even support basic 3D graphics. Historically, it has also been cheaper to acquire – ten years ago, when I started using the program, the full version cost fifteen dollars. Today the professional version of the program costs one hundred dollars, but a free version with nearly full functionality is available. Game Maker, like RPG maker, does not require programming to use, instead allowing for users to make games by dragging and dropping logic tiles onto game objects, defining their behavior. However, advanced users can program games with the software’s built in programming language. The program is highly accessible to new users, but still suits the needs of experienced developers.

There are numerous other examples of programs used by indie developers to produce software, including Unity, Stencyl, FlashPunk, Fixel, Adventure Game Studio, Construct, and Unreal Engine. Each of these programs has varying technical accessibility and affordability, but generally excel at one or the other, if not both. The existence of tools such as Twine, RPG Maker, and Game Maker makes it easier for
anyone to make a game than it ever has been, enfranchising those who, until now, have been excluded from game development.

**Online Communities**

Online virtual spaces – such as message boards, forums, and social networking sites, generally serve two purposes in indie game development. The first is that they allow for game developers to share code, assets, and knowledge among each other. Because amateur game developers are often not technically skilled, accessibility to all three of these things is vital. The second purpose is that they allow for developers to publically distribute their game to mass audiences and spread news of other games by word of mouth. Because indie games cannot be marketed by conventional methods, the ability to build an audience through alternative means is crucial.

Forums such as The Independent Gaming Source forum (or TIGsource) adequately satisfy both of these roles. TIGsource is by no means the only forum for game developers, but it has historically been one of the largest and most well known. On TIGsource, game developers showcase their completed games, works in progress, art, and other work. Users ask for advice on topics ranging from programming knowledge to self-sustenance through indie game development. Being a public forum, anyone can join the TIGsource community for free. While TIGsource’s community is not especially known for producing political games, and also focuses as strongly on commercial game development as much as amateur development, it functions much
the same way that a more amateur or progressive forum community would, and would satisfy the same community needs.

More explicitly political communities are present. Toward the beginning of my research, I was invited to join a private online message board for independent game developers called Games and Play. Because community membership is by invitation only, members of Games and Play are generally like-minded: its members generally include leftist, activist, and amateur game developers and writers. While there is much discussion of games and game development, the rest of it is more personal and political in nature. Topics of discussion include sexism in tech, online harassment, Gamergate, safe-space policies, racism, and the building local developer communities. Members of the community produce political and subversive content – one member of the community is making a game about net neutrality. Another is Alice Maz, the creator of *Super Maria Individual*, a game which re-imagines *Super Mario Brothers* as a nonviolent lesbian love story. An acquaintance of mine within the community, Mark Wonnacott, is developing a game authoring tool called KoolTool that allows for people to make games without programming by doodling on a screen. Through KoolTool, he hopes to further reduce barriers to game development. The leftist leaning of the community is dependent upon its small size and exclusivity – its members generally feel more comfortable talking about social politics within it than on completely inclusive communities, such as TIGsource. While these semi-secret communities are invisible to those outside of them, they are present, and they serve a
unique social function. I will discuss the feminist leanings of Games and Play in greater depth in Chapter 4.

The last platform I will discuss is Twitter. Twitter may be a popular platform among independent game developers because of its highly public nature. Regardless of what one uses Twitter for – games, politics, personal life – one’s tweets are generally publically available to the entire community. Game developers can tweet information about their game through hashtags (#screenshotsaturday, #gamedev, and #indiedev are popular), reach every single person watching those tags, and receive exposure. The use of hashtags is especially powerful for indie developers because of indie tweet bots, automated accounts that automatically retweet anything with one of the aforementioned hashtags in it. Users who follow one of these bot accounts automatically receive most tweets tagged with “#indiedev,” making Twitter a powerful self-promotional tool for independent developers.

Through public and private online spaces, independent game developers are able to receive otherwise absent technical and emotional support and promote their work. On Games and Play, many developers, including myself, have bemoaned the fact that we do not have access to a local game development community that satisfies our needs. For many of us, online spaces do not supplement our real world community interactions. Instead, they are the only spaces we have. Unlike other alternative communities, such as the punk and alternative rock scenes, the indie game scene, as we know it, would likely not exist without the internet.
Distribution Platforms

Free software and community supports means nothing if one cannot share their game with an audience. While flash game portals such as Newgrounds have existed for a long time, flash games require a relatively high level of technical competency to create, making flash game development unappealing to the amateur activist developer. The creation of popular, free distribution platforms for both browser-based and downloadable games is a recent development. While game developers have long been able to host downloadable games on file sharing websites, it has still been left entirely to the developer to find or create a space on the internet through which to showcase their work. Selling games independently, for many amateur developers, has been out of the question altogether. Recently, however, two websites which host indie games, Game Jolt and itch.io, make it possible for any layman with an internet connection to host and sell a game.

Game Jolt is a website for the hosting of freeware indie games. Anyone can upload a game to Game Jolt, and personalize their game’s page with screenshots, text, and other content. A built in comment system allows for basic communication between the developer and their audience. Itch.io, however, is an especially important platform. As with Game Jolt, anyone, can upload a game at no cost, customize their game’s page, and communicate with their audience. What makes itch.io different is

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17 Most games produced by the (non-dominant) indie community are playable on web browsers or are downloadable computer applications. While smart phones are becoming an increasingly popular platform for casual games, the web browser is the largest common denominator among potential players. Not all players and developers of games own or can afford a smart phone, but nearly all have access to computers with internet.
that it allows any user to sell their game in any manner they want. Itch.io games are sold on a pay-what-you-want model, in which the developer sets a minimum price for the consumer to pay, or releases the game for free while accepting donations. Itch.io is remarkable because it allows anyone to monetize their work without any technical or business knowledge. Developers do not need to pay a fee to use itch.io, nor can their games be censored based on their content. It is a unique platform that eliminates nearly all formal barriers to entry to making a living by developing independent games. Game Jolt and itch.io are noteworthy distribution platforms in the indie scene because they further reduce already low barriers to game distribution to marginalized developers, amplifying their voices, and allowing them to produce progressive game content.

**Game Jams**

One of the most prominent institutions of the indie game scene is the game jam. Game jams are events in which indie developers must create a complete game in a short amount of time, usually ranging from 48 hours to a month. Some game jams allow for games to be made by teams, but others, such as the Ludum Dare Competition, require developers to work solo. Games made during game jams usually conform to a set theme that encourages the creation of unusual and experimental games. Themes may be more mechanically focused, requiring the player to make a game with procedural content, or to make a game that only uses one button. Occasionally, game jams require users to create games with subversive content. The 2014 Ruin Jam, for example, requires the developer to “ruin” video games by making
a game that includes anti-violent themes, minority characters with agency, characters motivated by social justice, or similar elements. The aforementioned *Average Maria Individual* was created for the Ruin Jam.

Game jams encourage the creation of subversive games through a number of their features. The first is that they encourage the creation of games by individuals rather than teams – games made by individuals are more likely to contain stronger viewpoints. The second is the short time span in which games are made. Not only do short development periods lower the technical expectations of what is possible, but it also encourages the creation of vignette style games, which lend themselves to experimentation. This experimental tendency is amplified by the requirement that the game adhere to an unusual theme. While experimental content obviously does not always result in more progressive content, it makes the creation of progressive content more possible.

Taken together, these institutions of the indie game scene - accessible software, public online spaces, free distribution platforms, and game jams – not only make the creation of experimental, subversive, personal, and political games by marginalized people possible, but in many ways actively encourage it. While the gender hierarchy in mainstream gaming is largely the result of male-dominated workplaces, male-targeted marketing, and hostile online spaces, the indie game scene provides alternative institutions that are structurally distinct from their mainstream counterparts. Developer communities exist online rather than in the workplace, games are marketed through blog posts and word of mouth rather than through risk-adverse publishing companies,
and separate online spaces exist which may be friendlier to women and marginalized people. There is great potential within the indie scene to serve as a feminist alternative space to mainstream game culture.
Chapter 3: Gamergate Observed

or, My Experience as an Undercover Social Justice Warrior

Gaming subculture is not a monolith. Even though I’ve spent much of the
previous two chapters describing the history and characteristics of gaming subculture
in general, there exist numerous subcultures within it, each with its own unique history
and set of community practices. These subcultures vary to the degree to which they
resemble, or reject, the mainstream culture. In this chapter, I will focus exclusively on
Gamergate’s subculture, arguing that it represents mainstream gaming culture in its
most extreme form and provides a valuable example of how patriarchy can be
manifested through gaming communities.

I begin this chapter with a re-introduction to Gamergate and an overview of my
methodology for my Gamergate research. From there, I will discuss a number of
topics pertaining to the movement, including the roles of women and minorities,
interpretations of “the SJW agenda,” claims to diversity, understandings of feminism,
the objectification of women, rape fantasies, usage of politically incorrect language,
transphobia, discursive phallic display, the celebration of gamer identity, claims to the
apolitical, and the role of game development in Gamergate.

Gamergate

Gamergate is a reactionary political movement, a response to progressive
changes in gaming culture and a defense of the traditional gamer identity. From a
certain perspective, an investigation of Gamergate may seem irrelevant to my project.
After all, the goal of my project is to illustrate how indie developer communities may challenge mainstream gaming’s gender norms. Gamergate is not strictly an indie developer community, nor does it feature progressive gender politics. I chose to investigate Gamergate because, in many ways, it represents mainstream gamer culture in its most extreme form. It serves as a valuable reference point from which to compare the progressive indie communities. It is because of communities like Gamergate that alternative, feminist spaces are relevant, and vice-versa.

Indeed, Gamergate is also relevant because the controversy surrounding it may be one of the most important issues regarding gaming and gender in contemporary times. Countless women in the games industry (and even some outside of it) have reported being targeted by Gamergate with death threats, rape threats, and doxxing. Many critics of Gamergate argue that the movement is a misogynistic hate group and has effectively silenced many women in the general gaming community.

**Methodology**

I have been following the Gamergate controversy firsthand through my personal experience on Twitter since it began in August of 2014. In the early months of the movement, I engaged in debate with, and have occasionally been insulted by, some of its members. I have been saving screenshots of online conversations among, with, and about Gamergate since September of 2014. Much of my understanding of Gamergate, before beginning my research, is informed by its targets and critics on
Twitter, who have shared stories of their harassment at the movement’s hands and shared screen captures of online exchanges between Gamergaters.

While I was able to obtain knowledge of the history and character of Gamergate through these accounts, as well as my own firsthand experience with the movement, my perception of Gamergate was distorted by my outsider status. Even though I follow a member of Gamergate on Twitter, and regularly receive news of Gamergate from its critics, I have not, before my research, directly observed the Gamergate community as a whole. In order to obtain a fair and accurate understanding of Gamergate on Twitter, I needed to follow a more random sample of Gamergaters and witness their communication firsthand.

To achieve this, I created Terriermon, Phd.

Figure 3: For my research, I created the Twitter account Terriermon Phd. Follow him at @JustTheCutest!

Why did I select Terriermon, Phd to represent myself on the internet? A significant number of Gamergate’s members on Twitter are anonymous accounts, and
Gamergaters who communicate through the image board site 8chan are anonymous by the site’s design. Not only did I decide to create an anonymous account to understand how such anonymity might affect my own online interactions, but also because there are some in Gamergate who already know who I am and what my political leanings are. I did not want Gamergaters to have any knowledge of my research’s goals. I did not want to risk members of Gamergate blocking my account and preventing me from viewing their tweets, nor did I want to risk the possibility of having my true identity uncovered and become a victim of harassment and doxxing myself, as unlikely as that might be.

As for the persona I chose to adopt for my anonymous account, I decided to choose a visage of cuteness. I wanted to guarantee that my online persona was likable, approachable, and harmless. To ensure that my interactions with Gamergate were as fruitful as possible, I wanted to increase the chances that Gamergaters would want to actually talk to me, and I wanted to minimize the chances of being suspected as the undercover “social justice warrior” (SJW) that I am. Terriermon is a character from one of my favorite childhood TV shows, Digimon. He is undeniably adorable and has a harmless appearance, making him an excellent candidate. He is arguably made even more adorable when he has a Phd.

As Terriermon, Phd, I followed 200 accounts owned by people who were clear supporters of Gamergate. I chose my sample by following a selection of Gamergate’s most prominent supporters: Breitbart reporter Milo Yiannopoulos, actor Adam Baldwin, game developer Slade Villenna (known has RogueStar), and anonymous
accounts TheRalphRetort and Sargon of Akkad. In order to approximate a random sample to the best of my ability, I began to follow accounts recommended by Twitter, in the order that they were recommended, as long as the account’s owner had a clear affiliation with Gamergate.

While not all of the screenshots taken for this research were taken as Terriermon, Phd, the screenshots I had taken of my everyday Twitter experience over the previous months also offer important insight into Gamergate’s practices, and are consistent with my enhanced understanding of Gamergate as Terriermon. The following account I give of Gamergate is a synthesis of my experiences both as an outsider and as an insider of the movement.

“I Support #Gamergate and I am #NotYourShield”

Before beginning my research under the guise of Terriermon, I already knew that Gamergate often counters criticisms of racism and sexism by making claims to diversity. Female, transgender, lesbian, and nonwhite Gamergaters use the Twitter hashtag #NotYourShield to signify their existence within the movement. While #NotYourShield is clearly used as an attempt to bring attention to Gamergate’s alleged diversity, the actual meaning of the phrase is ambiguous, even among Gamergaters. It is common knowledge that female, nonwhite, and LGBT Gamergaters use the hashtag to protest “SJWs” using them as shields, but how marginalized people are actually used as shields is not immediately clear. To better understand #NotYourShield, I asked Gamergate to explain the hashtag to me. Rather amusingly, the first Gamergater
to respond didn’t seem to be able to provide an answer, instead assuring me that “I’m sure a #NotYourShield will show up.” Thankfully, I got a large number of responses shortly afterward. However, most answers were about the significance of the hashtag rather than its meaning, even though I explicitly asked about the shield metaphor.

![Figure 4](image)

**Figure 4:** A selection of tweets from Gamergate when I asked them to explain #NotYourShield.
Figure 5: A selection of tweets from Gamergate when I asked them to explain #NotYourShield.

Many of the responses indicated that #NotYourShield is used by Gamergate to assert its racial and gender diversity and deflect accusations directed toward women and POC in Gamergate that they were actually white men hiding behind fake
sockpuppet accounts. \textsuperscript{18} None the responses shared above, however, explain the shield metaphor. Even when other Gamergaters attempted to explain the shield metaphor, the responses I got were varied, and many of them were vague.

Figure 7: One explanation of #NotYourShield, suggesting that “SJWs” use marginalized people as “crutches” for their “stupid arguments.”

\textsuperscript{18} In fairness to Gamergate, many of these accusations were unfounded, notably in the case of Twitter user and Gamergater Lizzy Finnegan. Ever since she was accused of being a sockpuppet, it became a running joke within Gamergate that Finnegan was actually a man. Despite becoming a prominent figure in Gamergate, Lizzy stopped tweeting about the movement after she was doxxed and her personal information was spread on 8chan, an image board site for anonymous speech heavily used by Gamergate. Lizzy claims that neither Gamergate nor Anti-Gamergate was responsible for her dox, despite 8chan’s role.
Writer Oliver Campbell also linked me to a video of his titled “Giving Voice to the Voiceless: The #NotYourShield Project” in which 27 Gamergaters from different backgrounds proclaimed their support for Gamergate and stated that they were #NotYourShield. At the beginning of the video, a piece of introductory text explains that #NotYourShield means “That you cannot use women, minorities etc. as a shield to defend ideals or deflect criticism.” Out of the 27 people featured in the video, only two

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elaborated on how they were not a shield, the first suggesting that he wasn’t a shield “so you can engage in corruption, collusion, and censorship against my fellow gamers,” while another said he couldn’t be used as a shield “to deflect criticism.” The rest of the Gamergaters simply stated that they were not shields without offering any insight as to what that meant.

The written responses I received echoed similar sentiments. Eugene suggests that marginalized Gamergaters are not so much used as shields, but rather as “crutches” for the “stupid arguments” of “SJWs”. UppercutFistWizard thinks that “SJWs” use women and POC to shield their attempts at censorship. Campbell simply restates that they are used to deflect criticism, and DeusExMachinaV42, by saying that the hashtag “could be a synonym for take me as I am,” discards the shield metaphor altogether.

The “SJW Agenda”

Even after receiving these explanations, I was still unclear about the precise meaning of #NotYourShield. While it is clear that Gamergate thinks that “SJWs” are using their support of egalitarian causes to deflect criticism, make irrational arguments, and cover-up corruption, collusion, and censorship, it is unclear what using someone as a shield actually looks like in the real world. Is using a marginalized person as a shield actually synonymous with making an argument about the existence of social inequality? For further clarification, I decided to go straight to the source and consult the original usage of #NotYourShield.
While #NotYourShield has come to mean a variety of different things to Gamergate over time, it originally referred to the usage of marginalized people for the “SJW agenda.” Ninouh’s tweet implies that “SJWs” are not simply misguided in their pursuit of social justice, nor that corruption and censorship are side-effects of the pursuit. Instead, he implies that social justice is actually a false pretense for another agenda altogether. The only response I had previously received that makes a possible reference to such an agenda is UppercutFistWizard’s accusation of censorship. This begs the question, what is the SJW agenda? I posed the question directly to Gamergate.
Figure 10: Two selected responses about the “Social Justice Warrior Agenda” from Twitter user Stata.

Figure 11: Selected response about the “Social Justice Warrior Agenda.”
Figure 12: Selected response about the “Social Justice Warrior Agenda.”

Figure 13: Selected responses about the “Social Justice Warrior Agenda.”
Figure 14: Selected responses about the “Social Justice Warrior Agenda.” “Two minute hate” is a reference to George Orwell’s *1984*, referring to a daily activity in which people must express hatred for the enemies of the state for two minutes every day.
Among these responses, there are a few common threads. Many responses suggest that there isn’t actually any ulterior motive to social justice advocates besides social justice. Strata’s first response is indicative of this, and other responses I received suggested that the main problem with “SJWs” isn’t that they have a hidden agenda, but that their pursuit of social justice is misguided or too extreme. Inquisitive Mind is a bit more specific about how the pursuit of social justice in gaming is problematic, arguing that “SJWs” try to force games to have certain social themes through coercion. While Jamie Rölling is vague about the end to which “SJWs” shame and bully their opponents into submission, or what such a state of submission looks like, she ultimately seems to be concerned about the use of coercion by “SJWs” to achieve their goals.

The most interesting responses were from Bears and DeusExMachinaV42, who suggest that social justice is not simply misguided, but is actually a false pretense for something more sinister: “control and money.” Bears is under the assumption that social justice activism is a profitable enterprise, especially for “professional victims.” The professional victims Bears has in mind likely include Zoe Quinn, Anita Sarkeesian, Brianna Wu, all of whom are women involved in games who have achieved some degree of fame as a side effect of receiving online death threats and harassment. Many in Gamergate believe that these women are exploiting their victimhood to further their careers, while other believes that their harassment has been fabricated altogether.
Figure 15: Examples of tweets by Gamergate members accusing game developer Brianna Wu of being a "professional victim." Anti-Semitism in Gamergate will be discussed later in this chapter. Tweets are dated March 2015.

DeusExMachinaV42 provides the grimmest account of the SJW agenda, stating the goal of social justice is the control of *literally everything*. He argues that recent social justice movements are attempting to control the chaos of a free world in which “no one is actually stopping us doing what we want to do except for us.” He seems to suggest that social justice’s ultimate goal is to replace our post-racial, post-feminist, classically liberal society with an authoritarian society dictated by “SJW” ideals. While DeusExMachinaV42’s perspective is particularly extreme, less extreme variations of his beliefs are not all that unusual within Gamergate. Within my random sample, a substantial number of Gamergaters describe their politics in their Twitter bio as “antiauthoritarian,” “libertarian,” “pro-individual,” for “freedom of expression,” “Not a fan of censorship,” and “freedom loving.” For Gamergate, the issue of social justice is not framed as one of social progressivism versus social conservatism, but
rather as one of authoritarianism versus libertarianism. As evidenced by many of the responses I received about #NotYourShield and the “SJW agenda,” Gamergate is generally concerned about censorship at the hands of social justice advocates.

Through the #NotYourShield hashtag, Gamergate claims that recent social justice movements do not actually represent the views of marginalized people, and that they are not the shield of their extreme and misguided form of social justice, which, by some accounts, is actually a guise for massive profit and total political control. But, for Gamergate, #NotYourShield’s meaning may not be as important as its usage. Most people seem to use and discuss the hashtag without making any reference to what being (or not being) a shield actually means, instead simply using the tag to signify their existence within Gamergate and argue for its diversity.

**Claims to Diversity**

Gamergate’s members not only make claims to diversity through #NotYourShield as a direct response to criticisms of social homogeneity, but also to deflect allegations that Gamergate is a hate group. Gamergate is often labeled by their opposition as an anti-feminist “hate group” or “harassment campaign.” Gamergate members often respond to these arguments by asserting that they cannot be a misogynistic hate group because there are women in their ranks. For example:
Higgins 91

Figure 16: An image shared on Twitter by a Gamergater. This screen capture is from January 2015.

Figure 17: A tweet by a Gamergater regarding its reputation as a hate group and its alleged diversity.

This first image questions the notion that Gamergate is an exclusionary hate campaign, suggesting that it is not credible that a group including members of “all…”
sex/gender identities” can rally together “in support of hate, misogyny, & death threats.” The message concludes by insisting that Gamergate is “diverse & welcoming.” The second tweet restates this more bluntly, stating that the accusation of Gamergate being “a hate group” is “an obvious lie if you look at their diversity.” In both cases, there as an underlying assumption that a group of individuals cannot be hateful or misogynistic if they are, as the first image indicates, “diverse” and “welcoming.” I have not seen Gamergate explain precisely why it is impossible for a diverse group of individuals to commit hateful acts.

However, by analyzing my random sample of Gamergaters, it is clear that Gamergate was not the bastion of diversity it claimed to be, and that those tweeting under #NotYourShield represented a clear minority of the movement. One of the first things I did as Terriermon was gather gender demographic data on my sample. Because Gamergaters are more likely to use anonymous avatars than, for example, members of an indie developer community like Games and Play, determining the gender of its members was relatively difficult. However, I was able to make educated guesses about the gender of most members through the presented gender of their avatars’ character, the gender of their usernames, and references to masculinity or femininity in their timeline. Regarding the Twitter accounts of pro-Gamergate web publications and review sites, I coded them as male if the entirety of their staff was male (as was the case for Niche Gamer), and as indeterminant if their staff was of mixed gender (as was the case for Tech Raptor, which has some female contributors). The only exception I made to this criteria was if the user’s avatar displayed a female
anime character, but offered no other clues as to their true gender. Such avatars are sometimes used by male users because they are highly sexualized. For example, in the exchange below, an anonymous Gamergater, named “Do Not Read This!,” has a female avatar, but comments that “The tits are a distraction. My real avatar is in the speech bubble,” casting doubt as to their actual gender. It also noteworthy that the avatar in question is sexualized: she has exaggerated breasts, significant exposed cleavage, and is blushing. I will return to the topic of sexual objectification in Gamergate later in this section. In any case, if a user had a female anime character as an avatar, I coded the gender of the user as indeterminant.
Figure 18: Twitter user Dicks Fagballs asserts that "most users with Anime girl avatars are actually male." One of these users, with their own anime girl avatar, supports the assertion.

Out of the 200 Gamergaters I followed, 67.5% present themselves as male, 12.5% as female, and 20% as indeterminant (meaning that they offered no indication of their gender in their communications). While I can’t make any claims one way or another about Gamergate’s racial diversity, their gender diversity is unimpressive. Among those in my sample whose gender I was able to identify, there are 5.4 times as many men as women. Even in the highly unlikely scenario that every gender
indeterminant member of Gamergate was actually female, there would still be more than twice as many men in Gamergate than women.

While many Gamergate members, if they comment on the topic of diversity, claim that they strive for, and have achieved, inclusivity and diversity within their community, one Gamergater, in my sample offered the following honest opinion:

Figure 19: Gamergaters offer their opinions on the topics of diversity and equality.

While many Gamergaters talk about diversity as a trait inherent to Gamergate or gaming culture in general, very few talk about it as an aspiration. While alleged diversity is convenient for Gamergate, tweets like the pair above suggest ambivalence toward its pursuit. I have yet to see a Gamergater earnestly suggest the attainment of greater diversity among its goals.
Claims to “True” Feminism, Anti-Feminism, and Egalitarianism

Not only does Gamergate make the claim that they are a socially diverse movement, but they also claim that they are a fundamentally egalitarian one. Among the Gamergaters I followed as Terriermon, Phd, a significant number self identify as “egalitarian,” or “humanist.” Others describes themselves as “Equal rights advocate,” “Humanist that abhors injustice,” and “Supporter of equality, love for all.” While some describe themselves as pro-gender equality, very few call themselves feminists, and those who do usually differentiate themselves from contemporary feminists and so-called “SJWs.” One user described themselves as a “Feminist… the good kind,” while another says they are a “Disliker of… fake feminists.” A third says that “I’m a feminist that doesn’t sub to 3\textsuperscript{rd} wave ie Anita\textsuperscript{20} & co.” Other users describe themselves as “pro-justice” and “pro-equality” but “anti-feminist.” Very few in Gamergate openly identify as feminists, and none of them claim that they are a feminist with no strings attached.

Despite the claims of a few Gamergaters to be feminist, even fewer, if any, seem to be in agreement with any prominent contemporary feminist scholars or advocates (with one possible exception, to be discussed shortly), nor do any of their self-described feminists seem to be seriously engaged with feminist theory or thought. While members of Games and Play and opponents of Gamergate frequently discuss gender issues in earnest, members of Gamergate only talk about them to criticize the perceived extremism of feminist “SJWs, such as when they criticize the misguided

\footnote{20 Referring to Anita Sarkeesian, creator of the Feminist Frequency video web series.}
nature of the “SJW agenda.” Most discussions of feminism by Gamergaters I see are either directly critical of feminism itself, or declare that feminists are hypocrites. For example:

![Figure 20: Tweet made by a Gamergater in February 2015 refuting the existence of patriarchy.](image)

![Figure 21: Gamergater retweeting a series of tweets by a female supporter of Gamergate, Liana K, who feels excluded from gaming culture because of “The video game industry’s embrace of Anita Sarkeesian.” The commentary on these tweets asks who “the real enemies of women in gaming” are. Despite feeling unwanted by gaming, Liana K has since been given a job writing for the online gaming magazine, The Escapist.](image)

While the numerous refutations of feminist theory by Gamergaters such as STEMlord #10440 are fairly straightforward, the accusations of feminist hypocrisy by
those such as McDermott are more interesting. In this example, Liana K’s feelings of exclusion from the gaming industry due to its “embrace of Anita Sarkeesian” is used by McDermott evidence that “SJWs” are actual the enemies of women. Despite these criticisms toward “SJWs” for supposedly failing to promote gender equality, and even being anti-woman, I have yet to see a Gamergate supporter talk about the actual implications or methods of achieving gender equality.

Arguably the only self-described feminist scholar who is taken seriously by Gamergate is Christina Hoff Sommers, the author of Who Stole Feminism? and a researcher for The American Enterprise Institute, a politically conservative think tank. Soon after Gamergate began, she released a web video as part of her Factual Feminist series titled “Are Video Games Sexist?” in which she argues that, even though there is a significant gender gap in gamer culture, games are not sexist. Like many in Gamergate, she argues that the mere existence of any female gamers is proof that gaming is inclusive. Toward the end of the video, she makes the assertion that gaming’s feminists don’t simply want gender equality, denoted by the presence of a minority of women, but instead, they really want “male gaming culture to die.” While this may be true in the sense that a truly egalitarian gaming culture requires the demise of male dominance in gaming and major culture reform, Sommers seems to be making a different point. She claims that there is nothing wrong with gender in gaming culture, and all attempts of reform are actual attempts to impose female domination upon video games. Ever since Sommers made this argument, she has been celebrated

as Gamergate’s “feminist” hero, often referred to as Gamergate’s “based” mom.” She has since released a second video that more overtly defends Gamergate, despite admitting in the first video that she does not play games and therefore has no personal stake in the Gamergate controversy.

Figure 22: A critic of Gamergate, Sarah Butts, shares a screencap of a Gamergater's tweet declaring that Christina Hoff Sommers is "a real feminist scholar." The tweet is from November of 2015.

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22 In the context of Gamergate, “based” is synonymous with “good” or “awesome.” I have seldom seen this word used this way outside of Gamergate or “Chan” culture.

Nowhere in either of these two videos does she make any reference to actual feminist theory or prominent feminist thinkers, nor does she ever identify sexism as a real and serious problem. She criticizes feminists such as Sarkeesian, but never seems to actually endorse an alternative feminism in any way. While Sommers can be considered a feminist because, on a superficial level, she believes in equal rights for men and women, it is a meaningless identification. Declaring that Sommers is a feminist is about as useful as declaring that you can drink lighter fluid. Both are technically true statements, but the former is as poor a source of feminist theory as the latter is of hydration.

Sommers’ approach to feminism is similar to that of many members of Gamergate. Both assert, on a purely superficial level, that they support gender equality and may even be feminists themselves. However, they are seemingly only ever critical of nearly all other forms of feminism, regarding them as “fake,” “extreme,” “man-bashing,” or “misandrist.”

As Terriermon, Phd, however, I was willing to give Gamergate the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps, I thought, there were sincere feminists within Gamergate who, while critical of contemporary feminists, were genuinely concerned with gender issues. I tweeted some questions to the Gamergate hashtag about feminism and egalitarianism. At the time of writing, 48 Gamergaters are following Terriermon, Phd on Twitter and have interacted with the account in the past, eagerly answering my questions about #NotYourShield and the “SJW agenda.” Additionally, every tweet I had made to Gamergate’s hashtag in the past under my personal Twitter account had
always received at least one response. I expected that I would receive numerous responses this time as well. If Gamergate is at all eager to prove that they’re an inclusive and egalitarian movement, I hoped that they would take the opportunity to prove it.

![Figure 23: Terriermon, Phd asks the tough questions.](image)

For a long time, I had received no response to either of these questions. Nobody has ever answered my question about feminism, but I eventually got two replies to my question about egalitarianism. The first response was short and run-of-the-mill (“Egalitarian to me implies an interest in fairness for all, preferring no single race, gender, etc.”), but the following response resulted in an especially noteworthy conversation.
Figure 24: Beginning of a conversation on gender equality (1/4).
At this point, I began to develop a suspicion regarding his actual beliefs about women and politics. I wondered to myself: is he actually suggesting that women are naturally disinterested in politics?
I was not surprised that he believed that women were disinclined from institutional politics due to biological differences, but I was surprised that he was willing to state it so bluntly.

Figure 27: The end of the conversation (4/4). The tweets are from January 2015.
What’s interesting about DeusExMachinaV42 is not the only frankness with which he states that women are naturally disinclined from politics, but how “uncontroversial” the assumption is to him. He expresses surprise at two points in the conversation that he even has to explain why women are underrepresented in the U.S. Congress.

I am disappointed that I only got two responses to my questions about egalitarianism and feminism, but I am not surprised that my other questions were far more popular. Gamergate seems to be very interested in informing me about the virtuosity of #NotYourShield and the evils of the “SJW agenda,” but it seems to be less interested in genuine conversations about feminism and egalitarianism.

**Women’s Bodies and Rape in Gamergate**

Despite making claims to support gender equality, Gamergate frequently objectifies women’s bodies in their imagery. To begin, let’s consider Vivian James, Gamergate’s anti-feminist girl gamer mascot, who I briefly mentioned in Chapter 1. Her color scheme, green and purple, are a reference to an internet rape joke known as “Piccolo Dick,” and these colors were allegedly used specifically to anger feminists. Gamergaters have since tried to argue that the colors are actually a reference to the American suffragist movement, who prominently used the colors purple, green, and white, but considering Gamergate’s political leanings and the absence of white in Vivian’s design, this is not a compelling claim.
In addition to serving a Gamergate’s mascot, Vivian is often reduced to a sex object. It only took me a few seconds to find sexualized images of Vivian on Twitter, created or shared by Gamergaters. There is plenty of Vivian porn throughout internet, although, to be fair, there is porn of everything on the internet. It is worth noting that Vivian is not sexualized in most depictions of her. This is to be expected, as her
original purpose was *not* to serve as a sex object. However, porn of Vivian is not uncommon, and even when she is not sexualized, Vivian is a mascot, an objectified body that only does and says anything that Gamergate wants her to. If Vivian represents Gamergate’s ideal “gamer girl,” then her lack of autonomy as a person holds interesting implications.

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24 Vivian James’ origin is an entire story in itself, but the short version is that she was created by Gamergate members as a character for game developed for a contest sponsored by a self-described feminist group, The Fine Young Capitalists (TFYC). For reasons too numerous to address in this footnote, Gamergate’s opponents have criticized TFYC’s sincerity and legitimacy as a feminist organization, arguing that it does little to address actual issues of gender equality in gaming. Many members of Gamergate support TFYC, using their support as evidence that they are pro-woman.
Figure 30: Sexualized depictions of Vivian James. These are only from what I could find on Twitter, and does not include depictions that include nudity. The internet at large is filled with Vivian porn of all kinds.

Vivian is not the only usage of a female mascot by Gamergate. Pro-Gamergate game review site Niche Gamer has a female mascot of its own, named Mika.

Figure 31: Niche Gamer’s twitter page on December 9th. Mika is featured prominently as the avatar and header image. Note the exposed thighs and breasts. Apparently, Niche Gamer’s readers voted to have her dressed up as a Viking.
Figure 32: A tweet by Niche Gamer regarding Mika's latest design, now as a Viking. Her skirt is appears to be falling off in the back – it would seem that half of her butt, strangely, is exposed to the ice and cold. Her attire is impractical both for Scandinavian Winter and for battle.

Niche Gamer’s staff of ten is entirely male – she is clearly not an expression of their gender identity. Rather, she is a sex object designed for heterosexual male gamer consumption, as is evident by both iterations of her appearance. The impracticality of her attire, the exposed thighs, breast, and hips, and the usage of game controller buttons in her design are all indicative of her purpose.

Sexualized depictions of women’s bodies are not limited to Gamergate’s mascots. Such imagery is pervasive throughout Gamergate. In addition to the sexualized avatar of Twitter user Do Not Read This!, which I had previously
discussed, I found numerous other examples of sexualized female bodies used by Gamergate:

![Image of Twitter avatars and header images of Gamergaters.](image)

**Figure 33: Depictions of women's bodies in the Twitter avatars and header images of Gamergaters. The first is of a female gamer in space. While I have seen this image in many places, the Twitter user displaying the image in this case, interestingly enough, is female. The second image is of the avatar of Twitter user Boku no Ramza, which consists of a depiction of a woman's butt. The third image is the avatar self-described “lewdposter” fengas.**

In the first of these examples, we have a depiction of a female gamer in space. Her breasts are accentuated and her pants barely conceal her genitals. The depiction of this gamer is not unlike the some of the sexualized depictions of Vivian James: many of them feature the female gamer with a controller in her hands, her eyes half-open, and her body posed in an attractive manner.

The other two images are the avatar images of two “lewdposters” in Gamergate – those who tweet porn to their followers. Both use female bodies to represent themselves online, the first using a woman’s butt, the second using a woman with large exposed breasts. Despite their choice of avatar images, of them are male: the first, Boku no Ramza, uses the Twitter handle @MrIvoryTower, while the second, fengas, describes himself as a “random guy.”

Both users frequently tweet “lewds,” or pornographic images (usually of softcore or hand drawn variety), but they are not the only users in my sample who did
this. Ramza, strangely enough, regularly posts drawn images of flat-chested women on Fridays, tweeting them under the hashtags #FlatJustice and #FlatPrideFriday. There is some variation in the porn posted by Gamergaters – some characters are nude and engaged in sexual acts, others are clothed and posed in sexual positions, and there is a large amount of porn featuring two female subjects – but there is one common thread among all of the hand drawn porn I have seen: they only feature women. While the occasional detached penis may make an appearance, men’s bodies are otherwise never sexualized through hand drawn porn created or shared by Gamergate.

These pornographic images are not simply shared for Gamergate’s own consumption. Over the past five months, I have often seen Gamergate spam anti-Gamergate hashtags (such as #StopGamergate2014) with “lewds.”

Figure 34: "Lewds" tweeted to the anti-Gamergate hashtags #StopGamergate and #GamersAgainstGamerGate. These are some of the tamer examples. The porn tweeted to antiGamergate hashtags also includes nude photographs.
One can only interpret the spamming of porn into their opposition’s hashtag as a form of attack, however ineffectual. Regardless of the goal, intention, or effectiveness of such a tactic, the aggressive tweeting of porn at Gamergate’s opponents is, effectively, the usage of women’s bodies as weapons.

Sometimes, pornographic photographs are also tweeted by Gamergate, although this is less frequent. Most of these images are of solitary, clothed, female models. However, it is a known practice for Gamergate to edit the faces of their targets, notably Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn, onto the bodies of women in pornographic photos, usually images of intercourse. These photos are then shared. I myself had stumbled upon one such image spread by a Gamergater: in it, a man and a woman were having sex. A woman’s face was sloppily edited onto one of the bodies, a man’s face on another. The man, for whatever reason, was vomiting. I was not able to recognize the woman’s face, but it is not far-fetched to assume that the woman is a critic or target of Gamergate, or otherwise disliked by the creator of the image.

These poorly edited images could be interpreted as visual representations of rape fantasies. Some members of Gamergate have discussed fantasies among themselves in which they rape women such as Quinn and Sarkeesian. David Futrelle, who writes the feminist blog We Hunted the Mammoth, examined the logs of the IRC (internet relay chat) channel #burgersandfries, within which individuals organized the harassment of Zoe Quinn before the controversy surrounding her evolved into

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25 The title of the IRC channel, #burgersandfries, is a reference to the allegation that Zoe Quinn cheated on an ex-boyfriend with five different men, hence the channel was named after the fast food restaurant Five Guys: Burgers and Fries.
Gamergate. They make multiple references to raping Quinn and Sarkeesian. One of them says that “you would all fuck the zoeholes,” another says that “she gonna get raped.” Later on, they debate whether they would choose between Quinn and Sarkeesian if they were forced to “put their dick into one of them.” Another says that he would probably “hate fuck” Quinn, meaning that he wants “to assert [his] dominance as a male on her, a primal savagery.”

References to raping Gamergate’s female targets and critics have persisted beyond these early IRC logs. Somehow, on December 15th, 2014, a thinly-veiled rape fantasy about Zoe Quinn had somehow found its way onto Amazon.com, being sold as an ebook. The book is titled Roughed Up By #GamerGrape. Its description reads: “Zada Quinby is a controversial video game designer who may have stepped the line… When her latest game offends the nation, five upset players decide to teach her a lesson. This gang of gamers decides to give Zada a piece of their mind, and much more!”

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26 Source: Futrelle, David. “Zoe Quinn’s screenshot’s of 4-Chan’s dirty tricks were just the appetizer. Here’s the first course of the dinner, directly from the IRC log.” We Hunted the Mammoth. N.p., 8 Sept. 2014. Web. 7 Apr. 2015. <http://wehuntedthemammoth.com/2014/09/08/zoe-quinns-screenshots-of-4chans-dirty-tricks-were-just-the-appetizer-heres-the-first-course-of-the-dinner-directly-from-the-irc-log/>. A direct link to the complete chat logs is provided in the blog post.
Figure 35: A fantasy of Zoe Quinn being raped by Gamergate, sold as an ebook on Amazon. Amazon removed the page shortly after the ebook was published.

The work in question not only promotes the rape of Quinn, but also justifies it. According to the book description, Quinn’s rape is an act of justice, an appropriate response for her “stepping the line.” In this story, it is allegedly Quinn’s fault that Gamergate rapes her.

References to rape were also prevalent in the comments box during a livestreamed debate between Gamergate critic Jenni Goodchild (known on Twitter as PixieJenni) and Gamergate supporters Sargon of Akkad and King of Pol. The debate was held on Youtube in September 2014, roughly a month after Gamergate began. The debate primarily concerned allegations of corruption within DiGRA, the Digital Games Research Association, at the hands of feminist scholars. Because it was organized by Gamergate, most of the people watching the debate were supporters of
the movement. I took screen captures of the comments, and many of them were alarming.

Figure 36: Selected viewer comments from the debate between Goodchild, Sargon of Akkad, and King of Pol.

Although Goodchild has a few fans present among the comments, most commenters were hostile toward her, calling her a “skanks,” asking, “who is this woman?” and making multiple references to sexual violence against Goodchild, with many commenters simply typing “RAPE,” and that “JENNI IS GETTING RAPED.” One commenter types “Ask her for sex now,” while another asks, “is she hot?” Also noteworthy are comments such as “THIS NIGGA BRINGIN THE HURT” (“nigga” most likely referring to King of Pol) and “WHITE POWER.” The few comments in support of Goodchild (such as “Thanks for being here Jenni”) are civil by comparison, with the possible exception of comments such as “You gone fucked up Sargon!” Even
when supporters of Goodchild are aggressive toward Sargon and Pol, they do not use misogynistic or racial slurs, nor do they wish rape upon them.

Although references to raping the female targets and critics of Gamergate are largely absent from my actual Twitter feed, the depictions of sexuality that are present are not any more favorable to Gamergate. Gamergate reduces women’s bodies to sex objects with a striking frequency, especially through their imagery. While Gamergate claims to be for gender equality, the actual conduct of its members does little to support the notion.

**Misogynist, Racist, Anti-Semitic, and Homophobic Language and Imagery**

When I began to research Gamergate in depth, I was honestly surprised by the frequency at which slurs of all varieties were used in their speech. While Gamergaters usually don’t express ideas which are overtly sexist, racist, anti-Semitic, or homophobic, the language which they use in their everyday discourse often is. For example, consider this selection of consecutive tweets ripped from the Twitter profile of prominent Gamergater and Youtube personality Internet Aristocrat:

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27 I do not include transphobic language in this list because Gamergate *does* often express overtly transphobic ideas through transphobic slurs, as I will soon discuss.
While, to be honest, I do not know the context in which most of Internet Aristocrat’s tweets were made, the language he uses in the tweets selected (“sweet pussy,” “faggots,” and “cunts”) are representative of much of his common vocabulary.

Although Gamergate doesn’t usually express ideas which are overtly sexist, racist, or homophobic, they still manage to do it from time to time.

While very few Gamergaters say deliberately racist things, as Internet Aristocrat does, the word “nigger” is frequently used by (usually white) Gamergaters to refer to other (usually white) people. For example, as this Gamergater mocks the
nose size of Gamergate critic and comedian Peter Coffin, he refers to him as a

“nigga”

Figure 39: A Gamergater states that Peter Coffin looks like a bird, referring to him with an inaccurate racial slur. Tweet dated January 2015.

Another Gamergater then replies to this tweet with something perhaps more offensive, comparing Peter Coffin to a stereotypical and anti-Semitic caricature of a greedy Jewish man.
Figure 40: A Gamergater compares Peter Coffin's appearance to that of an anti-Semitic cartoon. Tweet dated January 2015.

Variations of the above cartoon are surprisingly common within Gamergate. In the following variation, the Jewish caricature is modified to resemble Anita Sarkeesian.
Figure 41: Anti-Semitic cartoon suggesting that Anita Sarkeesian fakes the death and rape threats she receives, particularly the threat of a mass shooting that resulted in her canceling a talk at Utah State University. Anita Sarkeesian is not Jewish (Image source: “Gamergate.” RationalWiki. RationalWiki. n.d. Web. 7 Apr. 2015. <http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Gamergate>).

In addition to the usage of sexist and racist language and imagery, Gamergate often uses homophobic language. They are especially fond of the word “faggot.”

Figure 42: Gamergaters referring to others as “cocksuckers” and “fags.” Tweets are dated January 2015.
Figure 43: Internet Aristocrat frequently uses the word “faggot.” Tweet dated November 2015.
Figure 44: Prominent Gamergater Slade Villena describes the difference between being an “Androphile Man” and a “faggot.” Also of note is the username of “Dumb streamer faggot” and his usage of the word “nigga.” Breitbart reporter and Gamergate supporter Milo Yiannopoulos is a gay man. The tweet is from January 2015.
In these examples, homophobic slurs are sometimes used aggressively (as in the case of Internet Aristocrat) and other times affectionately (as in the case of Echo Owl), although they seem to more often are used to tease or insult people. However, in no cases are homophobic pejoratives used to describe oneself – they are always used to describe people as being “other,” and frequently used to describe those others as inferior.

To further make the point that Gamergate supporters frequently rely upon the usage of slurs in their discourse, here is an example of one using racist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic language all at once.

Figure 45: A Gamergater chats participates in an online chat under the name GayNiggerHolocaust, and then brags about it. Tweet dated January 2015.

Despite claims to being welcoming of gamers of all types, Gamergate frequently uses pejoratives in their speech that refer to specific groups of marginalized people. By using these slurs, it does not appear that Gamergate is reclaiming language in the way that, for example, some women have attempted to reclaim the word “bitch” to have a positive connotation. Gamergate generally uses these slurs to refer to other
people, especially when those other people do not belong to the social group which the
slur refers to. Not only that, when used, these words usually do not have positive
connotations. One of the exceptions to this, strangely enough, is the word “nigger,”
which sometimes is used to refer to positively refer to other Gamergaters.

Transphobia

When one considers the common use of offensive pejoratives by Gamergate,
their expression of actual misogynistic, racist, and homophobic ideas tends to be
relatively subtle or infrequent. This makes Gamergate’s openness about their
expression of transphobic ideas unusual by comparison. Gamergaters often refuse to
accept the gender identities of transgender people, deliberately misgendering them.
The following excerpt is from a Gamergate thread on the anonymous image board site
8chan about transgender indie developers, “SJWs,” and opponents of Gamergate.

Figure 46: A brief exchange from an 8chan thread regarding the identity of a transgender woman in a
photograph. Randi Harper is a Gamergate critic with blue hair, Anna Anthropy is an indie game developer
and author of Rise of the Videogame Zinesters, and Patricia Hernandez is a games journalist who’s been
accused of “corruption.”

The rest of the 8chan thread is filled with the deliberate misgendering of
transgender women, the assertions that such women are actually men, and images of
people puking out of disgust. Many Gamergaters ask, “Why is it always the trannies?”
while another, in response to a written description of a transgender woman, writes

“Jesus kill it with fire.”

It is not uncommon for Gamergaters, in reference to transgender women like Anna Anthropy, to place their name in quotes and refer to them with masculine pronouns. Sarah Butts, an outspoken Gamergate critic and also a transgender woman, has also frequently been referred to by Gamergate as a “he.” The pejorative “tranny” is commonly used by Gamergate as well. What makes the usage of this pejorative different from the usage of “nigger” and “faggot” is that “tranny” is used to specifically refer to transgender people, usually women, while “nigger” and “faggot” are used to refer to people regardless of their actual race or sexual preference. The only other pejoratives used by Gamergate that actually refer to the social identity of their targets are misogynistic ones, such “cunt” and “bitch.”

To further understand Gamergate’s transphobia, consider this Gamergater’s explanation of his stance towards transgender people.
According to Echo Owl, one’s gender identity is synonymous with their assigned gender at birth, as determined by their genitals. For him, gender is not a social construct, but instead synonymous with biological notions of sex. One of the responses to his tweets agrees with this sentiment, while mocking the usage of trigger warnings.

I do not wish to imply that all, or even most, Gamergaters are so insensitive towards transgender issues. However, the insensitivity that does exist is common, uncompromising, and unapologetic.

**Phallic Discursive Display in Gamergate**

As unfortunate as Gamergate’s rampant transphobia is, it was one of the things that I expected to find in Gamergate when I began my research under an anonymous account. What I did not expect to find, however, was the overwhelming amount of
penis jokes. While penis jokes are not the typical background radiation of the Gamergate Twitter experience, they dominated my Twitter feed on my first day of research as Terriermon, Phd. I do not know why.

Figure 48: Male masturbation joke from January 2015. Even though user @icze4r uses a female anime character as his avatar, he often makes references to his penis.

Figure 49: An exchange about “docking dicks,” dated January 2015. A reference to Drybones-kun’s penis is made, despite his usage of a female avatar.
Figure 50: A small sample of jokes and references about penises by Gamergate from January 2015.

In nearly every one of these jokes, there are direct references to the Gamergaters’ own penises, as well as the penises of other Gamergaters. These Gamergaters are not talking about masculinity in general, but specifically their own.

While Gamergaters do not constantly engage in these discursive displays of masculinity, a large number of them will do it occasionally. While these displays may seem trivial, I argue that they are quite meaningful in the context of Gamergate’s pornographic imagery, rape fantasies and rhetoric, usage of homophobic slurs, and transphobia. Heterosexual male sexuality and sexual domination is celebrated in Gamergate, often to the exclusion of all other forms of sexuality.

**Gamer Identity**

While a discussion gamer identity may not initially appear to be as directly relevant to social issues of gender and race, it is an important topic because, for reasons discussed in Chapter 1, traditional gamer identity is a masculine identity.

Gamergate’s celebration of gamer identity is immediately obvious to the casual observer of the movement. Not only is the word “gamer” in the movement’s name
itself, but the movement itself gained most of its momentum only after the release of a series of blog posts and editorials allegedly proclaiming that “gamers are dead.”

The “gamers are dead” articles are a series of writings which respond to the harassment and threats Quinn and Sarkeesian had received during the first two weeks of what was about to become known as Gamergate.28 The most prominent of these articles are Leigh Alexander’s “‘Gamers’ Don’t Have to Be Your Audience. ‘Gamers’ Are Over”29 and Dan Golding’s “The End of Gamers.”30 These articles both express deep concern over the harassment of women in gaming, arguing that the harassment is part of a reactionary response to the increasing irrelevant of traditional gamer identity. A significant number of similar articles were all written and published on the same day, partly as a response to current events, and partly as direct responses to Golding and Alexander’s pieces.

The writing of these articles angered many gamers. Many in Gamergate perceive the “Gamers are Dead” articles as a direct attack on gamer identity, and many cite the articles as one of the reasons they joined the movement. As a result, Gamergate is full of individuals for whom gamer identity is a core aspect of who they are.

28 While Eron Gjoni’s thezoopost, which sparked the harassment of Zoe Quinn, was released two weeks before the writing of the articles, the #Gamergate hashtag was only used for the first time on the previous day by actor Adam Baldwin.
Many behaviors exhibited by self-identified gamers in the movement greatly resemble behaviors of traditional masculine gamers discussed in Chapter 1. For example, consider the following exchange between Gamergate critic Jenni Goodchild and various Gamergaters. The conversation begins with a Gamergater asking Goodchild to demonstrate that “games are exclusive in some way.” Goodchild responds by linking to an article which cites quantitative research strongly suggesting that white men are disproportionally represented as the protagonists of games. In the article, it is written that 75% of the studied games made in Japan feature white main characters. A Gamergater proceeds to doubt these findings.

Figure 51: Beginning of a conversation between Goodchild and Gamergate.

Goodchild and fuzzb3nder argue for a while, fuzzb3nder insisting that, in Japanese anime and manga, white and Asian characters are depicted in the same manner, while Goodchild tries to remind him that the “75% of games” statistic does not apply to games in general, but only to the 50 games included in the study, listed at the bottom of the article. In an attempt to prove his point, fuzzb3nder provides Goodchild with a link to character art from one of the Japanese games in question.

![Image of Twitter conversation](image-url)

*Figure 52: Continuation of the conversation.*

The character art belonged to the game *Persona 4*. When Goodchild demonstrates that she is unable to recognize the game’s characters, fuzzb3nder calls

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32 While it is true that, in anime and manga, white and Asian characters are depicted the same way, the race of characters can be gleaned from the game’s setting. Japanese games included in the study, such as *Valkyria Chronicles*, very clearly identify their characters as white through the setting (the game takes place in a fictional continent called “Europa,” which is very similarly shaped to Europe). Other Japanese games, such as *Demon Souls*, rely on a realistic art style, and leaves no ambiguity as to the race of its characters. It is reasonable to assume that the research in question is accurate.
her legitimacy as a gamer into question. Both he and nils continue to emphasize Goodchild’s ignorance of this particular game.

Figure 53: Continuation of the conversation.
Goodchild addresses how ridiculous it is that her gamer credibility is disqualified due to ignorance of a single game, while fuzzb3nder tries to insist that the existence of a single Japanese game with no white characters somehow disproves the research’s claim. He continues to aggressively ask Goodchild how many of the characters in the image are white.

Figure 54: The last selection from the conversation.

Fuzzb3nder’s last comment is especially relevant, as he asserts that “non-gamers” such as Goodchild and the researcher are ignorant of gaming’s “entire culture,” suggesting that, despite their obvious interest in video games, they are outsiders to gaming culture. This entire scenario is an excellent example of how

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33 For what it is worth, nils’ claim that *Persona 4* is more popular than *Dark Souls* lacks merit. *Persona 4* is relatively obscure compared to *Dark Souls*
female gamers are cast out as “fake gamer girls” on account of their lack of knowledge about games, as I discussed in Chapter 1.

Not only does Gamergate strongly celebrate the gamer identity, but they are eager to declare that they represent the interests of the majority of gamers, and that their opponents are not real gamers. Gamergate often argues that game journalists attacked their entire audience when they wrote the “Gamers are Dead” articles, implying that all true gamers were under attack by them. Often in their rhetoric, the word “gamer” is synonymous with “Gamergate supporter.” Lately, Gamergate has taken their rhetoric a step further and dubbed critics of Gamergate as being “anti-gamers.”

![Tweet 1](image1.png)

![Tweet 2](image2.png)

**Figure 55:** One of many references to opponents of Gamergate (Anti-GG) as “anti-gamers.”

In this example, as well as in general, “anti-gamer” seems to refer to more than someone who rejects the gamer label. As Mathenaut says, “Anti-gamers are bad at games.” The opponents of Gamergate are supposedly less competent at games than their supporters, implying that they are less skilled at games, spend less time playing games, and are generally not as enthusiastic about the hobby as the true gamers of
Gamergate. According to Mathenaut, the opponents of Gamergate better fit the definitions I established in Chapter 1 of “fake gamer” and “casual gamer” than “hardcore gamer.” Considering that Gamergates critics mostly includes people who play, make, and write about games, Gamergate’s designation of their opponents as “anti-gamer” is especially interesting. However, understanding the binary established by Gamergate between true gamers and “SJW anti-gamers” is essential to understanding how they’ve framed the issue of social justice in gaming. Gamergate represents the interests of real games, while their critics are frauds, casuals, and outsiders.

**Claims to the Apolitical**

Throughout this entire chapter, I’ve demonstrated that members of Gamergate are generally concerned with issues of censorship, corruption, feminism, egalitarianism, and political control, and social identity. Their movement is a reaction to the increasing presence of progressive social politics in gaming culture. Yet, despite this, Gamergate seems split as to its own status as a political movement. Many in Gamergate claim that they are not, in any way, a political movement, or even concerned about politics. While this not by any means a universally held sentiment, it is not uncommon either.
Figure 56: A Gamergater asserts that "We are NOT about politic [sic]."

Figure 57: Another Gamergater responds to claims that the movement is right-wing by denying that it is a political movement.
In these two examples, there is recognition that Gamergate is a social movement of some kind. However, both reject the notion that Gamergate is in any way a political movement. The first suggests that Gamergate is a “consumer revolt,” while the second suggests that it is “not a political movement” but “a cultural one.” The first framing of Gamergate is likely rooted in the belief that the movement is not about feminism and social justice in games and games writing, but rather that the movement is about “corruption in video game journalism,” which is how Gamergate frequently describes itself. In this narrative, the struggle surrounding Gamergate is not one of social progressives versus social reactionaries, nor is it even one of authoritarians versus libertarians. Rather, it is one between corrupt industry professionals and consumers – a conflict that is not seen as political in the typical sense.

This may be what is meant when The New Versailles states that Gamergate is cultural and not political. He states that “You can be politically liberal and support Gamergate,” suggesting that the division between Gamergate and its opponents is not between conservatives and liberals. I suspect that, because The New Versailles believes this division does not reflect the typical division between the political parties in mainstream politics, they do not register it as being political at all.

The conception of Gamergate as apolitical is likely not universally shared. While I have not seen a Gamergater explicitly state that Gamergate is political, it is something that does not need to be stated among discussions of freedom of speech, authoritarian control, and social justice. However, the frequency at which Gamergate
suggests it is apolitical strongly suggests that many of its members are not entirely self aware of Gamergate’s political nature.

#SolutionSixMonths

For the most part, Gamergate is concerned with the consumption and discussion of games rather than their development. While game developers are present within Gamergate, it is the consumer identity of gamer that unites most of its members. Yet, by February 2015, toward the end of my research period, Gamergate finally began to turn its focus toward building its own community of indie developers, launching an initiative called #Solution6Months. Its objective is for members of Gamergate to develop game development skills within six months with the end goal of injecting freshly trained pro-Gamergate developers into the games industry. Because #Solution6Months unexpectedly emerged toward the very end of my research, my discussion of it will unfortunately be general and brief.

The community is hosted on the website GameDevLife. The website declares that “We’ve seen some big problems in the games industry as of late,” and that the only way to solve them is “by more people getting involved in this ever-growing industry.” Ultimately, their goal is to “rebuild the independent games industry” in a manner which better conforms to Gamergate’s political vision.

Upon quick reflection, most games created by GameDevLife’s members seem to be devoid of deliberate social or political content. The exception to this is the work

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of the user KMDES, the developer of the games *Super Oppressed PPL* and *Sockpuppet Speech Simulator 2015.* The former is a parody of *Super Mario Bros.* in which the player, despite being prompted to create a character of nearly any gender or race, is forced by the game to play as a transgender person of color. The game then repeatedly chastises the player for exhibiting behavior that cannot be performed by people with various disabilities, repeatedly calling the player a “white cis gender scum ableist.” According to KMDES, the game regards “how ridiculous inclusiveness can be.”

The latter game, *Sockpuppet Speech Simulator*, parodies a speech made by Tim Schafer at the Game Developer’s Choice Awards in which a literal sockpuppet voiced by Schafer makes jokes at Gamergate’s expense. At the end of the game, the player can throw a root beer bottle at Schafer, causing him to melt and die. Text displayed at the end of the game reads “Totalitarianism uses fear and shame to control people. We will not stand for it. Our voices will not be erased. Take back the industry.” While I have found few other examples of deliberately political games created by members of Gamergate, those that do exist, such as the games by KMDES, are generally works of reactionary satire.
Although people are allowed to share games with political content through GameDevLife’s forum, its members are not allowed to criticize such political content. The forum’s code of conduct states that “Attempts to run out a member due to their game’s content (provided the game content is legal) is not acceptable regardless of how you feel about it “politically”. If you do not like the games topic, leave the thread.” Complaints about a game being “offensive” are entirely forbidden, being described as attempts “to derail a topic about someone else’s game into your own political platform.” In short, one cannot respond to political games on GameDevLife with dissenting political speech of their own.

While it is difficult to determine, in its early stages, whether #Solution6Months will flourish as a community or have a significant political impact in the long run, it is an interesting counterexample to the progressive indie development communities I will explore in Chapter 4. The goal of the community is not necessarily the personal or political expression through games themselves, but to eventually take over the indie games industry. They use the same modes of production as non-dominant indie developers, but to a drastically different end. Additionally, critical political discussion about games (outside of the games themselves) is discouraged in GameDevLife, which seemingly contradicts Gamergate’s general advocacy for free speech.

Gamergate and Gender Politics

Gamergate is a reactionary political movement opposed to social justice reform in gaming culture. The movement’s objectives are clearly political: they oppose the
influence of “Social Justice Warriors” in gaming. Other objectives of the movement, such as the promotion of “ethics in video games journalism,” ultimately connect back to the anti-social justice crusade. The games journalists, developers, academics, and critics most frequently accused of corruption, collusion, and intimidation are, not coincidentally, “SJWs.” Gamergaters condemn leftist editorials about gender and race issues in gaming as “clickbait” articles, and believe that they are outside the function of an “objective,” ethical gaming press. Furthermore, members of Gamergate also believe that their freedom of speech is at risk from the “SJWs” and that their very identity as gamers is threatened. The Gamergate controversy is a contestation between two social factions – reactionary Gamergaters and progressive “SJWs” – over the common spaces shared between them.

Yet, as I have demonstrated, Gamergate is not entirely aware of its own political status. While their opponents (feminists) have generally had interest and knowledge of gender and race issues before Gamergate, Gamergate itself generally has not. Being a reactionary movement, they are simply responding to their opponent’s political consciousness. Their political consciousness is shaped by the threat to gaming posed by “SJWs” – their active opposition to social justice did not exist until social justice advocates became a powerful force in gaming culture.

Gamergate is not only an anti-feminist movement, but a misogynistic one. It is through a relative lack of political and social self awareness that Gamergate perpetuates sexism. Gamergate’s members claim that it is inclusive, diverse, and pro-woman, yet women are commonly portrayed in Gamergate’s imagery as sex objects,
and its members often use sexist language, make rape jokes, and promote rape fantasies. It is not a coincidence that the most commonly cited targets of harassment by Gamergate – Zoe Quinn, Anita Sarkeesian, and Brianna Wu – are all women. While members of Gamergate generally do not consciously hate individual women for being women, as far as they are aware, the movement as a whole has a clear misogynistic bent. When accused of misogyny, Gamergate deflects the accusations by asserting that a movement that includes women cannot be sexist. Gamergate believes that we already live in a post-feminist, egalitarian society – women are no longer being oppressed. Because women do not experience legal or formal barriers to gaming, game development, or political participation, any inequality present is, as DeusExMachineV42 would put it, the result of natural choice.

I return to DeusExMachinaV42’s assertion that political equality between the genders is the result of natural choice not only because it is troubling, but because he is likely one of many in Gamergate who believes this. DeusExMachinaV42 was aware that women were underrepresented in political offices, but also believed that there were no social or political forces preventing women from pursuing those offices. When one believes both of these things, the only logical conclusion one can reach is that women are naturally disinclined from obtaining positions of political power. Political inequality, by this logic, is the result of inherent, biological difference between men and women, and is therefore justified.

The logic explaining women’s absence from political offices perfectly carries over to their absence from game development. In both cases, there are no legal or
formal barriers for women to be elected to office or become game developers. Yet, in both cases, women are severely outnumbered by men. By DeusEx’s logic, gender inequality in gaming must be the result of natural choice. Because this is the only explanation for gender inequality if one disregards non-formal barriers to entry, it is reasonable to conclude that there are many in Gamergate who believe that gender inequality in gaming is a natural phenomenon. Male domination in gaming and game development is, to be frank, an obvious condition of gaming culture, but most members of Gamergate seem to deny the existence of patriarchy in face of this. If one believes that gender inequality exists, but refuses to believe that the inequality is socially caused, what conclusion can one reach besides that men are inherently different from, or even superior to, women, that men are biologically more inclined to enjoy video games and game development than women, that men are naturally meant to dominate gaming culture?

Of course, as I demonstrated in Chapter 2, there are numerous factors which discourage women from participating in gaming culture and the industry. In reality, it is not naturally made choices which explain the gender gap in game development, but hostile community behaviors, sexist community practices, and the tendency of publishers to market games toward boys and men. We do not live in a post-feminist world – gender inequality in gaming is a clear indicator of that fact.

Because Gamergate members believe we live in a post-feminist world, their claims to the ideals of diversity and equality are not claims to their future realization, but rather, claims that diversity and equality have already been achieved. Such claims
are made entirely defensively, and are not central to their political objectives. By arguing that a group which includes women cannot be sexist, Gamergate makes claims to diversity that primarily serve to deflect criticism that Gamergate is a hate group. In this regard, #NotYourShield ironically serves as Gamergate’s shield – it is an excellent example of the usage of marginalized people to deflect social criticism.

The literature analyzed in Chapter 1 identified a number of behaviors which are associated with masculine gamer performance, including the usage of homophobic, sexist, and racist slurs, virtual and discursive masculine sexual performance, shaming feminine casual and fake gamer identities, and accusing women of being “fake gamer girls.” Having mostly distanced myself from mainstream gamer culture since my teenage years, I had thought that many of these behaviors, such as the usage of homophobic slurs, had fallen out of fashion. Frankly, I was incredibly surprised to see members of Gamergate perform the symbolic male core gamer identity so perfectly. Addressing others through slurs, making rape jokes, discursively displaying male sexuality, and accusing women of not being “real gamers” are all common behaviors demonstrated by Gamergate. Not only that, but these behaviors are performed by more than just teenagers and pre-teens – fully grown adults in Gamergate commonly use homophobic and racist slurs as well. Gamergate members not only makes claims to the hardcore gamer identity, they fully embody it. They are mainstream gaming culture in its most extreme manifestation.

While Gamergate itself is a recent phenomenon, the individuals who comprise it have existed for long before. These individuals have been playing multiplayer
games, posting in gaming forums, commenting on news articles, and working in game development companies for years. Anita Sarkeesian did not first receive online harassment from gamers when Gamergate began in 2014 – in fact, when I first heard of her, it was because she had received harassment and death threats for launching her Kickstarter campaign for the *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* video series in 2012. The behavior exemplified by Gamergate has been present in the gaming community for years – it is only though Gamergate that many individuals engaging in such behavior have finally organized under a common banner.

Gamergate does not constitute a majority of gamers, but its members do represent the gamer identity in its most extreme form. It is not a coincidence that Gamergate, more often than their opponents, makes claims to gamer identity, to being the primary audience for gamers, or to preserving gaming culture from “SJW” assault. Gamergate is a product of patriarchal mainstream gaming culture and a reactionary response to progressive change, organized in the mainstream culture’s defense.

Gamergate’s existence, therefore, begs the question: who are the individuals responsible for the cultural shift that allegedly is threatening traditional gamer identity? Who are the “SJWs” or “cuties” who are trying to kill video games? In the next chapter, I will explore how the independent mode of game production has facilitated the promotion of feminist politics through games.
Chapter 4: How to Kill Video Games
and Look Cute While Doing It

Up to this point, I have primarily focused on describing the problem of gender inequality in video game subculture instead of addressing how it might be solved. Chapter 1 explored the existence of gender roles in gaming and the underrepresentation of female characters in games, and Chapter 2 explored the differences in habits between male and female gamers, the gender gap in the games industry, and the social factors which produce these differences. The study of Gamergate in Chapter 3 provided an example of a contemporary patriarchal gamer subculture and affirmed the relevance of the literature discussed in the two preceding chapters.

It is in this chapter that I will more fully discuss how the patriarchy in gaming is challenged. Discussion of this topic began in Chapter 2, when I introduced the independent gaming scene and provided a theory as to how it can facilitate feminist politics in gaming, but it is in this chapter that I will examine actual indie developer communities and provide examples of the theory in practice.

I will examine two indie developer communities in this chapter. The first is Games and Play, a private message board for progressive members of the gaming community, predominantly indie developers, and the second is the queer game scene, a loosely defined community of LGBT independent game developers. Through these examples, I will demonstrate how alternative game development communities serve as
spaces in which feminist politics can be practiced, and how the alternative mode of production of indie games makes the creation of games with more socially progressive content possible.

**Games and Play**

Games and Play is a private, progressive online community for game developers. Games and Play is hosted on a service called Slack, which is meant to serve as a tool for online team communication. Each conversation on Slack occurs in a separate “channel,” created by an administrator. General users are not able to create their own channels, meaning that conversation topics are determined by the community’s leaders. Because Slack was designed for private communication, one can only become a member of Games and Play through invitation by another member. The community has been described by one member as semi-secret – some members have acknowledged its existence in public contexts, but it is largely unknown. I myself did not know of the community until I was invited in October of 2014. As a result, members of Games and Play tend to be more like-minded on political issues than those of the general gaming community.

It is because Games and Play is a closed community that it has a socially progressive flavor. Not only are currently existing members more likely to invite newcomers with similar political viewpoints, but they are also more likely to openly discuss political issues without the fear of getting in unwanted arguments or alienating potential audiences for their work. A politically-minded developer has much less
freedom to express their views on a more public social network such as Twitter without negative consequences, especially if they are a professional developer and want to maintain general accessibility.

Games and Play’s channel topics immediately tip off the casual user as to the political consciousness of the community. While many channels are strictly dedicated to game development (#programming, #makegame, #share-a-game), others are overtly political (#politics, #elephant-in-the-room, #fembruary). While the #politics channel itself is seldom used, at the top of its page, it declares that “everything is political,” suggesting an awareness of the inherently political nature of the creation of games media, its creation, and the surrounding culture. Most discussion of social issues, politics, and current events in Games and Play occurs within a channel called #elephant-in-the-room. As one member explained to another, #elephant-in-the-room “is the Fucked Shit channel basically… It started as the Gamergate channel when that was a ubiquitous thing (hence the room name) but evolved into the general place for awful stuff... It’s a way to make the awfulness opt-in, out of the other channels so only ppl who are okay w seeing it are exposed [sic].” Besides Gamergate, other topics in the channel include gender, race, accessibility, class, immigration, and transgender issues. Discussion on the channel is rarely divisive – participants generally approach issues from a leftist perspective, and most comments made are met with sympathy or agreement. While Games and Play might not be the best place to have one’s perspective challenged, it is a safe space for people to freely discuss their progressive political beliefs and personal lives without fear of harassment or other negative
consequences. In fact, the community has collaborated on the development a safe
space policy to make Games and Play “a safe place for everybody regardless of
gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disability, physical
appearance, body size, race, age, or religion.” While the internet at large can at times
be a hostile place, especially in the context of Gamergate, Games and Play serves as a
civil, progressive, and safe bastion for members of the indie game community to freely
discuss game development, their personal lives, politics, and current events.

Despite the strong socially progressive flavor of Games and Play, it is still
overwhelmingly comprised of men, similar to gamer culture at large. As of January
2015, out of 310 members, 67.74% openly present themselves as male, 21.29%
present themselves as female, and 10.97% were of indeterminate gender. That being
said, the relative lack of female participation within the community likely has more to
do with the lack of female participation in general games culture than with the
community practices of Games and Play. The gender balance in Games and Play is
more representative of the general population than that of Gamergate or the general
games industry (which is 88.5% male, as mentioned in Chapter 1), and does not
necessarily preclude Games and Play from being a feminist community.

**Observed Interactions within Games and Play**

Members of Games and Play seem to have a general awareness of feminist
issues. For example, one of the discussion channels is titled #fembruary. The
instructions at the top of the page read: “During the month of February, only consume
media created by women. Use this channel to swap listening/reading/watching/playing
tips.” Such a channel was likely created with the awareness that most popular entertainment media is created and dominated by men. Through participation in #fembruary, members of Games and Play are encouraged to support and promote potentially disadvantaged female artists.

The conversations within the other channels are just as telling of the group’s feminist leanings. For example, consider the following exchange, in which one member relays information of a contest for female gamers:

Figure 59: Conversation regarding a contest for GDC passes for women. The GDC is the Game Developer's Conference, a major convention for game developers and industry professionals. As Games and Play is a private community, I have blurred out the names and avatars of its members to protect their privacy. In this exchange, the first commenter is female. The subsequent responses are from men.

The first commenter’s criticism of Xbox’s contest consists of two points: first, that the entrants’ merits are based off of photographs, placing emphasis on physical appearance over actual interest in gaming or personal worth, and second, that Xbox is asking for entrants to prove their “gamer cred” through their material possessions. While she doesn’t explain why she thinks the contest is “shitty,” her criticisms are likely rooted in concerns about gender equality and gendered gamer identity.

Regarding the first point, not only are photographs are poor indicator of how
passionate one is about gaming or whether they are a “game changer,” but they also inevitably mean that one will be judged based on her personal appearance, and not her character. As many feminists take serious issue with the objectification of women’s bodies or the prioritization of physical attractiveness over other traits, many would agree that the judgment of women’s value to gaming culture based solely on photographs is detrimental to the pursuit of gender equality.

Regarding the second point, the original commenter seems to take issue with the assumption that one’s credentials as a true gamer can be measured by the possession of technology that makes up her “interactive environment.” As discussed in the first chapter, this assumption is problematic as the stereotypical male gamer identity has traditionally been defined by consumerism: their legitimacy is partially granted by the possession of the latest and most powerful technology on which to play games. The consumer aspect of gamer culture effectively creates a monetary barrier to entry, discouraging non-participants from participation and therefore reinforcing pre-existing gender exclusion. In this manner, the controversy regarding the Xbox contest can be further framed as a feminist issue.

In another example, a number of Games and Play members respond to the news that the developers of the upcoming game *Hotline Miami 2* decided to keep a scene in the game in which the player character implicitly rapes a woman. The scene was originally featured at the end of the game’s demo, in which the player character drops his pants in front of the female character after throwing her to the ground. Off
screen, a director yells “cut!” before the actual rape takes place. The female character in question is the only woman in the demo.

Figure 60: Response to news of the inclusion of the rape scene in the final version of Hotline Miami 2. "GG" refers to Gamergate. All participants in this discussion are male.

The original commenter’s decision not to buy Hotline Miami 2 is most likely politically driven. Many people’s objections to casual or uncritical depictions of sexual assault in media are out of sensitivity to the issue of rape culture, the idea that sexual assault, especially of women, is normalized through social attitudes. The commenter likely would not have made the decision to boycott Hotline Miami 2 if he did not think that his decision had any social significance. The sentiments of disgust regarding the rape scene that follow after his comment are likely to be similarly motivated.

An even more overt discussion about gender and gaming culture occurs in the following thread. It starts out with a fairly innocent conversation about watching videogame footage while drunk, but quickly turned to the subject of “toxic masculinity.”
Figure 61: Beginning of a conversation about esports bars and toxic masculinity that continues on the next page. “Esports” are the highly competitive, sometimes professional, playing of multiplayer games. A “speedrun” is a complete play through of a game, often recorded or performed live, done in an exceptionally short period of time. “LoL” refers to the team-based multiplayer game *League of Legends*. The pink avatar belongs to a man, the dark avatar belongs to a woman.
Figure 62: The remainder of the conversation about the hypothetical esports bar and toxic masculinity.

In this example, we finally see a conversation in which an overt connection is made between mainstream gamer culture and harmful aspects of mainstream masculine identity. The second speaker in this conversation, a woman, considers a hypothetical esports bar, an institution similar to a sports bar except the patrons are watching competitive video games being instead of traditional sports. Her immediate concern is with the sort of people that such an institution would attract (“gross cesspits of violent men”), and the sort of behavior performed by them (“toxic masculinity”).
The original commenter in this thread, a man, associates toxic masculinity with “mainstream gamer culture,” drawing a link between toxic masculinity and mainstream male gamer identity. Overall, this exchange demonstrates an awareness of gendered behavior within mainstream gamer culture, and it demonstrates a desire to avoid the toxicity of such culture, or alternatively, to create a culture based on “egalitarian camaraderie.”

Especially among the white men of the community, there seems to be lots of discussion regarding their privileged status and how they can be effective allies for the political causes of marginalized people. For example:
A conversation regarding Scott Aaronson, white men, privilege, and signal boosting. The "Scott Aaronson post" probably refers to a blog post comment written by MIT professor Scott Aaronson in which he argues that nerdy men do not experience male privilege (Source: Aaronson, Scott. “Comment #171.” Shtetl Optimized. N.p., 14 Dec. 2014. Web. 7 Apr. 2015. http://www.scottaaronson.com/blog/?p=2091#comment-326664). A “rando” is a stranger on Twitter, who is usually responding to one’s Tweet or mentioning one’s username in a tweet (appearing in one’s mentions). “Rando” is usually used to refer to such a person when they are hostile, of a different political disposition, or otherwise unwanted. The third commenter is black, all commenters are male.

Essentially, the above conversation is about the appropriate role of white men in conversations about race and gender. There are some notable commonalities among
the participants: overt concern about feminist issues, an inclination for white male allies to “boost” the speech of marginalized people instead of speaking for or over them, and the conception of social issues through the idea of privilege. We can also see in this conversation the categorization of people into three categories: women and people of color in one, their white male allies in another, and a “specific kind of” white man in the third – the sort of white man who is “in total denial of their privilege.” This could be an oversimplified model for understanding social politics in which there is no differentiation between the experiences of women and people of color in relation to white men (in this conversation, both women and POC apparently choose to “no longer care about generic whiteman opinions” and have an “endless amount of randos in [their Twitter] mentions.” However, it is also possible that the commenter is correct in his assessment that, in the cases he provided, the online experiences of women and POC are the same.

Not only is the privilege-denying white man effectively cast out as ‘other’ in the Games and Play community, but self-described gamers sometimes are as well. For example, one member of the community once stated that he never designs games for gamers as an audience, but rather for other developers. The pejorative “gamerbros” has been used by some members of the community to refer to male gamers, especially Gamergaters. Even if they don’t actively distance themselves from the gamer identity, people in Games and Play rarely, if ever assert their identity or credibility as gamers.

Not only are members of Games and Play inclined to pursue social equality in society at large, but also within the Games and Play community itself. For example,
whenever a member of Games and Play types an ableist slur, an automated bot will reply to the member, gently suggesting that they use a different word. Interestingly enough, the sorts of words which activate the bot are words which most people might not consider slurs – “stupid,” “dumb,” “crazy,” and “insane” are among them. Responses to the bot are almost always positive and appreciative.

Additionally, suggestions that the community could better satisfy egalitarian ideals are generally met with enthusiastic agreement. For example:

Figure 64: A member of Games and Play suggests that the community should invite more people of color. The first commenter is black, the second is white.

In this exchange, both participants recognize that there is a lack of racial diversity among the members of Games and Play, even though there are already some people of color present within it. The second commenter is eager to actively work towards improving the community’s diversity, immediately recommending potential new members.

Games and Play as a Feminist Space

Certainly, within Games and Play, a sense of egalitarian camaraderie exists. Any hierarchical relationships within the community are, at most, insignificant. A very
large number of its most active users are given administrator privileges, and such privileges are, as far as I could tell, never abused. During the time in which I have been a part of the community, I cannot recall a display of dominance or superiority of any sort, along gender lines or otherwise. There are no displays of sexual dominance, of superiority of knowledge, or of legitimacy as a gamer, as there often is in Gamergate or general gamer culture. While there are significantly less women in the community than men, those who are present appear to participate to the same extent as the men, with the same degree of comfort and enthusiasm. The existence of gender hierarchy within gaming culture and society in general is acknowledged and openly disdained. This is not to say definitively that a gender hierarchy doesn’t exist within Games and Play, as the subculture still exists within a pervasively patriarchal context. However, the primary indicators of gender hierarchy in mainstream gamer culture – such as the dominance of the masculine consumer gamer identity – appear to be absent. If a gender hierarchy exists within Games and Play, then it is very subtle.

A traditional gender hierarchy may be absent, but it doesn’t mean that gender roles don’t exist altogether. In one of the conversations I analyzed, all people are placed into one of three categories: the marginalized person, the ally, or the person ignorant of their privilege. In the context of this conversation, marginalized people are generally aware of their marginalization, allies are white men aware of their privilege, and ignorant people are (usually) white men unaware of their privilege. The first category is symbolically androgynous (although perhaps more feminine than masculine), while the latter two are clearly symbolically masculine. While, in reality,
people in the third category who are unaware of marginalization and privilege also include women and people of color (for example, the people of #NotYourShield), it is generally white men who are associated with the category.

Each of these categories can be considered a gender role with their own set of behaviors. The role of the self-aware marginalized person is the only one which is not symbolically masculine. Women and other marginalized people effectively play the role of speakers and thinkers within progressive subcultures – theories of social life are based upon their perspectives, not the perspectives of the privileged. Meanwhile, symbolically male allies play the role of signal boosters, using their privilege not to promote their own speech but instead the speech of marginalized people. By contrast, symbolically male ignorant persons use their privilege to deny the unique experiences of marginalized people.

Within Games and Play, members obviously tend to play out the first of these two roles. I would be reluctant to refer to these roles as existing in a hierarchical relationship – while allies are, in a way, subjugated to marginalized people as signal boosters, they still maintain privilege in a general societal context.

Games and Play’s community ethos is also defined by a sensitivity to certain types of offensive language and content. While Gamergate frequently used homophobic, sexist, racist, and transphobic language, such pejoratives are completely absent from Games and Play. While some members of the community occasionally use what may be ableist slurs, the words which activate the community’s anti-slur bot
are not considered to be ableist slurs by the average person’s account. Even myself, writing from a leftist perspective, am uncertain as to whether the word “stupid” is as problematic as the Games and Play bot indicates. Either Games and Play is oversensitive in regards to offensive language, or they are on the cutting edge of social progressivism.

Because gamer culture at large tends to exclude women, it is to be expected that relatively few women make up the membership of Games and Play. However, the community seems to be self aware of its general lack of diversity, and seems sincerely dedicated to building an even more progressive community than it already has. Additionally, for those few women who are members of Games and Play, it is a relatively safe, feminist, and egalitarian alternative to other game development communities. While it is not necessarily inclusive (it is a private community for progressive developers only), it is very welcoming to those who are a part of it. In order for communities like Games and Play to, one day, proportionately represent the demographics of the general population, what would primarily need to change is the culture surrounding the communities, not simply the community practices themselves.

Games and Play possesses many of the traits of the Twine community which makes feminist, political, and personal speech through games possible, as discussed in Chapter 2. Members of the community use game development tools which are cheap, free, or accessible, such as Twine, Game Maker, and Unity, and one member of the community is currently working on making a highly accessible game development tool himself, with the purpose of making it easier for technically unskilled people to
express themselves. That being said, the most prominent trait of this community is its imperative toward political speech. The community is clearly as concerned about games as it is about their political implications.

The Queer Games Scene

The queer games scene differs from previously examined communities in that it is a natural and informal social network, rather than a distinct community sharing a common space (Games and Play) or a collection of individuals organizing around a political cause (Gamergate). Games and Play may have a strong commitment towards progressive politics and community building, but the queer games scene is a better place in which to find games with overt social and political content made by marginalized people. While, as transgender game developer and author Anna Anthropy says, “There have always been queer developers,” the formation of a community for queer indie developers is a relatively recent development (Keogh). Covering the scene in an article titled “Just Making Things and Being Alive About It,” Brandon Keogh writes that, beginning around 2012, “something… started to change. Numerous queer developers have started to coalesce into what people — both from within and from outside the community — are starting to notice as something of a scene, as a movement.”

The boundaries of the queer games scene are less strongly defined than those of, for example, Games and Play, or even Gamergate. Membership of Games and Play is defined by admission to its virtual space. Even though Gamergate’s community
activity is spread across multiple websites, membership can be determined by their identification with the movement, usage of the hashtag, and inhabitance of specific virtual spaces. Determining who, exactly, makes up the queer games scene is not a simple matter. Some of the game developers most frequently associated with it include Anna Anthropy, Merritt Kopas, Mattie Brice, Porpentine, and Robert Yang. Beyond that, who belongs the queer games scene is ambiguous. Are all queer indie developers effectively part of the queer games scene, or only those who belong to the same social network as Anthropy and Kopas? Are heterosexual, cisgender games writers and developers who are involved in with the work of queer developers part of the scene, despite not being queer themselves?

Charting the queer games scene is made especially difficult because it is spread across multiple institutions, both in the virtual and real world. For example, Merritt Kopas curates “accessible, free games for nontraditional audiences” through her website, *Forest Ambassador*, teaches workshops on using Twine, and hosted *The Naked Twine Jam* in January 2014. Porpentine’s community involvement involves occasional participation in the Ludum Dare game jam and the curation of free indie games for the website freeindiegames.es. All four queer developers mentioned have a history of engagement with the indie developer community on Twitter. The queer game scene occurs through most of the same institutions as the indie scene at large. Unlike Games and Play, it is not separate from the general community but deeply

37 In the aftermath of Gamergate, Mattie Brice has said that she wants “nothing to do with games,” I am currently uncertain as to her present degree of involvement with the queer games scene.
embedded within it. My interactions with the queer scene as a game developer have
generally been through virtual spaces shared by the general indie community

The queer scene, as I mentioned, is a natural and informal social network. When visiting the websites of Anthropy, Kopas, Brice, and Porpentine, and the websites linked from them, one will come across many of the same names among lists of artistic collaborators, supported developers, and allied writers. The names of games writers Aevee Bee, Lana Polansky, and Particia Hernandez are often mentioned, as are the names of games developers and artists Stephen Lavelle, Ben Esposito, Connor Sherlock, and Liz Ryerson. Anthropy and Kopas themselves have directly collaborated on a multiplayer game called *Space/Off*, indicating the existence of a direct relationship between them. Thus, the queer game scene is not simply a categorization under which all queer game developers are placed, but, as Keogh writes, “a still-forming network of support and allegiance [that] can be traced, amplifying each creator's own, unique voice.”

Because the queer game scene is so difficult to observe as a distinct community, and because I already thoroughly detailed the community interactions of indie developers in Games and Play, I will focus primarily on the content and technical production of the games produced by Anthropy, Kopas, Brice, and Porpentine, rather than the discourse surrounding them. If Games and Play serves as an example of progressive community interactions among indie developers, then the queer game scene will serve as an example of the creative product of such interactions.
I have selected these four developers because they are not only the ones most commonly associated with the queer scene, but also because they are otherwise fairly well known personalities within the indie game community. All four of the women I will discuss are transgender, having transitioned from male to female. Anthropy, Kopas, and Porpentine are white, while Brice is mixed race. It is less frequent for cisgender gay developers, such as Robert Yang, to be associated with the queer gaming scene, and transgender men are virtually unheard of. The overrepresentation of trans women in the indie gaming scene, relative to trans men, is likely because of the societal factors that discourage girls and women from the play and creation of games, discussed in chapter 2. Transgender women, because they were raised as boys, are more strongly encouraged to play games and develop a love for them that lasts into adulthood. Meanwhile, transgender men, raised as girls, are less encouraged to play games as children, and are unlikely to develop a love for them into adulthood or beyond transition. This is consistent with Aphra Kerr’s finding\(^ {38} \) that most girls were recruited into the gaming community between the ages 6-10. While some factors, such as online harassment, may impact the way in which men and women interact within the gaming community, one’s actual initiation into the general community happens at a young age, and is more likely to occur to those raised as boys.

**Queer Games and the Feminine Aesthetic**

Most of the games examined in this chapter do at least one of the following three things: they employ a feminine or queer aesthetic style, they discuss transgender

\(^{38}\) See Chapter 2
issues, or they explore and celebrate queer sexuality. I will begin this chapter by discussing queer games which are strongly defined by their feminine or queer aesthetic: *Hugpunx* by Merritt Kopas and *Cry$tal Warrior Ke$ha* and *Armada* by Porpentine.

Merritt Kopas is a game designer, speaker, and writer interested in “play as a utopian project that contains a critique of the present and the seeds of potential futures.” Her “games are directed towards non-traditional game audiences, inviting interaction and play with the goal of challenging players’ preconceptions and experiences more so than their reflexes and logic,” and through her efforts to curate games and teach workshops, she tries “to promote the growth of new cultures of digital play that are raised from the ground up for marginalized people.” Her game curation site, *Forest Ambassador*, only showcases games which are short, free, and require little knowledge of traditional gaming conventions – in other words, games which are accessible to people typically excluded from gaming culture. Through her game development and community involvement, Kopas has no intention of catering to the traditional male gamer demographic. Instead, she is focused on critiquing the status quo and creating alternative spaces within gaming culture for those otherwise removed from it.

Kopas began releasing games in 2012. Her work includes *TERF War, Lim, Queer Pirate Plane, Bubblegum Slaughter, Hugpunx, Space/Off*, and *Consensual*.

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40 Same source as above.
Torture Simulator. Much of her work is created with the programs Twine and Construct 2, game authoring tools that doesn’t require the user to write code.

Consensual Torture Simulator and Space/Off are her only commercial works, both sold on itch.io, while the rest of her work is free. Like most of the women discussed in this chapter, Kopas publishes short and free games created with accessible software, and distributes or sells them independently.

One of her most well known games, Hugpunx,\(^{41}\) is inspired by Aevee Bee’s “Towards a Cutie Aesthetic,” a speech about the subversive potential of “cute” graphics. The game was created in response to Zak Ayles’ short indie action game PUNKSNOTDEAD\(^{42}\).

In PUNKSNOTDEAD, the player controls a small pink man who walks down a street and punches other people, destroying streetlights and blowing up cars along the way. When people get punched, messages such as “get fucked” and “eat shit” are generated above their bodies as they fly across the screen. Amidst the carnage, some people will flash green, pull out a gun, and attempt to shoot the player. While all of this is happening, a punk rock song plays in the background, prominently featuring the lyrics “Walking down the street... I get punched.” While the game’s low fidelity graphics, punk aesthetic, and short length are less typical of mainstream games, it is a highly violent game that depends upon the player’s reflexes and skills to complete.

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*Hugpunx* features a nearly identical art style and control scheme as *PUNKSNOTDEAD*. However, the game primarily differs in that, instead of punching people, you hug them. Not everyone can be hugged, however – it can only be done to those who enthusiastically indicate that they wish to be hugged, by turning green and waving at the player. When this happens, messages such as “get hugged” and “hey cutey [sic]” are generated, as opposed to *PUNKSNOTDEAD*’s “get fucked.” In contrast to *NOTDEAD*’s angry punk music, an upbeat indie song plays in the background with the lyrics “Hold me tight, don’t let go,” and while *NOTDEAD*’s game world deteriorates due to violence, flowers populate the world of *Hugpunx* and grow larger throughout the game. Players in *NOTDEAD* can die and be forced to restart the level, but in *Hugpunx*, there is no way to lose the game.
Figure 65: A comparison between Ayles’ *PUNKSNOTDEAD* (top) and Kopas’ *Hugpunx* (bottom). In the top screenshot, debris litters the floor of the level, streetlights are crooked and collapsing, and a body is told to “get fucked” as it flies across the room. The bottom screenshot, the player character hugs another, and the message “hugz” is displayed on screen. Flowers are growing.

*Hugpunx* is a re-envisioning of *PUNKSNOTDEAD* that subverts the traditional game play expectations present in the latter work (violence, destruction, and a loss condition), while preserving its alternative characteristics (its low fidelity punk aesthetic). Stereotypical masculine themes of competition and violence are replaced with stereotypically feminine themes of affection and cuteness. By drawing a direct
comparison between itself and PUNKSNOTDEAD, Hugpunx encourages the player to question the masculine ideals which we celebrate through video games, and suggests that video games are capable of celebrating alternative ideals.

Porpentine also employs a feminine aesthetic in her games. She is the creator of a large number of free games, including titles such as Armada, Cry$tal Warrior Ke$ha, Love is Zero, Wild Wild Gender Mines, Pink Zone, and Howling Dogs. Her work is usually made using Twine or Game Maker. She also used to curate free indie games for the website freeindigam.es and the online PC gaming publication Rock, Paper, Shotgun.

Many of her games share a common aesthetic style among them. Her games often feature hot pink, purple, and green colors, crystals, trash, and slime. A recurring character is much of her work is “Slimebabe,” a purple-skinned girl with bright green hair, a pink dress, and slime oozing out of her mouth. Her work often juxtaposes feminine colors and objects with things not typically associated with femininity, such as trash, slime, and fantasy violence.

A strong example of the juxtaposition of a feminine aesthetic with non-feminine thematic content is the text-based Twine game Cry$tal Warrior Ke$ha, in

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43 Source: Porpentine. Cry$tal Warrior Ke$ha. Web. 7 Apr. 2015. <http://aliendovecote.com/uploads/twine/kesha.html>. For the sake of those unfamiliar with the medium, it is worth noting that Cry$tal Warrior Ke$ha, like all Twine games, is text-based. Completing the game requires the player to read a passage of text, and then click on a hyperlink indicating what they would like Ke$ha to do next. Although there are exceptions, Twine games rarely require fast reflexes or strategic thinking – most are simply interactive stories.
which players assume the role of pop singer Ke$ha who, in the middle of a concert, is attacked by “haters” and “slutshaming dudes.” Ke$ha, clad in crystal shard armor, retaliates by engaging in “cosmic warfare.” To find and destroy the “alpha hater” behind the attack, Ke$ha must dodge explosions, shoot down enemy projectiles, and ride in her machine gun-equipped bus, named The Vagina Jungle. While all of this happens, a song by the actual Ke$ha plays in the background. Glitter and crystals are prominent throughout the game.

In this game, Ke$ha exhibits clear dominance and control over men. She keeps the photos of emasculated men she’s had sex with on the walls of the Vagina Jungle, and forces a young male fan to either drive the bus or man its machine gun turret against his will, later using his energy to fuel a “slutwave mantis transformation,” if the player wishes it. The game’s antagonist, the male alpha hater, tries to argue that Ke$ha’s pop music is “scientifically terrible,” but in the end, he melts to death in the face of Ke$ha’s self confidence.

The game also subverts gender expectations by juxtaposing stereotypically feminine aesthetic elements (pink colors, glitter, crystals, and pop music) with Ke$ha’s physical and technological superiority over her enemies. The visual information usually associated with, for example, a Barbie doll is instead applied to the story of a powerful and incredibly violent cosmic warrior.
Another game of Porpentine’s featuring a similar aesthetic juxtaposition is Armada, in which the player plays as the aforementioned Slimebabe. The game begins in a swamp with Slimebabe and a corpse. When Slimebabe examines the corpse, text appears at the bottom of the screen, reading “your friend is dead… but the struggle continues.”

![Figure 66: A screenshot from the opening scene of Armada.](http://aliendovecote.com/armada.html)

The struggle in question refers to a fight against the game’s villain, Armada, who is attempting to corrupt the world. The game consists of Slimebabe’s mission to

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assassinate Armada, requiring her to explore the game world, talk to its inhabitants, and kill enemies with her slime blast.

Similar to *Crystal Warrior Ke$ha*, *Armada* pairs stereotypically feminine content (in this case, girly colors, pink dresses, and crystals) with content that, while not necessarily masculine, is definitely not feminine (trash, swamps, violence, artificial intelligence, and data corruption). The game’s website prominently features the text “GAMES FOR GIRLS (AND EVERYONE ELSE),” indicating that the game parodies stereotypical “girl games” while also questioning the practice of the gendered marketing of games. While the game appears “girly” on the surface, its game play and story are anything but. The end result is a game that is neither masculine but feminine, but altogether queer.

**Queer Games and the Transgender Experience**

While the social commentary of games such as *Crystal Warrior Ke$ha* is not necessarily obvious, many works by queer developers feature social commentary that is more explicit. Games such as Anna Anthropy’s *Dys4ia*, Mattie Brice’s *Mainichi*, and Merritt Kopas’ *Lim*, for example, all contain clear messages about living life as a transgender person.

Anna Anthropy is arguably the most well known of the queer indie developers. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, she is the author of *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, and is credited by Jane Friedhoff for popularizing the game authoring program, Twine. She’s released numerous games over the past seven years, including *Dys4ia*,


Encyclopedia Fuckme, Lesbian Spider Queens of Mars, and Calamity Annie. Most of her games are free, but some are sold on the distribution platform itch.io. She is often the sole content creator for her games, but sometimes collaborates with other artists for assets such as music. Many of her games are created with relatively easy-to-use game authoring software, such as Game Maker and Twine, but she also develops Flash games, which are technically more difficult to produce. In most ways, she makes indie games through a mode of production similar to that I described at the end of Chapter 2. Generally, she often uses cheap (or free) and accessible software to create short games independently and can distribute and sell them without approval from a third party.

*Dys4ia,*⁴⁵ one of her most well known games, is a perfect example of a personal game with social themes. *Dys4ia* is an autobiographical game about Anthropy’s experience beginning hormone replacement therapy. She tells her story through a series of mini-games accompanied by text. Each mini-game serves to demonstrate an aspect of Anthropy’s life through game mechanics. For example, in one mini-game, the player must navigate a women’s restroom without being seen (the text during these scene reads “I feel like a spy whenever I use the women’s bathroom”). In another, the player must move a razor across her face and chest to remove masculine facial and body hair.

Mainichi by Mattie Brice, like Dys4ia is an autobiographical work about life as a trans woman. Among the game developers associated with the queer games scene, Mattie Brice is one of the least prolific. Many of the games in her portfolio aren’t even digital games – one of them is a board game, and others require players to follow a set of rules for real-world behavior. The only graphical digital game she has produced is called Mainichi, created in RPG Maker, and was made without Brice having to write a line of code.

While Dys4ia tells a linear story about Anthropy’s progression through hormone replacement therapy, Mainichi explores the repetitive, day-to-day social

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struggles of being transgender. The game begins in the apartment of Brice, who is preparing to meet a friend for coffee. After completing her morning routine, Brice leaves her apartment, walks down the street, enters a café, meets her friend, buys a drink, and has a conversation. After the conversation, the day restarts, and the process repeats.

Throughout each day, the player is faced with a series of choices which impact the play experience. Do you take the time in the morning to wear makeup and dress nicely, or do you nap and play video games instead? Do you brave the crowd of people as you walk to the café, or do you lengthen your commute to avoid them? Do you pay with cash or credit card when you buy your coffee? Unfortunately, no matter what choices the player makes, Brice has negative experiences. On days in which Brice puts little effort in appearing as feminine, strangers stare at her, misgender her, and ask each other about her gender identity. However, if she puts great effort into appearing feminine, she experiences a noticeable amount of street harassment from men. Ultimately, the best way for Brice to avoid staring and harassment is to avoid people in public spaces altogether – something which, in the real world, is not only inconvenient, but often impossible.
Figure 68: A screenshot from Mattie Brice’s Mainichi. In this scene, a stranger who attempts to hit on Brice discovers that she is transgender, and promptly yells to everyone in his vicinity to “watch out for that man.”

Mainichi presents the player with choices which produce no desirable outcome. It is not a game that can be won. No matter how hard the player tries to make optimal choices, Brice ends each day feeling disheartened, in one way or another.

While Dys4ia and Mainichi visually represent Anthropy and Brice’s lives in a somewhat literal manner, Merritt Kopas’ best known game, Lim, discusses transgender issues through an abstract approach. In Lim, the player assumes the role of a colored square in an abstract world populated with other squares, which are colored orange and blue. When the player’s square is outside of sight of the other squares, it flashes into multiple colors. However, as soon as it approaches other squares, it settles

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as orange or blue. If the player’s square is the same color as the other squares, it can pass by without incident. However, if it is a different color, then it is attacked by the other squares, which run into it and impede its progress. In this situation, the player can change color and blend in by holding the “z” key, but when the player does this, the screen begins to shake and the player’s field of view narrows. Effectively, the player must choose between experiencing violence from others and experiencing violence from oneself.

Figure 69: Screenshot of Merritt Kopas’ Lim.

The game can serve as a metaphor for the transgender experience. I do not think it is a coincidence that there are two colors of squares in the game – the coloration of the squares can represent the gender binary. If the player’s square does not visually pass as the appropriate color (gender), then it is subjected to oppression by others, but if it forces itself to pass as the correct color (gender), it still experiences
pain and hardship, although of a different sort. The game ends on a positive note – the player’s square eventually finds another square that changes color just like it – but until that point, life for that square is a choice between two different types of struggle.

Celebration of Queer Sexuality

The work of Kopas and Anthropy don’t only focus on the negative aspects of being queer – both of them are the authors of games celebrating queer sexuality. For example, Kopas’ short text-based game Queer Pirate Plane\textsuperscript{48} tells the story of a lesbian who steals a psychic plane, gathers a crew of lesbians from around the world, and goes on an adventure. When the player character isn’t busy picking up crew members or evading military aircraft, she can spend time with her crew in the cabin, flirting with them and consensually being stomped on by them. While the game was entirely written by Kopas, the game’s title was conceived of by Porpentine, and a graphic shown at the game’s end was drawn by Anthropy, providing further evidence that these artists are part of the same support network.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{queerpirateplane.png}
\caption{A screenshot from Kopas' Queer Pirate Plane. Crew member A. asks if she can stomp on the player character.}
\end{figure}

\begin{itemize}
\item Please
\item Not now
\end{itemize}

Another example is Anthropy’s *Encyclopedia Fuckme and the Case of the Vanishing Entrée*, a pornographic text-based lesbian dating sim. In the game, the player assumes the role of (the submissive) Encyclopedia Fuckme, as she visits her (dominant) sexual partner, Anni, for dinner and sex. What should have been a wild and fun evening quickly turns dark when Anni binds Fuckme with rope, suspends her from a hook in the pantry, and prepares to carve her flesh and eat her. Fuckme manages to escape, but is pursued throughout Anni’s apartment. During the game, if the player is too submissive or too resistant to Anni, Anni will kill Fuckme and eat her. However, if the player alternates between submissive and resistant behavior, Fuckme will have the opportunity to ask Anni to have sex with her as a final request. Anni places her hand inside Fuckme, not knowing that Fuckme’s vagina has teeth. Fuckme promptly bites off Anni’s hand, causing Anni to fall unconscious from the blood loss and allow Fuckme to escape.

![Screenshot of *Encyclopedia Fuckme*](http://www.auntiepixelante.com/encyclopediafuckme/).

Figure 71: A screenshot of a passage from Anthropy’s *Encyclopedia Fuckme*.

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According to an interview with Anthropy by Leigh Alexander, the game is actually inspired by “the inner lives of two adults in a healthy, playful relationship” – namely, that of Anthropy and her submissive partner. One of her intentions with the game is to “confront potentially sheltered players with the fact that identity and sexuality are far broader than they may have assumed.” Even though the game is pornographic, its intent is not to satisfy heterosexual male desires, as is the case with most porn, but to share an aspect of the author’s own sex life that is rarely portrayed in mainstream art or media.

**Queer Games and the Indie Mode of Production**

The work analyzed in this chapter demonstrates the sort of speech through games that is only made possible by an alternative indie scene. All of the games analyzed bring attention to transgender issues (*Dys4ia, Lim, Mainichi*), celebrate queer or female sexuality (*Encyclopedia Fuckme, Queer Pirate Plane, Cry$tal Warrior Ke$ha*), or employ a queer or feminine aesthetic (*Hugpunx, Cry$tal Warrior Ke$ha, Armada*). Games in the first group communicate overtly political messages about the social positioning of transgender individuals in society, while other games are strong examples of marginalized people using games to communicate their otherwise unheard perspectives. Games such as *Encyclopedia Fuckme* could never be produced by the dominant mode of production of the mainstream gaming industry. It is hard to

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imagine a pornographic game about lesbians being sold in retail next to *Call of Duty* or *Pokémon*.

Most of the games examined also subvert mainstream game play expectations. Games such as *Dys4ia*, *Lim*, *Queer Pirate Plane*, *Hugpunx*, and *Crystal Warrior* *Ke$ha* cannot be lost, only completed. *Mainichi* is even less traditional as it not only lacks a loss condition, but even a win condition. The only games which can be won or lost in the traditional sense are *Encyclopedia Fuckme* and *Armada*.

Additionally, these games largely don’t require much skill or pre-existing knowledge of games to play. Anyone who can use a computer is capable of navigating through a text based game. Regarding the graphical games, *Dys4ia*, *Hugpunx*, and *Mainichi* all have very simply controls and no loss condition, and even if one does not perform very well at *Dys4ia*’s minigames, it does not affect one’s ability to complete the game. Most of these games are designed to accommodate the abilities of people who usually don’t play games, or, in other words, those who have been excluded from the culture. Through accessible, nontraditional game mechanics, queer games are accessible and inclusive to nearly everyone, not just traditional male gamers.

What is it, then, about the mode of production of these games that makes their existence possible? One of the most important aspects of their creation is that almost all of them were made using the accessible tools discussed in Chapter 2, such as Game Maker, Construct 2, RPG Maker, and Twine. Unlike professional game development software, all of these programs are easy to use and are affordable for the hobbyist
developer, if not free. Additionally, Merritt Kopas and Anna Anthropy both use the game distribution platform itch.io to share and sell some of their work – a valuable platform to indie developers because it allows anyone to sell a game, free from censorship and third party approval.

Although I have not primarily focused on the community activities of the developers mentioned in this chapter, there is clear evidence that they are actively involved with many of the institutions of the indie scene. All of four of the developers I wrote about participate in game jams, sell their work on itch.io, curate free indie games, write about indie games, collaborate with other indie developers, or promote the growth of the indie community through their own workshops and events. It is largely because of the indie game scene that progressive, feminist, and queer games are made possible.

The Political Potential of the Indie Mode of Production

Of course, not all games with progressive social content were created in the queer gaming scene – numerous examples of other such games have been created by independent developers. Moga’s *I’m Scared of Girls*[^51] tells the story of a young man who dresses as a woman, focusing heavily on the character’s expression of gender identity. *Coming Out Simulator*[^52] by Nicky Case is a game inspired by the author’s own experience with coming out to his family as bisexual. Alice Maz’s *Super Maria*

*Individual*[^53] is a *Mario Bros.* parody in which the female player character searches for her girlfriend, solving problems nonviolently along the way. Stephen Lavelle has created over a hundred short games[^54], many of which deal with themes such as gender, sex, queerness, and domestic violence. Jack King Spooner’s *Will You Ever Return: in da Hood,*[^55] is a satire of 90’s hip hop culture which subtly includes themes of feminism, racial equality, and gun violence. Hannes Flor’s *The Day the Laughter Stopped[^56]* is a text-based game about a 14 year old girl who, regardless of the choices she makes throughout the game, is pursued and raped by an older boy[^57].

Through independent game development, stories can be told through games which contain characters, content, and themes otherwise absent from the dominant culture. Within indie games, there exist numerous characters who are female, feminine transgender, transvestite, gay, lesbian, of color, and possessing both typical and atypical sexual desires. These characters exist in games which contain feminist overtones, feminine and queer content, subvert gender norms, or otherwise subvert


[^57]: *The Day the Laughter Stopped* is a fantastic example of how game mechanics can be used to convey a message. It is a text based game in which the player makes choices by clicking on hyperlinks. However, no matter what choices the player makes regarding the male character in the game, the story always ends the same way: he rapes her. When the player character is raped, options to resist and fight back are displayed but cannot be selected by the player, simulating the protagonist’s loss of agency at that particular moment. Flor explains in a blog post (source: http://hypnoticowl.com/the-moment-the-choices-stopped/) that he designed the game this way to make it impossible to blame the victim in this scenario and help players empathize with victims of sexual assault. According the logic of the game, rape is not the fault of the victim, but of the rapist. Furthermore, once the game is completed, it cannot be replayed. Instead the entire text of the game is displayed, forever unchangeable, conveying the long lasting impact that sexual assault can have on survivors.
traditional game play expectations. The games discussed in this chapter alone contain themes of pacifism, affection, sex, queerness, transgender experience, coming out, social oppression, female domination, and surviving sexual violence. Some of these works celebrate stereotypically feminine ideals, traits, and characters, while others dismantle traditional notions of gender altogether. All of the games I have discussed feature socially progressive content in some form or another, and many of them are deliberately feminist works.

I do not know how many indie games, created under the non-dominant mode of production discussed in Chapter 2, feature such politically conscious content. At a glance, it appears that such games represent a minority of the overall creative output of indie developers, and it would be difficult to determine just how small of a minority it is. However, games in the mainstream industry which explore themes of gender, violence, and sexuality do not exist in the way that queer games do. So far, it has only through the non-dominant indie mode of production that such games are possible.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Patriarchy in video game culture was born of the patriarchy of general culture, but maintained through the mode of production by which most commercial games are created. The earliest games were generally created by men, and many of them reflected masculine values. As video games became increasingly expensive to produce and distribute, marketing decisions, by necessity, became conservative. A masculine, hardcore gamer demographic became the primary audience for games, and the games that are sold generally cater to that demographic. Both developer and play culture, as a result, are patriarchal.

The hardcore gamer, the most culturally legitimate consumer of games, is a symbolically masculine identity, while the less legitimate casual and supposedly fake gamers are symbolically feminine. While nearly half of all players of games are female, women do not participate in the core gaming culture to the same extent as men. Women tend to play games of core genres less often than men, spend less time playing games, and are less likely to participate in public player culture in online spaces. Women who play games are less likely to identify themselves as gamers, and generally become players of games due to the influence of male friends and family. Some women find the masculine content of core games unappealing, while others experience stalking and harassment in online games and gaming communities. The few women who are invested in core gaming culture often have their legitimacy and competency as gamers called into question. Nearly 90% of professional game developers are male, and women who do exist in the industry do not feel entirely
comfortable in their workplace environment. Within games themselves, women are severely underrepresented as playable characters, and characters in games often adhere to gender stereotypes. Female game characters have historically been oversexualized in a manner which caters to heterosexual male desires. In all aspects of mainstream gaming culture – among players, developers, and games – gender hierarchy is present. This hierarchy is not the result of biological difference between men and women, but largely the result of market forces which favor masculine consumers. Mainstream gaming culture is a consumer culture. Game publishers have marketed their products to men and boys, and it is not surprising that it is they who dominate the culture.

Independent gaming subculture, as I have demonstrated, has proven to be a valuable space through which gender norms in gaming are challenged. While “indie game development” can refer to many different modes of production, I have primarily referred to the noncommercial game development by individuals, rather than the commercial game development by teams. Indie developers of this sort tend to use affordable, free, and accessible software with which to create their work. They distribute their work digitally on free hosting sites. They create short works, which gives them greater freedom to produce experimental content, and they tend to create these works individually or with a partner, allowing for the expression of more political, controversial, and intimate ideas.

It is difficult to create local feminist indie developer communities in the real world – as far as I know, I have never physically met another game developer like myself who creates games independently and possesses a feminist political
consciousness – and the online communities of the general gaming culture are insufficient for such developers. As a result, feminist indie developers have had to build their communities through their own online spaces – Games and Play is an example of such a space. In these spaces, indie developers can construct a set of social norms alternative to the dominant culture. Not only do alternative online communities serve as spaces in which developers can reconstruct or abolish gender roles and expectations, but they also serve as support networks which facilitate the creation of games which subvert gender expectations – consider the queer games discussed in Chapter 4.

**The Greater Impact of Feminist Indie Games**

The ability of alternative spaces to challenge dominant institutions depends, to some degree, upon their separateness. Adopting social norms different from those of the dominant institutions requires the alternative community to be distinct from the dominant one. However, this is not to imply that these spaces are entirely separate. The queer games scene is deeply entrenched within the general indie scene, and members of Games and Play generally participate in online gaming communities outside of their own. The impact of the games of feminist game designers are not constrained to alternative spaces – Zoe Quinn’s *Depression Quest*, which ultimately served as the catalyst for Gamergate, is a notable example.

It is possible, even, that the rise of progressivism and feminist criticism in games journalism is the result of the influence of indie game development. While I did
not explicitly focus on the social ties between indie developers and gaming press as I conducted my research, it was difficult not to notice evidence of interaction between them. Anna Anthropy lives with Kotaku writer Patricia Hernandez. Porpentine formerly wrote a column on free indie games for Rock, Paper, Shotgun. Zoe Quinn once dated games journalist Nathan Grayson, who, incidentally, has written for both Kotaku and Rock, Paper, Shotgun. Both of these online publications are among those identified by Gamergate as “SJW” games sites. While most of these are examples of intimate relations between indie developers and the gaming press, numerous other relationships, both professional and otherwise, can be traced from relatively well-known journalists to relatively obscure feminist game designers. Popular gaming publications are not strangers to indie or queer gaming subculture.

The time that has passed between the birth of the contemporary indie scene and Gamergate’s reactionary revolt has been short. The contemporary indie scene emerged in the mid-2000’s, with the English translation of Cave Story in 2005, considered by some to be the archetypal indie game, and the creation of The Independent Gaming Source (or TIGsource) forums in 2007. Anna Anthropy began releasing games in 2008, starting with her Western-themed lesbian love story Calamity Annie. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, queer game designers began to be identified as part of a unified queer games scene in 2012, and by 2014, Gamergate responded to the rise of social justice discourse in gaming. Approximately five years passed between the birth of contemporary indie game development communities and the recognition of the queer scene by the gaming press, and two years after that, feminist criticism became
common enough in mainstream gaming culture that reactionary gamers have organized under a common banner to oppose it.

I can only speculate as to whether the challenge posed by indie developers to dominant gender norms has actually resulted in the more feminist mainstream culture which provoked Gamergate. However, the growth of contemporary indie subcultures has tightly coincided with the rise of social justice discourse in mainstream gaming culture. It may only be coincidence, and there are likely other factors which have resulted in the current struggle between feminists and reactionaries in gaming, but it is very possible that alternative indie developers have had a significant degree of feminist influence upon the mainstream culture.

**Implications for Gender Politics and Online Activism**

Obviously, I am writing about a niche subculture. Not all people play video games, fewer of them identify as gamers, and fewer still participate in gamer culture. An even smaller number of people are independent game developers, and a very small number of them are feminists.

That being said, the struggle between feminists and their opponents in gaming subculture is not all that different from the struggle that occurs in general culture or other subcultures. Feminist discourse and theory in gaming is similar to more generally occurring feminist theory and discourse. The conversation of gender and games is just one of many ongoing conversations about gender equality in other contexts.
It is worth comparing the justification of gaming’s gender inequality to the historical justification of gender inequality in the general culture. Consider, for example, arguments against women’s suffrage in the United States – archaic arguments which, at first glance, may seem irrelevant to contemporary gender inequality. Formally established legal inequality - the denial of the vote for women - was justified on the perceived natural difference between the genders: the belief that women were too emotional, too irrational, and too politically disinterested to vote. In gaming culture, gender inequality is not formalized, as there are no laws or policies which prevent women from playing, creating, or discussing games. Due to the absence of these barriers to entry, Gamergate members can claim that gaming culture and their movement are inclusive institutions. However, similar to the absence of women from the polls, the absence of women from gaming and game development is believed by many to be a natural preference. The argument follows that the different consumption habits of women in the free market is evidence of their naturally differing preferences. Never mind that gaming’s women are often in positions of invisibility, illegitimacy, and inferiority – this is supposedly what women would naturally chose, and they would chose this because they are women. Even if the signifiers of gender inequality have become more subtle over the past century, the justification is still based, among many things, in the alleged difference between the male and female mind. Such a justification is not an antiquated artifact from the days of the suffragette movement a hundred years ago – it is fundamental to gender inequality in the present. While claims to women’s inherent psychological difference, even inferiority, are not often made by
Gamergate and other deniers of gender inequality, they are frequently implied. My study of Gamergate suggests the possibility that the belief in the natural inferiority of women may be more prevalent in contemporary society than many of us would like to believe.

My study of independent game developers, by contrast, offers some insight as to how sexism can be challenged. The ability of indie games to challenge dominant gender norms is the result of two conditions, the first being the usage of a noncapitalist mode of production, and the second being the ability for strangers to create global communities through the internet. The ability to make and distribute creative work without the need for capital, revenue, or third party publishing dramatically increases who is able to produce creative work and what they are able to express through that work. Digital distribution and communication through the internet makes a noncapitalist, or at least less capitalist, mode of production possible, one which facilitates the creation of feminist work.

Additionally, there are too few indie developers for progressive indie communities to form on a local scale, and without such support networks, it is more difficult for indie developers to create games and be influential as artists. Without internet access, challenging gaming culture’s gender norms through game development would be impossible.

However, the existence of alternative online communities and modes of production alone does not result a feminist impact upon the general culture. Such
communities must simultaneously be distinct from and entrenched in the general community. Within the alternative community, dominant social norms can be identified, critiqued, and dismantled, and community members can support each other in the creation of alternative works. Yet, ultimately, it is only through their interactions with the general community that feminist artists can have a general and lasting impact. While some degree of interaction with the general community is inevitable, the manner and extent of this interaction is what determines the social impact of alternative artists.

**Implications for Democracy**

Why does it matter than women are given equal opportunities as men to express themselves through games? The first reason is that, in an ideally just society, individuals should be granted equal life chances regardless of circumstances of birth. One’s gender identity, in nearly all instances, should have no bearing on the choices available to them. One cannot morally justify a culture that encourages some individuals to create games because they are men, and discourages others because they are women.

The second reason is that the inclusion of women in game development can further promote democratic culture. If the goal of democracy, as deliberative democratic theorists would argue, is not simply to represent the general or majority will of the people, but for public decisions to be informed by democratic deliberation, it is necessary that one’s ability to participate in deliberation isn’t constrained by
factors such as gender. Democratic deliberation occurs on the floors of legislatures but also among citizens in the public sphere. The exchange of information through deliberation, in theory, can lead to greater consensus among citizens and more informed opinions which better account for the needs of all parties affected by a potential public decision, whether that decision is made by the state or another democratically run institution. Whether the citizens who participate in deliberation are making public decisions in the voting booth or from positions of power, the decisions they make are theoretically better informed and more optimal as a result of the deliberative process.

Video games are one form of communication in the public sphere through which ideas are communicated. While not all games are created with explicit political intent, they may still subtly or unconsciously communicate ideas about society, such as what it means to be a man or a woman. If women are excluded from game development, then the voices of women are absent from the discourse made through games in the public sphere. The deliberation that occurs is less effective as a result. The men who remain in the public sphere are ignorant of the perspectives, needs, wants, and knowledge of excluded women, and as a result make public decisions which they make are less informed and less consensual than they otherwise could be.

The inclusion of women and other marginalized people into game development, and into the public sphere in general, is necessary for a more democratic society. Of course, gaming subculture represents an incredibly tiny slice of the overall public sphere – achieving gender inequality in gaming would be a necessary, but
minuscule, step toward a more democratic society. However, the mechanisms by which gender equality can be achieved in gaming subculture may be applicable to other patriarchal subcultures, all of which constitute pieces of the general public sphere. The promotion of gender equality in games is not only necessary for a just society, but for a more democratic one.

The Slow and Endless Murder of Video Games

While I write about video game culture as having a long history of patriarchy, it is, as I write this, undergoing significant changes. When I submitted my thesis prospectus, Gamergate did not exist. Discussion of gender and harassment in gaming culture was occasional, and certainly did not qualify as front page newspaper content. I knew that gender inequality was a significant issue for the gaming community, but I did not expect it to be a topic that gaming culture at large would concern itself with, let alone the mainstream press.

The Gamergate controversy began the summer before I formally began my research, unexpectedly changing the context and nature of the project. Gaming culture has been in a constant state of change, but Gamergate forced members of the culture to openly acknowledge it. I was optimistic when the movement began. Finally, I thought to myself, feminists and anti-feminists were having an open discussion about gender in video games! It was through this conversation, I believed, that progress would be made. Just as, in the Hegelian dialectic, a dominant thesis is challenged by an oppositional antithesis to result in a new synthesis, I believed that the conflict between
feminist and anti-feminist thought would result in a new gaming culture which, while not perfect, would be more feminist than the preceding culture.

As soon as I became fully aware that Gamergate, in effect, was not merely anti-feminist but altogether misogynistic, my optimism faded. The more time I spent observing and engaging with Gamergate, the more propaganda, misogynistic slurs, rape jokes, transphobic comments, and death threats I came across. It became clear that what was occurring was not a synthesis between two different factions within gaming, but a fracturing. Over the course of Gamergate’s activism, its members decided which publications, developers, and institutions belonged to their subculture, and which belonged to their enemies. Gaming publications such as Kotaku, Gamastura, and Rock, Paper, Shotgun, game studios such as Double Fine Productions, and industry events such as the Game Developer’s Conference were no longer part of Gamergate’s subculture – they now belong to moderate gamers and the “Social Justice Warriors.” Similarly, publications such as the Escapist and gaming personalities such as Total Biscuit were no longer part of “SJW” gaming culture – those now belong to Gamergate.

The far left and far right of gaming culture have organized and separated, but I have spoken little about gaming’s middle. Neutral, moderate, or politically disinterested gamers – the center – have not entirely sided with the “SJWs,” nor have

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58 I do not mean to imply that Gamergate’s opponents have been entirely angelic either – cruelty is not exclusive to only the owners of specific ideologies. When enough people of any disposition participate in a public conversation, you will find bigots, ideologues, fools, and villains among them. However, I also do not mean to imply that the degree or form of misconduct between Gamergate and their opponents is at all equivalent. The quality and quantity of incivility I found within Gamergate is uniquely representative of Gamergate and Gamergate alone.
they sided with Gamergate, nor will they ever identify themselves with either party on the fringes of the political spectrum. However, this does not mean that the mainstream gaming culture cannot adopt a center-left or center-right position on the issue of gaming, and for a long time, I was uncertain as to whether the mainstream culture was more sympathetic to the “SJWs” or to Gamergate. It has been difficult to determine how many people are actively opposed to Gamergate, and how many support it. Estimates of Gamergate’s membership have greatly varied, but most estimates are only in the tens of thousands of people. Even though a very small minority of gamers actively supports Gamergate, this does not mean that a majority of gamers oppose them. Even though, due to the critical nature of mainstream news coverage of Gamergate, most non-gamers I have spoken to about Gamergate are strongly opposed to it, the gamers I have talked to are more often ambivalent towards the movement. They condemn the harassment committed by Gamergate, but otherwise do not sympathize with the cause of gender equality in gaming – in fact, many of their ideas about gender in games strongly resembled those of Gamergaters. Outside of my friend group, I know of more gamers who openly supported Gamergate than those opposed to it. Even though mainstream news coverage of Gamergate was generally negative, I have been under the impression that gamers are more likely to sympathize with Gamergate than the general public is.

Two things happened during the Game Developer’s Conference (GDC) in March 2015 which altered my perception of the mainstream culture’s attitude toward Gamergate. The first was when, during the Independent Games Festival awards, the
award host, indie game developer Nathan Vella, gave a short speech condemning Gamergate, which was met with a minute-long standing ovation from the audience. The second occurred later that night, during the Game Developer’s Choice awards, when its award host, developer Tim Schafer, made a number of anti-Gamergate jokes, using a sock puppet as a prop. The jokes were as well received as jokes generally are – the audience laughed, and the show continued. One without any prior knowledge of Gamergate would not have known that Schafer’s jokes were of a potentially controversial nature.

These anecdotes are nothing more than recollections of my personal experiences and interpretations of recent events, but the ability for Vella and Schafer to advocate against and satirize Gamergate at a prominent industry conference and be met with positive feedback (and, in Vella’s case, overwhelming applause), was the first indicator that the mainstream gaming industry was possessing, or leaning toward, a center-left bent. While gaming’s center may not necessarily be feminist, it may at least be more sympathetic to Gamergate’s opponents and victims than to Gamergate. Gaming culture has fractured, but gaming’s progressives may possess more influence on the general culture than its reactionaries. Previously, I thought that a dialectical synthesis would occur between progressive game enthusiasts and Gamergate; I am now of the disposition that it will instead occur between gaming’s progressives and its moderates.

Gaming culture is in a state of change, and the direction of that change is unquestionably toward a more feminist culture. Gamergate, so far, has slowed this
progress but failed to stop it. In the short run, the harassment, email campaigns, death threats, rape threats, and online hostility posed by Gamergate has silenced some feminist critics, turned them away from gaming culture, and contributed to an online climate hostile to them. However, Gamergate has also prompted a serious conversation among many gaming enthusiasts about sexism in their subculture. While gaming’s reactionaries have networked and organized under a common banner, its progressives have been forced to do the same. The new, strengthened feminist community that has been created to combat Gamergate will likely continue to be a political force in the gaming community in the coming years. It would be foolish to expect that total gender equality in gaming will be achieved in the short term, but advocacy for it may be stronger than it ever has been.

Gamergate will continue to exist for the foreseeable future. While the movement may not be as strong now as it was in when it began in fall 2014, the members who remain are dedicated, active, and well connected. Until the influence of feminist critics in gaming is regarded as normal, Gamergate will persist. It is difficult to imagine a future in which Gamergate increases in influence. The furthest they have ever gotten in challenging the “SJW” press was when, through an email campaign, they briefly managed to convince Intel to pull ads from Gamasutra’s website. Intel later reinstated the ads, and Gamergate has achieved little to promote the cause of “ethics in video game journalism” ever since. While Gamergate maintains a sizable online presence, they are increasingly becoming irrelevant.
I predict that the independent gaming scene, as I have defined it, will continue to be a feminist community relative to the dominant industry. The indie scene will have a slight, if delayed, impact on mainstream culture: indie creators influence games journalists, who influence mainstream consumers, which alter the demand for games in the market, which alters the content of mainstream games. While alternative communities may have some degree of influence on mainstream culture, it is not a direct, absolute, or immediate influence. Furthermore, mainstream culture will never emulate alternative culture. The indie mode of production inherently lends itself to experimental and political controversial speech, while the industrial mode of production simply does not.

As a result, the mainstream culture will begin to reflect more feminist ideals, but never to an extent that will satisfy feminists. The radical left will influence centrist gamers but never represent mainstream culture itself. What we are currently witnessing in gaming culture is the establishment and organization of long-term political factions. While people of various political dispositions have always played and created video games, the organization of these individuals in accordance with their political dispositions within gaming culture is a recent development. Within a commercial industry and its consumer culture, it is difficult, sometimes pointless, to build communities based on political consciousness, for it is largely the production and consumption of games which unite individuals under consumer culture. It is even harder to build niche political communities without the ability to communicate globally with strangers through the internet. While the contemporary indie mode of
production is likely not the only factor which has led to the rise of feminist gaming communities, it has, at the very least, facilitated their creation.

Once feminist and leftist communities became influential, the creation of an oppositional faction was inevitable. If the “Zoe Quinn scandal” did not result in the creation of Gamergate, it would have been sparked by something else. The desire to oppose gaming’s social justice advocates was already present – all that was needed to organize Gamergate was an inciting incident.

Cuties are killing video games. It is happening, and it cannot be stopped. Mainstream gaming culture will become more feminist in the coming years, perhaps at a faster rate than it ever has in its short history, but this does not mean that feminist activism is nearing its completion. The killing of video games is not a moment in history, but instead a lasting cultural trend. The independent mode of production will always produce content distinct from its industrial counterpart, but ultimately industrially produced games will be the ones to shape and inform the mainstream consumer culture. The social norms of mainstream culture and alternative culture will be at odds with each other as long as they exist. Of course, what is occurring in gaming culture now – the challenging of the social status quo – has been occurring in general cultures for much of human history. What makes the current moment in gaming culture so important is that we are witnessing a transition from a subculture in which social activism was nearly impossible to one in which activism is deeply entrenched within it. From this moment onward, there will never be a dull moment for cuties. There will always be killing to be done.
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