

**Shut up and play, or get out:**  
*A pedagogy of gendered digital identities in video gaming*

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## **Dedication**

*To my parents, with love,  
to Kurtis, for being Player Two, or fighting for Play One,  
and to Hali for teaching me to catch baby Mario.*

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## Abstract

This research project is an answer to the question, “*What is the trouble with Gender and Gaming?*” Distinguishing between sex and gender, the research examines how players learn to participate in gaming culture through a gendered lens and explores the voices of participant gamers who are learning and dealing with gendered violence and sexism in video games. Specifically, I examined the complicated nature of power, gendered representations/performances and language in gaming. To accomplish this, I used a poststructural feminist theory that I call ‘theory of disruption,’ which utilizes Butler’s (1991) theories on gender performance, Foucault’s (1978) concept of the docile body, and Haraway’s (1991) theory of disruption through the metaphor of the cyborg.

Methodologically, I used digital ethnography, where I took on the role of participant-researcher by examining and analyzing my experiences as a video game player, on the one hand, and played with and interviewed 12 avid North American video gamers, all of whom are English speakers, including 8 women and 4 men, on the other.

In analyzing my own and the participants’ narratives, gendered violence and sexual violence perpetuated within the context of gaming was deemed as a major deterrent for self-identified female gamers, often leaving them disconnected from the gaming community, and at times driving them to stop playing online games completely. In the case of female gamers, I show, they begin gaming already orienting their performance around a male narrative and in a male-dominated space. Throughout the thesis, we see that the trouble with gender and gaming is how gender is performed in games: cultural limitations, as well as design limitations influenced by culture, restrict players to the point where performativity (i.e. the pattern of gender performance) morphs into gender norms. These norms, I also show, are not left to perpetuate. In many cases, they are disrupted, subverted, dismissed or outright ignored. Nonetheless, I conclude, all gamers, male or female, have to negotiate gendered identities and their storylines as represented and made available by game designers.

Approached as a ‘null curriculum’ (Eisner, 1985), video gaming is a site where most people, but particularly young people, invest in their identities and desires, thus turning it into a learning site. Here, particular representations and gendered norms and behaviours are learned. Pedagogically, I therefore conclude, we need to critically engage with it and show its creative as well as its ‘other’ (especially when it comes to female representation) side. Membership to the gaming community, it seems, is open to anyone with a gaming system and a desire to log into play; but if those community members were more attuned to how their actions, words, and conversations impact their greater community, perhaps we would begin to see a version of the gaming culture that is safer and more open to all.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

When I was six years old, my grandfather gave my siblings and me a Super Nintendo gaming system. In addition to the drama of four children trying to play games with two controllers and learning how to share time on Super Mario Brothers, I also faced my first dilemma as a girl playing video games: the only female character in the game was Princess Peach, a character needing to be rescued by the heroes of the game, Mario and Luigi. I remember being very annoyed that the only girl in the game was not an active player, but instead had to sit and wait to be rescued. She was dressed for the part, in a giant fluffy dress, coloured peach pink, and wearing princess jewelry. My eldest brother laughed at my annoyance at the time: “Of course you can’t play her! Princesses are for rescuing, and she’s clearly a princess.” As an adult gamer, I have often reflected on this experience, and this gendered character whose walk, talk, and clothing were all symbols of her status as a damsel in distress. She wore no warrior’s clothing, held no weapons, and was vulnerable to the kidnapping antics of Bowser, the game’s designated bad guy. Today, players are able to exercise a little more control over what the characters in their video games look like. We are able to influence the narratives in games with many more options in dialogue and action, and we can often craft our virtual identity using avatar creation tools. However, despite our individual choices as video game players, the culture of gaming, the people who play games, and the people who create games, still greatly influence the digital identities and narratives with which we engage.

In video games, as we shall see, whether a character looks male or female, how they move, talk, and engage with the world around them is impacted both by gaming culture and game design. If gaming culture promotes the idea that female avatars should be nice to look at, and have a manner of walking that is attractive to the hetero-male gaze, for example, then the choices available to the player will be reflective of that gendered gaze. Because I must negotiate game designers’ understanding of gender and representation, my decision to play as a female character might mean the need to sport a piece of armour that I find overtly sexual, but which guarantees the wearer more success against a fighting foe than if they went without it. How players negotiate aspects of gaming culture that narrow the understanding of gendered digital identity has become an important question because of how much time is spent in digital spaces playing, communicating, and learning. Digital games are the largest and fastest growing market

segment of the multi-billion dollar entertainment industry (Kirriemuir & McFarlane, 2004) and development costs, revenue, and audiences for digital games are comparable to those of the movie industry (Kirriemuir, 2002; Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013). Ninety-seven percent of North American teens play a digital game on a regular basis (Lenhart, Kahne, Middaugh, Macgill, Evans, & Vitak, 2008). Current market research by the Entertainment Software Association and gaming intelligence firm Newzoo put the 2017 sales of video games in the region of \$109.2 billion US dollars (mobile games: \$46.1 billion; console games: \$35.5 billion; and PC games: \$29.6 billion).

In turn, research on video games is relevant to a number of academic fields, from communications and education to computer science and engineering. How games are looked at has evolved alongside the games themselves. As games become more complex and accepted examples of media culture, researchers, teachers, parents, and gamers alike become more interested in them as a medium. So, too, do researchers, educators, writers, bloggers, and mainstream media.

### **Education, Video Games and Gamer Culture: The Null Curriculum**

Much of the research on video games and education these past two decades has centred on topics such as: Are video games an educational tool, or not? (Jenkins et al. 2003; Ray et al. 2013; Jong 2015) Since the early, global popularity of video games like Pac-Man in the early 1980s, some in education have speculated if “the magic of ‘Pac-Man’ cannot be bottled and unleashed in the classroom to enhance student involvement, enjoyment, and commitment” (Bowman 1982, p. 14). I am of the generation that was introduced to educational video games in a school setting, games like *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego* and *Typing Tutor Race*, educational games packaged to resemble entertainment games I might play at home. From *Typing Tutor* in our 1990’s computer labs to today’s app-based learning games seen throughout classrooms in the developed world, video games have become an integral part of classroom learning. Schools across Canada use gamification programs like *Classcraft* and *Class Dojo*, to help regulate classroom behaviours by rewarding students with game-like graphics and avatars. In my current role supporting Inuit teachers in Nunavik schools, I regularly see the fun avatars and mini games from *Class Dojo* used as classroom management tools by teachers. In my practice as a high school teacher, I have used entertainment-based simulation games such as *Total Empire*:

*Napoleonic Wars* to engage in complex discussions around politics, economics, and warfare during the Napoleonic age with my eleventh- and twelfth-grade students. Current educational research, such as James Paul Gee’s description of video games as learning milieus where players discover the world of video games through trial and error, at their own pace of play (Gee 2013), has demonstrated a focus on video games as a venue or space for learning.

According to Gee (2007), “Video games engage players in powerful forms of learning, forms that we could spread in various guises, into schools, workplaces, and communities where we wish to engage people with ‘education’” (p. 216). Jonassen and Strobel (2006) suggest that through “formal and informal apprenticeships in communities of play and work, learners develop skills and knowledge that they then share with other members of those communities with whom they learned and practiced those skills” (pp. 1–2). One school of thought which looks at Digital Game-Based Learning suggests that today’s generation of ‘fluent’ digital users are drawn to learning experiences that capitalize on their technological culture and interests (Tapscott, 1999; Gee, 2007; Gee & Hayes, 2009). However, as de Castell and Jenson (2003) suggest, games are also being used to cultivate better classroom management while keeping tabs on student success:

Technology's principal use in curriculum development has had little to do with transformation and far more to do with its principal appeal to educational administrators: its unprecedented capabilities for surveillance, control, and documentation – all basically forms of record-keeping – and so of ‘educational *accountability*’. (p. 48)

Video games as tools for management in the classroom, therefore, appropriate a powerful part of youth culture, utilizing them to further what Eisner (1985) names the null curriculum of school—a curriculum of competition, achieving pre-ordained goals, and a reward structure which integrates certain values and eliminates unwanted behaviours. However, by not also acknowledging the pre-existing culture surrounding games *outside* of the classroom, aspects of gaming culture also become part of the ‘hidden’ or null curriculum. Eisner argues that what is not explicitly taught in the classroom is just as educationally significant as the implicit rules and achievement goals being taught through things like classroom gamification: “I argue this position because ignorance is not simply a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problem” (1985, p. 97). If video games make up a part of the modern school’s null curriculum as educational tools and classroom management aides, so too do the

culture, language, and community of video games. According to Bogost (2008), video game players have “their own culture and values. Video game players often self-identify as ‘gamers’ and devote a major part of their leisure time to video games [...] Video game play could be understood as a ‘community of practice’” (p. 119). It becomes essential to a technology-infused education system, therefore, for educators and researchers to understand and develop strong inclusive critical pedagogy on video games in the classroom. One way to do so, in my opinion, is to critically engage with the learning communities of online gaming, which have been under fire for their distinct lack of diversity and the problematic behaviour of male gamers towards women, people of colour, and queer/transgender communities.

### **#GamerGate**

A quick Google search of ‘gaming culture’, or a glance through gamer hashtags on sites such as Twitter, quickly demonstrates that gaming culture is undergoing a revolution online (Schenold, 2013). Recently, the gaming community, defined as those who actively engage in the playing, creation, developing, or critiquing of video games, has been overrun by a discussion tagged as #GamerGate on social media. #GamerGate—a Twitter hashtag used to gather ideas and posts surrounding issues in gaming, first coined online by actor Adam Baldwin on his Twitter feed (the term was then taken up by numerous bloggers and posters)—showcases some of the issues in gaming that researchers have yet to explore fully, such as: gamer pushback on critiques of video games, ethics in gaming reporting and blog posts, and online forums where gamers discuss what is problematic with gaming, gaming culture, and gamers as a whole. Video game reporters have highlighted how culturally complicated covering games has become. Kotaku author Stephen Totilo (2014) states:

I see all these questions about diversity in gaming these days, about women in *Assassin's Creed* or gay marriage in a Nintendo game. Hell, I hear myself asking these questions sometimes and see the game developers and executives to whom I'm talking stiffen up or cast their eyes at the floor. They sense a trick or a trap or, simply, a can't win situation. Whatever they're going to say about whether their game is diverse or not is going to piss someone off. But lately I've heard a call for game reporters to just stop asking about diversity, to stop nagging about social issues. I've seen a call for game creators to stop answering, to just shut up, to stop doing more harm with every word they say. I don't

think this is the correct path. Consider this a vote for more asking of the diversity question and more answering, too. (Totilo, 2014, p. 2)

In August 2014, a series of online arguments between gaming reporters, critics, and commenters on the website 4chan.com (a site that hosts forums and blogs, without much regulation or editorial oversight) brought the issue of gender and gaming to the forefront (Evans & Janish, 2015). After an online rumour of corrupt gaming reviews and promotion of independent games, involving a game developer and game reporter, surfaced, a series of online protests, dubbed #GamerGate, began. #GamerGate comprises a loose affiliation of discontented gamers, ostensibly coming together to protest journalistic corruption. It culminates in several well-known critics and researchers, all women, being forced into hiding—for voicing opinions on video games. Brianna Wu, a game designer who spoke out loudly against #Gamergate, faced an onslaught of harassment from the online community: “I think there is a war on women in technology,” she said to the BBC. “It’s not like I’m advocating that we ban *Call of Duty* or anything silly like that, [all] I’m asking is for companies to look at their hiring practices, to hire more women ...and make sure they portray women in their games in a socially responsible way” (Cellan-Jones & Lee, 2014). Pictured below is a tweet from Wu, pleading for people to realize the number of personal attacks she was receiving during this time.



Figure 1. Twitter screenshot (October 17, 2014)

The harassment became so intense that Wu fled her home for several weeks, as her home address

and other personal information had been shared online by hackers who had ‘doxxed’ her accounts (stolen personal information and shared it widely). Anita Sarkeesian has continued to receive death and rape threats from opponents of her work (Stuart, 2014). These threats have also been made using the medium she is critiquing: someone created a game which allows players to use their mouse buttons to simulate punching an image of her face (Wingfield, 2014). Recently, Sarkeesian released a series of images from her Twitter feed, depicting several days’ worth of harassment and threats. The following is an excerpt of Tweets from January 21, 2015, specifically on gaming (but there were several more pages of threats and hate speech) found on her Tumblr page (Sarkeesian, 2015):





Figure 2. Feminist Frequency Tumblr <http://femfreq.tumblr.com/post/109319269825/one-week-of-harassment-on-twitter>

While several bloggers (Not Your Mama's Gamer; Critical Distance), online journals (*First Person Scholar*; *Loading ....: Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*; *Ada: A Journal of Gender Media and Technology*) and feminist critics (Bergstrom, Fisher & Jenson, 2014; Shaw, 2010; Chess, 2011; Chess, Evans, & Baines 2017) have been exploring the issues of diversity in gaming, issues surrounding gender and gaming have not always been at the centre of video games and research. Since 2013, media critic Anita Sarkeesian has been making waves with her hit YouTube series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*. Sarkeesian wanted to tackle the representation of women in gaming in a non-academic forum, to elicit change in the way minorities and women are shown in games. She began a Kickstarter (online fundraising) campaign to help fund her research and filming. The campaign triggered substantial, misogynist reactions from self-described gamers who saw her critiques as a direct attack on

video games themselves, and Sarkeesian became a major target of online harassment. According to Lewis (2015), along with fellow academic Leigh Alexander and game developers Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu, Sarkeesian has experienced a long-drawn-out backlash by the so-called #GamerGate movement, which targeted outspoken individuals in the gaming community and throughout social media with online abuse and violent threats. While #GamerGate has largely played itself out, it is obvious that the online targeting and trolling of individuals in digital spaces has increased dramatically in its wake. #Gamergate-style abuse campaigns became endemic because of the underlying inherent similarities in the design, governance, and communication cultures of a range of online platforms. This is no coincidence, according to Salter (2017), as “the architecture and administration of [...] online platforms [such as Twitter and Reddit] emanate from the very same “geek” cultures and related industries as #GamerGate. In online abuse, [...] technology is always already symbolically and strategically implicated in assertions of masculine aggression” (p. 9). What follows is a brief introduction and overview of how the #Gamergate phenomenon developed and grew online.

This research project on gaming and gender began to take shape several years before the online phenomenon of #Gamergate. However, this issue was infusing gaming culture just as I began preparing to collect data, and I worried about the impact this hostile environment might have on my ability to do so. I continually had to be mindful that asking questions about gaming and gender in the wrong space online could have placed me in harm’s way personally. Because of #Gamergate, I approached my research with much more caution than I originally might have. How I spoke to my prospective participants was also affected by this issue; in fact, simply including the words gaming and gender in my participant ethics form lost me three participants who felt too strongly about #Gamergate to want to participate in this study, a matter which is addressed in detail in the methods section of the study. The climate of gaming culture in relation to gender changed and became more intense as this project continued; however, despite and perhaps because of this heightened cultural discomfort with gender, this project answers the question “*What is the trouble with gender and gaming?*” by grappling with the complicated nature of power, gendered representations, and language in gaming. While women in positions of authority have long been the focus of hate speech when critiquing issues surrounding culture and gender (Miller & Marwick, 2014), never before have perpetrators had so many arenas in which to conduct their hate campaigns. From social media accounts to new games designed to beat



them bloody to blogs to emails, texts and phone calls, the sheer number of ways in which these attacks can be conducted is overwhelming to the victims and those that support them. Often, these attacks are perpetrated using gendered stereotypes and indicate a performance of hegemonic masculinity predominant in online culture.

It is with the understanding of the need for a more critically aware pedagogy around video games in the classroom, coupled with my experience with the climate of violence, misogyny and hate speech that appears to be prevalent in gaming culture that I have created this research project, to improve our understanding of the null curriculum infused in video games, and therefore, infused in the everyday lessons of school.

### **Defining and Distinguishing Gender and Sex**

As this research project takes up terms such as “gender” and “sex,” it is important to define and distinguish these terms as they will be used throughout the analysis. Often “gender” and “sex” can be seen as interchangeable. However, Bryson and de Castell (1996), Butler (1993), de Lauretis (1987), Haraway (1991), and many others have highlighted the importance of distinguishing carefully between sex and gender. Donna Haraway (1991) states that “gender” was a term used in contrast to the term “sex” as a way of problematizing what was counted as “natural” or biologically imposed. This distinction makes “sex” the biologically set physical markers (genitalia) we use to classify humans physically and “gender” the social construction of sex. In her now classic work, Butler (1988) argues that “feminist theorists have disputed causal explanations that assume that sex dictates or necessitates certain social meanings for women’s experience” (p. 520) because lived experience cannot be dictated by the physiological appearance of an individual. Joan Scott (1988) argues, accordingly, that “sex” is itself “gendered”:

It follows then that gender is the social organization of sexual difference. But this does not mean that gender reflects or implements fixed and natural differences between women and men; rather gender is the knowledge that established meaning for bodily differences[...]We cannot see sexual differences except as a function of our knowledge about the body and that knowledge is not ‘pure’, cannot be isolated from its implication in a broad range of discursive contexts. (p. 2)

Our bodies then both influence and respond to the society we live in; or as Shapiro (2015) put it, “all social dynamics are embodied” (p. 7). This means all of our interactions are by and through the body and any shift in society creates changes in the body—and vice versa. Taking up these arguments, Raewyn Connell (2009) theorizes that:

Bodies are both objects of social practice and agents in social practice. The same bodies, at the same time, are both. The practices in which bodies are involved form social structures and personal trajectories, which in turn provide the conditions of new practices in which bodies are addressed and involved. There is a loop, a circuit, linking bodily processes and social structures. (p. 67)

A decade before Connell, Donna Haraway (1991) determined that the possibilities for the term “gender” lie in its commitment to a critical account of different and contradictory constructions and, more importantly, deconstructions of social processes. She ends her *Cyborg Manifesto* by stating:

Finally and ironically, the political and explanatory power of the ‘social’ category of gender depends upon historicizing the categories of sex, flesh, body, biology, race, and nature in such a way that the binary, universalizing opposition that spawned the concept of the sex/gender system[...]implodes into articulated, differentiated, accountable, located and consequential theories of embodiment. (p. 148)

Haraway’s point is an important one as “gender” is too often taken as a category that can be separated from race and class. Agreeing with Haraway, Butler (1999) argues that difference in gender is constructed and normalized according to heterosexual male/female divisions, and so, too, are race and class. The concept of “woman” or “man,” then, is not only mediated by gender, but also by race, class, and nationality. In North American societies, for example, social “scripts” or “norms” for gender, race, and social class teach us culturally specific norms, such as individuals are one of two genders—woman or man—as determined by those markers that make us physically of one sex or the other, a male or female body. These gender scripts are followed by body movements, hair and clothing choices, and other social markers (Butler 1999). These gender scripts or “norms,” moreover, are perceived as innate and fixed (Shapiro, 2015). For Judith Butler (1992), this means that to describe or define “gender” is a discursive process of normalization, where: “identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative,

and as such, exclusionary” (p. 15). “Definitions,” therefore, Jenson (1999) suggests, “which categorize and normalize the many possibilities there are for gender fail to acknowledge how it is both multiply and contestably constructed within the social” (p. 27). Simply put, ‘gender’ is rendered complicated and unfixed precisely when we deconstruct and do away with the binary opposition between masculine and feminine (see also: hooks 1981, 1990; Butler, 1999, 2003; Beasley, 2008; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Shapiro, 2015).

Building on this, I have used “gender” throughout the thesis to express a fluid and critical examination of issues related to how participants engage with, negotiate, and perpetuate relations of power and the body in the context of online games (and, in some cases, offline gaming culture). Gender is performed in the movement of the digital body in games, the clothing selected by players to represent their gender identity, how and why players select ‘male’ or ‘female’ avatars to represent themselves, and how players choose to interact with other players when, for example, they select an avatar which is not reflective of their offline body. Participants were observed interacting in games using different avatar bodies, and asked to explain choices when it came to movement, clothing decisions, interactions with other players, as well as to share positive and negative experiences they have had because of the decisions they made in selecting and curating their digital body.

## **Gaming and Gender**

Avatars, or the digital bodies we inhabit in games, are integral to understanding the choices players make about their digital identity in online spaces. According to Beer (2013), “the body has been largely bracketed out of the analysis of new media and contemporary popular culture” (p. 123). Things might have changed since 2013, but not radically, and especially not in gaming culture. Dovey and Kennedy (2006) name game culture as “a critical site where discourses around technology, technological innovation, and technological competence converge with dominant conceptions of gender and race” (p. 131). They describe how these discourses shape who is allowed into the industry and the effect discourse has on the products themselves, the games. To be sure, the portrayal of current mainstream gaming culture in the media is one of a complicated discourse around gender, avatars, and negotiating stereotypes in an online space. Even more problematic is the ability players have to create “hacks” (changes in the code of the

games) to enact violence on other players' avatars. A particular case involving a hack of avatars in *Grand Theft Auto V*, where male rape was explicitly performed, recently made headlines in the gaming community. The initial player to report this new 'mod' (player-adapted map with its own rules) spoke to [www.kotaku.com](http://www.kotaku.com) about the graphic rape, recorded the conversation, and even shared videos of the incident via [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) (see: Hernandez, 2014).

As a gamer myself, I take part, engage with, and am literate in gaming culture. Part of that culture puts the onus on gamers to create identities within games, which can be a complicated business, because of the heterosexual/male focused culture of gaming. Let's take the example of avatars. An avatar is, on the one hand, an expression of the self and, on the other, a creative space where one can recreate or completely alter how one views oneself. But even in games with the option to create one's own avatar, choices are always limited by the tools available to a player by game design. Players must negotiate decisions on gender, race, and sexuality, all while fine-tuning how they will represent themselves within a game that is governed by a gaming culture and game designers. Many of these decisions are also negotiated in players' real-life identities, identities which reflect how they represent themselves digitally, which is explored in chapter 6 in the analysis of the choices players make.

As considered in the literature review, there are many ways to focus on gender/sex and gaming, and an emphasis has been placed on a "fixed gender" which Jenson and de Castell (2008) caution causes a static version of gender norms within the analysis:

The "trouble" with studies of gender and gameplay has most frequently been the static attribution of gender norms and characteristics to actors, contexts and artifacts that are always in flux. It is not that previous research has been inadequate or "wrong" it is simply that in the telling of those stories (Visweswaran, 1994), in the recounting of "findings" that researchers have "fixed" gender in order to stabilize the network of interactions and the possibilities for troubling gender shifts. (p. 19)

By this, Jenson and de Castell suggest that gender must be viewed as a performance, as the fluid act of decisions and choices made by an individual, intentional or not, within gameplay. Gender is not just the choice of playing as a female cleric elf, but rather, *the reasons why* you are choosing to play as a female cleric elf. Gender performance is read in the use of that avatar, in

the way she is clothed, in the way the player emphasizes the avatars built-in design, or the way a player disrupts the design of a 'sexy' female cleric elf through other actions.

## Research Project and Questions

Framed around the complex nature of gaming culture and informed by literature which highlights the complex interactions of gender, identity, and gaming culture, this research project focuses on gendered experiences within the contexts of gaming. Specifically, I explore gendered and sexual violence perpetrated within the context of gaming, in the contexts of learning to negotiate gaming culture and gendered discourses. In troubling the concept of gender (Butler, 1990) within a digital gaming culture context, my research project explores a selection of gamers' narratives and experiences with gender and gaming culture. Playing on Judith Butler's *What's the Trouble with Gender* (1999), I ask: 'what's the trouble with gender in gaming?' Of course, this is a large and not directly answerable question, so instead, my specific questions are:

- 1) How do people perform gender in online games?  
and
- 2) How do these performances disrupt and trouble and/or conform to gendered role expectations?

To answer these questions, I first draw on the poststructural feminist theory of disruption (see Chapter 4) to complete a 'gendered reading' (i.e. how people take up, perform, and verbalize their understanding of their avatar, which may or may not correspond to their identities as male or female game players) of two specific games, *League of Legends* and *World of Warcraft*, and their gaming cultures, while exploring my own gaming identity. Second, using digital ethnography, I identify the patterns (what Judith Butler calls 'performativity') in players' interactions with gendered digital identities. Here, I explore my participants' experience of and response to the gendered dimensions of violence perpetuated within the contexts of gaming.

These gendered dimensions of violence brought with them a series of subsequent questions, which are also explored in this thesis:

- 3) What acts and verbal expressions of violence are being performed by the players' digital representations?

- 4) When these acts are performed, how does this experience affect how victimized the player plays the game, and do they affect the players outside of the game?
- 5) In turn, how do players negotiate the violence that is directed towards them, their avatars or other players?

Violence against other players refers, throughout this project, specifically to acts not mandated by the structure of the game, acts outside of the storyline or game purpose. However, violence against characters embedded in the structure of the game is also explored as the participants highlighted experiences related to this. To be able to answer these questions and observe how my participants were actually playing and interacting within the gameplay, I needed to develop a method that integrated into the spaces inhabited by my participants, and that would allow me to have constant access to gaming culture, in which the answers to the research questions would be found.

### **Research Methodology, Site, and Participants**

I have sought to decipher how people perform “gender” online, specifically how they trouble the nature of gender in gaming culture. Informed by a theory of poststructural feminism disruption, I have done a gendered reading and deconstruction of two games, *League of Legends* and *World of Warcraft*, and their gaming culture, while exploring my own gaming identity in a section titled ‘Researching the Researcher.’

I utilized *digital ethnography*, which I explore fully in Chapter 3, to find the patterns and themes within other players’ interactions with gendered digital identities in a focus group held in *World of Warcraft*, as well as three other games selected by participants: *Gauntlet*, *Wildstar*, and *League of Legends*. I sought to understand the gendered dimensions of violence that were perpetuated within the contexts of gaming as my participants experienced them, and what each of them were doing about it. My methodological approach also encompassed observation, individual interviews, and one focus group interview. These interviews took place while playing games, with both a discussion portion, and gameplay observation.

Given the virtual nature of my research subject, the notion of research site and participants took on a different dimension. It is worth mentioning that I engaged with, collected,

and analyzed each portion of this project solely in the realm of the digital, that is, through online video games. No data was collected in ‘real life,’ only in the digital spaces of a series of video games and using audio connection software.

My participants were all avid gamers, ranging in age from 19 to 35. They were a mixture of university students, teachers, professional gamers, lawyers, and game designers/software engineers, all currently residing in Canada. I conducted four individual interviews with four participants, two of whom self-identified as women and two as men. I also held a focus group, which consisted of twelve individuals: five who self-identified as men and seven who identified as women. The focus group was held while playing the game *World of Warcraft* and each participant navigated to a designated spot within the game with their avatars to create a virtual gathering. The participants in the individual interviews used the screen names: **Biospark**, **Skwyr**, **Phedria** and **KD**. All four have extensive experience with gaming, online gaming culture, and competitive gaming. They all identified as regular, serious gamers, meaning they spent more than five hours a week playing video games. All four also participated in the focus group. The focus group members, in addition to **Biospark**, **Skwyr**, **Phedria** and **KD**, were **Galindlinari**, **Syfte**, **Wishfire**, **Dysis**, **MrWoody**, **Jirra**, and a last individual who wished to remain anonymous, and therefore has been dubbed **Anonymous** for the purposes of identification throughout the dissertation. All my participants identified as ‘involved’ gamers, meaning they felt they invested an adequate amount of their weekly entertainment time to maintaining various online identities, characters, or guilds. They all played more than one online game as part of their regular gaming activities, and four of the 12 maintained regular contact with their guilds outside of the game, through messages and Facebook groups dedicated to regular community building. All names were chosen by the participants as pseudonyms for the study. They were asked to think of gamer names that did not identify them. In Biospark’s case, he was asked to choose a name that also did not identify him in his professional gaming role. While each participant identified themselves as “man” or “woman,” they were not asked to identify any more information than they were comfortable providing. As such, gender identity as signaled by participants is binary, though the performance of gender explored in the study is not always so. Participants did not reveal their racialized backgrounds, and therefore, this information is considered as a limitation of the study, which is explored in Chapter 4.

## **Progression of Chapters**

**Chapter 2** is an in-depth examination of the current literature on video games, social media, and the digital body. Called ‘A Genealogy of Gaming Research’ it is divided into ten sections on aspects of gaming that have thus far been examined that might relate to gender and digital identities. Included in this overview are sections on how social media plays into the gaming world; on issues with avatars, race, sexism, and classism; and on the role gaming has played in educational settings. Through this review of the literature, one can see where this project fits, especially in relation to current research on gender in online gaming.

**Chapter 3** explores the theory of disruption from the poststructural feminist perspective. Here, the theories of performativity and impersonation from Butler (1990), the discipline of the docile body from Foucault (1977) and Haraway’s (1991) cyborg and its role in the disruption of binaries in online spaces form the foundation for the analysis of this project.

**Chapter 4** introduces and explores the different dimensions of digital ethnography. This, it is argued, is the best way to understand the context of the research, the emerging patterns, and the players’ experiences and narratives.

**Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8** are the analysis chapters. They should be read as sections, or levels, that aim to demonstrate to the reader each of the participant’s experiences playing in game and participating in researcher-led discussions. In them, I introduce and discuss the notions of researcher-as-instrument, the link between visual representation and the body, the intervention of power in representation, and the intersection of language, gendered discourse, and sexually violent language.

Serving as the concluding chapter, **Chapter 9** discusses the pedagogical implications of participants’ experiences and narratives. It also serves as a guide for future digital researchers in education as an exploration of the pedagogical implications of my experiences as a researcher in video games.

Finally, for the benefit of the reader, the following is a lexicon of words used in gaming in general and this thesis in particular:

1. In game: Within, or as part of a game. Whenever players or researchers refer to events that occur while playing a video game, it is called in game.
2. #GamerGate: Described as a manifestation of a culture war over gaming culture diversification, artistic recognition, and social criticism of video games, and



the gamer social identity.

3. Flamer/flaming: An online argument in which one party uses derisive or derogatory language as a tactic to drive the argument in their favour, and where the use of abusive language takes precedence over the actual merits of the argument.
4. Troll: One who posts a deliberately provocative message online with the intention of causing maximum disruption and argument.
5. MMO: Massively-Multiplayer Online, refers to a type of game with numerous players conducted online.
6. RPG: A game in which the player takes on the persona of a fictional character and has adventures with other characters in a world created by either a Game-master, a sort of referee, or a video game designer. Can be played with other people (“Face-to-Face” or “Table-Top”; also called “Pen-and-Paper”), or over the Internet (“Play-by-E-mail” or “Play-by-Post” games; this category also includes games played on IRC or via a chat site, E.g. *Garage of Games*).
7. MMORPG: A Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game.
8. RTS: Real-Time Strategy. Refers to a computer game or board game that involves strategy as the main gameplay, usually involving the management of resources, an army and/or civilization.
9. Champion: A champion is a being or person that has been summoned to wage battle in the *League of Legends*. They are the player-controlled character in *League of Legends*.
10. Toon: Usually referred to as a character in an online role-playing game. Also known as an alt.
11. Support: These champions usually have abilities that help their teammates, such as shields, heals, various buffs (rebuffs) to attack damage, movement speed, etc.
12. Tank: Tanks are usually melee characters and are supposed to be hardest to kill since they will usually have a lot of Health, Armor, and Magic Resistance that reduce incoming damage. They help protect party members with lower armour.
13. Raid: It involves players joining together to achieve a common in-game goal, such as taking over territory, killing an opposing faction, or most commonly killing an enemy or monsters. This also can refer to taking on the final level of a game, often referred to as a “boss,” a character of greater difficulty and ability, that usually signals the end of a level,

storyline, or the game itself.

14. **Dungeon:** A specific space in a game, usually indoors, which houses multiple rooms, puzzles, and enemies. The player must navigate their way through the dangerous place and face the dungeon boss (much harder than the regular dungeon enemies), to receive a reward and progress further in the story.
15. **Guild:** A small community of players that play online games together. This can include multiple games or just one.
16. **Team Speak:** One of several programs for audio connection between players primarily used by online PC gamers to communicate. Involves mics and headsets to communicate online.
17. **Gamer:** Applies to anyone who plays video games on a regular basis or even occasionally. However, even among gamers, this is a contentious definition, and there is a large amount of debate about who or what a gamer is.
18. **Gamer Community:** There are many gamer communities around the world. Many of these take the form of discussion forums and other virtual communities, as well as college or university social clubs.
19. **LAN party:** A gathering in the same location, usually consisting of a group of friends, where the use of a Local Area Network facilitates group play. This gathering involves an Xbox and/or a PC. Traditionally, this involved players co-situated in the same room or space; however, with the creation of private networking servers, players may 'LAN' via a shared network without being in the same room.
20. **Twitch:** Streaming website for individual gamers to showcase their videos of themselves playing video games; also where gamers can watch professional gamer events online.
21. **Avatar:** An icon or digital body which represents a user in a virtual reality/Internet setting.
22. **IRL:** Short form for 'in real life'.
23. **NOOB:** Slang for a new player, derogatory comment on someone's gaming skills.
24. **Log:** Short form for 'logging off' of a game.
25. **NPC: (Non Player Character)** Used to refer to any characters in a video game that are computer controlled that either a player interacts with, or are used to move the storyline along. These are also any characters used as background visuals (i.e. palace guards that don't speak or interact with the player).

26. AFK: Short form for 'away from keyboard', when a player is not in control of their game avatar.
27. DPS: Acronym meaning Damage Per Second. Often used in role-playing games such as *World of Warcraft*, *Elder Scrolls*, and *Diablo*. Used to measure how much damage per second a player is inflicting on another player or object in game. The higher the frequency of damage, the more powerful you are.
28. T-Bagging: Most often used in the gaming community as a victory move. After you kill an opponent, it is not uncommon to stand over your enemy's lifeless body and crouch up and down over and over, hitting them with your genital area, while the opponent watches from their screen, unable to act. As avatars in many First-Person Shooter games (where this move is usually utilized) are more often male, t-bagging means hitting another player in the face with the testicles and scrotum sack (not literally, but the action is suggested).
29. Unicorn: A unicorn can mean an individual, usually a woman, who has all the ideals and qualities someone might desire. Like the mystical horned creature, you may never meet someone in real life that meets these ideals. Often used in geek culture to refer to a woman who is interested in video games or sci-fi, etc., and attractive.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review: A Genealogy of Gaming Research

Over the last several decades, video games have changed how many of us spend our leisure time (Karsten 2005; Kuntsche et al. 2009). Entertainment-based games provide more advanced ways of engaging us virtually every year. The availability of new consoles, platforms, and technologies for the delivery of games, as well as the constant need to meet consumer demands of said platforms, drives developers, designers, and publishers to reach for new heights.

Early research on video games had a focus on the negative impacts of playing digital games. Negative effects of playing video games are numerous, and oft reported, such as difficulties in regulating the amount of time spent playing games (Ogletree & Drake, 2007), addiction (Griffiths & Davies, 2002), and even the isolation anxiety disorder known as Hikikomori (Teo & Gaw, 2010) caused by video games play in Japanese youth. Anderson and Bushman's meta-analyses, widely influential in media analyses of video games and violence, suggest that playing violent video games leads to increases in aggressive thoughts, aggressive affect, and physiological arousal, as well as reduced arousal to subsequent depictions of violence and a decrease in pro-social behaviour (Anderson, 2004; Anderson & Bushman, 2001). Sexual violence in video games has also been explored by researchers like Dibbel (1993) who considered the significance of a virtual rape in LambdaMOO. This incident, much like the more current #GamerGate, drove academic interest into the digital realms of MUDs (Multi-Player Dungeons). Turkle (1995), in exploring identity in early gaming spaces online, posited that these environments revealed the fluid and reorganised nature of identities. Nakamura, Rodman, and Kolko (2000) have challenged the utopian visions of cyberspace, arguing that online communities do not foster racial equality but merely make racial minorities easier to suppress.

Despite this early focus on the negative impacts of video games, there has also been interest in the positive effects of *playing* games. Taylor (2006) in her analysis of MUD classifies this gaming style as "a new turn in which multi-user spaces were to become one of the most innovative developments within internet technologies and certainly a genre that excited many computer users" (p. 23). MUD, according to Taylor, paved the way for future multi-user experiences in games like *Second Life*. In his meta-analysis of the effects of playing violent games, Ferguson (2007) found that playing violent games was linked with positive skill

acquisition, such as improved visual spatial abilities. Interestingly enough, however, he found no effect of playing violent games on aggressive behaviour.

Another aspect of online video games that is perhaps under-emphasised by the public is that online gaming is woven into gamers' everyday lives and identities, and is worth academic consideration. As Castronova (2005) has argued, 'synthetic worlds' or online game worlds have a series of major economic impacts outside of the game, as "once one recognizes that a silver piece in Sabert's [his character] world can have value just like a US dollar, one must realize that a silver piece is not merely like money, it is money" (p. 47). This understanding of the impact of synthetic worlds on real life drives the body of the present research. Studies, which focus on the experiences of players, and the impacts of emotions and success in game that they might encounter in games such as MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) like *World of Warcraft* demonstrate that exertion and effort *mean* something to players. Juul (2005) asserts that players of *World of Warcraft* and other games like it "feel emotionally attached to it" (p. 36) and to the outcomes of their endeavours and missions. A problem with video game research, as often with research in technologies in general, is the rapid evolution of the medium over the years. Video game research is only a few decades old, and its iteration has evolved alongside the technology it analyses. As Kirriemuir & McFarlane (2004) reflect, it is hard to compare an early text-based adventure game, or MUD, like *Dungeons and Dragons*, with next generation HD first-person shooters. The games played today have expanded and progressed in numerous styles and genres. The way people, and not just 'gamers', play and engage with video games has changed, and is continuously changing. An example is the prominence of mobile and casual gaming, (McGonigal, 2007) or the growing market for Alternate Reality or Virtual Reality gaming.

While past research has examined and explored the potential side effects or consequences of video games, we still need to understand what aspects of a game have an influence on players, and in what ways players themselves are disrupting those influences, especially for communication purposes, which is precisely what this thesis sets out to do.

### **Kaleidoscopic Picture: Gender, Identity and Digital Representations**

The ability to communicate and perform with other gamers is a key motivator for many online gaming participants (Crawford & Rutter, 2007). Wright, Boria, & Breidenbach (2002) suggest

that the value of online gaming does not lie only in the game structure or text, but rather in the social environment the games facilitate. They write:

The meaning of playing *Counter-Strike* [an online First-Person Shooter] is not merely embodied in the graphics or even the violent game play, but in the social mediations that go on between players through their talk with each other and by their performance within the game. Participants, then, actively create the meaning of the game through their virtual talk and behavior borrowing heavily from popular and youth culture representations. Players learn rules of social comportment that reproduces codes of behavior and establishes standards of conduct, while also safely experimenting with the violations of these codes (Wright et al. 2002, pp. 277–278)

Wright et al.'s research, however, leave us with two essential questions: 1) What is the resulting impact of violating codes of conduct and community on players?; and 2) What is the impact of isolation from this culture by players who fail to engage with the correct codes? There is still no agreement about what exactly young people are learning from gaming, and more importantly, whether gaming is affecting their ability to empathize and connect with the people around them. One of the major ways in which young people engage with technology—the playing of video games—is not necessarily seen by the public as knowledge production, but just ‘fun’. Anand (2007), for example, analyzed the impact of video game play compared with other extracurricular activities. The participants—who were 19-year-old males in post-secondary education—were given questionnaires on time management and video game play. The questionnaires were then compared with participants’ task orientation and SAT scores, to determine whether playing too many video games had an effect on young peoples’ abilities in other areas. Anand found that there was a significant negative relationship between the amount of video game play and total SAT scores, and between video game play and GPA. However, missing from Annand’s study is the ingenuity and creativity that go into creating digital identities and experimenting with them, something which does not appear in an SAT test.

To get a clearer picture of gaming identity, several studies also examine the identity formation that occurs as teenagers and young adults spend their free time within digital communities. Light (2010) addresses the idea that “information technology holds the potential to alter the discourses of identity,” or rather that identities are being altered and reformed by

technology. Technology can now “see inside people,” producing “new performance arenas for the expression of identity” (p. 583). Light (2010) adopts a post-structural view when examining this shift in identity performance. She draws on Butler’s concept of “performativity” in connection with identity, as a performance where one “does” one’s identity in the same way as “one does one’s body” (p. 585). Light stresses that “this is not to choose one’s identity,” which Butler sees as “subject to the norms of society” (as cited in Light, 2010), instead it is to view identities as shaped in a set of interactions with others, putting meaning upon that identity, “that inscribes, prescribes and proscribes who we can become” (Light 2010, p. 586).

danah boyd (2002) analyses the usability of the identity management software *Social Network Fragments* and *SecureId*, and identifies two instigators in the shaping of digital identity and online social behaviour: the power of architecture and disembodiment. The latter, boyd concludes, where digital representation is the only focus, removes all sense of the body from the user. She argues that the digital creation of identity is disembodied as it is free from the societal and cultural forces of the offline world. She explains that “in the physical world, the public space still has boundaries; people are not performing for the entire world, across all time. They are performing in a particular environment and draw from the contextual cues of that environment” (pp. 33–34). Online, when an individual performs for a particular chatroom or media space, they make certain assumptions about who has access to their presentation. The role of the anonymous audience, for boyd, could play a very significant role in individuals’ management of their online personas. Self-conscious identity performances have been analyzed in internet spaces like social network sites (Livingstone, 2005; boyd, 2007;), blogs (Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008; Reed, 2005), dating sites (Ellison et al., 2006), and personal homepages (Papacharissi, 2002; Schau & Gilly, 2003). ‘Anonymous audience’ is, according to Marwick & boyd (2011), the notion that in a game or social media space, we have no certain idea who is taking in our performance of self online. In their qualitative digital analysis and survey of Twitter users and their perspective on audience, Marwick and boyd (2011) found that users did not “lack an audience, but that they are uncomfortable labeling interlocutors and witnesses as an ‘audience’” (p. 6). The authors conclude that many people are not consciously thinking about the invisible audience when posting or creating content that represents themselves online, and those that do have to presume who that audience might be, never completely certain of who might be ‘reading’ or ‘watching.’

In contrast, Bugeja (2005), in his historical overview of how different generations have

coped with great technological change, maintains that it is part of the “human condition” to “interact with each other face-to-face in physical habitat, developing language and social skills” (p. 40). Bugeja analyses the shift in communication through the digital age by exploring how it is used in marketing and new media engagement with the public, comparing the change historically. The use of technology for communication, he argues, is causing us to lose social skills because we are seduced to “interact on impulse” (p. 41). Bugeja questions whether online or digital interactions give us true social sustenance, or whether these are “pale, uni-dimensional pieces of social interaction” (p. 78). Here, he is questioning whether we are just talking to ourselves. He further suggests that in cyberspace “activities are simulated rather than authentic” and “people de-evolve in virtual environments into symbols (hypertext, pixels, [and] logins)” (p. 78). Bugeja and boyd create an interesting landscape through their notions of simulation and disembodiment, respectively; a landscape which will be investigated further in the analysis chapters.

Harwood and Anderson’s (2002) content analysis of primetime dramas and comedies, focusing on representation of age, sex, and ethnic groups, suggests that representation on television is at heart a representation for other social forces—that is, groups who appear more often in the media are more ‘vital’ and enjoy more status and power in daily life. When certain groups are underrepresented or negatively portrayed, such as Latina women, who Harwood and Anderson found to be portrayed in less positive roles, society is partly to blame since it is the views of society that inform the portrayals on television. For the purpose of this study, one may infer that, how gender is represented, via characters and storylines in forms of media like video games, therefore, becomes vitality important to who holds the privilege (i.e. power) within gaming culture.

As an overview of where we are currently in popular culture when dealing with gender identity and construction, Milestone and Meyer (2012) explore how the production and consumption of cultural texts, and the process of representation within those texts, interact to construct normative gender identities. The authors achieve this through a summary and critique of the last 30 years of cultural studies theory in relation to gender. First, they examine the creation of popular culture; they ask who produces cultural texts, and attempt to explain when gendered patterns occur, and what impact these patterns have on cultural content. The authors wonder how it is possible that the process of cultural production remains predominantly in the



hands of men, despite the notion that women are seen as more ‘creative’ than men (p. 38). Further, Milestone and Meyer argue that technology is still considered a male kingdom, despite the promise of new digital media, accessible to all who wish to share their opinions with the World Wide Web. The authors argue that while culture is being consumed by all it is in fact curated and designed only by men, and that this is a major cause for concern, because the hegemony of patriarchal ideology maintains White, male, heteronormative values, which includes the perception that women are simply not ‘cut out’ for frontline cultural production (p. 57). Current research suggests that sexism and racism are concerns in a few gamer communities; the harassment of women by other players of all ages has been examined, and it has been demonstrated that despite the prevalence of female players, games are still viewed as male-dominated spaces (see especially: Fox & Tang, 2014; Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2013; Salter & Blodgett, 2012). Manago (2013) conducted a case study of a male identifying as heterosexual leading the researcher on a tour of his profile on the social networking site Myspace. The analysis focuses on the digital representations of his masculine sexuality on the profile and how the participant explains and interprets his online behaviour during the tour. The author argues that his performance reflects shared understandings of what constitutes valuable and desirable masculinities in the community at large. Here, that identity is hyperfocused on the ‘sexiness’ and ‘man’s man’ persona often displayed in the dominant images of pop culture, and with which the participant also engages.

A similar study on digital self-representation online that focuses on young women’s notions of self in digital spaces offers a comparative perspective of digital performance and gender. Dobson’s (2011) study asks what the self-representations of young women on social network sites (SNSs) can tell us about the conditions and experience of inhabiting femininity in the digitally mediated context. She examines a small selection of social network sites (SNS) profiles owned by Australian women aged 18–21, to highlight the ways of resisting that each young woman develops online as pushback against the dominant terms by which contemporary femininity is understood. While the women are often seen seeking opportunities to pushback against curated identity, too often the platforms glorify their similar, perpetuated identities and validate the need to perform according to normative cultural standards, engendering little incentive for resistance, something I also note in upcoming chapters.

Collectively, the studies above create a kaleidoscopic picture of the representations of

identity and gender in digital spaces, and of the negotiations around the pressures of digital and pop culture in those representations. By now, stories of prejudicial harassment online—whether racial, anti-LGBT, sexist, or some *mélange* of the above—are legion and public, with a legacy stretching back through the length of the internet’s relatively short lifetime (Nakamura, 2000; Kafai et. al., 2008; Citron, 2009). A growing body of social scientific literature supports the idea that online space is specifically hostile to women (Jenkins, 1998; Ballard & Lineberger, 1999; Norris, 2004; Meyer & Cukier, 2006; Kuznekoff & Rose, 2012) and research suggests, tentatively, that it may even exacerbate hostility to women well beyond the world of gaming (Dill, 2009; Beck et. al., 2012).

### **Gender Intelligibility: Digital Representation, Gaming, and Gender**

“It is not only what I do that makes me recognizable as a woman,” Bury (2005) writes, “but what I say and how I say it. In an online context, the body continues to signify gender intelligibility *linguistically*” (p. 8). Digital representation is an area situated in pop culture that has received increased attention in scholarly communities, particularly in anthropology, sociology, and gender studies (e.g., Deuze, 2006; Thumin, 2012), with specific interest in gender intelligibility, i.e. questioning and making sense of notions of masculinity and femininity, not taking gender as a given category but a contested, contingent, and ever-changing category. For the purpose of my research, the online battles over Marvel’s depiction of women have resulted in complex and confusing instances of gender inquisition, such as the controversy over Anita Sarkeesian’s questioning of sexist video game tropes, revenge pornography websites using hacked photos of an ex-girlfriend and her loss of a job as a result, etc.

The next section of the literature review delves into the environment and intersection of gender and digital representation, examining research from a variety of perspectives and building a space in which to situate my own research project. By exploring the literature on digital representations, gender, gaming, digital culture, and digital communities, I demonstrate how examining the narratives and learning environment of gamers for their creation of gender roles fit into a narrative of grappling with the trouble with gender and gaming.

Following the academic literature review is a short exploration of blogs and online news media, which reveals how much gender and gaming features in the pop culture sphere,

and what is being said about gender and gaming.

### **Digital Communities and Online Spaces**

Digital communities such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and the gamer-based Twitch have millions of users who daily dedicate time to interact with other online users. This has been the case since the early inception of sites like MySpace and ICQ, but today, one could argue, social media have become the main communication tools enjoyed across the world. boyd and Ellison (2008) define social networking sites as digital spaces that allow “individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, [and] articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211). While most sites encourage users to construct accurate representations of themselves, participants do this to varying degrees. For example, Marwick (2005), when developing her typology of user presentation strategies on Friendster, Orkut, and MySpace, found that users on three different SNSs had complex strategies for negotiating the rigidity of a prescribed “authentic” profile, one that strives to connect with a representation of self and social connections.

To understand these representations and social connections, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) conducted a multi-method data analysis of the entire incoming first-year undergraduate class at Michigan State University and their use of Facebook. Using surveys, interviews, and cognitive walk-throughs with students, the authors found that Facebook is used to keep up existing relationships or connect with new offline friends, as opposed to being a tool to meet new people. Pushing the research of Ellison et al. (2007) further and focusing on profile, boyd (2009) examined the phenomenon of “fakesters” and argued that profiles could never be “real.” To boyd, no online identity is a true identity, but rather an act or performance of what an individual would like to be seen as by their friend audience. SNS users are predominantly young adults; three-quarters of adult Internet users under the age of 25 have a profile on a social networking site (Lenhart, 2009). Although exceptions exist, the available research suggests that most SNSs primarily support pre-existing social relations. People use the Internet to socialize with people they already know and to expand their circle of friends (Jones, 2009). This finding is of interest to my research project as several participants also noted the connection between online gaming socialization and friendships. However, there also exists a greater need to

socialize with strangers and form community, which is something that will be explored further in the analysis chapters.

Two of the primary tools that enable connections between players are social networking sites and instant messages (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Jones, 2009; Lenhart, 2009; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). Jenkins (2006) describes three concepts that shape what he calls “convergence culture”: media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence (Jenkins, 2006, p. 2). Media convergence is “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). Within digital media, such as social media and video gaming online, I will focus primarily on participatory culture. Participatory culture, Jenkins emphasizes, contrasts with the idea of a passive viewer in a time when producers and consumers are no longer distinct roles, but rather interactive ones, with constantly evolving rules. From YouTube video production to players creating content for video games and selling them on file-sharing sites, people are engaging in ‘production through consumption’ of digital media, but without a set structure to said creation.

### **Social Media and Gaming**

It is not yet understood what implications an active online social life, whether through social media or gaming, can have for an individual. Research does suggest, for example, that the stereotypical teenage ‘nerd’ who games for hours in isolation can in fact be in danger of harming social relationships with family and friends, and also at risk of developing an addiction (Griffiths and Hunt, 1998; Roberts et al., 1999; see also Turkle, 1985). Some studies document that gaming occasionally produces new bonds within families, in particular between fathers and sons (Pasquier et al., 1998; Durkin and Aisbett, 1999; Livingstone & Bovill, 1999; Durkin and Barber, 2002). Gamers were also seen to form new relationships within their peer group (Orleans and Laney, 2000) or online by participating in gaming or online gaming forums (Parks and Roberts, 1998; Griffiths et al., 2004; Schaap, 2002).

At a LAN (Local Area Network) event, gamers link their PCs within a high-speed LAN to play together in real life, creating a shared physical presence that supports social interaction. The social activity of gaming amounts to fighting ‘clan wars’, where one group of gamers confronts other groups (Jansz & Martens, 2005). However, according to Williams, Consalvo,

Caplan, and Yee (2009), the combination of these two areas—gaming and social Internet activities—remains an area that needs further exploration in terms of gender-based research; hence the present research.

### **Gaming, Play, and the Shaping of Digital Identities**

In his exploration of digital identity in digital space, Rehak (2003) explores the idea of creating characters when he discusses the use of the visual representation of an ‘avatar’ in video games as a form of ‘Playing at Being’. The avatar, writes Rehak, is “presented as a human player’s double, merges spectatorship and participation in ways that fundamentally transform both activities” (p. 103). His notion of identity of self in a game is crucial to this research project, and more generally to academic exploration of gaming and its embedded culture. Gamers have a distinct characteristic where they strive to be on the verge of what Jane McGonigal calls an ‘epic win’ during her TED Talk in 2010. She suggests that gamers are problem solvers, bent on success and victory, and will collaborate to that end. Gamers are a unique community, a fact that had to be kept in mind throughout this research project. According to Entertainment Software Association of Canada’s 2014 Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry, 54% of Canadians identify as ‘gamers’, people who have played video games more than twice a month, spending a total of \$2.3 billion dollars in 2013. Previous empirical work in the area of video game studies more often than not can be divided into two main approaches: 1) studies of the audience for games (the players), such as Ferguson’s (2007) meta-analysis of both positive and negative effects of playing violent games, in which he found that playing violent games was associated with better visual spatial abilities, but found no effect of playing violent games on aggressive behaviour, or 2) critical analyses of the games themselves, such as analyses of first-person shooters (Grimshaw & Schott, 2011; Hitchens, Patrickson, & Young, 2014). These studies take a number of different approaches, which include conducting experiments (Sherry, Curtis, & Sparks, 2003); distributing surveys (Media Analysis Laboratory, 1998; Sherry, Lucas, Rechtsteiner, Brooks, & Wilson, 2001; Yee, 2007; Quandt, Chen, Mäyrä, & van Looy, 2013); and conducting interviews with gamers (Yates and Littleton, 2001; Oksman, 2002; Nardi, 2010). Currently, considerable research is focused on the entertainment and/or learning aspects of video games.

Alberti (2008) notes the popular use of the phrase “to play videogames,” prompting him to question the verb *to play*. “While the verb ‘play’ is used in reference to other art forms,” he writes, “it usually applies to the producers of artistic texts—musicians, actors—rather than their audiences” (p. 262). This brings into question the role of the person *playing* video games. Alberti suggests that video gaming is a discursive situation where the processes of “creation” and “reception” mesh together (Alberti, 2008, p. 262). A question directly related to my research, however, is: who takes part in the creation of this ‘text’? Is it only the player, or is the game designer also a creator? Current research (Connolly, MacArthur, & Boyle, 2012) suggests the growing supremacy of gaming as a media platform, the dawn of cheaper digital production tools, and online delivery platforms which allow for any and all creators to share their creations means the opportunity for much more variety in terms of who participates in games and their creation, as well as in terms of the manner in which they participate in the production and distribution of media like video games (Salen, 2008). Sites like Twitch, for example, have brought down the barriers of game creation, and allowed players and their fans to engage with each other and games in a way previously unimagined.

Video games research (see Funk, 1992; MediaScope, 1996; Sherry, 2001; Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Trepte & Reinecke, 2015) has focused largely on traditional media effects issues, particularly the effects of violent video games on aggression. However, researchers have also begun to examine other aspects of the gaming entertainment experience. Authors look at video games in relation to thinking (S. Johnson, 2005), learning and literacies (Gee, 2003, 2007, 2010; Hsu & Wang, 2018), gender (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000, 2008, 2010; Rutherford, 2018), their effects on children (Kinder, 1991; Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Greenfield, 2014; Ferguson & Olson, 2014), war (Halter, 2006), and engagement of girls in games (Sanford & Kurki, 2012). Taking a somewhat different approach, for some researchers (e.g., Zillmann & Vorderer, 2000; Bryant & Miron, 2002; Bryant, 2004) games have posited a need for further study of the entertainment experience.

Other scholars (see Frasca, 2001; Nakamura, 1995, 2007; Salen & Zimmerman, 2006; Wright, Boria, & Breidenbach, 2000) have focused on what particular or specific preferences meant to the individual players; the importance of these choices in a psychological, social, and cultural context, and how the aesthetics of game design influenced the ideas and ideologies of the players. Much of their examinations deal primarily with the identity of the players as interpreted

through the creation of their avatars. Players enter a game world through the projection of the main character, which is either player created or designed by the game creators ahead of time, and which is visually represented by “a computer-generated body” (Castronova, 2003), known as an *avatar*. In a sense, the utilization of the term avatar takes the earthly body and makes it ‘virtual’ in a sense. Through the virtualization of the body, the player is able to infuse meaning into the actions and interactions of the avatar within the game world.

Taylor (2006), in her historical overview of the relationship between video games and the internet, suggests that “avatars are objects that not only represent people in the virtual world, but influence and propel the formation of identity and relationships” (p. 966). But how then does the avatar interact with and alter the ways in which we identify who we are? How do we perform identity within this ‘other’? Cohen (2001) writes in his theoretical discussion on digital identity development that “identification requires that we forget ourselves and become the other – that we assume for ourselves the identity of the target of our identification” (p. 247) but the fact is that in the case of most games we don’t forget ourselves and assume the identity of the other, which is the avatar—we are both the self and the other. Video game play, Cohen explains further, allows the player to “surrender [...] consciousness of his or her own identity and experience [...]the world through someone else’s point of view. Identification leads to the (temporary) adoption of an external point of view and to viewing the world through an alternative social reality” (p. 248). Of importance is how we learn to negotiate that simultaneous performance of self and other, e.g. how the participants of this study negotiate and perform gender identity in the context of video games, and how they connect that performance to themselves within their narrative.

### **Educating and Gaming**

Games have gained growing attention both for their applications as deliberately pedagogical tools (de Castell & Jenson, 2003; Kafai, 2006) and for the technological and multimodal competencies cultivated through their play (Gee, 2003; Steinkuehler, 2006). In an essay on the cultural framing of computer/video games, Squire (2002) argues that what is missing from the current debate and research on gaming and culture is any representational study of what “game-playing experiences are like, how gaming fits into people’s lives, and the kinds of practices people are engaged in while gaming.” He contends that despite the growth of gaming as a medium, “The pedagogical potential of games and social contexts of gaming have been woefully

unexamined” (p. 4). Ito (2008) examines, through a series of ethnographic studies conducted with children and families in the Silicon Valley area, the phenomenon of “Edutainment” software in response to the growing connection between the classroom and games developed to present education as something ‘fun’. Ito suggests that the boom of educational/entertainment games in the classroom can be seen as a model of the dialogues surrounding new technology, children, and education. Gaming in education focuses on learning tools, and bridging the gap between entertainment and learning. However, Ito points out that education ignores the entertainment side of video games, and there must be a build in dialogue around these new digital media forms. In education, games as tools for serious learning have played a strong role in classrooms for the past decade. Gee (2007), in his important text “What do video games have to teach us about learning and literacy?” stated that video games needed to be examined and considered as learning tools. He suggested that video games deliver an environment in which players are in fact learners, creating opportunities for decision-making and consequence-based critical thinking.

Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, and Gee (2005) further suggested that these opportunities to learn and problem solve within a gaming context are that much more powerful as a result of the medium. Unlike film or books, the engagement and involvement of the player in a game is a unique experience for a young learner. Here, the pedagogical implications of using video games to engage students in complex ideas and curricula are astounding. For example, one could teach students about evolution through a lecture, or create a powerful learning experience using an in-depth video game like *Spore* that allows them to manipulate and alter organisms.

Gee (2007) argues, in his series of case studies that examine learning and literacy skills acquired through gaming, that gaming in the classroom is not just a hook used to engage and teach within a sphere that is comfortable and familiar to media-savvy students. Gaming acts as a bridge between content-based learning and the participatory engagement the students experience in their entertainment activities. This bridge offers educators a way to assist students in granting their numerous identities, real and virtual, the ability to co-exist. “If children cannot or will not make bridges between one or more of their real-world identities and the virtual identity at stake in the classroom,” Gee contends, “or if teachers or others destroy or don’t help build such bridges, then once again, learning is imperiled” (p. 57). Ignoring the learning and creating occurring in virtual spaces, Gee concludes, only further serves to drive attention from our curriculum. The general trend in research into the nexus between education and gaming (see



Amory, Naicker, Vincent, & Adams, 1998; Aldrich, 2004; Spectrum Strategy Consultants, 2002) indicates the increasing popularity among learners for using ‘serious games’ and simulations to support curricula. Yip and Kwan (2006), for example, examined the usefulness of online games in vocabulary learning for undergraduate students, using 100 freshmen engineering students and two carefully selected gaming websites. They found that ‘drill and skill’ type online games had the potential to support vocabulary acquisition, and that students generally enjoyed/preferred learning in this way.

In another example, Huizenga, Admiraal, Akkerman, and Dam’s (2007) investigated the usability of *Frequency 1550*, a mobile city game used to acquire historical knowledge of the medieval city of Amsterdam. Participants were 13-to-15-year-old students in three secondary schools in Amsterdam. Their results showed that the students were very enthusiastic about the game. The group that played the video game also showed significant increase in motivation for history while the control group showed decrease in motivation. Research focusing on the nature of digital literacy learning and video games (Steinkuehler, 2005; Steinkuehler & King, 2009; Gee & Hayes, 2010) has also grown. Gee and Hayes (2010), in their case study of women gamers who create and add to the production of *The Sims*, expand the conversation on literacy by focusing on women’s rhetorical strategies in production and design within the digital context of the video game. However, the gender of the gamers receives little attention in the exploration of their digital literacies, despite gender being the main focus of Gee and Hayes’s study. This exploration focuses on a very specific gaming context, *The Sims*, and does not explore the nature of the player’s gender and their choices while gaming. Jenson and de Castell (2005; 2010) suggest that research in education has seen very little work being informed by attention to “girls’ perspectives on gaming, their participation in and exclusion from game cultures, and an absence of theoretically adequate and empirically grounded studies of the kinds of games, characters, and overall approaches to ‘play’ that might better engage and involve girls” (2005, p. 2). While I have suggested that Gee and Hayes’s research examining *The Sims* with female players does not engage with gender in a meaningful manner, Jenson and de Castell (2005) suggest further that in Gee’s earlier learning and video games text, “he summarily dismisses ‘gender’ from his own consideration of video games and learning” (pp. 2–3). There is evidence that within education and video gaming research, we are missing a vital component of how gender and identity is recreated and learned within a digital context of gaming. I will raise these issues and contentions,

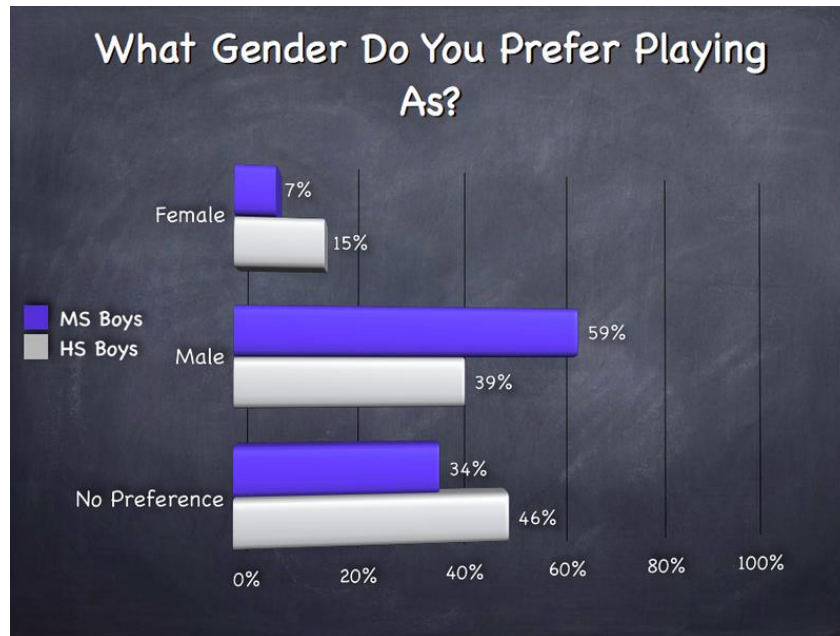
including notions of community, in my concluding chapter.

### **Community and Gaming**

With the growing popularity of MMOGs (Massive Multi-Player Online Games) comes the growing body of work looking at the sense of community that can develop in online gaming. Several studies exclusively deal with MMOGs as the primary object of study (Steinkuehler, 2004; Duchenault, Yee, Nickel, & Moore, 2006; Humphreys, 2006; Yee, 2007; Snodgrass et al. 2011; Glas, 2013)). Duchenault, Yee, Nickell, and Moore (2007) examine the structure and governance of online guilds in *World of Warcraft*, using their data to discuss what games can teach us about group dynamics online and also what kind of ways groups could be better supported by developers to better maintain their connections and guilds. Through hundreds of hours of game play, they contextualize the positives and negatives of guild structures by examining how they are run, and what their success or failure rate is. These games have become popular sites of both play and community (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006), but systematic research on gender within them is rare (see Yee, 2006).

### **Gender, Sexuality, and Gaming**

As of the mid 2000s, female video game players comprised nearly half of game players, and women over 18 made up more of the game-playing population than males under 17 (Top 10 Industry Facts, 2008). Wiseman and Burch created a survey in 2015 to address how the gender division in player preferences looked six years later. The survey was delivered to 1,583 students aged 11 to 18 over the course of 2014. The results, the authors say, are enough to turn the games industry's understanding of gender issues on its head. Young male players identified as being at ease playing as male or female characters, contrary to many mainstream gaming companies' claims for why women continue to be underrepresented in games.



*Figure 3. Wiseman & Burch (2015)*

In her now classic study, Dietz (1998) examined violence and gender stereotypes in a content analysis of 33 Nintendo and Sega Genesis video games. This analysis showed that female characters were most often non-existent. Heintz-Knowles et al. (2001), in a similar study on sexism and violence on games, found that of the 874 characters, 73 percent were male, and 12 percent were female. When females were present, they were almost exclusively present as a secondary or background character. Jenson and de Castell's (2009) work demonstrates that little has changed in terms of gender presence and representation. As they put it, "girls and women[...]continue to be under-represented as players and are woefully few in the industry (latest figures from the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) put the number of women working in the commercial games industry at 11.5%" (p. 2). Sherry and Lucas (2003) found that college males spent more time playing video games than females (see also Lucas & Sherry, 2004). Research on gender and gaming focuses a great deal on the exclusion of female voice and/or participation, or the differences in play based on 'sex', sexuality, and sexual violence rather than gender (Jenson & de Castell, 2010). This is significant as the focus on gender issues, and gender narratives, needs further research. Knowledge about the performance of gender, how players negotiate issues of gender, and what gendered experiences are like in an online game setting would give us better insights into gaming culture and the social pressures

that exist within it.

Studies have consistently found that video games include far more male characters than female characters (Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002; Dietz, 1998; Heintz-Knowles & Henderson, 2002; Smith, Lachlan, & Tamborini, 2003). When female characters are included in games, it is frequently as nonessential, passive characters (Dietz, 1998; Haninger & Thompson, 2004), and female characters are often depicted wearing revealing and provocative clothing (Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002; Dietz, 1998; Heintz-Knowles & Henderson, 2002; Thompson & Haninger, 2001) and indulging in sexually suggestive behaviour (Haninger & Thompson, 2004). For example, in her gender and sexual analysis of the game, *Tomb Raider*, Helen Kennedy (2002) calls for a more complex reading of Lara as a figure of sexual desire and as a playable entity. Kennedy's examination of various feminist readings of Lara concludes that *Tomb Raider* provides too masculine a perspective, with Lara continuing to represent male desires; "If we are going to encourage more girls into the gaming culture then we need to encourage the production of a broader range of representations of femininity than those currently being offered" (Kennedy, 2002, p. 2).

A substantial amount of research (Yee, 2006; MacCallum-Stewart, 2008; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014) demonstrates that gamers (especially male ones) will gladly gender-bend while gaming, and do so for reasons that have little to do with gender preference. In a Canadian study of eight adolescent girls, Sanford and Kurki (2012) examined the absence of girls from gaming and its implications. Through interviews with the girls, they discovered that attitudes of both young women and young men towards girls playing video games kept girls away from mainstream games enjoyed by boys. They also noted that the way female characters were portrayed in games made girls 'check out', i.e. leave the games.

Many studies focus on the sexualization of female characters, and the psychological effects of hypersexualized avatars on both male and female gamers (Dietz 1998; Beasley & Standley, 2002; Yao, Mahood, & Linz, 2010; Beasley & Standley, 2002). For example, research has focused on the sexual nature of bodies of female avatars (Martins, Williams, Harrison, & Ratan, 2009), and on male and female sexuality in video game characters (Downs & Smith, 2010). Miller and Summers (2007), Scharrer (2004), and Schott and Horrell (2000) examine the role of gender and virtual violence, aggression, and the different roles gendered characters play in acts of violence in video games. They document instances of game violence against female

characters as a part of violence in gaming. Schut (2006) suggests that role-playing games (RPGs) are almost exclusively about physical power in the manner of “blowing things up and killing enemies” (p. 107) in a great number of computer or video game plots and scenarios. Schut (2006) further suggests that RPG’s character building is shallow and engrossed in gendered representations of bodies, through the walk, talk, clothing, and even the stances of characters, as well as an obsessive adulation of heterosexual masculinity, noting: “Men appear as powerfully built warriors, trim and agile thieves, or respectable and wise-looking wizards. Women, on the other hand, are almost always, regardless of their character-role, beautiful and voluptuous, with tight-fitting, revealing clothing. In other words, men are powerful and women are eye-candy” (p. 109).

Around the same time as Schut, Yee (2006) explored players’ motivation, gender differences in representations of, and participation in, gaming. To understand what motivates their play, Yee created surveys for MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) players to engage with in gaming forums, based on which he formulated his model. According to Yee, in Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), men are significantly more likely to play games due to the possibility of great achievement and the ability to manipulate the game environment for personal gain, whereas women are significantly more likely to play games due to their desire to interact with fellow gamers and form meaningful relationships. According to psychologists Ogletree and Drake (2007), men are also significantly more likely to play video games for longer periods of time, and state that video games can interfere with men’s other real-world activities. In a survey about video game preferences, Heeter, Magerko, Medler, and Fitzgerald (2009) found that boys are significantly more likely to state preference for games that are viewed specifically as designed for boys, whereas girls prefer those designed for girls. Consistent with other studies, Sherry and Lucas (2003; see also Lucas & Sherry, 2004) also found that college male students spent more time playing video games than females.

Gender role theory suggests that “individuals internalize cultural expectations about their gender because social pressures external to the individual favor behavior consistent with their prescribed gender role” (Kidder, 2002, p. 630). As other literature has suggested, girls may be avoiding engaging with games either because video games are projected as a ‘boys only’ activity, or because they find they don’t like the gendered options available to them in gaming culture. As an educator who seeks to include video games in my practice in the classroom, it is critical to

understand the reasons why a group of my students could potentially be alienated by the pedagogical tool I would like to implement. It is also important to understand more generally why a portion of the population is alienated by games because of their gender. Video games have often been depicted as a male-based activity (McQuivey, 2001). However, the latest ESA numbers would suggest that women are playing games in a variety of formats, unlike their male counterparts (ESA online 2017). Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, and Yee (2009) contend that too much of our current research focuses on the messages and content of games, as well as the impact of games on players, and not enough on how players interact.

How girls engage with video games is another area worth looking into. Walkerdine (2004) has argued that female game players may be forced to engage in interactive behaviours that are inherently masculine in nature while maintaining some feminine characteristics. Research suggests that to many gamers the idea that there are negative gender stereotypes or issues with gender in gaming are overblown and exaggerated and are of little consequence, as they are merely harmless fun. Brenick et al. (2007) exposed 41 male and 46 female college students to gender stereotypes and to violence in video games. They found that players who played games more often, especially male players, were more likely to overlook harmful stereotypes such as sexually exploited females and violent males. Furthermore, this study found that their participants, in general, believed that exposure to any negative stereotyping in games was inconsequential and had no impact on their own behaviour. This correlates to the response of several participants in this study of “it’s just a game.” Players are often dismissive of the narratives they are engaging with as they have limited relevance to their everyday reality. Brenick et al.’s study is an important one to compare with the views of stereotypes expressed in this thesis, as participants in both studies expressed that they are annoyed at hearing about negative stereotypes within games, while some suggested that they enjoy them.

Hilde G. Corneliussen (2011) explores the construction of gender in *World of Warcraft*, illustrating how a complex mixture of possible and available gendered positions opens up the gendered space of games. However, Corneliussen also demonstrates limits for masculinity and femininity along the lines of power (dominant heteronormative culture), and aesthetics (looks). Intersecting gender, sexuality, and race, a recent study of note (Waddell & Ivory, 2015) examined avatar attractiveness and sex (the authors use the game signified ‘male/female’ avatars as the sex of the avatars within this study) to determine players’ responses to them. Using a field

experiment manipulating avatar attractiveness, avatar sex, user sex, and favour difficulty, they measured responses to a requested favour across 2,300 interactions in an online game. They created avatars based on the attractiveness level of three different *World of Warcraft* “races.” They used the Blood Elf (considered the most attractive), the Night Elf (middle level attractive) and the Orc (unattractive). An avatar was created for each race and gender, resulting in six possibilities.

**Figure 1**  
**Avatars Used in Attractiveness Conditions**



*Figure 4.* Waddell and Ivory (2015)

They utilized the avatars to approach other players in the game—who were unaware of the experiment—and ask for help. While asking, they would subtly reveal whether they were a male user (“could you help a guy out”) or a female user (“could you help a girl out”)—or not reveal their sex (“help me out”). Lastly, the researchers asked different users for a small favour (like directions) or a large favour (to escort them to another town). They would repeat this course of questions 2,300 times. Of the 2,300 interactions, 1,221 players responded to the initial request and struck up a conversation. Remember that thousands of players are often in the same world at once, interacting. The analysis found that the more attractive the avatar, regardless of sex, the more likely players were to help them. However, ‘general attractiveness’ did not make a huge difference. For example, close to 78 percent of participants helped an attractive avatar, 71 percent helped a medium-attractive avatar, and 66.5 percent helped an unattractive avatar. The attractive avatars received more help, until, that is, the sex of the user was revealed. When the sex of the user was discovered to be

female, suddenly both the sex and attractiveness of the avatar mattered in determining how helpful others were. “It doesn’t matter if you have an ugly avatar or not,” wrote Waddel (2015, p. 1) in a follow-up press release, “if you’re a man, you’ll still receive about the same amount of help. [...] However, if you are a woman and operate an unattractive avatar, you will receive significantly less help.” Similarly, female users trying to hide behind male avatars received significantly less help than male users operating female avatars. “When user sex was female, female avatars elicited much more compliance [help] than male avatars; and when user sex was male, avatar sex had little influence on compliance.” This particular study, as we shall see, does reflect what some of my participants discuss when examining gaming community and player motivation, and is therefore important to keep in mind when looking at the analysis section.

Underrepresentation of women and non-white ethnic groups has also been observed by earlier content analyses of sex and racialization in video games, which have found only 13% of characters to be female (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Dietz, 1998). Heintz-Knowles, Henderson, Glaubke, Miller, Parker, and Espejo (2001) found in their study on racialization of characters in video games that more than 87% of leading characters were white. These tendencies in character/avatar representation in storylines and general gameplay have been attributed to matching demographics of game designers. Williams (2006) suggests that the non-appearance of non-white and female characters in games is a result of the lack of women and minority designers in the gaming industry.

Ewan Kirkland (2005) analyses the game series *Silent Hill* in regards to gender, sexuality, and race and finds it to follow the common formula that includes “the sexualized depiction of female characters, the overwhelming masculinity of the implied game player, and the recurring structure of male heroes rescuing helpless females” (p. 173). I have previously mentioned the issue of female characters being depicted in a stereotypically gendered way regardless of type of role, and Kirkland provides the example of Princess Toadstool from the popular *Super Mario Bros.* series. Princess Toadstool has the ability to float, which her accompanying characters do not; this “compatibility of Princess’ abilities with traditional constructions of femininity as dainty, ethereal and light/slender deserves acknowledgement” (p. 173). Moving to the analysis of *Silent Hill* itself, Kirkland describes how the series “both



conforms to and complicates this formula” (p. 173). Another example that parallels that of Princess Toadstool is the *Silent Hill* character Eileen. She is joined by a male character, Henry, and, “while undeniably a rescue-figure, Eileen does join in combat, although her chosen weapons of handbag and riding crop to Henry’s revolver and baseball bat are as markedly feminine as Princess’ graceful gliding” (Kirkland, 2005, pp. 173–174). *Silent Hill*’s characters continue to complicate the formula of the sexualized female through “Heather, *SH3*’s central character, [who] also differs from video games’ predominantly fetishized femininity in her androgynous appearance and narrative centrality” (p. 174). The formula of the masculine male, Kirkland (2005) explains, is complicated as well: “Harry’s fatherhood, James’ husband-hood, and Henry’s imprisonment within his apartment, domesticate, feminize and distinguish these male characters from other more hyper-masculine video game heroes” (p. 174).

Finally, an emergent theme in research centred on gender and gaming is the focus on the need for diversity in gaming. Feminist game scholars have analyzed the limited ways in which games have been constructed and the impact this has had on how women in particular are represented in games (de Castell & Jenkins, 2000; Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun, 2008; Taylor, 2006). Important to note is that often gamers’ voices and experiences are not examined in these discussions on gaming and gender. How gamers build gendered identities, negotiate culture within games and the gaming community, as well as the storylines within games need further and closer examination, something this research project does. Further, I would turn to the world of the Internet to show just how often the need for further examination is expressed and engaged with within the blogosphere. For a further examination, I have included an appendix (C) of the top 20 blog hits on gender and gaming taken from the Google search engine in August 2015.

### **Gaming and Positions of Exclusion**

Nakumara (2002) argues that gaming culture is plagued by actions and speech of violence around gender, race, and sexuality (see also, Jenson & de Castell, 2013). The problems surrounding sex (male/female) and gaming is not a topic unfamiliar to the gaming world. According to the International Game Developers Association (2005), 88.5% of game developers are male and 92% of developers are heterosexual. Also, both female and LGBTQ game developers held stronger opinions that the game industry lacks diversity and that diversity has a

direct impact on the games produced. The Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab released a video online in March 2011 which documented the intense hate speech which occurs in most online gaming communities. Although not intended as a research experiment, staff at GAMBIT aimed to demonstrate that “the vicious harassment directed at rape survivors was an example of an enduring atmosphere surrounding online interactions between game-players, where hate speech is tolerated, accepted and barely recognized in day-to-day play” (Tan, web, 2011).

In her ethnography of gaming, which focuses on the narratives of gamers in 11 households in the UK, including their actual gameplay and post-gaming reflections over four years, Thornham (2011) argues for an ontological narrative approach to the study of the video game, and that “the stories gamers construct” (the way in which they narrate how they first become gamers, or how often they game, or what they do when they game) “position them well within a masculine tradition of logic, reason and causality” (p. 20). Women gamers thus have an additional burden in this regard. This is particularly acute in the articulation of pleasure. As Thornham (2011) notes, during interviews with the women of gaming households, female gamers tend not to stake a claim in the gaming, but situate themselves as “simply” joining in. Thornham calls this a “position of exclusion.” Gaming is, Thornham thus concludes, “a terrain on which a certain kind of gender is produced, but also[...]a place where masculinity and femininity is managed and negotiated” (p. 48).

Williams (2006) suggests that online gamers’ (especially those who play MMOs) perceptions of real-life crime could be formed by the extent of their time exposed to violence within an MMO. Playing video games, according to Behm-Morawitz & Mastro (2009), has demonstrated the ability to foster belief in gender stereotypes. In their 2010 study, Yao, Mahood, and Linz found that playing a game containing themes of female objectification may indeed contribute to the short-term priming of sexual thoughts and “encourage men to view women as sex objects” (p. 77). Furthermore, the results also suggested an increased self-reported tendency to sexually harass or behave inappropriately towards women. On their part, Dill et al. (2005) analyzed violence, sex, race, and age in the top-selling PC games. They found that most games (60%) were aggressive and that women were underrepresented in video games (about 20% of characters were female). Male characters were never portrayed as highly sexualized, but female characters were. Only ten percent of main characters were female. Gaming culture provides space for a disaffected man to more easily, as philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2010) argues,

aggressively respond to women he perceives as powerful and aloof to “dominate and punish them, remaining utterly secure himself” (p. 84). It has also been observed that males are the target audience for major video games. “Many gaming magazines and television commercials feature more males than females and have layouts and coloring that appeals to guys” (Sanford and Madill, 2007).

Several important ethnographic studies into gender and gameplay have begun to explore the sociocultural considerations that larger statistics-driven accounts tend to ignore. Studies reported by Carr (2005), Taylor (2006), and Bryce and Rutter (2005) as well as Jenson and de Castell (2007), graph the physical and expansive circumstances of gendered play while at the same time recording and analyzing the experiences of gamers who identify as women. The scope and methodological approach of these ethnographies differ, but they all share an interest in working against the tendency of game marketing strategies, player communities, the male-dominated game industry, and journalistic and academic accounts of gaming to render female gamers “invisible.” Taylor, for instance, devotes a chapter in *Play Between Worlds* to recounting the experiences and perspectives of ‘hardcore’ female *Everquest* gamers; she sees in this an intervention into the ongoing construction within game studies literature of the imagined gamer as a straight white male, where often, she points out, “women and girls playing what are typically defined as masculine games are considered simply exceptions, data points that are outliers to be written off” (Taylor, 2006, p. 94).

### **Player Motivation and Gaming**

For my research, the conclusion of the qualitative study conducted by Penny (2004) on the consequences of divorcing the virtual world from the so-called real world when virtual images are involved, is significant. Penny suggests that the racial and physical violence perpetuated in a virtual world creates real world reactions. As he put it, “in interactive media a user is not simply exposed to images that may contain representations of things and actions, the user is trained in the inaction of behaviours in response to images, and images appear in response to behaviours” (p. 80).

Of particular interest to my research is the digital identity that is gendered within the text of games themselves, and the discourse of the gamers playing games, both of which are currently

absent from the body of research. Gendered digital identity is not limited to the selection of male or female avatars; rather, it is reading how the avatars, and how players performing gender through the avatar, are read. In a hegemonic masculine space like video games, often the use of avatars is gendered. Through imitation and simulation in video games, we are learning a range of cultural roles, both negative and positive, in relation to gender. Gee (2007) suggests that the domains of video games, when we learn to negotiate them in a more active manner, are spaces “usually shared by groups of people who carry them on as distinctive social practices,” and that “we gain the potential to join this social group, to become affiliated with such kinds of people (even though we may never see all of them, or any of them, face to face)” (p. 24). For gender-based research, it is essential to examine game spaces where players of varying gender identity interact, rather than examine solo game play in a lab setting. This research is an attempt to begin that conversation and exploration. This research project continues a discourse on cultural roles in gaming culture and contributes to the growing literature on gaming and gender. Building on my lengthy experience with gaming, and framed within feminism, I have explored what and how gamers of various gender identities negotiate a new sense of self each time they game because of gender-specific story lines or character models they are exposed to in each video game.

### Chapter 3

#### **Framing the Research: Toward a Poststructural Feminist Theory of Disruption**

People, according to Berger (2004), “respond differently when confronted with the edge of knowing—either we embrace, question, engage or retreat to comfort” (p. 342). When it comes to knowledge, it is worth iterating from the beginning, my epistemologies and beliefs are not a partner outside of myself with which I engage depending on the research project. Rather, they are a reflection of who I am. As such, I am regularly confronted by ‘the edge of knowing’ and my own uncertainty in the knowledge I engage with as a researcher. It is from this position I have chosen to articulate my research framework as a theory of disruption, which balances on the edge of knowing, of breaking down knowledge, and reassessing ideas. This theory is articulated within the larger umbrella of poststructural feminism, which sees disruption and critique as a narrative of resistance and interruption. Ritchie and Boardman (2000) suggest that, in feminist research in general, “disruption is often linked to[...]theories of power, discourse, and ideology,” and the aim of the research to “investigate and uncover the contradictions in those dominant structures” (p. 223).

The structure that the present research is looking at is video games. Using poststructural feminism as my theoretical framework, I specifically look at gender performance in video games and ask: how is gender performed in video games? How do players move? How do they dress their avatars? How do they react to binary gender norms programmed into the game? Do they disrupt gender norms created by game designers? Which gamers perform outside of the gender norms prescribed by the game designers, and gaming culture as a whole? How do these performances conform or disrupt gender stereotypes? To understand these questions theoretically, I combine the paradigms of poststructuralism and feminism and their intersection as poststructural feminism. These two paradigms have informed my theoretical understanding of ‘disruption’. When combined, they form what I am calling a poststructural feminist theory of disruption, where the digital body is seen as a site for events and acts. These events and acts create what Judith Butler (1991) calls ‘performativity’. A pattern is created where the digital body is supposed to look, move, and be seen in particular ways.

This chapter outlines this *poststructural feminist theory of disruption*. With its help, I hope to address and answer my overarching research question: “*What’s the trouble with gender*

*and gaming?*” This theory is crafted through; a) the political and social lens of poststructural feminism; b) the notion of the body as a surface of text and cultural experience; and c) the notion of the body as a site of discipline and hegemonic control. For the latter point, I made use of Butler’s (1991) notion of ‘performativity’ and Foucault’s (1978) ‘docile bodies’. Harraway’s (1991) *Cyborg Manifesto*, and its arguments of the power of disruptive behaviour within the context of a “cyborg pedagogy,” is also used to further explore how participants include or reject disruptive practices in performing digital gender.

### **Poststructuralism**

St. Pierre (2000) highlights the type of questions of concern to poststructuralists: “How does discourse function? Where is it to be found? How does it get produced and regulated? What are its social effects? How does it exist?” (p. 485). Post-structuralism, according to Peters and Burbules (2004), tends to “eschew the traditional account of the truth corresponding to reality, emphasizing the idea that language functions as a *differential system*” (p. 6). Building on Nietzsche’s writing, Peters and Burbules (2004) argue that the critique of truth and that of many entrenched binaries (e.g., mind/body, nature/culture, male/female) has a strong influence on poststructuralist thought. In a poststructuralist approach to textual analysis, the reader/researcher replaces the author as the main focus of investigation and, by eliminating the focus on the author, examines other sources for meaning (e.g., readers, cultural norms, etc.), which are never intended to be an authority on their own. When the reader’s place in the world becomes the focus instead, their culture and society, and personal experiences, have at least an equal share of influence on the understanding of a piece to the experiences, histories, and cultural norms of the original author (Peters & Burbules, 2004).

For Anyon (1994), poststructuralism is informed heavily by the writings of Michel Foucault (1972, 1973, 1980) and Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984), where “approaches attempt to assess local power relations rather than large, abstract social structures” (p. 118). Poststructural theorists search for small-scale narratives that reveal truths about cultural issues more likely to “capture the complexity of situations” (Anyon, 1994, p. 118). From an epistemological standpoint, poststructuralism divorces authors from texts and suggests that each reader of a ‘text’ creates the meaning and connections from it. As Barthes (1968) suggests, “text is experienced

only in an activity of production” (p. 7), that it is produced, consumed, reproduced, and deconstructed into a signified understanding by the reader. Barthes further states that “to give a text an author, is to impose a limit on that text” (Barthes, 1968, p. 8). This is famously known as ‘the death of the author’, where the reader is contributing to making meaning in the text, rather than the text conveying an inherent meaning (Eco, 1962; Barthes, 1968). For researchers, ensuring the death of the author involves a process of deconstructing the cultural by situating themselves, and only themselves, as a reader of that object. Here, Lather (1995) argues, “the goal of deconstruction is to keep things in process, to disrupt, to keep the system in play, to set up procedures to continuously de-mystify the realities we create” (pp. 167–168). Jacques Derrida’s (1966) work on deconstruction has been at the forefront of developing poststructural theory, albeit not by his own arguments. Derrida (1978) would argue that while a critique of structuralism is a frequent theme of his philosophy, this does not mean that philosophy claims to be capable of removing all structural aspects.

Derrida coined the term ‘deconstruction’ as a process of undergoing a critique of texts from within it. Deconstruction is based on the notion that the meaning of words happens in relation to sameness and difference. “In every text,” Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) argue, “somethings [sic] are affirmed, such as truth, meaning, authorship, and authority; however, there is always an ‘other’, something else, that contrasts that which is affirmed” (p. 90). The only way to properly understand the ‘other’ present within the text is to deconstruct, or break down, the assumptions and knowledge systems that produce the impression of singular meaning or truth. This is a central notion that will prove to be useful for my analysis chapters. This is especially true when it comes to gender analysis. That is, deconstructing what people decide to play and display while playing a game (male or female), along with how they understand the avatar they play (through interviews), will give us a fuller and more complex gender analysis.

It is worth remembering that poststructuralism builds on Saussure’s (1974) notion of ‘language’. For Saussure, a structuralist, language is broken down into two relatively rigid components: *parole* which is “the executive side of language” and *langue* which is “a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and acoustic images” (p. 196). Saussure thus placed language as a system at the forefront of linguistic analysis (Giddens, 1987). Pushing Saussure’s ideas in a different and a poststructural direction, Derrida (1970) sees words, symbols, or ‘texts’ as a construction and not a simple reflection of the world. Text, Derrida

argues, structures an individual's interpretation of the world; and the symbol behind the language is created by the individual interpreting the object or experience they are encountering. Put simply, the poststructural understanding of language troubles the idea that language reflects the world, an idea, which impacts our understanding of social identity.

### **Social Identity and Language**

Building on the above arguments and influenced heavily by Foucault (1970), Stuart Hall (1987) defines identity as an unsettled question emerging from various discourses intersecting and drawing out an unfixed experience. For Hall, identity "is a process, [...] is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the other to oneself" (p. 44). In other words, there is no identity without the other. This assertion asks us to examine identity as something other than a true self. Wendt (1994) elaborates, contending that "[social identities are] at once cognitive schemas that enable an actor to determine 'who I am/we are' in a situation and positions in a social role structure of shared understandings and expectations" (p. 395).

Identity cannot be understood without connecting it to social 'power', i.e., one's position within one's society. To explain this point, Bourdieu (1991) analyzes our language: what we say and how we say it. For Bourdieu, the language an individual utilizes is a symbolic expression of their social status. Put otherwise, via language, an individual's 'right' to be heard, acknowledged, and given credence is drawn. "In other words," Bourdieu (1991) explains, "utterances are not only (save in exceptional circumstances) signs to be understood and deciphered; they are also signs of wealth, intended to be evaluated and appreciated, and signs of authority, intended to be believed and obeyed" (p. 66). Learning the signs/symbols of a given culture (video gaming in my case), repeating them and engaging in them, until the nuances and wealth of them are within your hold is how one becomes 'powerful' in the sense of having symbolic capital (see also Gee, 2010). This notion is directly related to my research, where we will see how certain players occupy more of the video game space than others and speak with a voice of authority more than others. But to reach this point, as we shall also see later in the analysis, an intersection of symbolic capital, language, symbols, culture, and identity in video games must happen.

Weedon (1987) argues that the meaning behind signs is relational. That is, the meaning of a word is created in relation to other words. "It is not anything intrinsic to the signifier 'whore,'



for example, that gives it its meaning,” writes Weedon, “but rather its difference from other signifiers of womanhood such as ‘virgin’ and ‘mother’” (p. 23). The deconstruction of these types of connections prove very useful to my analysis, especially when applied to the avatars that my participants use and their gender performance.

## **Feminism**

Feminism is an umbrella term that encompasses many ideas and theories, from political to social to experiential (Davies 1990; Smith, 1987). “Feminism,” Fiss (1994) explains, “is the set of beliefs and ideas that belong to the broad social and political movement to achieve greater equality for women. As its governing ideology, feminism gives shape and direction to the women’s movement and, of course, is shaped by it” (p. 413). For Weedon (1987), at its core, “feminism questions the assumptions about women which social theories posit as true, pointing to their irrelevance to woman’s experience” because, she concludes, the historical context of social theory ultimately excludes the female narrative (pp. 5–6). On the other side of the fence, however, some have argued that we have made such great progress as a society, especially for women, that we live in a time of ‘postfeminism’. As suggested by Hawkesworth (2004), there is a repeating refrain in our culture, “the recurrent pronouncement of feminism’s death. From the 1970s through the new millennium, journalists, academics, and even some feminist scholars have declared the demise of feminism and hailed the advent of the postfeminist age” (p. 962). Mascia-Lees and Sharpe (2000) contend that 1970’s feminism is looked at suspiciously (see also Hollows & Moseley, 2006). However, Angela McRobbie (2009) pushes back by suggesting that antifeminist ideas are channeled regularly, particularly through mainstream popular culture. It is done purposefully “so as to ensure that a new women’s movement will not re-emerge” (p. 1). Telling, as we saw in the introduction exploring Sarkeesian’s experiences, is the complicated relationship that the gaming community has with the word ‘feminism’. My participants are no different, as we shall see, and some push back against the word feminism.

Some authors have claimed that when we speak of and theorize about women, we run the risk of excluding and falsely generalizing (Ahmed, 2000; Alcoff, 1989; Cosgrove, 2003). What is the worry, and is it possible to address this in a satisfactory way? I focus specifically on a few sets of texts that are in conversation with one another and consider the role of “holding to account” in feminist theory.

Is feminism then a theory that chooses to include the female narrative? On what assumptions is the term ‘women’s experiences’ based? Should gender be considered a fixed entity in research, or should we completely deconstruct ideas of gender? Cosgrove (2003) asks: “When we as researchers account for women and try to rectify sexist bias by adding ‘women’s perspective’ to the mix, do we reify the concept of gender in ways that are consistent with positivism?” (p. 92). Cultural feminism (e.g., Rich, 2007) holds that the explanation of sexism and the justification of feminist demands can all be grounded securely and unambiguously on the concept of the essential female (Alcoff, 1988). The notion of the essential female—based on a biological and binary definition in traditional feminism—is, according to Butler (1990), wrong. Butler questions the categories of ‘woman’ and of ‘the masculine’ and ‘the feminine’. There has been a growing trend within feminism towards deconstructing essentialism, developed most extensively by Alice Echols (1989; see also Lorber, 2001), who prefers the name “cultural feminism” for this trend because it equates “women’s liberation with the development and preservation of a female counter culture” (Echols, 1983, p. 441). Beasley (1999) further suggests that “feminism is almost invariably a female discourse” (p. 41), and that knowledge based on and linked to physically having a female body, and with experiencing the world through that body, is necessary to have any real understanding of the female gender’s interactions with culture. Cultural feminism promotes a discourse around a knowable female gender that chooses not to engage or ‘politicize’ the exploration of the female within the male-dominated social discourse, whether that be in the social sciences or everyday experiences of womanhood (Evans, 1995; Nicholson, 1997).

For some feminists, however, the problem with the approach of cultural feminism to gender oppression is that it does not “criticize the fundamental mechanism of oppressive power used to perpetuate sexism” (Alcoff, 1989, p. 415), nor challenge the discourse that exists around that power. In fact, it reaffirms that mechanism in its promotion of a separate female discourse, outside the bounds of a male one. Operating outside the boundaries of a male-dominated discourse does little to actually address the oppression occurring within that discourse. It also fails to include the experiences of individuals who are transgendered, or two-spirited, who may not possess the physical body (here I am talking about biological sex, rather than gendered bodies) necessary to fulfill the ‘understanding’ of experiences outlined above.

In the present research, my approach sees feminism as a method that creates robust

findings through the articulation of diversity, contradiction, and bias, while standing in a politically situated, moral collective. I see feminism as being effective for this study as it honours contradiction and partialness, which enables community building and understanding. A feminist perspective offers important insights into technology, specifically its capacity to create spaces for people to converse, interact, and experience the world together, as we shall see next.

### **Feminism and Technology**

As this research deals with feminism within technology empirically, I have chosen to highlight the relationship between theoretical feminism and technology to further demonstrate how my research is anchored within feminist discourse. Faulkner (2000) suggests, in a now classic work: “whilst there exist several established streams of feminist scholarship on technologies, technology *per se* has been under-theorized in much of this literature, with serious implications for feminist praxis” (p. 2). She continues to suggest that Feminist Technology Studies, theory in which the experience of gender with specific technology or technological fields becomes the focus, is a more “helpful framework for analyzing the relationship between technology and gender” (p. 2). Wacjman (1991) identifies the early beginnings of feminism and technology as scholars recognizing the “complexity of the relationship between women and technology” (p. 4). Feminists were discovering and examining the gendered aspects of technology itself. In Sandra Harding’s (1986, p. 29) words, “feminist criticisms of science evolved from asking the ‘woman question’ in science to asking the more radical ‘science question’ in feminism.” Feminist frameworks now recognized masculinity as entrenched in technology, stressing technology’s role as a key font of male power (Cockburn, 1985; McNeil, 1987; Wajcman, 1991).

While women are creators within the technological field, the research area of ‘women and technology’ suggest only interaction with already created technology. Faulkner (2000) explains that the interaction rather than creation of technology and women results in varied, conflicting experiences. Aoki suggests (1994) that “these encounters are often marked by extraordinary juxtapositions of positive and negative feelings about technologies” (p. 2). Wacjman (1991) suggests that different experiences in childhood using technology, the existence of a variety of role models, education, and the drastically segregated gender roles in the job market all influence what Cockburn (1983) describes as “the construction of men as strong, manually able and technologically endowed, and women as physically and technically

incompetent” (p. 203). “Entering technical domains therefore,” Wacjman (1991) explains, “requires women to sacrifice major aspects of their feminine identity” (p. 3). It will be interesting to keep Wacjman’s words in mind as the female participants in this study discuss the experience of entering the traditionally male-cultural ground of video games on a regular basis.

Feminists who examine gender and technology have been mostly optimistic about the opportunities arising as a result of information and communication technologies that empower women and girls, while helping to improve gender relations (Green & Adam, 1999; Kirkup et al., 2000). Cyberfeminists (e.g., Plant, 1998), view digital technologies as a way of distorting the current boundaries between humans and technology, as well as between male and female, allowing technology consumers and users to choose their ‘masks’ and assume other, sometimes multiple, identities. Video games are a popular place to design and alter identities. They are an interesting place to challenge and test this malleable gender identity belief. A poststructuralist analysis is not a tool for interrogating the nature, bounds, and potential knowledge of femininity, but asks instead, as Sherene Razack (1993) suggests, “how we know what we know” (p. 95). Poststructuralism is an effort to comprehend in what ways we understand ourselves, question the validity of these understandings, and invite previously marginalized discourses to the fore (Burr, 1995). Questions interrogating the production of contextual meanings replace questions of knowledge or truth.

### **Poststructural Feminism**

An understanding between poststructuralism and feminism creates poststructural feminism. The latter, according to Weedon (1987), is concerned primarily with “how gender power relations are constituted, reproduced, and contested” (p. vii). Poststructural feminism uses the concepts of language, subjectivity, and power to understand why those within society who identify as women endure the social relations that subvert their interests and values to those of a male culture (Weedon, 1987, p. 40). Working against the grain, poststructural feminists, therefore, continually cultivate a thought-provoking dialogue between notions of equality and difference. “A woman cannot be; it is something which does not even belong in the order of being. It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say ‘that’s not it’ and ‘that’s still not it’” (Kristeva, 1981, p. 137). The result of this continuous negation, according to Kristeva, is an ‘other’. Like with Irigaray (1985), Kristeva’s notion of being the ‘other’, seems a negative notion of being, but Kristeva invoked it to disrupt the male-

centric knowledge discourse and ways of being. Poststructural feminism, in sum, is about disrupting the male narrative, and as such poststructural feminists are “bound to be radicals” (Beasley, 1999, p. 33). Radicals here means individuals who are oppressed within their culture, society, academies, and institutions, but are compelled to rebel, “overturning, with a force never let loose before” that oppression in which they have existed (Cixous & Clément, 1996, p. ix).

Work within poststructural feminism (e.g., Butler, 1990, 1991; Haraway, 1985, 1991) magnifies the language of “difference” while disrupting the binary categorization associated with normalized discourse around gender. This is an important influence on research on gender and educational media and technology because earlier research is grounded on the essentialist sorting of learners as male or female.

So, to tease out and deconstruct the ideas of gender in a male-dominated culture, such as video gaming, I turn to the discourse of two poststructural feminists, Luce Irigaray and Simone de Beauvoir. Both Irigaray and de Beauvoir believe in problematizing the notion of ‘woman’ within a given context of culture, but argue for two different conceptions of the category ‘woman’. De Beauvoir (1949) states : “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (p. 301). Gender, for de Beauvoir, is acquired; through interactions with the society we grow within, from our parents and schools, from the images and media we consume. Building on this, Butler (1996) asks: “if gender is always there, delimiting in advance what qualifies as the human, how can we speak of a human who becomes its gender, as if gender were a postscript or a cultural afterthought?” (p. 151). One *becomes* a woman, a constructed and reinvented entity that has neither a start nor finish. De Beauvoir’s notion of “becoming” encompasses a significant uncertainty that positions gender as both a social construct imposed from without (via society/cultural/institutional influence) as well as a self-made concept articulated from within. Irigaray (1985), on the other hand, argues that there is no such thing as female. She contends that the only sex that exists within our current language and discourse is male; anyone who identifies as not male is simply ‘other’. Irigaray suggests that maleness is the dominant gender, and in turn argues that beyond that one gender, all other understandings of gender “elaborates itself through the other” (p. 18). From a gender perspective, Irigaray thus concludes, women are not women, they are just not men.

Then, how can she ‘be’? For Irigaray, there is a means of disrupting that exclusion by creating what could be argued as a separate space of ‘being’, a created discourse completely

outside that of the masculine. It is here that we must create female language, create female sexuality, and overcome the oppression by exaggerating it. Tong (2013) writes “primarily to motivate women to change their ways of being and doing in the real world” (p. 194), to in turn grant “freedom from oppressive thought” (p. 199). Poststructuralism seeks to afford opportunities for more fluid interpretations of social constructs like gender and to provide us with a framework that does not rely simply on a binary, simplistic definition. Haraway (1997) expands on this framework regarding gender, explaining that “gender is always a relationship, not a preformed category of beings or a possession that one can have [...] gender is the relation between variously constituted categories of men and women [...] differentiated by nation, generation, class, lineage, color, and much else” (p. 28). St. Pierre (2000) would suggest further that gender is not only flexible and malleable depending on the setting and the identity someone is embracing, but it is also altered by other factors:

Much work has been done to identify the essence of *woman*. Some feminists, however, are concerned that the desire to fix this essence is dangerous since they believe that *all* the identity categories – race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, wellness, etc. – not just gender, must be taken into account as we think about people’s lives. (p. 480)

Feminist researchers must, according to St. Pierre (2000), become savvy bricoleurs. Bricoleur is a term used by Levi-Strauss (1963) and Derrida (1970; 1966) referring to someone who uses what is at hand (Derrida, 1966). Yet, the political stance of feminism, according to Weedon (1987), is “how social power is exercised and how social relations of gender, class and race might be transformed” (p. 20). I contend that, as savvy bricoleurs, agents of feminism must be willing to take up all theory and tools within our reach that allow for a disruption and deconstruction of the discourse norm. Limiting experience to power relations, and not embracing a tool for the sake of narrative does injustice to the shared social experiences that can arise from a space beyond the politics of gender inequality.

### **Poststructural Feminist Theory of Disruption**

A central focus of this research is uncovering the ways in which gamers either self-regulate their gender according to normative discourse or take up a disruptive performance of gender. Quoting Jansz and Martis (2007), Gauntlett (2008) suggests that characters and avatars within the gaming industry are trapped within stereotypes of gender and representation:

By their nature, video games are typically about action rather than reflection, and male characters in games are often brutal gangsters or grunting soldiers. Female *player* characters are not weak—which would make for boring gameplay—but are usually fighters who are meant to have a particular ‘sexy-feminine’ allure. (p. 68, original emphasis)

As a researcher examining the digital gendered body, I deconstruct the representation of the body within the culture in which it is presented. Butler (1990), asks:

If there is no recourse to a “person”, a “sex” or a “sexuality” that escapes the matrix of power and discursive relations that effectively produce and regulate the intelligibility of those concepts for us, what constitutes the possibility of effective inversion, subversion, or displacement within the terms of constructed identity? What possibilities exist by virtue of the constructed character of sex and gender? (p. 44)

Here Butler suggests that if power and structure inform our identities of gender, or even the very foundation of our personhood, then what do our discourses of pushing against the 'norms' of this power structure look like? How do individuals go beyond the constructed notion of gender to invert, subvert and displace normativity? To examine the ways in which gender is performed in normative and disruptive manners by video game players. I take up the tools of poststructural feminist disruption theory, as well as Butler’s notions of performativity and of the body as a surface of text. I also utilize Foucault’s notion of docile bodies, to demonstrate instances where participants either conform to the inherent power dynamic of game design and show no interest in using their digital bodies outside of the framework of the game, as well as to signify instances of masculine hegemony driven players taking advantage of the expected docility of players using avatars. By this I mean how certain players use the fact that others are non-questioning of the state of gender in gaming, and use the opportunity to perpetuate masculine hegemonic power. Harraway’s (1991) *Cyborg Manifesto* and arguments of the power of disruptive behaviour within the context of the cyborg is also used to further explore the role technology plays in participants’ inclusion or rejection of disruptive practices in performing digital gender.

A definition of ‘disruption’ is helpful at this point, especially to explain how this notion is approached, deployed by some of my participants. Disruption is approached in two different

ways. The first is akin to what was done by second-wave feminists (Whitehead, 2002), where disruption is seen as a political intervention into normative behaviour, usually to change it for the better. The second approach, however, has a negative connotation, and is exemplified by the words and actions of one of my participants, Anonymous. Anonymous names his interventions of extreme sexism and misogyny as a political intervention against the “Social Justice Warriors” (a group of politically active and socially conscious players and critics who are asking for diversity within video gaming;) whose agenda, according to him, is diminishing the comfortable, hegemonic male space that video games should be. He wishes to take players back to a status quo, boys-only experience of gaming. He often argues that the status quo is too accepting of women and feminine gameplay, and his actions and words are used as a disruption. In a way, this too becomes an intervention, albeit one of extreme negativity.

I use a poststructural feminist theory of disruption to understand people like Anonymous. It is an epistemic attempt to map out the complexity of gender in online video games. Here, ‘disruption’ – as performed by my participants – is a double-edged sword, with positive and negative connotation. I am qualifying the use of poststructural feminist disruption theory in two ways:

- 1) It takes up gender and social power through different interpretations, specifically by examining the performances and impersonations players enact within the context of the video game.
- 2) The research site, video games, guarantees that gender performance is always in progress, changing, never fixed. Disruptions that are observed throughout the study revolve around gender; therefore, I focus the analysis on gender as the central question.

For these reasons, poststructural feminism is the most apt theory to analyze this project. It is worth noting, however, that disruption as defined in poststructural feminism, is practiced in different ways throughout the study, and therefore the theoretical approaches to a) hegemonic masculinity, b) the docile body, c) impersonation and performativity, and d) the cyborg need to be explored, connected and reintegrated with the empirical data arising from this research project. In the following sections, each of these approaches adds a layer of theory to the analysis and deepens the understanding of the disruptions occurring. I will start by exploring hegemonic



masculinity, especially its relation to disruption. I am starting with this to demonstrate the hegemonic nature of masculinity and to argue—as shown by the language used and the avatars, which are created with the male gaze in mind—that the space of video games is inherently a masculine space. Second, I will deal with Foucault’s notion of power, discipline, and docile bodies as a means of further exploring how the digital body is disciplined and confined within the confines of hegemonic masculinity that is video game culture. Next, I consider how Butler’s gender performativity can be used to read players’ impersonations of sex and gender, which either further reinforces gender norms, or creates moments of disruption to the disciplining structure of hegemonic masculinity. Finally, I explore how Haraway’s cyborg can serve as a final piece to the theory in the role of “cyborg pedagogy,” demonstrating how players learn and enact disruption to the docile digital bodies they are using to perform their digital identity within video games.

### **A Note on Hegemonic Masculinity and Disruption**

Hegemonic masculinity refers to the culturally normative belief that to be a man is to be foremost in humanity and that the subordination of women and girls is necessary to preserve such control (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Mankowski & Maton, 2010). Masculinity does not come in a single standard of behaviour but rather encompasses a range of gender identities grouped around beliefs about masculinity that Connell (1995) has termed hegemonic masculinity. Connell states that hegemonic masculinity is “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (p. 77). While most men do not perform everyday hegemonic masculinity, the models of hegemonic masculinities “do, in various ways, express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires” and they further help to articulate the way masculinities are performed “in everyday local circumstances” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 838). Hegemonic masculinity is not assumed to be normal in everyday behaviour of men; only a minority of men might enact it. But it embodies the extreme interpretation of what it means to be a man, it requires all other men to position themselves in relation to it. As we will see within the analysis of this project, many of the identified men rejected the strong language and position of hegemonic masculinity. However, these same men received the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of

masculine dominance. We will witness quiet moments of sexism embedded in the performance and words of participants that they themselves do not recognize as compliance.

When performing hegemonic masculinity, men are expected to display strict masculine gender roles that aim to encourage male dominance through the subordination and complete distrust of anything feminine (Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991). As Messerschmidt (1993) points out, “masculinity is never a static or a finished product. Rather, men construct masculinities in specific social situations” (p. 31). More specific to the digital space is the invisibility of masculinity. The overtly masculine space is rarely acknowledged as a space that embodies masculinity; yet this invisibility serves as a mechanism of hegemony, removing a dominant form of masculinity from the possibility of censure (Brown 1999). For example, Consalvo (2003), examining media reporting of the Columbine High School massacre, notes how the issue of masculinity was withdrawn from scrutiny, leaving the media with no way of representing the shooters except as “monsters.” Whitehead (2002, p. 93) argues that the concept of hegemonic masculinity can “see” only structure, making the subject invisible: “The individual is lost within, or, in Althusserian terms, subjected to, an ideological apparatus and an innate drive for power.” As masculinity is embedded in the cultural norms of gaming culture, it becomes invisible to the player; however, its role in the discourse of games, in the narrative, in the gameplay and in the player interaction, makes it an important contributing factor in creating the docile bodies/participants in video games, which we will explore through Foucault’s discipline and the body.

### **Foucault: The Docile Digital Body**

Foucault’s (1978) theory of power, in which power and resistance are relational, comes to life in the historical events on the body, as “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (p. 94). Bodies composed of these potential subversive acts, ones that disrupt the regime of power, allow for the disciplined subject to not completely lose her agency when power is exercised over her; her body becomes a site of possible “resistance.” Even in the context of a digital body that we do not physically own, I would argue that Foucault’s notion of power and history etched on the body still apply. Bodies within games are curated by designers, who in turn have physical bodies of their own. Their understanding of how a body should look, move, like, be shaped, and be

interacted with are all reflected in the digital body. In turn, players must take up the bodies designed for them in these circumstances. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault imagines the docile body as a pliable entity on which disciplinary force is acted. For Foucault, the body is a site or object that we can read to determine how power is organized during moments throughout history. Elizabeth Grosz (1994) suggests that, unlike some poststructuralist theorists who analyze the representation of bodies without due regard for their materiality, Foucault's assertion of the reality of the body which is directly moulded by social and historical events eliminates the gendered void between the body and culture. Foucault describes this body/object as "pliable," and something that can be "manipulated, shaped, trained" (pp. 135–136). "Training" is an important step of the projection of power upon the docile body, within institutions such as schools, prisons, and the military. According to Foucault, "the carceral texture of society assures both the real capture of the body and its perpetual observation" (304). These "docile bodies" thus lose power over their bodies but increase in "aptitude" and "capacity" (p. 138). He explains: "Discipline sometimes requires enclosure, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed upon itself. It is a protected place of disciplinary monotony" (p. 141, original emphasis).

Within the game playing process, there are enclosed areas that confine players and their digital bodies. One example of this, according to Chess (2005), is the theoretical space: the space within the context of the story's narrative. "No matter how robust, all game narratives must subject themselves to a limited space: a town, a maze, a residence, etc. While all visual media has limits, the difference with a game (as opposed to film or television) is that the player is constantly testing the limitations of these walls" (p. 4) The storyline and the creation/design of one's avatar also limit the player's ability to break away from the boundaries of the game world. According to McLuhan (1964) "a game is a machine that can get into action only if the players consent to become puppets for a time" (p. 238). Players who do not question or concern themselves with the way storylines or avatars are created by game designers are, in a sense, trained docile bodies, feeding back into the caricature of society. While these are not physical bodies as Foucault imagined them, they are still pliable objects on which events and social norms are projected.

In his later work, Foucault came to see the limits of his system of all-pervasive power, which led to docile bodies. He recognized that it didn't account for any types of resistance to that

generalized system, something which feminists would point out (see also McNay 1992). Foucault saw this system of self and individuals served to expand on the ideas that the self could be shaped in specific cultural contexts. These individuals could come to choose behaviours deliberately and knowingly. In their analysis of *Second Life* players' virtual sexual lives, Brookey & Cannon (2009) take up Foucault's notion of docile bodies as an underlying concept of performativity. They suggest "docility helps explain why [those] empowered with the agency to [create] their own sexual world might choose to perpetuate the established norms of gender and sexuality" (p. 148). In the analysis phase of this project, I have chosen to similarly explore participants through interviews and observed gameplay, using Foucault's notions of power and discipline of the body. Drawing on Foucault (and Butler, as we shall see further on in this chapter) helps highlight how participants within the space of the digital realms of games are confined players who operate within the historical experience of gaming culture: heteronormative and hypermasculine. We will also see the practice of disruptive players who fight against this docility, as well as participants who take advantage of the fact that most players do not disrupt the power over digital bodies, and therefore insist this hegemonic masculine space is natural and the way video games were made to be engaged with. So, too, can we see using the technologies of self the instances in which players' behaviour are chosen, even embraced.

### **Butler and the Body**

While Foucault observed a deceptive, disciplining social order rife with dominated subjects, Butler observed a deceptive, at times fluid motion within this social order, and individuals who side step the regulatory capacities of normalizing regimes, and, through their performance, disrupt it. Butler (1997) defines performativity as "that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names" (pp. 111–112). She suggests this production always happens through a certain kind of repetition and recitation. Like Foucault, Butler sees the body as a site on which to view the written experiences; however, her notion of the body as an imaginary construction, being fictional, and therefore being capable of being rewritten and reinscribed suggests a constantly shifting landscape of choices and performance. Butler, specifically talking about gender, makes the following comment about the body:

Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put

on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds [...] Gender is an act [...] which is open to splitting, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of ‘the natural’ that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status. (Butler, 1990, p. 282)

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1991) asks: “Does being female constitute a ‘natural fact’ or a cultural performance, or is ‘naturalness’ constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?” (p. xxxi). Given this, what does it mean to perform gender? And can our bodies be the site of a performance projected by others? Do our skins become a stage for the enactment of a cultural performance?

Gender, according to Butler, is concurrently the body’s variable methods of cultural expression as well as the site upon which cultural systems are written. Gender is a recurrent modality of bodily reading within or partially outside the shifting paradigms of ordinariness. However, one cannot be a born gender, there is only an engagement with hegemonic language and ideas from which we perform and act out gender. Genders are not biologically determined, but rather a juridical concept and a means of cultural production of identity. Men’s disembodiment is reliant on the condition of women occupying their bodies as their absolute and essential identities. If women are their bodies, if women are only their bodies, this suggests that they are not “existing” or alive in their bodies as a “project and bearer of created meanings” (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 37). Women then “monopolize the bodily sphere” (Butler, 1998, p. 37) as their freedom and consciousness are merely permutations of bodily need (Butler, 1986; de Beauvoir, 1949; Foucault, 1979).

Butler (1991) suggests that we can only perform gender, created via language and meaning ascribed to that language; the appearance of gender is constructed. The appearance of gender “is achieved through a performative twist of language and/or discourse that conceals the fact that ‘being’ a sex or a gender is fundamentally impossible” (pp. 25–26). The notion of performing a discourse to construct gender is perhaps the foundation of Butler’s arguments within *Gender Trouble*, as it attempts to define what gender is, and is not. Feeling like a woman, in this argument, becomes a gendered psychic position; a positive reinforcement of not being the

male. By breaking down the power, influences, or even the source within a particular culture, seeking out the normalized discourse and dissecting it, we have a better understanding of how gender and other identities are performed to meet that structure. For this thesis in particular, examining the influences and power source of game design and gamers' influences over each other allows us to better understand the choices gamers make when it comes to curating their digital selves. Do they conform to the standards of the game and culture? Do they disrupt the desired narrative by making counter-culture choices? When they gender-bend, are they doing so to be disruptive? Or is that decision a performance steeped in the behaviours of hegemonic masculinity?

Butler (1999) claims "Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time" (p. 151). She reasons, "the act that one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that's been going on before one arrived on the scene." More, she proposes that, "gender is an impersonation [...] becoming gendered involves impersonating an ideal that nobody actually inhabits" (1993). Expanding from Butler's work, Sara Salih (2007) reasons that "gender is not something one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a 'doing' rather than a 'being'" (p. 56).

The concept of docility (Brookey & Cannon, 2007, p. 148) also informs Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. She argues that individuals must constantly perform established gender norms to escape the social discipline that is exercised against queer sexuality. In the repetition of the performance, the performativity of gender is forgotten, and the embodiment of gender norms is thought to be an expression of internal identity; in this way the gendered subject becomes a docile body. Theorizing from Foucault and Butler, a fundamental problem emerges when introducing the digital body: while disciplining gender may be exercised on the physical body, and may produce an individual who nonetheless imagines itself independent of the body and the discipline enacted on it, however, inversely, "liberating this subject from the body via cyberspace does not necessarily mean that this subject escapes the influential disciplinary practices that produced its identity" (Brookey & Cannon, 2007, p. 149). For instance, Miroslaw Filiciak (2003) suggests that the creation of digital identities is not so much an escape from the "self" as it is "a longed-for chance of expressing ourselves beyond physical limitations" (p. 100). When used to examine video game players, their identities, and their digital bodies, the questions

of impersonation, of taking up gendered identities, can be examined through the performance of the players. Some players choose to use avatars that are deemed 'non-feminine' in order to push back against their feelings that games over-sexualize the female body. Others play as female characters, physically dancing, bouncing, and engaging in combat moves that make their female avatar shout, precisely because they find gratification in the exaggerated, sexualized movements. A few participants are very concerned with the fact that their male characters have better armour than a female character, and make decisions about what characters to use and play with based on how they can clothe or arm their characters.

The trouble here, however, as we will see in the analysis, is that these expressions often do not move beyond the gender roles and sexual norms that inform the confined space of the digital game. If player identity is being defined by performativity, "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1990, p. 45), this invokes a framework for talking about how player expression forms character actualization. That is, how the player's identity and character's identity work together toward a third identity, the digital identity. Within this research project, I engage with the digital body and its experiences in a way that forces me to break down the meanings placed on the body (sexuality, wealth, worth, shape, colour), and enact Foucault's idea of the docility of the body in order to view the cultural impacts on that body when looking at the body as a representation. Culture and history inscribe on a newly minted body, in other words, and they inform how that body is created and shaped, whether the body is a physical one, or a digital one.

### **Revisiting the Cyborg in Digital Identities**

The final section of this theory chapter deals with the feminist view of the role of technology in redefining the relationship between biological sex and gender; and comes directly from Donna Haraway (1991). In her *Cyborg Manifesto* she discusses the potential of cyborg technology as a tool for both confusing and reconstructing the boundaries of gender. As a binding force to the poststructural feminist theory of disruption, I have explored Donna Haraway's theoretical framework of the interactions between emergent technologies and gendered bodies (Haraway, 1991), using participants' selected video games as an ethnographic space.

Early researchers and observers often viewed “online” space as a realm where users and players could be totally disembodied, discarding their real-life bodies to reconstruct themselves anew (D. Bell, 2001). Some cyberpunk fiction (e.g., Gibson, 1994) suggests that the body is just meat, and on entering cyberspace, a user can leave the ‘meat’ behind. Yet, to think of digital spaces as only playgrounds for the mind is to forget the inescapable connection between body and mind, as emphasized by Stone (1991):

Cyberspace developers foresee a time when they will be able to forget about the body. But it is important to remember that virtual community originates in, and must return to the physical [...] Even in the age of the technosocial subject, life is lived through bodies. (Stone, 1991, p. 125)

Among cyberfeminists, activists and researchers examining the cyberworld through a lens of feminist discourse (see especially Orgad, 2005; Plant, 1997; Podlas, 2000), some have suggested that Internet technologies can be an effective medium for resisting repressive gender regimes and endorsing equality, while some have questioned these claims (see Gajjala, 2003). Haraway (1991) introduced the term “cyborg” to refer to socially constructed hybrids of machines and organisms. Cyborgs live in borderlands—or industrious spaces intended for knowledge creation/building. Haraway uses the image and fable (or story) of the cyborg as an analogy of the slow creation of one’s consciousness within the digital, particularly with respect to newer technologies. Building on Haraway’s cyborg, I have examined the pedagogical characteristics of the gameplay and performances of participants, and the ways that they challenge the effects of video games on their bodies and identities. Garoian and Gaudelius (2008) refer to these intersections as “cyborg pedagogies,” which serve as “a complex metaphor that represents the body/technology hybrid while it exposes the cyborg’s dialectical pedagogy of inscription and resistance” (p. 334).

Rogers (2013) suggests that the Internet, and any online component that requires the Internet, “is a site of research for far more than online culture and its users. With the end of the virtual/real divide [...] it may be rethought as a source of data about society and culture” (p. 38). In a different context, Rogers and Penny (2004) suggest an interesting and tentative concept that our digital selves and real-world selves are not divided at all. Yet, these authors, like Haraway before them, commit to partiality and non-polarity between the public and private. In *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway (1991) writes:



The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological poll based partly on a revolution of social relations in the oikos, the household. Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other. The relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world. (p. 201)

Bringing these contentions to video gaming, it is worth noting that the gaming world toys with the image of gender. That is, it creates a fantasy interpretation of what is and is not allowed in gender representation. In some online games, all avatars are male and all players are virtually identified as male, and it becomes much more difficult to signify gender. The trouble with gender and digital bodies comes to a head in the need to negotiate a heteronormative, male/female dichotomy, as well as a cultural space that alienates based on gender. Haraway's (1992) notion of the cyborg—its essence of disrupting the binaries and essentialisms of cultural norms—is significant for my research and suggests that “technologies are ‘crucial tools recrafting our bodies’ and as such they ‘embody and enforce new social relations for women world-wide’” (p. 164; see also Bury, 2005, p. 12). The situated cyborg and its experience, Haraway explains, is about the “power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other” (p. 175). The putting on the mantle of identity in digital space, the negotiation of being othered in that space, in other words, is where the nature of cyborg comes into being. Haraway (1992) submits, however, that the cyborg identity is a site of hybridity for mixing identities, as she sees “the cyborg as a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality” (p. 150). Part of the cyborg notion as a mapping of culture and social reality, is that the cyborg seeks to disrupt and rewrite the ‘map’ of culture. Haraway argues that “situated knowledges” are “marked knowledges” that produce “maps of consciousness,” which reflect the ways in which race, class, (trans)gender, and nationality affect how knowledge is constructed (1991, p. 111).

For the purpose of my research, I want to retain the notion of the cyborg as the figure that disrupts conventions and binaries, which makes it a central pillar within the theory of disruption.

For me, the cyborg is progressive and oppositional in its hybridity, where body and technology are no longer oppositional. Radically stated, Haraway (1991) argues, “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics” (p. 150). The metaphor of the cyborg, therefore, becomes another form of disruption, seeking to draw out the situated knowledges of gaming culture, and breaking its binaries. No body or self is stable, natural, or complete. Rather, we are multiple bodies and multiple identities, depending on the context in which we find ourselves, the cultural space in which those identities are taken up, and the other bodies and nonhuman entities with which we interact. This is especially true of the struggle for identity when creating a digital avatar.

Gamers interact with the cultural norms and expectations of a design team, as well as with the mandated gamer culture as a whole, which dictates the expression of self and body within a game. Gamers cannot form a fully separate self in such a space; this is where the gamer cyborg—an individual who enacts the cyborg pedagogy, taking up a disruptive identity in games—is born. These gamer cyborgs are found within the data of this research project.

### **A Note on Race and Anti-Racism**

While race and anti-racism are not the primary foci for this research project, questions of digital bodies and identity cannot exclude issues of intersectionality. Since my participants brought up issues of race and gaming they cannot be ignored in this study. I address anti-racism as another act of disruption by gamers, and believe anti-racist theory is ultimately about disrupting the silences and exclusions of racism (Stanley, 2014). It is important to begin by acknowledging the ingrained nature of racism(s), how the presence of racism(s) within our social institutions effectively perpetrate racist acts on the racialized every single day. Racism also can be obscured by the institutionalization of diversity. Diversity is used as evidence that institutions do not have a problem with racism. Ahmed (2012) argues, “diversity can participate in the creation of an idea of the institution that allows racism and inequalities to be overlooked” (p. 14).

Class-based theories of race argue that racial conflict is one mode in which class conflict is “lived out” or articulated (Hall et al., 1978). Drawing on Marxist theory, Hall et al. consider racism under the general rubric of working-class exploitation, which acknowledges racisms operating in workplace environments. For Miles (1989), a Marxist analysis of racism provides a

macro view of society, where the focus is placed on the role and actions of racism within institutions, such as the government, and the everyday workplace (see also Deleuze & Guatarri, 1984).

However, the everyday racism(s), those felt in the moment and in the heart of individuals, is where the social experience of racism begins and ends. “In everyday life, sociological distinctions between ‘institutional’ and ‘interactional’, between ideology and discourse, and between ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres of life merge and form a complex of social relations and situations” (Essed, 2002, p. 205). To successfully use anti-racism analysis in the everyday life of gamers, one may argue, research must find the space between the institutional and the everyday experiences of racism(s). Each of these experiences is created in a moment, an event, informed by attitudes and social stereotypes, ‘embedded’ beliefs, and “understanding the *social* embeddedness and *social activation* of racist ideas, attitudes, proclivities and actions—thus, of racist events—is a central contribution to our sociological approach to contemporary racism”; these racist events “are, in a word, *foundational*” (Bulmer & Solomos, 2004, p. 74, original emphasis). The argument of social embeddedness of racist ideas/events and the nature of experiencing everyday social racism(s), demonstrates that anti-racism analysis of online experiences, whether in games or in other spaces, can and should be used to disrupt these foundational events.

According to Essed (2002), racism is an umbrella term that encompasses both macro and micro elements, which reinforce and maintain social, economic, and political oppression of groups of peoples based on their racialization. Everyday racism becomes an arm of that oppression, built into the structure of society and perpetrated through everyday occurrences and experiences. In this argument, we see the terms of institutional and individual racisms as inadequate to define the inherent experiences of groups affected by both individual and institutional, by macro and micro, racisms. In essence, Essed’s approach mirrors closely the theory of racial formation developed by Omi and Winant (1994), which I think helps contextualize the social experiences of racisms as occurring both in individual situations and from external influences. The racial formation approach:

- (1) views the meaning of race and the content of racial identities as insecure and politically disputed;
- (2) understands racial formation as the intersection/conflict of racial “projects” that combine representational/discursive elements with structural/institutional

ones; and (3) sees these intersections as iterative sequences of interpretations (“articulations”) of the meaning of race that are open to many types of agency, from the individual to the organizational, from the local to the global (Omi & Winant, 1994).

### *Everyday racism(s)/anti-racism(s) and video games*

How do gamers go about creating, distinguishing and defining race in relation to their digital identities? Are game spaces where one is free to adapt, change and *paint* one’s real-world identity with a new one? Does our normalized language from everyday life show up in games, or are these new spaces of learning, engagement, and social interaction free from the everyday racisms our real-time world is permeated with? According to Leonard (2006):

Although extreme and blatant racial tropes flourish within video games, those simplistic notions that it is “just a game” or “kid’s entertainment,” as well as the prominence of colorblind discourses, limit serious inquiry into their racial content and context. Excluding race (and intersections with gender, nation, and sexuality) from public discussions through erasure and acceptance of larger discourses of colorblindness contributes to problematic, if not faulty, understandings of video games and their significant role in contemporary social, political, economic, and cultural organization (pp. 83–84).

Because video games have become such significant cultural objects within developed society (and gaming occurs globally), they have become important spaces for—and subjects of—cultural discourses. Within games, lived and imagined experiences of the real world are recreated, exaggerated, and overexposed by game designers and creators with agendas, prejudices, beliefs, and identities of their own. Racialized stereotypes can be found in virtually any game—Cuban/Colombian drug dealers in *Vice City*; muscle-bound, violent African American rappers in *Def Jam Vendetta*; and Arab terrorists in almost every current war game. I can choose a gaming title off my shelf, and experience a racialized character through avatars and dialogue in nearly every single popular title. While many scholars (see especially, Jenkins, 2006; Nakumura, 2008) have highlighted the democratic, empowering effects of participatory media for game users, it can also provide users with a space for distributing racializing discourses that reflect the ‘real’ world, often even exaggerating them under the cloak of perceived anonymity.

Not only are these discourses racialized, but often they create experiences of racism(s). This occurs not only in the player discourse, but also in the institution of the game itself. Racisms in gaming can be viewed through both a macro and micro lens, making games and player interaction another space for everyday racisms to occur.

In MMO games like *World of Warcraft* (WoW), real time experiences of racism and virtual representations can cross the boundaries of online gaming space into other websites such as blogs and YouTube, and finally, perpetuate those racism(s) in real time (specifically through voice interactions/headsets). Experiences such as the documented cases of ‘player workers’ highlighted in Nakamura’s (2008) exploration of the racialization of players in WoW working in real time in sweat shops to create online avatars, gold, and other paraphernalia to be sold online to the highest bidder (of actual dollars). Not only do these players experience racism and violence within the game setting, but these experiences are continued in player-created content elsewhere. These experiences are “actively constructed by WoW fans, who have produced an extensive body of writing and digital cinema which cybertype Asian farmers as unwanted, illegal, and anti-social workers” (Nakamura, 2002, p. 132).

As an experienced gamer, I have been exposed to online discourses comprised of hate speech that is normalized, accepted, and even encouraged; this is a discourse echoed by some of my participants when discussing their identity as digital gamers. Racial slurs, name calling, and bigotry are considered ‘smack talk’ in many co-operative play-based shooter games. The language in games like *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield 3* perpetuates a discourse of accepted negativity towards all things Arab, enforcing stereotypes of Islamic terrorism, jihadist bloodthirst, and extremism. When minorities are represented through specific narratives that only serve to perpetuate real-time stereotypes and racisms, video games become an unsafe space for those who cannot see a positive representation of themselves within the pixels on their screens. Disrupting the discourse of racism within gaming culture, therefore, also becomes a tool of that gamers can and do use within gaming spaces. Anti-racism becomes a praxis of intervention and disruption to instances of racism(s). I have included a discussion on race and racism in gamers’ experiences as my participants themselves shared their difficult experiences with racisms in games as well as their actions of disruption to create gaming experiences for themselves and their teammates that they deemed more constructive.

### **Theory in Practice**

I examine the gaming experiences and avatar creations and selections of my participants, and myself, within the many-layered framework of the poststructural feminist theory of disruption. Thinking of Haraway (1991), Foucault (1978) and Butler (1991), it is worth noting that, in the digital space of video games, players must constantly perform established gender norms, as they do within the confines of the ‘real’ world, in order to escape the social discipline that is exercised against non-heteronormative sexuality. We see this in avatar selection, in selection of sex, and in players’ notions of ‘gender-bending’, where the latter means choosing an avatar of another sex to disrupt gameplay, yet some players engage in gender-bending to simply reenact gender norms with that body, and we must be careful to unpack this term with participants. The result of this normative situation is that the gendered subject becomes a docile body.

How to recognize moments of disruption while conducting research is another important piece in answering what the trouble with gender and gaming is. The methodology chosen, digital ethnography, allows the researcher the necessary up-close look at gamers’ identity building and gender performance, as well as a means to provide space for the narratives of participants and researcher alike.

## Chapter 4

### **Methodology: Using Digital Ethnography to Study Gender Identity in Gaming**

Digital Ethnography is [...] the deliberate attempt to generate more data than the researcher is aware of at the time of collection [...] Rather than devising research protocols that will purify the data in advance of analysis, the anthropologist embarks on a participatory exercise which yields materials for which analytical protocols are often devised after the fact. (Strathern, 2004, p. 28)

Digital media are now an integral part of everyday life for many people. Boundaries between online and offline worlds are increasingly difficult to delineate (Crawford & Rutter, 2007; Wright et al., 2002), with digital media tools now used as part of routine activities and mobile technology no longer restricting the geography of usage, with some provisos of access, inclusion, and location. The solicitation or the viewing of digital information/identities created by individuals is one form of digital data collection. The communication of digital information can take many forms via different technologies. So, too, can the methodologies we use to observe, collect, and analyze that digital information. Hine (2005) states, “when we talk about methodology, we are implicitly talking about our identity and the standards by which we wish our work to be judged” (p. 248). She suggests that as researchers, we select and define our methods, as well as interpret our results by our measures and values. “The question of methodologies for Internet research,” Hine explains, “has been characterized by innovation and anxiety, presenting a methodology as innovative as double-edged: While we value innovation, we may be cutting ourselves off from useful resources” (2005, p. 245). The challenge for me as a researcher engaging with the digital body (avatars) and digital gendered and sexual identities (male and female) within video games is, as Saskia Sassen (2002) stresses, to “develop analytic categories that allow us to capture the complex imbrications of technology and society” (p. 365).

Participation in digital scholarship requires some form of technological knowledge, but is not limited to expertise in different technological areas (such as computer sciences, digital graphic design, programming, etc.). The openness of the field of digital knowledge means that scholars from a variety of fields, with an understanding of modern technology, can participate in

digital scholarship. People from all walks of life are now able to engage with, participate in, observe and gather data in online spaces like video games. While I recognize the complicated relationship between the virtual and real identities of my participants, I have chosen to utilize the online space to collect data on gamers and gaming culture, because this is a space they all inhabit and participate in on a regular basis. My methodological approach is digital ethnography. Using strictly the online space of selected video games as my research site, I observed my research participants playing games, conducted interviews with them, and participated in game play myself. As such, I was a participant-observer. The interviews were conducted both individually and in a group.

To properly examine gaming culture, and gamers' experiences with digital bodies and gender in an online game, I was required to be fully immersed in this digital space. To this aim, I collected hundreds of pages of transcripts and video recordings from game play observations, chat logs recorded through screenshots and video recordings, and transcriptions of in-game audio, as well as audio recordings of focus group and individual interviews. This methodological approach required that I use a range of technological skills including how to set up a private server, how to set up several different video capturing programs for video game play (as some are not compatible with all games), and how to use recording software to properly capture all conversations with participants while in game.

### **Digital Ethnography: What's in a Name**

Like Strathern (2004), Murthy (2010) sees digital ethnography as "ethnography mediated by digital technologies" (p. 159). Different from cyber or virtual ethnography, Murthy explains, digital ethnography involves not only accounts in the virtual space, but also the methods used to engage with participants, store notes, and collect online data. Media ethnography, in general, seeks to develop an understanding of active audiences by exploring genre readings, issues of race and gender, family living, and identity, to understand media as a cultural form (Murphy, 1999, p. 207). Ethnographic research on online practices and communications, and on offline practices shaped by digitalization, has increased substantially, as the literature review shows, with the growing influence and presence of the digital in people's everyday lives. This research takes numerous forms, within different disciplines and schools of thought, and under different names such as 'digital ethnography' (Murthy, 2008), 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2000),



‘cyberethnography’ (Robinson & Schulz, 2009), ‘discourse-centred online ethnography’ (Androutsopoulos, 2008), ‘ethnography of virtual spaces’ (Burrell, 2009), and ‘netnography’ (Kozinets, 2009). Current literature focused on the practice of internet and online (related) ethnography (e.g., Beaulieu & Simakova, 2006; Boellstorff, 2008; Burrell, 2009; Hine, 2008; Kozinets, 2010; Ardevol, 2012; Pink, 2012;) is emergent together with a body of anthropological studies of social media sites, platforms, and apps (e.g., Marwick & boyd, 2011; Miller, 2011). It is important to note that this methodology does not come without its limitations. In this study, participants were solely observed and interacted with online and in game, therefore, unlike in a traditional focus group, I was unable to read facial and body language as a way of gauging participants’ meaning. Their tones of voice and the context of the discussion were the only ways of interpreting their words. This also meant participants not only had to be video game players, but players who felt comfortable enough taking up the specific game I had chosen for their focus group, which is described further in this chapter. They also needed to be comfortable enough with the technology used to communicate with the rest of the focus group, *TeamSpeak*, in order to fully participate. However, it also allowed a greater reach for participants, as they did not need to meet with me in person to be interviewed. Another interesting benefit to the use of the in-game digital methodology was the investment participants had in the research process. As I note later in the analysis, some participants faced challenges in order to attend the focus group. However, their determination and enjoyment of video games meant they pushed through these issues and wholeheartedly engaged in the focus group and interviews.

### **Digital Ethnography: A Genealogy**

Since digital ethnography falls under the umbrella of ethnography, notes on what ethnography is are in order. Ethnography as an approach, Varis (2014) explains, is methodologically elastic and adaptive: it is not limited to following specific procedures, but is relatively open to issues arising from within the research or greater body of work. It “does not undergo fundamental transformation or distortion in its journey to virtual arenas because ethnographic approaches are always modified for each field site, and in real time as the research progresses” (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 4). The epistemological approach is much the same in ethnography as in digital ethnography. Ethnography is about telling stories. When an ethnographer comes back from ‘the field’, he or she, like Walter Benjamin’s (1969) ‘storyteller’,

has “something to tell about” (p. 3). Whyte’s (1993[1943]) influential work in *Street Corner Society* demonstrates how good ethnography effectively communicates a social story, drawing the reader into the lives of the participants. With the increasing presence of new technologies, the stories collected have not changed, but the ways they are told and consumed have changed. Research on technologically mediated communication has come far from what Androutsopoulos (2008) identified as the ‘first wave’, where “the focus was on features and strategies that are (assumed to be) specific to new media; the effects of communications technologies on language were given priority over other contextual factors” (p. 1). Presently, new strategies are being used to approach new media in the forms of virtual worlds. Boellstorff et al. (2012), in their handbook *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*, define virtual worlds as computer-generated physical environments that are characterized by four distinguishing features: 1) they instill in the users a sense of *worldness*; 2) they are, by their nature, *multi-user*; 3) they are *lasting* (they continue to exist even when the users log-off); and 4) they allow the users to “*embody* themselves, usually as avatars” (p. 7).

According to Hine (2013), there have been two phases in social research on communication via a technological conduit: the first one was considered experimental research, and the second one is characterized by a “growing application of naturalistic approaches to online phenomena and the subsequent claiming of the Internet as a cultural context,” with ethnographic research more and more applied (p. 7). Hine explains: “our knowledge of the Internet as a cultural context is intrinsically tied up with the application of ethnography” (p. 7). Here, digital ethnography is building on ‘pre-digital’ ethnography. If ethnography takes as its object of interest the reality of people, of which it aims to produce detailed accounts which, in the words of Geertz (1973), are ‘thick descriptions’ through the researcher’s writing, then digital ethnography does all of that, but virtually, online. Using the internet or online-based spaces like MMO or RTS games, and using language and other semiotic means (i.e. the reading of images and representations as ‘texts’) (Barthes, 1983). Here, digital ethnography has precisely the means of capturing this local reality, thus helping this researcher to understand her informants’ “life-worlds and their situated practices and lived local realities” (Murthy, 2008, p. 840). Ethnographic fieldwork, therefore, is fundamentally a learning process where research is directed by experience and knowledge gathered in the field; it is an approach of discovery and learning (Blommaert & Dong, 2009; Velghe, 2011).

In sum, ethnography as Dell Hymes (1996, p. 13) states, “is continuous with ordinary life. Much of what we seek to find out in ethnography is knowledge that others already have. Our ability to learn ethnographically is an extension of [our human ability to] learn the meanings, norms, patterns of a way of life.” Digitalization, therefore, has provided researchers with occasions to easily collect and sort ‘logs’ of communication, i.e. “characters, words, utterances, messages, exchanges, threads, [and] archives” (Herring 2004, p. 379). In digital ethnography, the researcher is the instrument through which data is collected. That being the case, it is essential to describe what type of role and presence that research tool takes on in a research project. For the purposes of this study, digital ethnography is defined as digital observation of participants in a series of games, and interview/focus group style discussions to tease out the observed patterns of play, avatar selection, and gender performance throughout the study. I have chosen to take on the role of participant observer throughout the study to be able to include readings of my in-game choices and performances in order to demonstrate my own biases and patterned behaviour within video games.

### **Participant-Observer vs Invisible Researcher**

Virtual participant observation of online communities follows two main strategies: 1) a completely non-intrusive one, where the researcher limits herself to observing the interactions of the community *by lurking*, which means to be invisible and not engaging while in the game (Bruckman 2006); and 2) a participatory one, where the researcher actively engages with other members of the community (Walstrom 2004). One complication of inhabiting the digital realm as an ethnographer is the degree to which the researcher is visible in the digital space which they are observing. On the one hand, never revealing one’s presence could allow the observer an unobstructed view of their research space. However, some questions as to the ethicalness of the invisible researcher have been raised. Ethnographers often opt to remain ‘invisible’ in virtual field sites—to engage in what Ebo (1998) names ‘cyberstealth’—as they ‘read’ blogs and forums, or hide behind an anonymous avatar or handle in a chat room, when making social media posts or contributing to forums. Even within games, an ethnographer can blend into certain gameplay without much notice from other players. Dicks et al. (2005, p. 128) caution that the Internet should never be read as a ‘neutral’ space as it always remains a data collection field

for the ethnographer, and therefore a researcher's data selection and analyses are always influenced or biased by their experiences, histories, and understanding of social norms. As is the case offline, there are important ethical considerations of hidden digital research. Observations in the digital space should not be treated, in an ethical sense, any differently than observations in real life. Denzin (1999 p. 123), for example, admits in his ethnographic study of online forums that he was a passive, lurking observer and never asked for permission to quote postings. Denzin's situation is not exceptional, with Schaap (2002) 'lurking' for several years in an online role-playing game. As Kozinets (2002, p. 65) observes, digital ethnography's "uniquely unobtrusive nature [...] is the source of much of its attractiveness and its contentiousness." The only baseline which researchers seem to concur on is that "we must consider the act of lurking and its implications" on those being investigated (Richman, 2007, p. 183).

Boellstorff et al. (2012), on the other hand, suggest that participant observation represents the heart and soul of the ethnographical method in virtual worlds. In fact, a face-to-face interview with a *World of Warcraft* player would make it impossible to understand the feeling of enthusiasm experienced when killing a raid boss with their own guild (Nardi 2013). Boellstorff (2006) argues that "the term participant observation is intentionally oxymoronic; you cannot fully participate and fully observe at the same time, but it is in this paradox that anthropologists conduct their best work" (p. 32). Participant observation is of value in disciplines like game studies where the object of study is developing, partly understood, and thus changeable. In the words of Strathern (2004):

What research strategy could possibly collect information on unpredictable outcomes? Social anthropology has one trick up its sleeve: the deliberate attempt to generate more data the investigator is aware of at the time of collection. Anthropologists deploy open-ended, non-linear methods of data collection which they call ethnography; I refer particularly to the nature of ethnography entailed in anthropology's version of fieldwork. Rather than devising research protocols that will purify the data in advance of analysis, the anthropologist embarks on a participatory exercise which yields materials for which analytical protocols are often devised after the fact. (pp. 5–6)

The choice to make participant observation the main technique ethnography adopts to explore virtual worlds is therefore necessary to study these environments on their own terms, that is, through methods and techniques that are inborn to them and in some way suggested by the environments themselves (Boellstorff, 2008). With this in mind, I have based the methodological approach of this research project in participant-observation, and have included a chapter I have called ‘researching the researcher’ (Ibrahim, 2014) in order to situate my occupation of the digital space of games. I chose to focus on two games in particular, *World of Warcraft* and *League of Legends*, as I spent the most time collecting data and interviewing and observing participants within these two games.

### **Semiotics/Digital Representation**

Because we are dealing with the virtual world, the project could not be completed without an examination of the visual representation of identity: the avatars of players, which are constructed images used to represent players within games. As Umberto Eco (1976) suggests, semiotics takes up anything that could be considered a sign, whether it is telling the truth or is a lie.

In some games players are given the ability to alter and create their avatars to their liking thanks to the game design, while in other games, they have less control over avatar representation, due to fewer options. These avatars become digital representations of ourselves within the game. How players’ notions of the digital body are approached, and how moments of violence and exclusion shape our interactions within the gaming space, are just as important to the exploration of representation in gaming as the players’ narratives. I have explored these digital representations of the body using semiotics.

In her introduction to semiotics and education, Noth (2009) explores the history of the early adaptation of semiotics in education as a challenge to rote learning and ‘concrete’ knowledge. Here she highlights the evolution in learning that semiotics offers as a challenge to curriculum standardization:

Semiotics, according to Cunningham (1985, p. 432; 1987c, p. 196) offers an integrative approach which “sensitizes us to the notion that cognition always involves an interaction between the physical world and the cognizing organism,” and “questions the possibility of absolute knowledge, which stresses the provisional nature of questions and which emphasizes the knowledge generating process itself.  
(p. 3)

In a similar line of thinking, Stables (2009) argues that a semiotic perspective in education must look at numerous ‘signs’ beyond the verbal and the visual. These signs are symbols, language (spoken and written), text, avatars, motions, actions, keystrokes (which control virtual actions) and visual representations used to express an idea, or communicate a meaning. Marrying two traditional views on signs and communication, Stables states:

Opposed though they are, I argue that a fully semiotic perspective must take from both the Peircean and Saussurean traditions [...] To be “fully semiotic”, semiotics must acknowledge that its scope cannot simply be defined by human language and other conscious sign use, such as visual imagery, in recognizable “texts” including those of film or art. Rather, the boundaries of what constitutes signs are, at best, fuzzy and at worst, totally uncallable. (p. 25)

However, video games are not simply semiotic images that we can analyze for representation and truths. More significantly, games are *played*; therefore, the representations these images project are both the response of the player to the narrative and interpretation of the designer. Gonzalo Frasca (2003) suggests: “narrative is based on semiotic representation, while videogames also rely on simulation, understood as the modelling of a dynamic system through another system” (p. 86). While avatars in their design are the result of game designers’ construct, the actions and interaction of the avatars are the sole representation of the gamer (or representations through engagements/encounters with other gamers’ avatars—sign exchange system-fluid, evolving, spontaneous, etc.).

“Learning in video games,” write Jenson and de Castell (2009), “is not accomplished through the delivery of content, understood as abstracted ‘facts’; rather meaning and significance arise through the player’s activation and negotiation of images, objects, events, and so on, in specific situations of challenge” (p. 2). Here, Stuart Hall’s (1997) deconstruction of our relationship with language and the meaning behind representations has been pivotal as I have thought about the learned gendered roles and representations that take place in video games.

According to Hall (1997), “all cultural objects convey meaning, and all cultural practices depend on meaning, [thus] they must make use of signs” (p. 36). If this is so, then the cultural object in question (and online games as a whole) convey a representation of real-world culture blended with fictional storylines and fantasy role playing. In order for us gamers to comprehend

the story and expectations while playing through the game, it must encompass at least some ‘signs’, which we can relate to and develop meaning through. However, I contend that learning in video games goes beyond already-there signs and signifiers; the gamer’s own actions become a sign which reflects meaning, too. That is to say, by Hall’s (1997) description, signs are images, objects, or texts, which we then interpret as signifiers, or meaning-bearers, based on our previously learnt engagement with social norms.

### **Digital Ethnography in Practice**

The approach I wished to embody in my methodology was similar to that of the M.I.T. series surrounding youth culture and digital identities, *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out* (2010). Within these series of projects, researchers examined how young people hang out digitally, and several researchers observed and interacted with young peoples’ ‘digital hanging out’ (Pascoe, Bittani, & Cody, 2010). In my research, I make my role as researcher known as a digital participant-observer, but within the terminology of hanging out and gaming with my participants. Participants remain fairly aware of my presence and the purpose of our interactions as part of the research, but also, as we shall see, blend my presence into the practice of their gaming.

As I delved into my own research, I found Bonnie Nardi’s (2010) research quite helpful methodologically. Nardi’s research project, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest*, was one of the first in-depth ethnographic examinations of the gaming culture of/in *World of Warcraft*. Nardi spent three years in game, cultivating and interacting with players in a fully digital ethnography method, examining the play and culture of players from the United States and China. This study proposes that game researchers must take a more active approach to player experiences and the aesthetic experiences they have in games to better understand the connection and cultures that are built up in game. While it specifically looked at the anthropological significance of MMOGs, this study is nevertheless pertinent to my own research, in showing why the experiences of community building, and the problems within gaming culture that break down community, are significant themes to examine when dealing with player identity. Nardi’s study has particularly influenced my interactions and analysis of player experiences when it comes to gender identity and avatar creation. My project has combined the digital ethnography of studying gaming culture from within the online game, but also the digital collection and analysis of data (see Bryman,

2008; Davies, 2008; Denzin, 2004). All the data collection occurred during digital gatherings of participants and myself, both during one-on-one interviews, and in a larger group of players for a focus group, using a closed network I set up to play alongside participants in which no one else could overhear our conversations or interviews. Holding the focus group and the one-on-one interviews within the setting of a video game is far from the traditional space a researcher in education might find themselves in. However, I felt that the best way to have discussions about digital bodies and digital play was to have those discussions *in* digital bodies *while* playing digitally. It allowed participants to highlight experiences they have had by demonstrating or pointing out examples throughout our time in game. They could observe digital bodies, comment on them, and share conversations with each other and other players using in-game chat. Engaging with participants directly in their chosen games or in the vast space of *World of Warcraft* created an opportunity to engage with gaming culture in real time. I could screen-capture bodies participants pointed out or reflected on and could observe play and interaction while listening to what participants had to share. By engaging in play, and observing participants in play, I was fully immersed in the digital learning culture. Castell and Jenkins (1998) suggest that female gamers tend to respond with “what they are supposed to say” (p. 19) when they are interviewed, which suggests wider issues around the social power dynamics within gaming culture, affecting the gendered position from which gamers speak on their experience. Here, while discussing gaming culture, a digital ethnographic examination of gamers’ play, positioning, and negotiation of gender in games allows a disruption of the power structure experienced solely within narrative and interview data. As this particular issue arose often in the transcripts of the data, I have decided to expand on this notion of language and power in chapter 8.

### **From Methodology to Methods**

I have used an intersection of methods, namely online story sharing and data collection through video games and gaming forums. I have also utilized digital recording software named Overwolf (Overwolf Ltd.), to screen capture and video record interviews. The audio portions of the interviews were conducted and recorded using popular gaming team play technology named *TeamSpeak*. As I have approached gaming and gender from several different perspectives—from gamers’ experiences, my own gaming journals, —this project brings together a rich collection of viewpoints, themes, and voices. However, it is situated around a sense of community that each



participant helped to build. Each chapter is an auto/ethnographic and narrative-based analysis of players' interactions with their favourite games, with conversations between them and myself as the researcher, guided by a series of question prompts (see Appendix B). The analysis chapters' weave together the quest to answer my questions on what the trouble with gaming and gender is.

The following section outlines my methods and approach to data collection and analysis. It will be followed by an introductory chapter that balances the nature of my data collection with a methods review of digital data collection I believe is pertinent to this project. I learned much as a researcher, and had many surprises throughout this process, important enough to be included here. The introduction briefly explained the methods of this research project while giving a short introduction to each participant. In the following methods section, the site of data collection, the participants, and the methods for analysis will be explored in more depth. First, I introduce the games used as research sites for the four one-on-one interviews, the focus group, and those used in a section titled 'researching the researcher'. Then the participants and their chosen in-game avatars are explored; here, I interweave the presentation of each with an analysis of their avatar selection and their own commentary on their choices. I also have included a brief explanation of the impacts of #GamerGate on participants as it arose within the data, and also had an impact on retaining participants due to events occurring in digital spaces at the time of the data collection. Finally, the data collection and analysis process is explained.

## **Games**

In this section I list the different games used throughout the study, and the number of times they were engaged with. Short summaries of the games and the processes of data collection within them are presented. There is a section exploring my own gameplay and observations; a section featuring the focus group game, in which 11 participants played together, and participated in a focus group led by me; and a section on the one-on-one interviews, dedicated to the games my four individual interview participants selected for observation, play, and interviews.

### **Researching the Researcher**

The first chapter of analysis in this thesis is dedicated to the analysis and digital ethnographic study of the popular online games *League of Legends* and *World of Warcraft* from the perspective of "researching the researcher" (Ibrahim, 2014). As an avid gamer, I had many options, and will

admit to wanting to write on as many different gaming experiences as possible. While my participants brought other games to the discussion, and I engaged in the games they were playing as part of the data collection, for the purposes of analyzing my personal experiences, these two games gave a very interesting outlook on the gaming community. One, *League of Legends*, held the title of the most played Multiplayer Massive Online game at the time of data collection. The other, *World of Warcraft*, is one of the most well-known MMORPGs in the world, with a long-standing history. *League of Legends* (or *League*) was created in 2009 by Riot Games, and it is described as a multiplayer online battle arena video game. It has millions of players across the globe, from the lowly amateur gamer to the professional gamers. The more elite players' battles are showcased on the game's main page, where other gamers may upload and view the battle between players. I was introduced to the game in 2011 by my younger brother, but only became a more active player in 2012. Now comfortably sitting at level 30 (of 30) and playing ranked games (competitively), I can safely say I have a good understanding of gameplay, strategy, code words, and etiquette when in the game. I believe this game will allow me to draw out rich data on gendered identities and allow for a collection of semiotic data that would allow this research project "to contribute to a process of continuous revision and enrichment of understanding of the experience" (Elliot, Fischer, & Rennie, 1994, p. 102) of participants and fellow gamers.

For the research I played *League of Legends* on average 15 hours a week, over a 12-week period (I did not keep track of personal playing time). One session would usually comprise 2 or 3 games at a time, each lasting from 30 minutes to an hour. Because of its timed format, *League* is a game I can regularly play when I am short of time. It was easy, therefore, to span my data collection over several different sessions, using various gaming avatars. I had a few regular teammates I played alongside, but for the sake of clear data, I chose not to include those sessions. I kept both digital and written notes of my experiences, as well as screen captures of particularly interesting gameplay or dialogue as they arose. I rarely disclosed my sex, and during this part of my research process, never played using TeamSpeak or Skype, audio programs that are popular with most *Leaguers* as it allows them to coordinate more efficiently.

*World of Warcraft* (WoW), my second game of analysis and the site of my focus group (discussed in the next section) is a community of gamers immersed in a storyline of good versus evil, tasked to grow, learn, and fight. In an ethnographic study of the online game *Lineage*, Steinkuehler (2007) explains what exactly these video games are to their players:

MMOGs are highly graphical two- or three-dimensional video games played online, allowing individuals, through their self-created digital characters or ‘avatars’, to interact not only with the gaming software – the designed environment of the game and the computer-controlled characters within it – but with *other players’* avatars as well. Conceptually, they are part of the rich tradition of alternative worlds that science fiction and fantasy literature provide us (e.g. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, 1938); technically, they are the evolutionary next step in a long line of social games that runs from paper-and-pencil fantasy games (e.g. Gygax & Arneson’s *Dungeons & Dragons*, 1973) to main-frame text-based multi-user dungeons (e.g. Trubshaw & Bartle’s *MUD*, 1978) through the first graphical massively multiplayer online environments (e.g. Kirmse Kirmse’s *Meridian 59*, 1996) to the no common, high-end three-dimensional digital worlds of today (pp. 298–299).

Consequently, when I first contemplated examining learning in gaming, I thought of WoW as the ultimate challenge. I love video games, but I had always avoided this game. WoW players make up a sub-culture of gaming, because while millions play, a stigma exists around the game that associates it with extremely anti-social gaming ‘nerds’. I also avoided it due to the time it takes to become a skilled player, and the ever-present disdain ‘normal’ society seems to have for role-playing of any kind. The website [charlesadbeater.net](http://charlesadbeater.net) offers the following succinct description of WoW:

Players create an in-game character, or avatar, which they guide through the game to gain experience points across the land/map and thus progress through various levels of seniority and difficulty. ‘Experience’ is gained by killing monsters, exploring new destinations and completing quests. There are ten races, nine classes of avatar to choose from and participants must select one of two warring factions to be a member of; Horde or Alliance. Once a player has chosen which faction they belong to, they can only interact or talk to players within the same faction, thus setting the two groups up as rivals whose only contact with one another is in battle. WoW is split into several levels with a few thousand players in each. This is to accommodate the sheer size of the gaming community; each ‘realm’ is hosted on a separate server and can host around 20,000

players. Depending on which character you choose, the game-play features different amounts of combat player-versus-player combat. ([www.charlesadbeater.net](http://www.charlesadbeater.net))

I played WoW an average of 10 hours a week, for 12 weeks. At times, this could be in one or two sessions of up to 6–7 hours of gameplay. Due to my own schedule, I could not establish a regular habit of daily play, which I came to learn many other players of the game do. I often played in the company of a close friend, who taught me a good deal about the social etiquette (do not try to duel upper-level players, do not type in cap locks, do not take items I do not need from group members when on quests, etc.), and we played in cafes and university hangout spots with Wi-Fi. It was essential to my ability to work as an ethnographer to have a more experienced WoW player help me negotiate the early complications of game culture and life. Despite being an avid gamer, I did not have much experience in online RPGs; this inexperience would have hindered early data collection from my participants and was therefore necessary to achieve data collection in gameplay with participants, instead of as a passive observer.

### **Focus Group Game**

For the purposes of the in-game focus group, I selected the game WoW after consulting with my potential participants, whom I will introduce below, and because the publisher offered a free version of the game for characters at level 20 and below. This was convenient because it allowed participants who did not own the game to attend the focus group without accruing costs. Two participants familiar with the game and I then chose a specific point in the game, the spawning area (where you come to life when you start the game) for Blood Elves. Participants who were very familiar with the game traveled from their realms to join the focus group, and new players simply selected this race to start with. The participants and I had to negotiate which servers we would use to play, which took some negotiation (and much time on game forums for me, to figure out which would be private and most secure for data collection). The focus group was held for an hour and 40 minutes within game, using the audio software Team Speak (which will be discussed further in the data collection section). All participants received and signed ethics and consent forms prior to the focus group being organized.

### **One-on-One Interviews**

I conducted four one-on-one interviews. Part of the difficulty of pulling from a large group of

gamers was the variety factor: in order to get a better idea of the community and experiences, I could not include individuals who all played the same game. Therefore, for the one-on-one interviews I allowed participants to select their own games, with the caveats being that: a) it had to have online access; and b) it had to allow for more than one player. I made these rules in order to have be able to play alongside my participants via an Internet connection. The four games chosen by participants were *League of Legends*, *World of Warfare*, *Gauntlet*, and *Wildstar*. *Gauntlet*, a four-player co-operative action game, involved online battles negotiated through ‘dungeons’ or various levels, where you and teammates take on evil hordes, collect gold and attempt to make your way through the maze alive, all while leveling up. The players choose one of four hero roles, allowing up to four-player multiplayer co-op gameplay. The dungeons to be explored are part defined maps and part procedurally generated.

*Wildstar* is a MMORPG, based on another planet, with open maps to explore, quests to complete, and a variety of in-game activities, such as starting your own business, building a house, or policing the galaxy your characters interact with. It is an open world for one to explore alongside other players, and allows for quite a bit of liberty. The game takes place in a fictional universe on the recently discovered planet of Nexus. The game’s main website ([www.wildstar-online.com](http://www.wildstar-online.com)) explains the narrative in which players find themselves thus:

The planet, once inhabited by a hyper-advanced race of aliens known as The Eldan who have all but disappeared, is fought over by two factions both hoping to control the concealed lost technology of Nexus, **The Dominion**, an intergalactic empire forged by the Eldan with the goal of controlling the galaxy, and **The Exiles**, a group of refugees and outlaws who have all been driven from their respective homelands by The Dominion and have joined forces to fight them. As the plot continues, and characters continue through the zones of Nexus, they continue to butt heads with the opposing faction, as well as other races—such as the eugenically-minded Ikthians, the tyrannical Osun, and the xenophobic and zealous Pell—and the remains of Eldan technology. Eventually, the characters and factions learn about the nature of Nexus, the purpose of the experiments performed there, and what happened to the Eldan and why they disappeared from the universe. (original emphasis kept)

The challenging part of allowing players to decide their own games was that I was not

familiar with the gameplay or culture, and spent some time with each participant being coached through the first parts of the game. This learning and community sharing will be explored further in the analysis sections, but I felt it was important to note as a development from the methodology.

### **Participants**

In order to have discussions and a place to collaborate with potential participants, I created an online gaming group called ‘Talk Nerdy To Me’ as an informal space where fellow gamers could post articles, videos, and discussions about social issues in gaming. This group was created as part of a past research inquiry for workshops on gaming in the classroom. In this group, I put out a call for participants (see Appendix B) for the individual narratives portion of my research, and another call for a gaming party (a collection of gamers playing together, but not necessarily in the same physical location) hangout in *World of Warcraft* for the focus group. I encouraged any extra participants to join us for the team play if they wished. I also put out a general call on Facebook, which was shared widely by friends, family, and colleagues. Due to issues with the nature of the gaming community and gender research, I did lose one of my one-on-one interviewees, an issue I will discuss further later in this section. Participants had to be above the age of 18; I ascertained their ages via their Facebook accounts (an imperfect indicator) and video chats.

Participants had to be willing to play the game I had chosen for the focus group, or be familiar with it at least, and be situated in North America, both for the sake of time zone congruity, and cultural understanding. For the purpose of the individual interviews, I selected five gamers, three men and two women, but ended up with two women and two men. Participants were selected based on several inclusion criteria: their self-reported experience with online games, their willingness to spend several hours at a time playing video games alongside me, a willingness to engage in either a one-on-one interview or a focus group, and their willingness to discuss topics like gender, sexual violence, and personal experiences in an interview setting. Participant names have been altered for the sake of anonymity, and they were given the option to use a created ‘gaming name’ as an identity tag for the purposes of our interviews. Some have chosen to do this, and some have asked for different names altogether. Participants were also given access to the data collected during their specific gameplay via a digital Dropbox, in case they wanted to review the video of their interview. During observation

of non-participant players within games, no in-game names were utilized. All images including the names of players have been removed for privacy reasons.

The participants were all avid gamers ranging in age from 19 to 35. They were a mix of university students, teachers, professional gamers, lawyers, and game designers/software engineers, all from Canada. Two one-on-one participants identified themselves as women and two as men, while the focus group consisted of five identified men and seven identified women. One player from the individual interviews was unable to make the focus group portion of data collection, so while there are 12 participants in total, only 11 participated in the focus group. When I began to write this dissertation, (male) participant number 12 asked me to remove all of their contributions and identity from the project, which I did. So, to be clear, I have 11 participants in total: four men and seven women.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Self-Reported Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Interview Participation</b>
Biospark	Cis male	26	Professional gamer	1 on 1 + focus group
Skwyrl	Cis female	32	Legal aid	1 on 1 + focus group
Phedria	Cis female	29	High school teacher	1 on 1 + focus group
KD	Cis male	20	University student	1 on 1
Anonymous	Asked to be referred to as 'he'	18	N/A	Focus group + private chats
Galindlinari	Cis male	28	Software engineer	Focus group
Syfte	Cis female	25	Elementary-school teacher	Focus group
Wishfire	Feminine Androgynous	43	Disabled + unable to work	Focus group

Dysis	Cis female	35	Software designer	Focus group
MrWoody	Cis male	25	Law student	Focus group
Jirra	Cis female	33	Nanny	Focus group

*Table 1.* List of participants by gender, age and profession

We selected *World of Warcraft*, as stated above, because it was the easiest game for new players to become familiar with and in which to gather digitally. While not every member was a regular player of WoW, for the purposes of the focus group, I asked that participants had some familiarity with online gaming in some capacity in order to participate fully. The four one-on-one interviewees were Biospark, Skwyr, Phedria, and KD. All four have long histories with gaming, online gaming culture, and competitive gaming. They all identified as regular, serious gamers, meaning they spent more than five hours a week playing video games. All four also participated in the focus group. The additional focus group members were Galindlinari, Syfte, Wishfire, Dysis, MrWoody, Jirra, and a last individual who wished to remain anonymous, who is referred to throughout as Anonymous. All my participants identified as ‘involved’ gamers, meaning they felt they invested an adequate amount of their weekly entertainment time to maintaining various online identities, characters, or guilds. They all played more than one online game as part of their regular gaming activities, and four of the 12 maintained regular contact with their guilds outside of the game, through messages and Facebook groups dedicated to community building/upkeep. All names were chosen by the participants for the study. They were asked to think of gamer names that did not identify them. In some cases, participants chose old avatars they no longer were affiliated with to engage with this study. In Biospark’s case, he was asked to choose a name that also did not identify him in his professional gaming role.

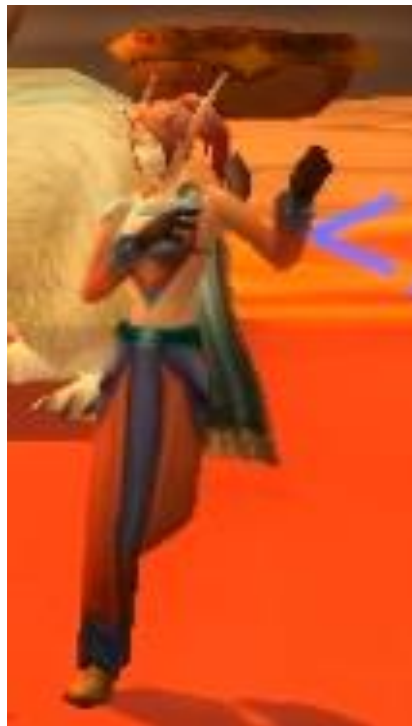
#### *One-on-one interviews*

**Biospark**, a 26-year-old self-identified male, is one of the most experienced gamers in the group. He has a dedicated gaming schedule, and plays professionally on a few teams, mostly within the game DOTA 2. He never uses the term ‘hardcore gamer’ to describe himself, but recognizes that he engages with a variety of games, a great number of gaming communities, and is quite



experienced. While he is well-versed in game details, news, and discussions, he avoids gamer politics. Early on in our conversations, he highlights a strong desire for more diversity in games, with different storylines, and less “stupidity.” **Biospark** chose the strategy game *Gauntlet* for our interview, because he wished to introduce me to this game he was quite caught up in, and felt it would make for interesting discussion around gaming skill and narratives of players.

**Biospark** made it very clear that his main motivators for avatar or character selections were always “strategy.” That is to say, on the rare occasions he plays games with an in-depth character creation element, he spends more time caring about the way he presents himself in the game. But, as our only professional gamer in the bunch, his motivation is “always the end line of winning whatever game I’m playing,” as he put it. Interestingly, he followed the set guidelines of creating a Blood Elf for our focus group, but made himself a female toon, which he explains as “I always play female characters in strategy games, so I just automatically select them in most games now.” When I asked **Biospark** why he does this, he explained that the type of gameplay he likes as a player is usually found in the abilities of female characters: rarely brute force, often assassins or support characters. His selections are, according to him, motivated completely by strategy, and how he best likes to win.



*Figure 5.* Screen capture of Biospark dancing during focus group in WoW.

During our one-on-one, **Biospark** always selected his champions based on what I selected to play. This, he explained was because of the style of game we were playing. He stated: “I think it is important that the team remained balanced and effective. So, whatever you go ahead and pick, I will try to balance out with my pick. That’s good strategy.” While **Biospark** made it clear he almost always chooses a female avatar, my selection of a female character forced him to rethink his strategy, and he selected the male player on the left in Figure 6 and 7. Figure 6 shows **Biospark** as his character, a thief dressed for hiding in the dark and keeping his identity secret, while the avatar beside him is my chosen character. She is a ‘tank’ character, one who has brute force, and is seen here clad in Viking armour, drawing her sword to show off her attack skills. As we will see in the ‘Researching the Researcher’ chapter, her armour and looks are not typical of the female warrior type. They fully cover her body, and do not reveal much in the way of curves or breasts. This is a departure from the traditional “kombat lingerie” (sexy warrior attire) (Fron et al., 2007b), we more often see in female warrior avatars.



Figure 6. *Gauntlet* champion selections of Biospark and the Researcher.

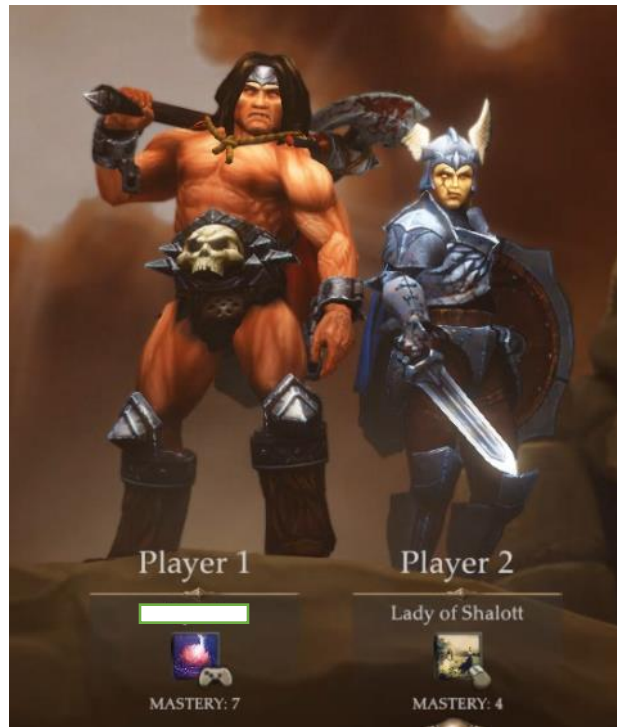


Figure 7. *Gauntlet* champion selections of Biospark and the Researcher.

The champions in *Gauntlet* do play around with the mainstream characters we usually see in games. **Biospark** speaks to the embodiment of the absurd in the creation of these characters “like look at my guy right now [figure 7, left] he’s completely ridiculous, macho, speaks in a dumbed down tone, and that’s simply part of the story or absurdity of videogames.” Clearly, **Biospark** is wide-awake (to use Maxine Greene’s, 1995, term) and conscious of gender representation. *Gauntlet*, interesting to note, is his chosen game, which speaks to the culture he is immersed in. This is an illustrative moment of how hegemony works (Gramsci, 1923): one can be wide-awake to the problematic nature of gender representation in this and other games, yet be seduced by it/them. *Gauntlet* offered a number of different types of characters to play that all had different skill sets. As you can see in figure 7, **Biospark**’s champion is the absurd macho he problematizes; he’s rippled over with muscles, much larger than my female character, and seems to be modeled on the old Conan the Barbarian video game/film character. He’s intimidating and covered in skulls. Significant to note is that, in the actual gameplay, despite his larger-than-life figure, this stereotypical warrior character has been exaggerated to the point where one as a player cannot really take him seriously. He is bare skinned to show his muscled warrior body and

his connections to the barbarian world. Here, bare skin is masculine, suggestive of his ability to be violent and dominate opponents, unlike the bare skin of female champions seen in the previous chapter. My character selection, on the other hand, came from the desire to play a ‘different’ female character. She embodied a more masculine female than most other avatars I have the opportunity to play. Her cut out eye and scarred face, full-body armour, and flamboyant Viking helmet attracted me. Here was an opportunity that I am rarely afforded as a player, to play against the hypersexual gendered woman (this will be further explored in the following chapter).

**Skwyrl** is a 32-year-old legal aid assistant who lives in the Northwest Territories. She self-identifies as female. She is married and a mother, and while this at times eats into her gaming, she and her partner often play together. In our introduction to each other through the online community, she sent this bio of herself to share:

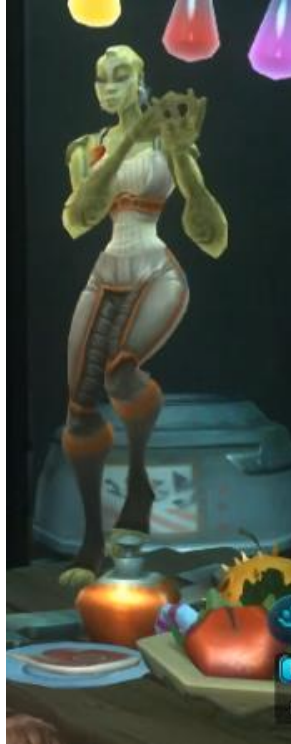
*I've been a gamer on and off since I was two, when my grandfather taught me how to use his Commodore 64, but I didn't start online gaming really until I was 21 - I started with first person shooters and then moved on to MMORPGs once I started dating my husband. The first MMORPG I ever played was Eve Online, and I played that on and off for about 10 years. After that, I also played WoW, Aeon, City of Heroes, and probably others that I can't think of right now. WoW and Eve were my favourites, and I've gone back to both of them repeatedly. I generally play with my husband, and I find it easy to make friends online as well. Even though I don't MMO much anymore, primarily due to my buggy internet connection, I still play quite a few games. I enjoy different platforms, but PC is my favourite. I play a lot of single player indie games right now (Steam is great for that type of thing) and I also enjoy puzzles games, etc., on my phone. I play the occasional console game, but I don't like the controllers and generally end up back on the computer. I tried gaming on the iPad, but same issue. Apart from gaming, I have blogged on and off, sometimes about gaming, for at least a decade.*

*I am a slightly social person, and am still friends with many of the people I have gamed with, although we're rarely in touch on a day-to-day basis.*

**Skwyrl** chose a new MMO called *Wildstar* for us to play together. This was a game I was not familiar with, which gave **Skwyrl** the opportunity to guide and teach me along the way as we conducted our interview.

**Skwyrl** spent a great deal of both the one-on-one interview and the focus group dancing and playing in the digital space (see Figure 8). She found the moments when we were talking about more than playing the games to be a bit boring, and used the space to ‘exercise’ her avatar through her jumping and dancing. Her avatar’s dances were her way of performing for attention during the interviews. The dances are often sexy, involving the use of hips and hands alongside

the body of the avatar in a rubbing motion. **Skwyrl**, often driven to disrupt the traditional view of the female body in avatars, also uses the sexuality of her avatar to draw attention to herself. Reading **Skwyrl**'s avatar in *Wildstar*, two things jumped out at me: first, her obvious feeding into gender stereotypical behaviour of being happy and playful on the one hand and curvy yet slim on the other (boyd, 2011); second, **Skwyrl** chose an avatar that displays a stereotypically racialized black body and facial type: cornrows, large lips and nostrils, wide hips and thighs, her alien (extraterrestrial) character (Nakamura, Rodman, & Kolko, 2000). This type of avatar, which Nakamura et al. call 'appropriation', will appear again in later avatar examinations in this chapter. **Skwyrl** shares, as we shall see, that she has to feel a connection to her digital representation, but she also uses that digital body to closely mimic how she feels at any given moment. She chooses to engage with avatars that are 'alien', large, and 'unique-feeling'. I noted during our interviews that she wants to represent herself in the gaming space, but at the same time, an 'other' self, one that visually represents her feelings of otherness in the real world, as she often expressed throughout her interview, and which will be shown later in this chapter. I also do not know how **Skwyrl** is racialized. In our conversations, she has never physically identified herself beyond expressing that she feels she has a large and cumbersome body. It is important to remind the reader that all interviews were conducted via audio software; so, with the exception of KD, who identifies as a racialized Vietnamese male, I do not know the racial background of participants.



*Figure 8. Skwyrl's Wildstar avatar.*

**Skwyrl** often gave contradictory readings of her representations in the selected games, and felt that was a symptom of constantly searching for ways to represent who she felt she was, while at the same time escaping that same self. Choosing the black body as a site of identification (Hall, 2013) is an interesting choice, to say the least. It opens up a number of lines of analysis. As a woman, first, **Skwyrl** is choosing to other herself to the extreme, especially in a game that is predominantly played by white males. Second, and this is what renders avatars unique, **Skwyrl** has the luxury of opting out of that character at any point either by altering herself and her skin colour or totally choosing a different character and avatar. Third, and finally, in our one-on-one interview, **Skwyrl** noted: a) that she felt a bit shy and uncomfortable around so many gamers; and b) she was worried her comments or reflection on games might come across as “wrong,” as she put it. Figure 9 shows her feelings of how she would feel if she was judged unfairly. Clearly, using the black-like body here gives her the distance that it is not her body that is judged. In other words, ironically, in choosing this avatar, for **Skwyrl**, the black body emerges as a site of identification, and as such of empowerment (Hall, 2013), but on the other, it does not matter if it is judged wrongly because it is a distant body.



*Figure 9. Skwyrl sitting in WoW.*

She decided she would select a different toon, her act of rebellion against the suggested avatars of Blood Elves, who were chosen so we might all begin in the same location. She told a story to the focus group upon first arriving in the chosen game location that she died 12 times (her character was attacked and killed by other players) along the way to the meeting point, as she was playing a new character. She selected a Tauren, which spawns to life in a different area in the game. This further reinforces **Skwyrl's** stated desire to never look like the 'traditional' female character. She rejects the embedded masculine narrative of 'sexy' female characters, and always selects characters she deems defy those conventions.

**Phedria** is a 29-year-old high school teacher from northern Ontario who self-identifies as female. **Phedria** was my pilot participant and collaborator in problem-solving some of the technical issues with data collection. As a result, I spent the most time with this participant. She describes herself as a 'serious gamer, but not like, serious games, just in the sense that I find this to be a big portion of myself.' She defines 'gaming' as including video games, table top (board) games and role-playing games. She is well-versed in all gaming platforms, but is a regular PC gamer. She loves RPGs and MMOs, because she enjoys collaborating with other players. She

also likes to integrate some video games into her teaching practice, if simply to connect with her students and their interests. “Games make up a big portion of who I am, and who my friends are. I do LAN [local area network] parties with friends, and invest a lot of energy in those friendships.” **Phedria** selected *World of Warcraft* as our interview game, it being the game she most often engages with, and as a way to help prepare for the focus group interview to come.

**Phedria**, too, made interesting gender selections in game. **Phedria** was extremely vocal about her frustration with existing female avatar character choices. Her frustration of the lack of playable female avatars, or ones that were not created with the male hetero gaze in mind, made up a lot of her decision-making in game, and discussions surrounding her digital body choices. In our interviews, **Phedria** played *World of Warcraft* both times, meeting me digitally in the fictional world of *Azeroth*. She selected two different kinds of elves for play, based on the requirements of our focus group and the one-on-one interview. In both cases, she was expressing her frustration with the wardrobe functionality of her avatars, comparing them to their male counterparts. She did that often throughout the interviews to show me what she thinks the trouble with gaming and gender was/is. By way of examples, figures 10 and 11 offer a similar elf woman in tight clothing, with similar body stances that plague female characters in games. This is “the hip stance” as other participants called it.



Figure 10. Phedria in one-on-one interview.



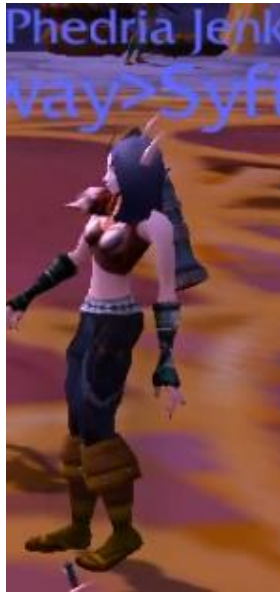


Figure 11. Phedria in focus group WoW.

**KD** is a 20-year-old pre-law student who self-identifies as a Vietnamese male living in eastern Ontario. He describes himself as a pretty ‘hardcore’ gamer, investing a minimum of 15–20 hours a week into gaming. He often plays with friends or roommates, but also with people he does not know in real life. **KD** is one of the participants who is more interested in discussing gaming politics and issues within the culture of gaming. He is well-versed in online articles and webseries that discuss games, and follows certain prominent gamers in the community. He has attended competitions and LAN party tournaments. One of the more skilled participants, **KD** chose to play *League of Legends* with me, and mentioned he hoped I could ‘keep up’. This comment is, one may argue, open for a feminist reading where I as a female player could be seen as less capable than a male player; an issue I will take up again my chapter on myself as a game player.

Like **Biospark**, **KD** also focused on the support and tactic driven idea of avatar selection. He, too, made decisions based on the team selection, and what the best outcome would be, but expressed frustration at times with the types of games he played, such as *League of Legends* and the desire to just play whatever he wanted to counteract other players messing around with that more noble sentiment. As he explains, “Why would I want to sacrifice my enjoyment of the game, when buddy here is going to try to play a random champion in a role they shouldn’t be?”

It's annoying. So sometimes I just say 'fuck it'."

For my games with **KD**, we tried as best we could to pair up and work supporting players in *League of Legends*, but had issues with players refusing to swap out roles. In a real-time strategy game, players take up certain roles, such as support (healing and helping others) tank (taking the brunt of damage in a fight), or jungle (pestering the opponent team in the hidden parts of the game map), for example. When a game begins, five players who are grouped together must work out what roles they will take up to support the team. Often, one must be willing to compromise what you will play as other players refuse to play anything but jungle, for example. In Figure 12 we see one of the champions from *League of Legends*, Leona, who is **KD**'s go-to champion, a support character. She is a Valkyrie, a warrior woman, out for blood and a solid strength-based character, despite her skirt and bikini-top armour. She is perhaps the most covered female champion you can select in game, and is outfitted with the best armour, shield included.



*Figure 12. KD as Leona in League.*



*Figure 13. KD as Shaco in League of Legends.*

**KD** played Leona in our first game, and a jungle/assassin character called Shaco (Figure 13) in the second round. Shaco is a scary clown character, two-toned and styled a bit like the movie character ‘The Joker’. He is often used to play the jungle role, popping out of nowhere to attack with his doll clown helpers, and two long knives. His face is painted, and he sports a jester costume. **KD** likes him because he is an instigator, an annoying figure in the game, and it’s fun to play him: “He’s such a shit disturber, you know? It’s why Shaco is a go-to champ for me.” Like **Biospark**, **KD** also spent more time designing his avatars in games that gave more options when it came to avatars, but had some interesting choices when it came to gender selection, motivated by male gaze and rewards, which will be highlighted later on in this chapter.

#### *Focus group interview participants*

The focus group interview members consisted of all individual interviewees, one anonymous participant who allowed me to refer to him as ‘male’, and the following participants:

**Galindlinari** is a 28-year-old software engineer from southern Ontario, employed at a gaming company, who self-identifies as male. **Galindlinari**’s character selections were unique, in that, of all my participants, he was the most open to playing all different types of bodies, genders, and races in games, and wished gamers had more opportunity to play out different versions of themselves because, as he says, “it’s boring to always be the same.” He played as a female Blood Elf for the focus group, and shared that he and friends would often play as female characters in online games, sometimes simply because people were more helpful and gave better assistance if you were thought to be a girl. **Galindlinari** explains his choice thus: “When I make

Blood Elves, I always make a female Blood Elf, because like, the guy Blood Elves all look like girls anyway, so what's the point?" Implicit in **Galindlinari**'s political correctness, if it is that, is the hegemonic male attitude that females need the help of males, so cunningly choosing to be a female in a game lets you get what you want.



*Figure 14.* Galindlinari spontaneously breaks out into dancing in the WoW focus group session.

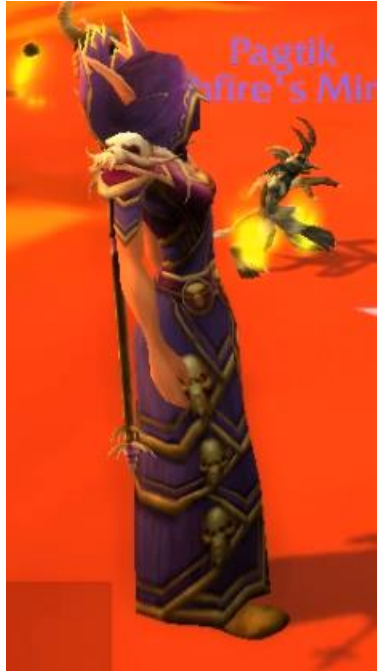
**Syfte**, is a 25-year-old teacher from eastern Ontario who self-identifies as female. **Syfte** was, as she shared, a little less certain of her identity digitally, and her choices when it came to creating a representation of herself. "I don't play all that much, so I'm not sure if I have a set way of going about it, if that makes sense?" Ellison et al. (2006) would certainly read **Syfte**'s hesitation as a gendered attitude, compared to **Galindlinari** e.g. who gives a clear account of what he plays, how, and above all why. When I pressed her in the interview, **Syfte** indicated that she gravitated towards female characters. However, she explained further, due to the nature of her gaming habits, playing alongside her fiancé and his friends, she often had to select her characters based on teamwork. Nonetheless, she did note her distaste for body types in certain team games, stating that she felt the variety of types for men far outnumbered those for women. "Oh there is awful female selection option in most team games. They all look boobalicious, haha." She too selected a female Blood Elf for the focus group, and designed her, she told me, to resemble herself. In figure 15 we see her hanging out on the floor of the Blood Elf start up space in WoW, a position she remained in throughout most of the focus group session, even when

others were dancing and running about. Her digital representation was a bit apart from others.



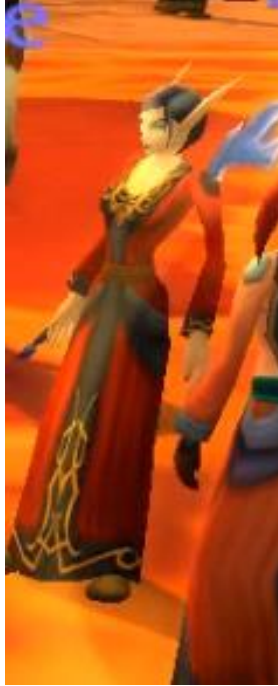
Figure 15. Syfte relaxing during the *WoW* focus group session.

**Wishfire** is a 43-year-old who self-identifies as female and a disabled person, originally from the UK but currently residing in eastern Ontario. **Wishfire**, perhaps the most broadly experienced of the women participants, has a very eclectic style of avatar creation. She fashions herself as “evil as possible,” as she put it, “Or, I suppose, as intimidating as possible. But usually female, which can be a challenge.” With this, **Wishfire** is expressing her indictment of the gaming culture as far as gender is concerned. Nonetheless, she repeatedly expressed that gaming provided a space of escape for her, and that she needs to feel her avatar represents that, as well as her ability to be the “baddest bitch in the room.” Throughout the focus group, her avatar remained hooded in a mage hood, hidden from view, but still threatening. She often plays as the ‘Horde’ or bad side of *World of Warcraft* player versus player combat sides. **Wishfire** was originally meant to be the fifth one-on-one interviewee; however, due to severe anxiety and depression issues which she allowed me to share, did not feel up to interacting much beyond the focus group sessions. This anxiety came across in her focus group interactions, as she preferred to type in the group chat to speaking aloud, but also in the selection and styling of her avatar: mysterious, hooded, unapproachable, and a bit angry.



*Figure 16.* Hooded Wishfire in the WoW focus group session.

**Dysis** is a 35-year-old software designer living in Quebec and employed at a gaming company, who self-identifies as female. **Dysis** is experienced with the greatest number of console and gaming styles, took a very specific stance on avatar creation: “I don’t particularly like interacting with others, even on WoW so I never give a rip about how I look. I create an avatar that I think will do the job of the game I want it to, and seems interesting or different to me, and go from there.” **Dysis** has played WoW the longest of the participant players, and as a video game designer, had a lot to say about the evolution of digital representation and gender. Like the rest of the participants, even though she declared gender representation as insignificant, her frustration at the lack of diversity (gender or otherwise) was often brought to the forefront of discussion.



*Figure 17. Mage Blood Elf of Dysis in the WoW focus group session.*

**MrWoody** is a 25-year-old lawyer and master's student who self-identifies as male and currently resides in the UK as an exchange student, but is originally from Ottawa. **MrWoody** declared his desire to make his avatars as “fucking handsome” as possible, as he described his selected Blood Elf design. He wanted his avatar to be outfitted as much as possible while still looking like a “handsome devil,” as he put it.



*Figure 18.* MrWoody Blood Elf Warrior in the focus group session in WoW.

He is a big proponent of the “idea of fantasy and escapism in avatar creation,” like several other participants. He often plays games as either gender, and even enjoys playing RPGs as a woman, something other male participants shied away from. For him, “the complete freedom to design someone new” was what drove his play. However, he was the first to declare in the focus group how “annoying the unrealistic body types for both male and female characters can be.” He advocates for armour that makes sense, and “beer bellies on male warriors because they can’t all be ripped and fit. I mean, come on, I’m sure Vikings were fat from all that ale.” On a more serious note, **MrWoody** turned the discussion often to threats of violence and sexual attacks on female characters and players within online gaming, noting that it happened too often, and that that kind of gaming turned him off.

**Jirra** is a 33-year-old nanny in eastern Ontario who self-identifies as female and a ‘new gamer’. **Jirra**, the newest player to WoW and the world of online gaming, was still in transition when it came to designing herself digitally. She too gravitates towards creating female avatars, but has played as a male on occasion in WoW. She expressed a noted “difference in treatment and willingness to invite me along on campaigns based on the identifiable gender of my toon,” something she declared was “frustrating and annoying.” She continues, “I’m only good enough



for a dungeon if I'm thought to be a dude, and if they realize I'm a woman, I need to prove myself to them first. So I just play with my boyfriend and his friends now." **Jirra** played the focus group session as a Blood Elf mage, and commented on her "sexy gypsy looks." Her female Blood Elf character holds to the general body type of Elves in WoW, large breasts, small waist; this character has clothing that sets her apart as a mage, such as a sash and long robes, but these are still cut to appear sexy and tight fitting. Clearly, one may contend, conformity is expected from female players.



*Figure 19.* Jirra in the focus group session in WoW.

The final participant in the focus group has asked to remain as **Anonymous**, but allowed me to divulge that he is 18 years of age and asked me to refer to him as 'he' for the purpose of sharing his contributions to the focus group discussions. He shared very different points of view from the rest of the participants when it came to avatar creation, but remained fairly quiet on why this was so until a follow-up discussion after the focus group, when we spoke over team chat in an informal way, during which he expressed to me that he believes the artists and designers who put "their blood, sweat and tears into game creation" should have "the say as to what characters

will or will not look like. Enough of this diversity saber rattling. It's not your game, so either you play it as is, or don't, but stop complaining about how characters look." This is an attitude to diversity and gaming that **Anonymous** expresses several times. What **Anonymous** shares shows that a greater diversity of players and avatars is unwelcomed by some gamers and speaks volumes about the trouble with gender and gaming. In his observations we see some of the same emotions that drive online campaigns against feminist critics and developers interested in diversity, introduced in the introduction. **Anonymous** stated that he picks characters and styles for his avatars to be as different and alien-looking as possible, as this is how he feels he looks to the rest of the world, too. He selected a different character for the focus group with that in mind, which I read as a desire to resist and be different. The reader will note throughout the analysis sections **Anonymous**'s desire to remain an outsider, and defend his stance on gaming.



*Figure 20.* Anonymous dances in the focus group session in WoW.

It is interesting to note that all seven women often felt driven to select their real-life gender identification in their characters whenever possible. They discuss throughout this chapter how they more often than not feel the lack of choices for female avatars. They suggest that this made them feel driven to cling more closely to a recreation of their real-life identity. This contrasts with how the male participants selected identity in games. The women further suggest that because they often did not connect with the male characters they were forced to play in many video games, they would choose to not gender-bend if they could. When given the opportunity to

be female characters, as we shall see, the women players identified more with their avatars. The male participants who identified the desire to play as male characters reasoned that this choice helped them feel better connected to the storyline, whereas the women tended to play male characters and storylines because they had to in order to play certain games.

Finally, I will note that while a few participants chose to play as non-humanoid looking characters in our interactions in game, none sought to use avatars of different skin tones. All selected light coloured, generally light-haired avatars to represent themselves. Sometimes this was due to a lack of selection when it came to skin tones, but often it was simply because they wanted to look more like themselves within the game. Gender and (skin) colour were certainly crucial components of my data collection and data analysis, which I deal with next.

### **#GamerGate**

Losing participants in a study is a very normal experience when conducting research, especially digitally (Nakamura et al., 2000). However, the ‘why’ of losing those participants can sometimes be a unique and complicated circumstance. Two such instances occurred during my process of recruitment, and as both these participants were members of the Facebook group used for previous research (Schmitz, 2014), I felt it was important to note why they declined to participate in the research groups.

A major division has occurred in gaming communities online, due to a phenomenon in August 2014 referred to as #GamerGate. As a number of the #GamerGate members have aligned themselves against ‘Social Justice Warriors and Feminists’, any individual seen to be exploring diversity in gaming, or specifically gender in gaming, risks becoming the target of a small group of malicious individuals in online spaces. I do not classify all #GamerGate members in this vein, as most that I have spoken with on Twitter or in gaming forums recognize that there are gender issues in games and gaming culture. However, with this anti-feminist label in mind, two of my recruited participants, both 18 and avid gamers, were of the mindset that anything to do with discussing gender and gaming would lead to a path of ‘eliminating’ what they loved most about gaming. They were fearful that the discussion and focus group would become a hostile, unwelcome space for them, as they had very strong views on feminism and video games. One

participant dropped out before the focus group and interviews were set in motion, while the second removed themselves from the process after the one-on-one interview, requesting all data involving them be omitted from the study.

I respect their need to feel safe when participating in online/game discussions, but wish to highlight the fact that they feared feeling unsafe in a discussion group that might simply challenge their views, while #GamerGate diehards make many online spaces unsafe for a number of researchers, gamers, reporters, and educators by threatening rape, doxxing, and death. I also wish to highlight the fact that talking about gender and gaming with gamers can be complicated, and even confrontational. While this research project was meant to create a better understanding of gamers' experiences with gender and gaming, it also serves to highlight the problematic nature of many people being invested in this pastime for a variety of reasons, and with a variety of identity attachments.

### **Data Collection**

My data collection sites comprised three separate spaces: the Facebook forum from which I garnered participants; the virtual space of my chosen games, *WoW* and *League of Legends*; and the games my participants selected to be observed playing, *Gauntlet* and *Wildstar* as well as *WoW* and *League of Legends*. After I obtained release forms from individual participants (Appendix D) and signed the participant forms (Appendix E), I began my data collection via conversations on Facebook, in game play and conversations, and via Google Chat (a program similar to Skype). Data was collected between August 2014 and February 2015. Interviews and focus groups were held between December 2014 and February 2015. Data was recorded using screenshots and game recording software called *Overwolf* (Overwolf Ltd) that allowed me to review conversations, dialogue, and actions throughout the game play. This software was used to record both my own game play and my participants' play. The software was also used during the larger 'hangout' gaming session, the focus group, to capture the interactions for digital ethnographic analysis. All audio was also recorded separately from video, utilizing TeamSpeak software, for clarity, and in case video froze up. Screenshots have been drawn from the video recordings for closer semiotic analysis, and to capture in-game dialogue via chat boxes through which participants engaged.

To establish protocols for the analysis, I piloted each section of data collection to gather information effectively. One of the pilot sessions led me to develop a section on digital methods/learning, which will be found in the conclusion. A voice recorder was used to keep track of observations and notes during game play. I spent 2–3 hours observing and discussing with each of my participants for a total of 13 hours of game play and discussion. This was enough time to capture evidence of their digital identities, as enacted, and experiences as gamers in an online setting. I also spent 3.5 hours in the focus group session, collecting data, as the bulk of gaming culture observations occurred during the time spent observing my individual gamers, as well as during my own gaming time. All screenshots, video, audio files, and written observations are kept in a closed Dropbox folder, with copies on a hard drive.

### **Data Collection: Researching the Researcher**

I began collecting data for observation in August 2014. I spent a total of 30 hours recording my game play for analysis within *League of Legends*. I chose this time as it allowed me to consider roughly 15–20 sessions of game play and to analyze the gaming space outside of the participants' interviews. I continue to play this game regularly, and while not every one of my sessions was recorded using video capture, I did screen capture conversations and avatar creation on a regular basis. My narrative of experience playing with my chosen champion, Miss Fortune, will serve as the data through which I examine how gender is represented within the online game *League of Legends*. How I negotiate game play as Miss Fortune (Figure 17), in her pirate hat and bustier, as well as my interaction with her ascribed 'dialogue', the gameplay quotes she expresses while I do combat, will serve as an example of dwelling between a positive and negative cultural interaction with digitalized gender.



*Figure 21. Miss Fortune from League of Legends*

While I still play WoW for recreational purposes, my engagement with the game for research purposes lasted for a period of four months (February 2011–June 2011). I played between classes, on weekend afternoons, and at times even during lectures. In total, I spent just under 125 hours of time in the online world. Writing a journal comprised of my notes and interactions, I attempted to keep a running record of ideas and impressions as I engaged with the game. I usually kept notepads near enough to pause and write down memorable engagements. Twice I used desktop recording software to replay my gameplay when it came time to write about the gaming experience. At times, I engaged in dialogue with other players, which I copied from the game chat box after I had interactions with other players. Often, however, my data was drawn from personal narrative. This narrative is derived from a running thought process; I wrote what I felt and what I thought in a free prose style. The focus on gendered identity grew from my experiences and the reflections on those occurrences that I formulated while engaging with the game. The greater the issues I faced with gender in the game (such as sexual harassment,

banning from quests by male-only groups, issues which I examine more closely further on), the more I began to reflect on the gender reading of my data. It was not until several months into my gaming experience that I decided to create multiple gendered avatars and examine the differences within game play.

Finally, I captured screen shots of various avatars and in-game characters to create a series of images from which I conducted my semiotic analysis of avatars in WoW. Each of these screenshots is of specific avatars within the game, either my own, those of other players, or computer-controlled characters I interacted with. To conclude, because I wished to focus my research on my narrative, I did not actively seek out friends to engage in gameplay. More often than not, much of my time gaming was spent with fellow online players I did not know.

### Analysis

I performed a qualitative analysis of the observation data (screenshots, game play videos, etc.) as well as my online conversations with the participants so patterns of themes emerged from the data collected and were not predetermined or imposed by me. To develop my focus group questions, I took the overall research questions and broke them down into questions that would give participants space to explore tough questions about their digital play, experiences with violent language, and overall impressions of gaming culture.

To prepare for an analysis using emergent themes, I took a step-by-step approach to my data set, which I have highlighted in table 2.

Data Analysis Steps	Method/Approach
Step 1. Emergent themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• watching/listening to collected data;</li> <li>• transcribing data;</li> <li>• coding data sets by themes such as race, sexuality, gender performance, violence, jokes, sexually violent language, romance, tactical discussions, guild discussions, etc.</li> </ul>
Step 2. Analyzing emergent themes against RQ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reviewing each collection of thematically separated coded data using the research questions, narrowing the data set to relevant topics to the research project</li> </ul>
Step 3. Analyzing emergent themes for key words/conversations on the body, gender performativity, sexualized language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• using theoretical framework language + concepts, I further narrowed the themes I would address in the project by teasing out conversations, performances, and actions in the data set which spoke to gender performances, performativity, instances of disruption and cyborg approach to digital culture, and moments of docility reflected in performance of hegemonic masculine culture</li> </ul>

+ disruption of culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• separating data into specific themes for analysis by connecting narratives;</li> <li>• setting aside ‘episodes’ for deeper analysis and to showcase the overall narrative emerging from the data set</li> </ul>
Step 4. Highlighting key episodes and conversations on hegemonic masculinity + gender performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• separating supporting/contradictory data that gave some insight from the overarching stories, main discussions;</li> <li>• working these episodes into the main analysis chapters: Power, Digital Bodies and Performance; and Language in Gaming Culture</li> </ul>
Step. 5 semiotic analysis of images, video and avatars in the episodes selected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• conducting a semiotic analysis of images and video captured during the highlighted episodes mentioned in step 4 in order to add a reading of gender performance and use of digital bodies during the episodes</li> </ul>

*Table 2. Methodological steps for emergent theme data*

In step one of my review of the data, certain themes emerged, such as: choices participants made around digital bodies; sexiness and avatars; the importance of visual representation when creating an avatar; the importance of storylines and gender identity; how much power participants felt they had in game play and interactions with other players; types of language (i.e. trash talking, jokes, sexual language, violent language) that participants felt impacted, or came up regularly in, their play experience; and the feeling of belonging players felt when engaging with games. As a second step, I compared the emergent themes and stories from the data set with my research questions, to help identify which themes I would examine more closely. As my initial research hypothesis was that I would find instances where players disrupted the culture of gaming as they negotiated it as individual players, as step three in my analysis process, I selected emerging themes that demonstrated whether disruption was occurring. I also focused on themes centred on the digital body, keeping Butler’s (1999) and Foucault’s (1978) theories on gendered bodies and docile bodies in mind.

Finally, in step four, I looked at my analysis of the games and participants’ experiences as ‘episodes’. I looked for episodes of hegemonic masculinities as experienced or enacted by participants, the ways in which the constraints against the digital body influenced their participation in video games; I then examined both these types of episodes for impersonation and performance of gender, seeking to find where participants became docile or disruptive bodies.

Because I am interested in the underlying socially constructed gender identities and performed gendered identities within these conversations and gameplay, analysis emphasizing



category identification and coding emergent themes, ideas, views, and roles was most useful to the study, as it allowed the conversations and the data to speak for themselves. However, as the researcher, I selected themes that signaled moments where gaming and gender were troubled. Specifically, data on who has the power to create and design digital bodies, the language participants and players use to describe digital bodies, and the language participants and players use towards other players or characters that were gendered, sexualized, or sexually violent in nature. I coded/labelled any parts of the data collected that met these thematic criteria.

The analysis of semiotic practices further enriched my data with multifaceted views of gendered identities in video games, moving beyond players' dialogue and performances to examine the bodies they utilize to enact their virtual play. Brandt (2003) suggests that "whenever anybody is learning to read or write anything, it is always possible to ask who is subsidizing the event (or not), how the materials involved have arrived at the scene (or not), and whose interests are served in the learning (or not)" (p. 247). Who has subsidized my literacy? What has fostered my ability to become multi-literate in the world of online gaming? Is anyone beyond the game creators and companies influencing how I learn within this sphere? Self-reflection is the first step in creating a research space that allows me, the researcher, and my participants the ample space to analyze the "economies of expression" (Fisher, 2005, p. 93). Video games have introduced a new way of interacting with technology, with others and with the learning environment, creating a space for new and multimodal literacies necessary for "reading" and decoding these digital environments.

In the planning stages of this project, I had intended to use each interview/focus group as a case study, treating each interview as an 'episode' or snapshot into gamers' experiences and representations. I realized, however, while collecting the data, and hearing and seeing my participants interact with each other and feed off of stories from other participants, that the analysis would be incomplete unless participants' stories continued to speak to each other throughout. Each theme, I realized, must include multiple voices if it were to successfully encapsulate the representation of those who participated in the project. The greatest conclusion from the data collection was that gamer identity and representation is wrapped up in the larger community of gamers, be it those in the focus group, or those who participate in the game being analyzed, or gaming culture at large.

### **Limitations and Ethical Considerations**

Murthy (2008) claims the presence of ethnographers in a virtual field site is often physically invisible and that expression between “the researcher” and “the researched” is not always grasped, which make the methodology problematic (p. 840). However, Hine (2005) makes the point that just as in face-to-face interactions, researchers in virtual spaces need to both draw on their existing social abilities, location and subject positions, and develop new talents to address the problematic nature of researcher–participant relationships. They also “need to become adept at creating comfortable spaces for informants and interviewees to share their experiences,” as well as attending to the ethical responsibilities which new forms of research relationship place upon them (p. 18).

Rather than simply acting as a source of data, the participants of my study have actively shared, engaged, and invested in the outcome of the research, becoming contributors to the project. However, having participants that involved in the research itself, and engaging in their pastimes with them further complicates the “researcher/researched” divide, especially if we consider that virtual ethnographic research in online gaming takes place in venues where both the researched and the researcher are required to perform digital identities. By including my gameplay for analysis, I hope to acknowledge my own digital gendered performance and thereby mitigate any complications that my participation may have led to in the participants’ virtual ethnographic collection.

## Chapter 5

### Researching the Researcher

*“She is a Night Elf with purple hair and blue skin”*

The embodiment of the unique researcher as the instrument for qualitative data collection has been widely acknowledged (e.g., Cassell, 2005; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Turato, 2005). The phrase researcher-as-instrument refers to the researcher as an active respondent in the research process (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Researchers “use their sensory organs to grasp the study objects, mirroring them in their consciousness, where they then are converted into phenomenological representations to be interpreted” (Turato, 2005, p. 510). It is through the researcher’s facilitative interaction that a conversational space is created—that is, a space where participants feel safe to share stories of their experiences and life worlds (Owens, 2006).

When I began my study, I recognized the importance of examining my own experiences with video games as a participant, so as to flush out bias, locate narratives, and structure my future discussions with participants. I have chosen to examine my experiences with two video games, *World of Warcraft* and *League of Legends*. This chapter focuses on gaming journals I kept for analysis purposes, screenshots taken during gameplay from the two games, dialogue and conversations with fellow players (who remained anonymous), and semiotic readings of avatars I have played with and interacted with throughout my time collecting data. I have included the semiotic reading of others’ avatars within the selected games to provide the reader with the greater catalogue of digital bodies with which I interacted as a player, so that my selected images for deeper analysis are seen as part of a greater pattern of gendering of video game characters, and not simply ‘cherry picked’ examples.

Selecting the specific games I would review was difficult; as an avid gamer I had many options, and will admit to wanting to write on as many different gaming experiences as possible. While my participants brought other games to the project, and I engaged in the games they were playing as part of the data collection, for the purposes of my personal analysis I chose *World of Warcraft* and *League of Legends*, as I felt they their rich data and patterns which reflected each game’s culture best represented my varied experiences as a researcher-participant. In this first analysis chapter, I introduce the reader to an in-depth reading of digital bodies and avatars situated within the two chosen games, as well as images taken from screenshots of the game that are analyzed semiotically and as patterns of the game’s particular culture. I then explore the early

experiences I had as a gamer, and what has led to my specific interest in this research project, to situate my understanding of gaming culture. I have also included a few examples from participants as comparisons to my journal to demonstrate that while my journal may be personal, it is not reflective of my experiences alone. Following this overview, a walkthrough of choices I made as a gamer is analyzed for each game, with special emphasis on gender performance and experiences of sexualized violence occurring in the games as I played them.

### **What Are Games to Me?**

For the most part, games are created by males for males, and much of what players interact with is hetero-male-centric. In my experience, player/computer dialogue involves responses and commentary male gamers respond to. On the other hand, computer-controlled female characters are typically shaped and designed to visually please heterosexual male gamers, in my interpretation of them as a female gamer. The gaming world is shaped by the curation of performances of normative gender by creating a fantasy interpretation of what is and is not allowed. For example, as we shall see when exploring the participants' experiences in more depth, it is perfectly normal for a male player to gender-bend and play as a female character, if his motivation is that he can, as participants put it, stare at a girl's butt while she runs through the forest. What would be frowned upon, as participant **Galindlinari** states, is a player who 'tricks' other players by pretending to be female, performing acts of a flirtatious nature in order to gain advantages over other players. Gender-bending in a trans- or queer-gendering way would be "breaking the dude code," in his mind.

In my experience, female gamers must negotiate a new sense of self each time they game because of gender-specific storylines or character models they are exposed to in each video game. Though male gamers may also need to negotiate multiple identity experiences, they do not face similar issues with gender (depending on their own orientation). Female gamers are forced in two main ways to perform gender identities which match the representation of the gaming world, and not necessarily their desired act of gender in real life.

First, girls, women, and transgendered players who engage with video games must more often than not negotiate a game as a male character. This representation forces gamers to navigate a games' storyline and character interactions as a man would, and to choose from actions designed to cater (usually) to heterosexual males. For example, should I wish to play any

of the *Grand Theft Auto* games, I would have to interact with the story as a male character who regains health points by having sex in the back of his car with a female prostitute, whom he can either pay, or force at gun point and then simply kill to conclude the act of sex. While this example is highly controversial, as the game is considered extremely questionable for its content of extreme violence, gang warfare, and violence against women, its extreme misogyny is typical of many mainstream games (Sternheimer, 2009).

Second, gamers, when given the option in mainstream games to create a female avatar, almost always have to negotiate the production controls and choices that have been created by a male designer. As a result, the typical female avatar in games such as *World of Warcraft*, or *League of Legends*, has a very cookie-cutter design for the female body: curvy, large-breasted, with a lot of cleavage, scantily clothed, big-eyed, and appealing to the number of hetero-male gamers who will interact with said avatar. The ‘champions’ (the name for avatars in *League*) seen in figure 22 collectively demonstrate stereotypically ‘sexy’ game avatars. As we will see throughout the analysis chapters, players from all backgrounds are continually asked to orient their performance in video games around the male heteronormative narrative.



Figure 22. Female characters in *League*.

Even in games such as *Tomb Raider*, which features a female main character named Lara Croft, the visual representation of the female body has one purpose: to stimulate the desires of

hetero-male gamers. Kennedy (2002) analyzes player responses to Lara as a character to be looked at, and suggests that “Lara’s status as an object of sexual desire” plays a significant “factor which the marketing/advertising of Tomb Raider was keen to reinforce” (p. 2). As we saw in the review of the literature, these body types have not changed throughout the evolution of characters like Lara. While Lara’s character has become more complex and rounded, the style of her clothing, cut of her tops, and shape of her body remains firmly in the ‘sexy female warrior’ category.

This visual representation is not limited to the female form, either. Male bodies are often unrealistic, unattainable macho figures, with rippling muscles, cut forms, and aggressive features, and are stereotypically built for violence. One-dimensional portrayals of men reinforce harmful stereotypes that limit men’s ability to recognize themselves in games, while limiting their identities in game to violent hero/saviours. Schut’s (2006) reflection that RPGs are profoundly concerned with physical strength in the form of “blowing things up and killing enemies” (p. 107) is true in many game-based scenarios. Schut also shares a commonly repeated observation concerning the gendered presentation, or lack thereof, of certain bodies and the acclamation of heterosexual masculine power in numerous RPGs, stating that men: “appear as powerfully built warriors, trim and agile thieves, or respectable and wise-looking wizards. Women, on the other hand, are almost always, regardless of their character-role, beautiful and voluptuous, with tight-fitting, revealing clothing. In other words, men are powerful and women are eye-candy.” (Schut, 2006, p. 109). Further, in *League*, players are not even able to customize their appearance; instead they select a ‘champion’ with a pre-set design and back story, along with colourful sayings and jokes they voice over the game while playing. The narrowed representation of gender in games when looking at individual characters, and how these champions are designed, is analyzed in this chapter. I perform a gendered reading of my personal gaming narrative, in which I had recorded my experiences of playing both as a ‘female’ and as a ‘male’ avatar, and a semiotic reading of avatars in *World of Warcraft* and *League of Legends*.

In WoW, I am given more options to alter the appearance of my avatar than I am in *League*, but not much. While players in *World of Warcraft* are given the choice of ‘race’ and the ability to alter facial details, hair colour, and body markings, all body types for each specific race remain the same. All gnomes’ bodies appear the same, all Night Elves the same, etc., as we see in figure 23.



Figure 23. The male Night Elves of *World of Warcraft*.

In *League of Legends*, I am asked to choose one of 123 pre-fashioned champions, 78 of which are male, 40 female, and 5 non-gender-distinct, as their bodies are animal- or insect-like. In this chapter I utilize data collected via screen shots and video play, as well as my gaming journals, juxtaposed with the reading of my avatars, as well as other in-game avatars, to create a deeper gendered reading of game play.

The beauty of creating a digital identity using an avatar is that it allows one the exploration of something beyond oneself. We can posit gendered representations and their semiotic meanings when engaging in text-based discussions or even audio conversations with other players. In the end, we distinguish ‘genders’ by reading a combination of actions, images, and discussions with players. Distinguishing one’s gender is narrowed in a game like *League of Legends*, where there are only two sexes for us to select from, and where the performance of gender through the character is controlled by the game creators, who, as I will show, have limited the gendered identity of female characters to sexy warriors, femme fatales, and innocent/childlike girls. In selecting a male character, character type and performance of masculinities is perhaps more varied than their female counterparts, but notably absent are trans or queered gender performances, with no male characters’ gender-bending, performing drag, or performing feminized identities. In online games where all the avatars are male and all players

are virtually identified as male, it becomes much more difficult to take up any counter gender performance. Here, players' performativity of hetero-male masculinities are the only forms of expression granted to gamers.

Beyond interpreting the images we are exposed to, gamers deal with interactive images that respond to whoever is controlling the gameplay. In an online game, we not only negotiate our own interactive images, but those of others. When another player blows you a kiss, the symbol for flirting in everyday society is now translated through your avatar. "In interactive media," Simon Penny (2004) explains, "a user is not simply exposed to images that may contain representations of things and actions. The user is trained in the inaction of behaviours in response to images, and images appear in response to behaviours" (p. 80). Therefore, the ability to read the signs in a simulated world requires a particular form of literacy and familiarity and becomes even more important when dealing with how individuals represent their identity within the world. "We create, maintain and revise a set of biographical narratives—the story of who we are, and how we came to be where we are now" (Giddens, 1991, p. 107). Likewise, Lather (2001) suggests "we are inscribed in what we struggle against" (p. 20). How I negotiate game play as Miss Fortune, a favourite champion in *League* in her pirate hat and bustier, and my interaction through her ascribed 'dialogue' (the gameplay quotes she expresses while I do combat), will serve as an example of dwelling between a positive and negative cultural interaction with virtual gender. So, too, is my negotiation between my male and female avatars, or 'toons', in *WoW*, as each role comes with cultural expectations.

### **Semiotics and Performance in *World of Warcraft***

Play in video games is an important aspect of games as learning spaces. Learning to play a game such as *World of Warcraft* demands a great deal of a new learner. It requires hours of commitment, patience, the desire to interact with others for assistance, and requires a quick explanation of the commands and tools used to advance yourself in levels of play. Steinkuehler (2007) describes the knowledge one gains from MMO play as a fluency in gaming literacy, and that "if we take the contemporary definition of literacy as 'sense making' within a multimodal, socially situated space, then surely the most mundane versions of MMO Gaming demonstrate fluency and participation in a thoroughly *literate* space of icons, symbols, gestures, action, pictorial representations, and text" (p. 301). My gaming literacy is demonstrated by my growing



knowledge of the world, and by the improvement of action/interaction, drawn from my learning the culture and developing the higher gaming skills necessary to ‘survive’ in this world.

In Figure 24, I have highlighted some of the important keys/tools players must comprehend in order to commence and continue with play. These tools change with one’s mastery of the game, but are also different depending upon one’s ‘class’ and skill. Because my character was of the hunter ‘class’, I have the option to see various animals, humans, and sub-humans on my world map. This allows me to better navigate around potential enemies, and to see fellow guildmembers (who are highlighted in a different colour than other players).



Figure 24. Screenshot of Tacey, a hunter character, in combat mode in WoW

My avatar or ‘character’, Tacey in this screenshot, is a symbolic representation of my virtual identity. Tacey is meant to represent me, however the avatar creation only allows me as a gamer to express my identity to a certain degree, depending on the game’s avatar creation tools. When given the opportunity to finely recreate myself virtually, I tend to be less creative than some gamers when I play an RPG or storyline-based game. I normally attempt to visually

represent my actual form as closely as possible, as quickly as possible, so that I can start the game. However, when playing a game such as *The Sims*, which is a game more reflective of my everyday life than a game where I am slaying dragons, I tend to take much more time and care. As I have already stated, the avatar creation program for *World of Warcraft* is not very extensive, when compared to the rich avatar creation options of popular RPGs like *Skyrim* and *DragonAge*, or the best in-game avatar creation program, *The Sims*. WoW has a number of different types of ‘races’ a player may select from, and the ability to choose a certain face, hair colour, and eye colour. It is important to note, however, that the bodies within a specific race do not change at all. As we will see in the following chapter on digital bodies, it is often very important to players what kind of selection process they have in choosing their avatars in games. For me, certain game publishers’ unwillingness to design any game characters not attractive to heterosexual men affects my ability to connect with storylines and further engage with a game. At times, it has driven me to completely abandon a particular gaming genre (e.g. sports games that do not allow for female players). It is important to note that in most games, a player must create or select an avatar to begin play. When that very first step in play is deemed alienating because of the lack of representation, we already begin to see the trouble with gender and gaming.

Issues with the representation of gender can also be observed in the play and action of non-human characters in game, such as the Gnomes, Dwarves, and Goblins in WoW. In Azeroth, the fictional land of WoW, players may select from 13 different races of characters when creating their avatar. Races are divided into the good and the evil (Alliance/Horde). For example, one cannot play a ‘good’ Goblin, or an ‘evil’ Night Elf. Only the new race of Pandaren, large Panda-like bears, can be found on either side of the Alliance/Horde divide. On the Alliance side (see Figure 25), we have Pandaren, Worgen (werewolf-like creatures), Draeni (light spirits), Dwarves, Gnomes, Humans, and Night Elves. On the Horde side, there are Pandarens, Goblins, Blood Elves, Orcs, Tauren (large cow/bull creatures), Trolls, and the Undead (demon creatures).

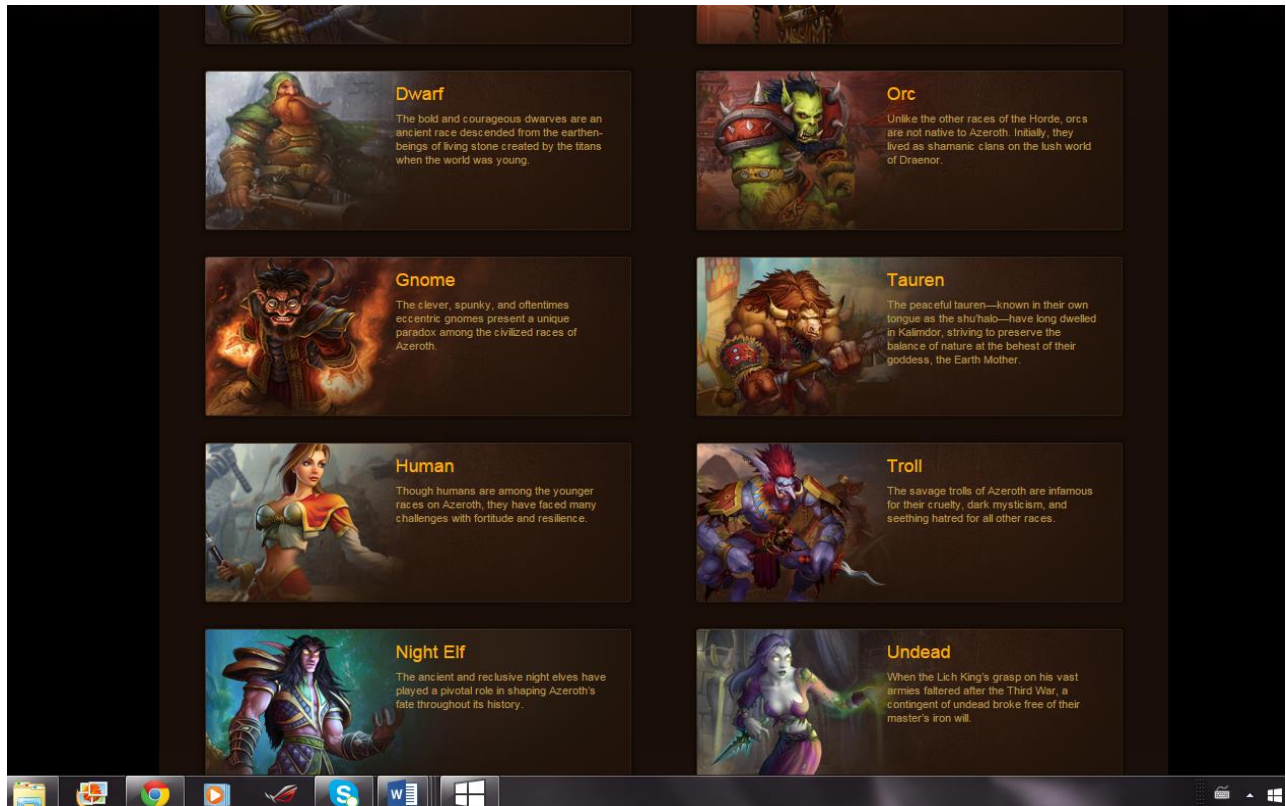


Figure 25. Screen capture of races from Blizzard’s WoW website.

Each Horde ‘race’ has their specific styles, highlighted with exaggerated features, skin colours, and often ugly appearances, wildly different from the ‘attractive’ Night Elves. However, in analyzing the female Goblin character in Figure 26, I am still met with a sexualized creature with wide hips, pink clothes, and exposed breasts. She is racialized differently than other characters in game, made to appear more evil as a member of the Horde, however, her armour and ‘pinked’ appearance in comparison to the male goblin also pictured demonstrates that the sexualisation of female toons appears across the ‘races’ of WoW.



*Figure 26. Male and female Goblins in Cataclysm expansion.*

So, there is no escaping the sexualisation of female characters, even in characters that are completely removed from the human identity. The undertones of body shape/style and gameplay are indicative of the sexualized entrapment of avatars in WoW. As seen in Figure 27, even monsters to be beaten, like the Naga, seem to fall into a gendered binary: the temptress female and the feared male. Interestingly, the male Naga is painted darker, with dreadlock-like hair, suggestive of a racialization not visible in his female counterpart. While both creatures are meant to be ‘bad guys’ within the game, the male is signified as a bigger, darker threat than his female counterpart.



*Figure 27.* Female and male Naga ‘villains’ in WoW.

Beyond the images presented, we should analyze the actual gameplay and ‘action’ of my avatars, which plays an important role in reading the gender representation. Within the game there exists the ability to type commands for your avatar; we can blow kisses, laugh, shake hands, clap excitedly, and even dance. Again, these actions are gender specific. My male avatar, Azei, has a deep, hold-your-belly style of laughter, whereas my female avatar has a giggle with your hand on your mouth action when laughing. Dancing is different, too. Tacey wiggles her hips in her dance whereas Azei does the Macarena. The designed command actions, and the image of femininity made for the game, caters to players who wish to engage with the game on a social level, such as **Wishfire**: “it’s really the place I feel the most likely to socialize and feel I can be outside of myself”; they flirt, chat, and engage in more ‘adult’-natured discussion. Much of this is healthy, normal behaviour. However, as I have outlined in my journal, some behaviour towards female players is wrapped up in an extremely sexual presentation and communication. For me, this created an environment that was extremely distracting to gaming content. It always ‘soured the milk’, so to speak. A running female Night Elf does not just jog, she wiggles, whereas a male Night Elf moves with strength and purpose, with no hip swaying. The avatars of

*World of Warcraft* are also the inspiration for current classroom aide *Classcraft*. While students may not be engaging with avatar creation on the same scale, this ‘borrowing’ of gaming culture fails to recognize the problematic elements of avatar creation and construction that dominates most of gaming culture. Another reason, then, for the pedagogy of video games in schools to involve a greater look at the parts of gaming culture often ignored in the quest for better classroom management.



Figure 28. Armoured female characters from *World of Warcraft*.

Through the design of certain of the female characters (see Figure 28), *WoW* is a place that reproduces a standard gender dynamic, namely the male gaze (see Mulvey, 1975). It often caters solely to that gaze. However, visually, these representations could be considered pretty tame. While the male gaze is catered to in *WoW*, in particular through the design of the Human, the Night Elf, and the Blood Elf races, as well as some of the NPCs, and a few items of “kombat lingerie” (sexy warrior attire) (Fron et al. 2007b), for the most part, the female characters are relatively modest, especially when we compare these to the design of the champions in *League of Legends*.

Using a few screenshots I took from gameplay on *World of Warcraft*’s latest expansion pack, *Cataclysm*, I will explore, through a semiotic reading, the patterns derived from the representation of the female and male forms the game designers have created for players in *WoW*. Figure 29 is a pre-game shot of my in-game avatar, Tacey, and her pet fox. The design of the clothing she is wearing represents the violent nature of the game: she is

armoured, but in clothing that does not restrict her movement. Unlike characters who do not engage in combat, my avatar is also armed. Using my knowledge of gameplay and the ‘rules’ I have been exposed to through trial and error, I have learned that if I remove any of these pieces of clothing, my character becomes vulnerable to attack.



Figure 29. My avatar Tacey, a female human hunter class ‘toon’.

To explain, feminine clothing such as blouses and skirts offer no armoured protection to my avatar. Her armour, however, is clearly fashioned for the female form. Low cut, form fitting, and coloured/shadowed to give her breasts greater contour; no one would mistake her sex. Her pants too give shape to hips. The shadow effect of colour and design play an important role of ‘shaping’ the character. Every female character within the game is given a generous chest. What one cannot see in an image of my avatar is her distinctly feminine gait and manner of interacting with the world around her. As she walks, she shifts her hips in a suggestive manner. The avatar suggests to me an impression of ‘sexy warrior’. She is designed with a specific purpose, which is that of a warrior, a strong fighter empowered enough to fight the ‘Horde’, but with sex appeal, too. She’s no brute in armour. In Tacey we see the “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 1988, p. 519) signal gender performance. Tacey’s movements in the game display gender norms of femininity despite her status as a warrior in “the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of

various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self' (Butler, 1988, pp. 519–520).



Figure 30. Azei, my male avatar, a male Night Elf of the warrior class.

Azei, on the other hand, is my male character (Figure 30). Here he is pictured in the avatar creation program at level one; I selected the Warrior class for this avatar, and he makes for a very different sight than my female avatar, Tacey. Standing tall, erect, armed with a sword and closely fitting leather clothing, he is intimidating. His scowl is meant to demonstrate the fierceness of his race and his class. A Night Elf is not a friendly Gnome, or a gregarious human. They are cool and reserved. Azei resembles the stereotypical male hero in most combat games: overly muscled, powerful thighs, lean torso, and detached facial expressions. He never smiles in game, even when made to dance. His appearance only increases in fierceness as you further armour him throughout the game. However, the image of powerful brute is never erased. This is not a sexy warrior; this is an example of a hyper-masculine warrior, that like the unattainable cut abs in the film *Spartans* drives young men to hit the weights. In this sense, this character also represents a desired look. He may not be a sexually desirable design, per se, but he's everything a 'man' should be. His body type is also not alterable, just his hair, skin colour, eye colour, and identifying marks. He is, however, still alien in appearance, with large elfin ears and blue hair. Despite these differences, Azei's body is gendered by the overall gaming culture and player



expectation to play as a ‘warrior’. The warrior “becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (Butler, 1988, p. 523).

Not only was I unable to alter the body type or general design of my female or male avatars in pre-game *World of Warcraft*, but I noticed that the computer-simulated female characters within the game all came in a certain shape and size, too, while more of the male characters came in varying shapes and sizes. The following two computer characters, one a quest giver, the other a soldier, both represent a sexualized image similar to the one that my avatar does. Figure 31 shows a character who is in need of assistance; within the game’s context, she sends warriors out to help her family’s farm. She is the stereotypical damsel in distress. Her brightly coloured dress signifies her in game wealth, as dye costs a great deal of money. Her dress is also cut very low, revealing her breasts, which, again, are ample.



Figure 31. Quest giver in the Stranglehorn Realm.

Next, Figure 32 shows a Stormwind soldier. We interact with guards/soldiers when needing directions or assistance finding specific trainers or shops within a large city or town. This particular soldier is female, which we can see by her size and the shape of her body. However, the sexualized nature of this avatar is more apparent when she is in motion; as she does her rounds of the city, she has a particular sway that is very

unsoldierlike. While she performs a small role in the overall gameplay gamers interact with, she is another instance of a specific representation of the female form within the game.



Figure 32. Stormwind female soldier.

### Semiotics and Performance in *League of Legends*

Gameplay in *League of Legends*, a Real Time Strategy game, is quite different to that of WoW. Here, the objective of the game is much more narrow: it is, simply, to capture the enemy base, and to kill as many of the enemy players as possible along the way. Because the game is more strategy-based, players do not get to create their own avatar. Instead, we select from a range of characters called “champions.” Using screenshots that I have taken from gameplay in *League of Legends*, as well as game-produced images of champion ‘skins’ (outfits/designs that are interchangeable for each character, if you pay for them), I have read the body types semiotically, and derived examples of gender performance from the characters the game designers have created. As *League* has over 100 champions, I have selected the top six characters I play most often. It is worth noting that they are *not* the exception to the rule when it comes to how bodies are represented in the game. Female champions, with the exception of three child-like figures in the game, all sport similar body types to those I have selected. As you will see in the following

chapter, Visual Representation and the Body, part of the culture of *League* focuses on the breast sizes of champions, and on which ones are sexiest to play.

The startup screen while any group of ten champions prepares to do battle also demonstrates the variation between champions, both male and female:



Figure 33. Load screen *League*.

Of the ten champions chosen to play the game in this round, six are read as female, by their dress, makeup, feminized features, and body types. Two are read as men, warriors with rippling muscles and armour. Finally, two are champions of unknown humanoid origins, one wolf-like, the other a scarecrow. Both these characters are referred to as male, as their voices in game are read as male. While the women outweigh the men, they also distinctly exhibit a breast-first, sexy pose in each shot. Even the two characters covered in armour still appear sexualized.



*Figure 34. Game champion selection image of Miss Fortune.  
“Are you sure you can handle me, Summoner?”- Miss Fortune*

Reading individual champions and their signature commentary in game further demonstrates this. As Figure 34 shows, here we have a champion dressed as a pirate, created thin at the waist, with round hips and large breasts barely contained by her top. Miss Fortune sports tight leather pants, high-heeled leather boots, a bustier, and a bare midriff. She is also made up with beautiful makeup, long lashes, and perfectly curling long hair. While equipped with two guns, she wears no protective armour or gear, though she is soon going into a battle arena. She is attractive, petite, and spilling over with lace, breasts, and sex appeal. The actual gameplay of this champion is a little harder to explain without a video of the gameplay, but even standing still, she exudes ‘womanly sexuality’, swaying her hips, holding both pistols in the air. She fits the mould of temptress, hunter of pirates. In the game play, as stated above, we are also given the ability to access in-game dialogue and actions using keystrokes. For example, typing /d in the text box,

will set my champion to dancing. While several champions have very silly dances, from the Macarena to one that closely resembles the chicken dance, Miss Fortune's dance again is highly suggestive and sexualized. She moves slowly downward, swaying her hips, raising both arms in the air, and turning about. Minus the pole, her dance is very like an exotic dancer in its style. The description of our champion is not enough in itself to demonstrate what the problem with a virtual avatar being sexualized in a game could be.

Reading her virtual body and what that says to male and female gamer alike shows why we should be troubled by champions and avatars like hers. Miss Fortune, dressed for combat in skimpy clothing, armed with her dualing pistols, was designed to entice; again, the concern for the male gaze and fantasy are highlighted. In *League*, Miss Fortune's female form and, consequently my identity as a woman gamer, become graffitied with conflict, violence against women, rape culture, and the hyper-sexualisation of women.

In figure 35, we see that fantasy of hyper-sexualisation and the imagining of women's bodies as warrior/sex symbols in another champion, Morgana, a sorceress who has wings as part of her game powers, and is therefore nicknamed 'The Fallen Angel'. A difficult yet powerful support champion, she is often used in games I play. Morgana visually embodies her name of fallen angel, with dark wings, long purple hair, and glowing eyes; she appears to be fierce, angry, and vengeful. Her elaborate skirts sit just at her hips, and the rest of her torso is covered by the smallest bikini-armour in the game. Her large hips and round backside are emphasized by the smallness of her waist and overly large breasts. Her movements in game, however, are all about her power wings and magic skills as a mage. Her in-game sayings focus very much on revenge and bringing pain to people. She also jokes: "Not all angels are good." Pictured in game skins and play Morgana is dark, but sexual and carnal; she is visually crafted to be sexy and scary at the same time.



*Figure 35. Morgana from League of Legends*

An exception to the sexy warrior figure would be that of Annie, a young girl whose main mode of attack is setting her robot teddy bear to breathe fire on her enemies. She is petite, doll-like and unassuming at first glance, though her violent catch phrases of “don’t make me hurt you” and “eeny meeny miny BURN” demonstrate otherwise. Dressed in a stereotypical doll’s dress and sporting cat ears, Annie is meant to embody the darling look of a five-year-old girl. Annie skips through the game, she does not run. In the game selection image below, she does exhibit some of the traits of her fellow adult female champions, with her hand placed on her hip, chest forward. Her apparent age also does not exclude her from discussions around breast sizes in champions.



*Figure 36. Annie and her bear.*

On the male side of the champion selection page, we have a mixed bag of aliens, insects, a number of other animals like bulls and polar bears, and warrior men in different shapes and clothing styles. These champions are interpreted as male as their in-game voices and sayings are read with a male voice. Beyond one joke from a pint-sized squirrel champion named Teemo, who states “size doesn’t matter” in a non-suggestive manner, all male champions’ sayings and quotes are very focused on one thing: winning at all costs. Quotes of violence, domination, death, mayhem, taunts, skills, and criticism launched at other champions abound. Unlike their female counterparts, these male champions come in a range of sizes, depictions, and shapes. From the lithe Mr. Yi, a thin ninja dressed in robes who speed attacks’ other players to the giant Gaunt, dressed in barbarian clothing and wielding a hammer, these champions are varied, interesting, and creative. There are, of course, also the typical male warrior shapes, muscle-bound and clad in manly armour. However, there is much more variety in the visual representation of male champions; characters like Gangplank, in Figure 37, a cutlass- and gun-wielding pirate, bearded and dressed in his 18<sup>th</sup> century sea captain’s outfit. He is fierce, a bit deranged in his facial expressions, but visibly intimidating without being cut from a ‘warrior’ mould. He is outfitted in a long Victorian style coat, big boots, and pirate hat. No attention is

given to his body type or style, nor are any muscles visible in the typical fighter/warrior avatar look. Nevertheless, he is stereotypically ‘male’. Bearded, with an aggressive body stance, explosions behind him, Gangplank mirrors the action heroes of films and games. However, in all, Gangplank exemplifies the varied, wide range of male champions within *League of Legends*, in direct contrast to his female counterparts.



*Figure 37. Gangplank*

### **Race and Champions in League of Legends**

An overview of male champions and their representative races shows that across the range of male champions, the overt sexualization we saw in the female champions is not present. However, the lack of diversity, and a racialization of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ stands out whenever characters of either gender are examined more closely. While most human-like champions are light in skin tone, with Ekko and Lucian, both male, being the only racialized black characters, a number of champions are racialized as Asian. This may in fact be playing to the game audience, with a large number of *League* players coming from Korea and China. However, these characters are always crafted in a hegemonic masculine brush, light skinned, made muscular and attractive. I contend these ‘good guys’ are whitewashed, made to be the antithesis of the dark, evil ninjas



within the game. When a champion is made to be a more evil character within the game (though this is only relevant to their sayings, back stories, and sometimes skills within the game, not the actual gameplay), they are almost always non-human; werewolves, robot hybrids, and bears. Jax, (Figure 38) for example, is an unparalleled fighter, who uses only a lamp post stick to beat his enemies. However, he is hidden from players' sight via his large hood and black face mask. His appearance is ominous, but reminiscent of the representation of a street thug, hoodie covering his face so he will not be recognized by the police.



*Figure 38. Jax from League of Legends.*

Warwick is a creature of the night, a werewolf with imposing claws and terrifying red eyes. He is dark, huge, and scary. It is important to note that examples of avatars like Warwick demonstrate that all characters not on the 'good side', which is peopled by light-skinned, racialized white or Asian characters, are signified by animals or robotic creatures. They are 'othered' creatures not at all like their human counterparts.



*Figure 39. Warwick*

Female characters are rarely anything other than human or humanoid. Perhaps the only ‘other’ female character is Nidalee, the Amazonian character who transforms into a puma as one of her skills. Nidalee is animalistic, tribal, and racialized as a darker ‘jungle woman’ who cannot control her nature as a human, and transforms into a cat. She is still, however, highly sexualized in her clothing, stance, and body proportions.



*Figure 40. Nidalee*

## My Gaming Journal

With a better understanding of the characters/avatars within the two chosen games, and the process through which I created and selected these characters, I can delve into an analysis of my gaming journal, a series of reflections and reviews of my experiences in game which I recorded after my gameplay in *League of Legends* and *World of Warcraft*.

My fascination with communicating with other players across the globe via online gaming first started when, in 2000, I began playing the simulation game *Age of Empires*, which simulated the social, political, and economic intrigues that evolved in Western society from the 'Dark Ages' to the Enlightenment. I played with classmates (all male) from middle school for hours every evening, attempting new war strategies or city planning in order to defeat them. We could play with eight players on a large map, and either have a free-for-all, or team up in pre-determined alliances. At lunch time and recess, we would spend time drawing up new strategies, get in arguments about which country had the best chance of winning (I usually played as Scotland, which resonated with me because of my family heritage), and which was the right division of assets when it came to military and economy.

As I advanced to high school, my online gaming tastes evolved. Taking history classes made me interested in more complex games like *Civilization*, a more advanced version of my middle school simulators. I could test out many of the political ideas I was learning about in Ancient Civilizations myself in the treaty building and breaking of online gaming. Soon enough, however, my gaming took on a new bent: *Halo*, a first-person shooter/multiplayer game, made its way into our household, and my brother and I found a new outlet for our competitive vendettas against each other. *Halo* granted XBox players the ability to connect online and shoot each other. Games like *Capture the Flag*, *King of the Hill* and *Team Domination*, similar to many camp and sports games I played as a child, dictated the rules of warfare engagement in a virtual world filled with colourful maps, an armoury of weapons, and gleeful murder.

A game like *League of Legends*, on the other hand, is not nearly as time-consuming or seemingly complex as an MMORPG because each game lasts between 10 and 30 minutes. However, a real-time strategy game like *League* requires a player to build a skill set over numerous matches against various levels of players, and learn different styles of battle and strategy as they advance through the ranks. It is the kind of game I can talk about both to my 7<sup>th</sup>

graders and to adult pre-service teachers who play the game, and be able to easily discuss structure, motivation, and methods of best practice. It is still, however, a fairly complex game, and four years since I first explored the game, I am still learning. I spend time on gaming forums discussing new champions, watch YouTube videos featuring particularly skilled matches, and more recently, having being invited by one of my research participants, I watched a live tournament in person of professional gamers playing *League*, The quick pace, skill required, and punishing level downgrades suffered as a result of losing too often require a gamer to continually hone their skills. So, while a match is short, the commitment to playing can be just as time consuming as being immersed in the realms of WoW.

The following analysis examines my experiences within both these games, analyzes their similarities and differences, as unique gaming cultures with particular values, structures, and experiences for an ever-learning gamer. As cited already, gaming journals juxtaposed with images drawn from within both games will be used to create a vivid and critical analysis of experiences with gaming and gender.

### **Reading *World of Warcraft*: Researcher as Participant**

*I have created my avatar. Her name is Tacey, she is a human female hunter class. She has long blond hair, vivid green eyes and her weapon is a bow and arrow. It was frustrating designing her. I like more choice, more freedom to tailor the look of a character. WoW gives you about 10 skin colours to choose from, limited resources, hair styles and facial expressions to choose from. No change in body composition, just a wide hipped, big breasted generic body type that suffices for all races (creature type). The only difference is the height. Gnomes and Dwarves are shorter than Humans, who are shorter than Night Elves. I have created this character in a game realm that is only gameplay/storyline action. (Journal Entry, February 25, 2011)*

While examining my *World of Warcraft* journal, three themes have emerged that give some idea of what gendering occurs within this space of gaming: social interaction and narrative building within games; what it means to *play* as an avatar; and the relationship of gender performance and gaming. The following is an exploration of these themes and analysis of them, interwoven with excerpts from my gaming journal.

### **Social Interaction and Narrative Building**

One cannot engage with a MMORPG without interacting with fellow players. Well, one can, but

it would result in very difficult gameplay for certain quests, and possibly boredom. A quest, for those unfamiliar with the gameplay, is a set of goals or tasks you acquire within the game. Some are easy collecting tasks that send you around the game map, while others involve complicated tasks best suited to a group of players. What makes games like *World of Warcraft* unique is that the players create much of the narrative through gameplay, through communication, and by forming social groupings called ‘guilds’. Depending on the people I choose to communicate with via scrolling text, voice (headphones/headset), or even avatar body motions, I alter the narrative. However, there is a particular, cultural narrative put in place, specifically heterosexual, which constrains my avatar within the game. As one engages with avatar design within *World of Warcraft*, one realizes that the way the “system of compulsory heterosexuality is reproduced and concealed is through the cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with ‘natural’ appearances and ‘natural’ heterosexual dispositions” (Butler, 1988, p. 524).

If I choose to make my avatar dance, people in my quest group can join me in dancing, watch me dance, or they could be annoyed by my wasting time and leave the group. However, how my avatar dances, the “natural” movement and rhythm of her body, is a direct reflection of the need to appeal to the wider audience of players who witness her movements. More often than not, social stigmas and constructions are implanted into this fantasy world. While gender is exaggerated and moulded by a fantasy ideal founded on historical precedence, stereotypes on race and sexuality become common in game banter/trash talk.



Figure 41. Standing in the centre of Stormwind, talking with guild members.

Language used in text interaction is censored, changing any profanity into symbols, but discussions using voice interaction (either TeamSpeak, Skype or Ventrilo) have no such censorship. It then becomes the responsibility of the players using such communication tools to police the negative behaviours of their teammates. As an example, I have included a section of my journal that highlights an interaction involving racial slurs that occurred over the voice system Ventrilo, or VENT, with my guild members:

*I ruffled a few feathers today. But first, let me set the day out: I settled in at a friend's place, juice, pizza and Wi-Fi at the ready, for a 6 hour levelling up mission. I can't believe how much fun it is to play with someone sitting at the same table, laptops in hand, laughing over the silly interactions we have with people. I did not think I could ever get to be the kind of gamer that enjoyed group gaming. Was I ever wrong! The key for me is definitely playing with people I already know, and making new friends along the way. I believe I do this when I walk into a party: I go with a friend, chat with that person and as the night wears on, I begin to feel brave enough to interact with others on my own. Apparently I online game the same way!*

*Like my real life identity, my WoW self doesn't take too kindly to inappropriate behaviour or rudeness. Feather Ruffling: I may or may not have pissed off our guild leader today. He was on our vent channel, talking with his second in commands in a 'joking' manner, and kept making extremely racist comments about the Jewish faith. After about the fifth comment I piped up on to the channel, stating: There are other people on vent right now, and I seriously do not appreciate the language you are using. I think there are rules about talking to people like you are currently doing. I know it's a 'joke,' but I do not really find it funny. Could you reign it in?"*

*This then triggered several minutes of discussion and apologizing by other members who exclaimed "oh he's half Jewish, he doesn't actually mean any of it." I shrugged this off, while my gaming partner eyed me and suggested I let it go before we got ourselves booted from the guild. Everyone seemed to get on ok after that, but I wonder if my interference will have consequences down the road? (Journal Entry, April 20, 2011)*

Here, what is deemed a contravention of proper etiquette in the game by some is excused by others; blatant racism used in the context of the game is excused because the player in question identifies outside of the game as half-Jewish. This creates a complicated dynamic when dealing with instances of sexism or racism. My own actions should also be questioned here: is it the safety of relative anonymity that allows me to take up a position of anti-racism in the guild? As a 'cyborg' for this moment, do I enact a "seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (Harraway, 1991, p. 175) to push back against the real-life categorization that players drag into gaming culture? I suggest that I am often selective in my interventions. More

often than not, my presence is not one of disruption, but rather, of docility (Foucault 1975), as someone unwilling to be made a target of derision, oppression, or to be outright rejected. As will be noted and explored in the later chapter Power Intervenes, often real-life social issues and problems are ignored and brushed aside with the “it’s just a game” excuse. My participants highlighted moments when they would have wanted to give voice to their inner cyborg, to reject their trained bodies and reactions to gaming culture’s rigid ideals of body, race, and gender identities. However, like me, they feared that the disruption would result in an immediate rejection.

As a member of a WoW guild, I wanted to belong, and form the comradery I had often heard one could have with online teammates. As **Wishfire** notes, there is a fulfilling feeling when you collaborate and achieve goals in games with others. It was made clear by teammates when I joined the guild that there were several dozen younger players (under the age of 18) within our guild, and it was suggested that we be role models and mentors of good gaming etiquette, to serve as examples for those younger players. Failing to do so would result in expulsion from the guild. I therefore took it upon myself once or twice to interfere with improper language use. It did not make me popular with certain members, but I was rewarded for my upholding of guild rules by a promotion in the guild ranks. Fair play and consideration are rewarded within the game world. Expulsion can occur for a number of reasons: not playing often enough, breaking the guild rules, annoying a guild leader to the extreme, being a poor sport (or poor gamer?), etc. Only a guild leader, those with administrative privileges over the guild, can expel a player. I learned it can be very easy to be booted from a guild:

*I have been abandoned. I signed on today after 20 days missing in action, and learned that what I had dreaded had come to pass: My guild DITCHED me. I knew they demanded at least once a week sign on and activity, but I had warned the guild leader that I would be preoccupied by work for the next couple of weeks. I would not have the time I did before to game. I promised to be back more regularly as summer came, but no dice. It seems my explanations and pleading won’t help either. I have searched out one of the other leaders to ask to be invited back, and was told I couldn’t be active enough for them, so no. I didn’t think I would be this disappointed, but I am! There were people I was forming a friendship with, a few gamers who I relied on often to help me out of sticky places and chat with about general issues with the game. A few of them knew I was planning on writing about my experiences as a WoW gamer and we chatted often about the merits of gaming and our experiences gaming. (Journal Entry, June 24, 2011)*

The more active I had become in the game, the more ‘friends’ I had made. Whereas I started off my gaming experience as a lone wolf, becoming a member of guild had opened new

doors for me: people were there to answer my questions, help me in quests, give me supplies, and come rescue me when ‘Horde’ players tried to kill me over and over again. Interaction within guilds can range from casual gaming with little communication to hard-core gamers scheduling quests and raids 4–5 times a week with a select group of gamers. I had been careful to choose a guild that catered to helping new players learn the game and level up, and that is exactly what my guild did. There are rewards for guild members for taking on group quests given to us by the moderators of the game as well. *World of Warcraft* designers have structured the majority of its game narrative on positive teambuilding and reward those who actively seek out other players to join their play with expensive and unique items and weaponry. Money in the game buys status.

### **What it Means to *Play* as an Avatar**

Games of any kind centre on one important concept, *play*. While many forms of media concentrate on story or narrative, video games are uniquely sculpted around both play and narrative, where narrative is governed by the desired play of the gamer. “Game designers are much less interested in telling a story than in creating a compelling framework for play. If we begin with this fundamental fact, it enables us to look at narrative in a play-centric context, rather than a ‘storytelling’ context” (Pearce, 2004, p. 144).

When I engage with the main storyline of *World of Warcraft*, I do so by choosing how the story will unfold, first by choosing either the (good?) ‘Alliance’ side of the game for my character, or selecting the (evil?) ‘Horde’ character starting point, and with every other goal or quest I choose to engage with from then on. Each decision results in different narrative and gameplay options. I am situated in the gaming world map differently, and I interact with different characters and quests, when I make gameplay decisions. I can spend hours “hanging out” in main social areas of the game, such as inns or city centres, talking and interacting with fellow players; or I can simply jump from quest to quest, building my experience points. My gaming journals and experience show that I have evolved as a player that once simply ‘quested’, seeking few alliances in game play, to one that now more regularly enjoys interacting with fellow gamers, specifically within the WoW context. However, how I interact with other players has almost become a defense mechanism unrelated to the storyline or gameplay. Should I need to play a quest or game which requires me to utilize audio to connect with fellow players, I only do so when playing with people I already have a relationship with outside of gameplay. This behaviour



is governed by the fact that I have had numerous negative interactions with players, such as the following, which occurred recently while preparing my new character for an upcoming one-on-one interview:

*I think I'm really going to have to limit what I do in WoW with the focus group. After today's test run to level up my new toon, I have come to realize too many issues could arise by a big group of us gaming in a PvP world. Today I partnered up with another Blood Elf to get through quests more quickly, and readily accepted the offer to speak over TeamSpeak to make coordination run more smoothly. I guess my new companion didn't quite have the same motivations as me. Not even 3 minutes in to using the TeamSpeak, he began to request that I "talk [him] through jacking off. Your voice sounds so hot." That has never happened to me before, but it's one of several negative interactions I have had on TeamSpeak with strangers, so I will have to definitely make my server closed for the interview, and have us stay in place so as not to cause too many problems. (Journal Entry, January 13, 2015)*

I have also had negative interactions in co-operative games, such as *League*, e.g. when players have heard my voice and realized that I am a woman, some have immediately suggested that I would be a bad player, and cost the team too many points by being present. I have been verbally abused a handful of times when this has occurred:

*I used TeamSpeak today for all of my game interactions. I played four games, and during three, the constant cat calling and name calling when I did badly have me resolved never to play with audio on again. I got called a stupid whore 56 times over three games, a cunt a total of 17 times in one game, told to uninstall my game, and told to make someone a sandwich in the kitchen a total of 14 times in two games. The game without name calling or harassment was civil and enjoyable, minus being referred to as sweetheart and girlie, but this wasn't a big deal. I may be annoyed by being called sweetheart, but it's pretty typical to endear women with that comment. I have often corrected players who call me dude or bro in game chat, typing, that I'm not a dude, and had very little negative reaction to that. So I truly thought I wouldn't have an issue on audio chat. (Journal Entry: January 21, 2015)*

Hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) dominates online gaming culture, granting permission for players to speak to female players with sexual and misogynistic language. The established gender norms in games are for heterosexual males, and when I choose not to hide behind the assumed maleness of gamers, when my voice signals my supposedly subordinate position as female, as woman, I am often attacked, mocked, harassed, or verbally abused. In the repetition of the performance of 'silent woman within a game', my performativity of gender is forgotten, washed away by the invisible masculinity of gaming spaces, and the embodiment of gender norms becomes the internalized identity; in this way the gendered subject, me and

whatever avatar I have selected to represent me, become docile bodies. When looking back through my gaming journal, I bear witness to my own complacency and acceptance of hegemonic culture in games; I am unwilling to break through the expected role of the female within games. Instead I become more interested in negotiating what performance of masculinities have been deemed acceptable by the general gaming group. Acceptable play in one realm in *WoW* is different from another realm, or another game. Games like *Halo* have a distinct culture attached to them, such as “t-bagging” an opponent’s dead body. However, acceptable play is not only governed by my interests or ‘moral’ compass while in the gaming world, it is dictated by the acceptable play and interests of other gamers. It becomes the confined space through which my body, virtually and in real life, is disciplined to consume and engage with gaming culture.

Play is also altered by my performed gender through the sex and gendering of my avatar. In experimenting with differently sexed avatars, I soon came to realize my ‘treatment’ or interaction with other players was altered. Other players were more inclined to assist me as a player with a female avatar. I received free items, free teleports, and any number of people stopped their game play to answer my questions. Even at a level 45, I still received offers. While my female avatar received assistance, my male avatar was often ignored when calling for help. However, he received a number of other benefits, as seen in this journal excerpt:

*After 4 hours of playing as my Night Elf Azei, I have learned a few things about the community of WoW. First and foremost, girls get so much more free stuff. Players, male and female, were offering me free items on a regular basis when I first started out playing as Tacey, especially before I reached a level 10. Maybe it was starting in a new realm with less friendly people, but no one wanted to help poor Azei out. Most people assumed I was a younger player because I asked so many questions, and many did help me, but the free item giving did not happen. I was more likely to be asked to help people in quests or dungeon activities, however. More male characters (I cannot say if the player was male or not) spoke to me. These communications were more likely to inform me how to improve my fighting skills, my upgrades, or how I performed in quests. When I played as a female character, people were more likely to simply congratulate me on a quest well done at the end. As a male character, however, the typed conversations that scrolled across my screen were constant improvement advice, and quite often advice on how to better equip my character. For example:*

Anonymous Player 1: oh, everyone knows you hit Tab to target. Smacking Tab fast lets you cycle through enemy targets fast. The only problem is that it’s easy too quickly + pull extra enemies. You gotta click target, it’ll work so much better

Anonymous player 2: Drov drops a multistrike neckbrace, both available world bosses

drop multistrike gloves. So just wait for that. But Sandman's pouch isn't BiS or anything, but it's around 10k on my server, definitely well worth the price it its similar on yours. I'm still using it with a few heroic clears under my belt. Lots of mages have ben going after Copeland's Clarity but I wouldn't pay the 120k it goes for on my server. Just my two cents, bro.

*I also found the higher level players were more likely to talk to me. They engaged me in conversations about the storyline, about where to get improvements for my class, when and where I should purchase my mount, and a continued dialogue about the best guilds for a guy wanting to make his character the best warrior. There was a lot of flirting from female characters as well. One can type commands to make your character giggle, dance, flirt, wink...whatever, really. It's all PG, but one can be pretty suggestive using keystroke commands. I found quite a few lower ranked female characters were 'trying out' game commands on my character, blowing him kisses and dancing with him. It was really odd for me. I didn't interact with characters like that when I was a lower ranked female, but I had encountered my fair share of colour commentary from male players.*

It is important to note that as a new gamer, I perceived female avatars to be female because of their avatar selection; I assumed from my own desire to play a character whose gender reflected my own, that other players did this, too. Spending a lot of time online gaming with many different people made me realize, however, that my early assumptions were not quite right. Gender-bending is acceptable in games among the gaming population, particularly with men, which is something we will explore further in visual representation and the body chapter.

### **The Relationship of Gender Performance and Gaming**

Something I realized very early on in my gaming journey was that within a game such as WoW, where I was represented solely by my avatar interacting and moving around somewhat independently within the game world, my perceived gender greatly impacted how I was treated in game, and how likely I was to advance. As a female character, I have often experienced misogyny, such as the constant barrage of private messages asking for blow jobs, or requests to dance in my underwear by male characters within the main cities of the game (a problem rarely experienced when outside that space), but also in the form of my perceived need for protection by other players, for help to survive and make it through. Often I am asked to join someone's party when fighting certain quests, or given gear to help me through certain areas that are more difficult. I never ask for these things, but am approached by players using male characters (and a few time female characters) to help me through. I am congratulated on my skills more often, and

applauded for playing the game. One factor in this may be the gendering of my avatars. Despite the body armour (as we have seen in this chapter), they all represent a particular narrative of gender—the soft, feminine damsel in distress, enticing but vulnerable, who almost shouts out to be protected by (male) players in game. Another might be the fairly romanticized nature of certain MMORPG communities like *WoW* and *Eve* as **Skwyrl** exasperatedly explained in our one-on-one interview: “There are people who only use these games to get virtual ass. They like the cybersex, the fakeness of it all. It’s people like this who thrive off of games like *Second Life* where you can have actual sex.”

**Skwyrl** does not use online games as a space to explore or challenge her sexuality or romantic relationships, and is quite judgmental of players who do use it for this cause. For her, games are about a different kind of fantasy, a fantasy that is divorced from the same routine performances of everyday life and responsibilities, a space where she continually disrupts the gendering of the female body as ‘sexy’ and attractive in order to make herself feel more powerful, more butch:

People see me as a big girl in real life, but as a mom and as a wife. In game, I get to be butch, I get to be a powerful-ass warrior woman... Well, I try to be anyway. Sometimes it really is still the stupid hot chick in armour. But I hate those games anyway. I don’t even play as a dude then.

While playing as a female character often leaves me feeling like a child that needs guiding, as a male character in *WoW*, I am often left to ‘figure it out’ on my own, but on the other hand I am also the beneficiary of better advancement and opportunities if I prove myself to guilds or team members during quests. By this I mean I am invited to participate in better raids or quests, and allowed to advance my character more readily because of these invitations. Other players are also more interested in helping me improve by granting advice and engaging in discussions about story organization or leveling opportunities. For example, when selecting gear division as a female character after a successful quest with partners, I am often told to “choose something nice or expensive” by my group members. As a male character, it depends on my comparative level with other players. If I am the least skilled of the bunch, I am allowed to select the items that will best aid me. If we are all relatively the same level, we roll a virtual dice to see who gets what. This has happened to me as a female character as well, but only about three times in over a hundred cases of gear selection.

The willingness of other players to interact with me throughout the game, as I have highlighted, is impacted by the normalized gender of my avatar; negatively, at first, for a male character. However, in the long run of the game, I am more likely to find long-term assistance and success, as well as acceptance in better guilds, as a male character. In two guilds my identity as a woman affected how the guild treated me. I was often ignored for raid requests, or when I asked for assistance in dealing with quests. On one particular occasion, I was left to be killed by Horde players even after I messaged for assistance a number of times. I was much less likely to be invited to prepare for dungeon attacks, too. However, in my third guild, my treatment did not seem to vary at all from other members, male or female. This guild had a variety of people from North America, had a 5/4 ratio of male-/female-identified players, and expected everyone to pull their own weight, while being loyal to each other. Neither my sex as a gamer nor the sex of my character was raised as an issue, or questioned by other guild members. I may never have realized why my other guilds isolated me after hearing my voice, had I not experienced a guild that did not react to my being female in real life. Hegemonic masculinity and the male gaze dictate how games are consumed by society. They reinforce the notion that games are not for girls, just boys, and if anyone from outside of the hetero-male hegemony is going to play in the boys-only sandbox, they must either comply (impersonating a male), or leave the space. I would argue that the behaviour of exclusion in guilds or raids is an example that reveals how effectively male dominance and female passivity are propagated as the “natural” state of gender difference in gaming communities.

The invisible masculinity of the space dictates how everyone plays within the game, and players must be aware of that hegemonic power over them as they willingly negotiate the game, for, as stated by Foucault (1978) “he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (pp. 202–203). All players are visible to the hegemonic masculinity that governs games; players who are complicit and benefit from said culture reinforce the confinement of gender to the narrow interpretation of masculinity as dominant. Often, I as a woman take up the performance of the damsel in distress in order to stay ‘safe’ within the confines of the discipline of the body in games. I say safety, and mean safety, because when bodies within the disciplined space take up resistance or disrupt the hegemonic

culture, it can result in violent language, outright rejection from the game, and threats made in the digital space that feel all too real.

### **Video Games, the Body, and Experiences of Sexual Violence in *World of Warcraft***

In online gaming communities, language can alienate based on gender, race, and sexuality, and a better understanding of the cultural and gender stereotypes young people are learning in these spaces is necessary. Gee (2007) suggests that the semiotic domains of video games, when we learn to negotiate them in a more active manner, are spaces “usually shared by groups of people who carry them on as distinctive social practices,” and that “we gain the potential to join this social group, to become affiliated with such kinds of people (even though we may never see all of them, or any of them, face to face)” (Gee, 2007 p. 24). The specific identity stereotype I faced within *World of Warcraft* came from my interactions with players that revolved around the issue of gender. It is also a reason that once my research process was finished, I did not actively continue with the game.

After playing the game for several weeks as a female avatar, using both text and voice to communicate with fellow players and guild members, I wondered at the specific nature of interactions I was having. At times players were overtly sexual towards me, asking me to remove armour from my avatar and “dance in your underwear”, as I wrote about in the following excerpt:

*It happened. I have had my first blatantly sexist encounter with another player today. I managed to get myself royally lost after jumping on a ship that took me to another continent (something you're not supposed to do until you level up to the RIGHT level and have completed a certain number of quests where you first started off). Well, I jumped on to the general chat and asked if anyone could help me find my way back to Stormwind. A level 85 mage popped up in my whisper chat and said “sure, I can take you back by teleport.” I didn't even know you could do that, so was extremely interested to see how this happened. I met him in the village off the docks, and greeted him by having my character wave. Well, she comes off as a bit wanton doing this, apparently, because this mage decided to whisper chat me a conversation best not repeated but which basically stated: “I'll take you back to Stormwind if you have cybersex with me.” I then switched to public chat, and yelled “\*\*\*\*\* is a really big CREEP.” Then, huffed off. It took me nearly 30 minutes of gameplay, but I managed to find my OWN way back to Stormwind. This encounter left me a bit frazzled. What nerve. But more than that, I've been thinking, how many middle school students do I know that play this game?(a game that is rated 'teen') How often do they encounter that kind of crap? I have numerous times now been given free items from higher level players whose characters are both male and female. I*

*always chalked it up to my being a very lowly level and being shown some pity.*

*Now I wonder, is that always the case? Or is it because I'm a girl? Because my character has virtual boobs? I am definitely going to find the time to play a few levels as a male character just to determine what exactly the difference is between male and female characters in WoW. (Journal Entry, March 10, 2011)*

Other times, male players (presumed by their voices to be male) were openly hostile towards the idea of female gamers. We 'ruin' the game, I was told, meaning we make players police the behaviour of all players, and, more importantly, by having active female players who engage in the play and dialogue in an independent manner, we shatter the often romanticized interactions between male gamers and scripted computer dialogue avatars. A passive, computer-controlled female avatar that follows a specific set of dialogue, usually scripted by male game designers, are thought by some male players, including one participant of this study, **Anonymous**, to be much more interesting to interact with than real women controlling virtual images. (See blogger sites [www.returnoftheking.com](http://www.returnoftheking.com); [www.alphagameplan.blogspot.com](http://www.alphagameplan.blogspot.com)). For example, the main topic of Return of the King, a men's rights activist blog that, while concerning itself with other 'issues surrounding male oppression', often returns to male treatment in video games, where a recent article states: "What man wants to be a passive-aggressive, back-stabbing person who thinks that power is gifted, not taken? Men, generally, don't want to be women because we want to *take* power, not have it handed to us" (Wickelus, 2014).

I have included within earlier excerpts summarized conversations with guild members that suggest female gamers disrupt the status quo of the gaming world. This belief may not exist within every game, but the invisible dominant hegemonic culture is pervasive. It is seen in the stereotypical recreation of the female form, idealized and cast to cater to specific fantasy types. Gendered social constructions also exist in the *absence* of the female avatar, specifically in the sports genre of games. Most of the latest sports console games such as *NHL 2014* or *Madden Football 2014* allow gamers to intricately design an avatar with which to climb through the sports world ranks. My complaints about avatar creation in WoW would be moot using these simulators. They allow for the closest of self-recreation; except if you are a woman. Some of the most popular games in the gaming market (Gameworld, 2011; IGN, 2011) still do not allow for female players. The argument made by several male gamers to excuse this exclusion, in my informal conversations with them, is that females rarely if ever make it to pro sports, therefore it is not realistic to allow for female players in the game.

I would argue, however, that this exclusion only serves to further generate the stereotype of what a gamer is, alienating women from games made for ‘boys and men’. In a virtual game, should we not allow for any scenario? This is not to say that games are not moving in this direction, nor that designers are not hearing the cry for more diversity in games. As of the writing of this dissertation, Ubisoft, the creators of the extremely popular series *Assassin’s Creed*, has acknowledged the great amount of criticism they received after trying to argue that their coders didn’t have the resources to ‘expand storylines’ to include a female assassin perspective. While their games have yet to develop far enough to allow for complete immersion as a female character, they have allowed for certain gameplay to be taken up by female characters at certain points in their new game, according to current online reviews, and press releases (see *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate* press release; Schreier, 2015).

### **Reading *League of Legends*: Researcher as Participant**

*The first time I played League, I got my ass kicked. A group of 13 year olds mocked me openly on TeamSpeak. I was embarrassed and quite frankly hated the game. I’m suppose to be good at games, and I sucked at this one. I think you’re suppose to be awful, at first. I had no idea who to play as, was confused by the options of roles I could play, and was super turned off by all the ‘boobalicious’ avatars. But, when my roommate started to play pretty avidly, and could help walk me through it, I got a lot more invested in the experience. (Journal Entry, November 12, 2014)*

*League* was quite possibly the most difficult game for me to learn to play. It is also one I have a very strong love/hate relationship with. As I read through my journals and watched recordings of my game play, I began to see that this game, a Real Time Strategy game, brings out a lot of anger, yelling, hurt feelings, and constant frustration and disappointment. Usually, this mostly has to do with the game play itself, and playing with other people you do not know, while being driven by a desire to win. However, it became apparent to me that my frustration was also to do with my struggle with the game’s rampant sexism from the moment of logging on. As I read through my gaming journal, interpreting it through the lens of poststructural feminist theory of disruption, the hegemonic masculinities which dominated this particular game became obvious as a pattern. So, too, did the performance of sexualized femininity. From the avatar selections made available (as we have seen in this chapter) to the violent nature of the sexualized language in the game, and my overall narrative as a woman playing *League* being unable to



navigate the hegemonic space without being complicit in the dominant gender roles it enforced, my analysis revealed a problematic game space that was unapologetic about its culture of sexism, misogyny, racism, and homophobia.

### **Gendered Bodies in *League of Legends***

Examining the bodies of my female avatars as an “inscribed surface of events” (Foucault, 1980, p. 153), it becomes apparent that their bodies reinforce this video game as a space of exclusion for anyone outside of hegemonic male culture, that exposes gamers, young and old, to distorted views of digital bodies, and genders them explicitly to reinforce the dominance of masculinity, and the passiveness of femininity. I contend that the female ‘champions’ or avatars within the game become a surface upon which gaming culture’s stereotypes and discourses are inscribed. By selecting one of the twenty odd ‘female’ champions from *League* for analysis, as well as reflecting on the sayings/quotes from characters that are used throughout the game, I demonstrate a pattern that shows how digital gender performance in *League* is held hostage by game creators, designers, and the docile bodies of players benefiting from hegemonic masculine gameplay. Interestingly enough, it is not just the female champions that this impacts. In design, some male characters, too, are stuck in the stereotype of game avatars. My first time analyzing a champion selection, for example, highlights how complicated this selection can be:

*I have purchased a majority of the champions through skill points now, so I am greeted by a rainbow of colour, shapes, sizes, and creatures when I log into champion selection. I can choose to play as Cho’ the alien/scorpion creature, or Garen, the machinist/biker looking tough guy with a sword, or Annie, the cute little girl in a purple dress with a killer teddy bear. The game creators have gotten really great at giving us options. But, when I look over any of the human female options, I am visually assaulted by cleavage, skin suits, and come hither eye makeup. It’s pretty degrading, but having seen all the fan art that features a majority of these female champions, I know they are really popular. The way they look also doesn’t keep me from more often than not selecting one of them either. Jinx or Miss Fortune are favourites, though I will also play as Ammumu, the small green mummy boy/creature. I think options and strategy have finally made their impact on my avatar selection. I would almost always opt for the female character before, no matter how icky she often seemed to me. This is no longer an option for me as ranked player, because we have to quickly decide who will play what role, and that is influenced by my skill at certain champions over others, not on who I identify with. This began to change with the new short form games we could play for fun around certain holidays, where players were encouraged to choose a character at random and simply play. It forced me to branch out as a player. (Journal Entry, November 16, 2014)*

It could be said that because of the nature of strategy, the argument that the selection of champions is based on identification with the gendered performance of their avatar becomes moot the more experienced a player becomes. As I state above, the look of my champions does not deter me from selecting them as I negotiate my play. However, I would argue that this is a further reinforcement of the invisibility of masculinity in this space: I am so used to having to play with female characters who gender the femininity desired by the male gaze of the majority of players that I must look past their sexualization in order to still engage with the game. I could choose not to play the game, or play as a male character, but the temptation to play as a woman, even a woman so wildly skewed, is too strong for me. Participants **Skwyrl** and **Phedria** also experience this dilemma in their own selection, this push and pull of wanting to play as a woman, but also wanting to reject the ‘sexy warriors’. But, as we will explore in the following chapter, this is rarely a real option. As **Phedria** shares: “sometimes we just have to shut up and play the game, or walk away from it.”

As a player who has spent many years learning to “shut up and play the game” I do not always have the luxury of selecting an avatar with the aim to disrupt. I do not always take up the tools of the cyborg to resist and inscribe upon the dominant culture of the gaming space (Haraway, 1991). In *League*, as a player who now sits comfortably at level 30 (of 30), I can safely say I have a good understanding of gameplay, strategy, code words, and etiquette when in the game. That feeling of safety and wellbeing, however, can change in an instant depending on the team I am playing with. Harsh criticism and a desire to win at all odds, coupled with anonymity, can make for a very unpleasant game. Highlights from my gaming journal outline the number of times I have been called certain names due to my ‘lack’ of skill. In a series of 3 games, I was called a ‘dumb cunt’ 72 times, a ‘fucking retard’ 211 times, and told to ‘uninstall and kill yourself’ 43 times, as an example. By far the most often repeated sexualized language I have heard in game, however, refers to the use of the word ‘rape’. ‘We’re raping’, used to signal dominance or victory in a game, was used 22 times in the three games I recorded language use in. I have, in the past, received a certain amount of skill-related abuse when playing multiplayer first-person shooter games, or whenever I have used a headset and other players have been able to identify me as a woman, but *League* definitely outranks all those experiences. Threats of rape, physical violence, and in particular threats to my champions and their digital bodies, are rampant. The language can be disheartening in general, certainly, but the instances of sexually

violent language are often gut wrenching in comparison. This kind of language, when aimed at me after I have heard my voice, has driven me away from using any audio software unless playing only with friends. On one occasion, I was even threatened post-game by a teammate who stated, “I will find where you live and rape you till your ass and cunt merge.” This threat occurred after I let my teammate be killed by not playing strongly at the start of the round. The violence of the language is typical, though the gendered nature and use of threat of rape is not something I would hear often except when other players identified me as a woman. This kind of language, when used to describe or threaten my female avatar, becomes a different yet similar experience, which is explored in the following section. This experience impacts how gender is perceived and performed in this digital space.

### **Experiences of Sexual Violence in *League of Legends***

The performance of my avatars’ or champions’ gender, hypersexualized and created to please and entice, projects into the game an understanding of the female form as an object to be desired by other players engaging in the play and discourse of *League*. It also becomes a space where player aggression and frustration is projected through threats of physical violence against the avatars. Language and trash talking within the game is often centred on such things as sexuality and rape, something one would think far removed from a battle arena strategy game. Recently, a teammate’s champion malfunctioned during gameplay and attacked my champion, who happened to be Miss Fortune:

*I’m still a little shook up over this one. I went into auto pilot while playing, but my round of League tonight was super weird. I was waiting at the start of the game in the hidden bushes on the bottom lane, alongside my support partner. Then, some sort of game glitch happened and his champion just kept jumping on mine, Miss Fortune, over and over again. He typed: WTF (What the Fuck?!) several times, surprised that this was happening. Then the teammate, after expressing shock that this had happened typed “HAH! I just tried to rape you. Man, who wouldn’t try to rape that?” I didn’t respond, and the game began. All I can think now is, well, what kind of person would WANT to rape an avatar? I don’t get it. I don’t get why it was funny, or why my other teammates hooted with shared laughter. Is it because rape isn’t a thing they think can happen to them? Or something they worry about? Am I only bothered because I am reminded daily that rape can happen to me, might happen to me, and has happened to me?” (Journal Entry, October 13, 2014)*

At that moment, though I am not Miss Fortune, and her body is not mine, the aggression and perceived violence made towards that body felt directed at me. Her digital body represents a

history of gender in gaming, as well as the story of gamers, female and male, who must continually navigate a discourse that is negative and highly sexualizes the female form. Because I am a woman who has experienced the language and violence present in this digital space, I react as though the threat to this digital body is made against my body, though it is not mine. Her experiences become my experiences. Her body becomes my body. The gendered violence to which I as a woman am subjected in the offline world colours the effect and reaction I have to sexually violent language in game, resulting in an effect of ownership. Female participants of this study suggest they, too, experience this reaction to language, and feel this ownership and connection between their offline and online bodies, as we will see in the final analysis chapter.

This experience also informed some of the questions I chose to ask my participants, because I struggled greatly with returning to playing the game afterwards. I wanted to explore how experiences of sexual violence and rape could be used in such a banal way that no other witnesses were shocked or surprised. In my experience, in online gaming communities the constant performance of hegemonic masculinity results in alienation of players based on gender, race, and sexuality, and a better understanding of the cultural and gender stereotypes gamers are learning in these spaces is necessary. Gender is simultaneously the body's variable modes of cultural articulation as well as the site or surface upon which cultural forms are imposed or written. I argue that the gendering of Miss Fortune's body, the invoked performance of 'femme fatale', is moulded by the ideal of hegemonic masculinity. It is a projection of a masculine idea of the ideal female form. Her body is the inscribed site of gender performance, and I reenact that performance each time I use her as a champion. While my own gender identity in the real world is also performed to some extent, it bears little to no resemblance to the way my gender is performed in game. Here, it is purely the game creators' and designers' projected beliefs of gender and the female form that are enacted on her body. Drawing from the invisible dominant culture of masculinity that is the gaming culture of *League of Legends* and what it believes a female avatar should look like in a game, which is itself constructed from the male heteronormativity of the bigger community of video games, Riot Games designers impose their interpretation of what it means to be a female, what it means to perform gender as a woman. Her body, as well as that of the majority of the female champions created for the game, becomes the site of my struggle against this cultural stereotype that permeates the gaming world.

## **Sexualisation, Language, and Controlling Champions in *League of Legends***

When playing *League*, most players I interact with assume I am a man. They address me in game with male signifiers—‘dude’, ‘man’, ‘bro’—and due to the large number of players in *League* who are boys or men, and the invisible dominance of masculine in games, they do not stop to think or ask if I am actually male. Players are often shocked when this is not the reality. This is signified by players’ language, their chosen in-game names, and the usual surprise if a player is ‘outed’ as a woman.

**Character Rammus:** ooooo no fucking way. A chick. Jesus. How do you stand this fucking game? Haha.

(January 12, 2015. *League of Legends* pre-game chat)

Several of my male participants also suggest that they believe most of the players they interact with on *League* are men. Players often addressed me as “man,” “dude,” or “bro,” or referred to me as “he” whenever we were in champion selection or conversations. However, interestingly, whenever players are in game, we are almost always referred to by our champions’ signified gender. If I play as a male champion, I am addressed by my teammates as that champion. I take up that champion’s identities, faults, skills, and abilities. If I fail, it’s because I don’t know the champion or its identity well enough. I become a ‘shitty Graves’ or ‘awesome Lux’, not just a bad or good player. “Where is Nidalee, she’s AFK? [Away from Keyboard]” is a perfect example of players disregarding the identity behind the champion and seeing only the champion when we play:

**Player 1:** Where is Nidalee, She’s AFK? [Away from Keyboard]

**Player 2:** STFU Lee, you suck dick.

**Player 3:** What are you trying to say? TF [Twisted Fate] ur so fuckin shitty you should uninstall

**Player 4:** I’m here, I’m here. Why are you bitchin, I was dead anyway???

**Player 2:** Not you Nidalee, him. Lee, he sucks balls.

(February 2, 2015. *League of Legends* in-game chat)

Players often identify each other by the gender of their avatars, and by the names of their champions once these have been selected. Within game I am not known by my player handle, but by the character I have chosen to play.

Miss Fortune, introduced earlier, is a pirate hunter. Armed with two musket pistols, and a variety of long-ranged attacks as a power, she has quick movements and the ability to deal serious damage to an opponent. I admit I have signed out of champion selections when teammates won’t let me play as Miss Fortune. The game designers, however, have endowed her

with a few other attributes that trouble me as a gamer who also happens to be a woman: an avatar that is blatantly sexualized and ‘desirable’; witty and suggestive one-liner game play sayings, and the passive skill of ‘strut’, signified by her leather high-heeled boots that trail hearts as she walks. Her in-game quotes, suggestive laughter, and flirtatious methods all seem highly outrageous; her death moans could easily be mistaken for an X-rated video sound clip, a fellow gamer once suggested to me during a match. However, game designers have given her some credit, in my mind, by giving her several quotes that are directly related to famous sayings by the character Han Solo from Star Wars (such as “I always shoot first”), in a sense bringing balance to the at times questionable content of this champion.

While I have highlighted this champion in particular, many of the champions are designed in a similarly disturbing manner. Champion Ahri, for example, a petite racialized Asian character who can change into a fox taunts “Do I make your pulse rise? Or...STOP [giggles]”. Janna, a blond, large-breasted sorceress whose main power is an ability to harness the wind, jokes: “Yes, it’s true. For only 2.95 a minute, I will leave you...breathless.” Nidalee, an Amazonian woman who transforms into a jungle cat, tells a joke about it being ‘mating season’ and informs players they cannot cage her. Male champions are assigned sayings meant to either be humorous or instill fear, such as Nasus’s declaration: “Your legacy shall drift away, blown into eternity, like the sands of the desert”; Garen’s “Let’s end this quickly... [coughs] I need to use the little soldier’s room”; and Tryndamere’s “My right arm is a lot stronger than my left arm.” This final ‘joke’ of Tryndamere’s is overtly sexual, but refers to his own prowess at the same time. Each of the female champions I have played, however, is assigned a taunting, sexualized call sign. Evelynn, for example, tells us “Mmmmm, I like it when they scream,” which suggests she enjoys taunting her prey, but the voice-over used to say this is quite suggestive in tone, which adds another element to the problematic nature of these jokes. Reinforced again and again are the ideals of hegemonic masculinity: the sexual prowess and brute strength of men, and the cunning nature of women. The fact that the champions engage in trash talking as part of their programmed behaviour further demonstrates that power, aggression, and dominance over others are what matters in the arena of *League*.

None of the female champions can move past their sexualized natures to appear truly intimidating. Cassiopeia, a vicious snake woman who is quite complicated to play, is reduced to commentary like: “Let me help shuffle off your mortal coil...” again, stated in an overtly

suggestive tone. The language of seduction, in this instance, is reminiscent of the visual representation of the WoW women, the ‘sexy warriors’, and suggests that the ultimate weapon for any woman in a video game is her sexuality, her body, and her desirability. A woman cannot be brutal, intimidating, or aggressive. She must be sly, sexy, and sensual to win a match. The sexualization of the female form is also fairly unproductive, with the only interactions the game play allows between characters being either verbal or by way of physical attacks. Rape is thus built into the gameplay.

Female champions are armed to the hilt, can kill just as easily as male characters, but become objects of fantasy along with their ability to win a match. It is therefore not surprising to see the kind of fantasy fan art that is also shared and enjoyed by this gaming community:

*While cuing today, someone posted a link to their fan art of Ahri. Normally, I wouldn't click a link in game because gods only know where it could take me. But several other players congratulated the artist, saying they really liked the work. Another questioned if it was actually their piece or not, it was so well done. So, I caved and clicked on it. This is the piece:*



Figure 42. Ahri Champion of *League of Legends* (centre) with Janna (left) and Kat (right)

*Well, that's awkward. The pin up girl status of video game characters always surprises me. They are virtual representations that are not at all what a normal woman looks like (especially not Ahri, who is part fox). Yet all the players in my game selection were exclaiming how beautiful and sexy this was. I hear calls for diversity in games, and hear people often telling me that the very idea that I have access to female avatars and gaming*

*characters should be evidence enough that things are changing. But, to constantly be faced with sexualized language and discussions of characters' 'tits' whenever I play a strategy game tells me that somehow, the language around women and gaming hasn't changed.* (Journal Entry, February 11, 2015).

Ahri (Figure 42, centre) is meant to be a play on “foxy,” she is designed to be sexualized, and mimics the popular animes that cross women and animals in a sexualized manner (Buruma, 1984). One of the biggest challenges I reflect on in my learning process in gaming is how to ‘shut off’ so to speak. It is difficult at this point to divorce the feminist educator from the gaming enthusiast. The fact of the matter is, that games, and the gaming community as a whole, view women, their bodies, and their skill sets in a stereotyped, vixen form. Players must learn to negotiate a body they do not identify with, projecting cultural ideas and dialogue which is imposed on them by game designers who aim to play to a discourse that often completely excludes women, or real women. Where male characters like Graves, the gruff gun aficionado, get to spout words of bravado and skill, and champion Ezreal, a magic-wielding teenage boy, boasts of his skills and thrill-seeking personality, the female champions of *League* are caught up in language that boils them down to creatures of sex, of deadly vaginas. I was consistently exposed to this language, in my pre-game and in-game interactions with other players, or when simply witnessing in-game exchanges between other players. For example, this exchange in a pre-game champion selection, which was an unprovoked conversation between two teammates:

*Sage Yaven: Ahhrrhgg, honor for kat for being such a fiery dame*

*Sage Yaven: She makes me roger jolly*

*Jeanne Von Bleue: this was my third time using lulu*

*Sage Yaven: I love how Ganplank is fast for no reason though*

*Jeanne Von Bleue: true!!*

(February 3, 2015, *League of Legends* in-game chat)

A player, channeling the speech patterns of Gangplank the pirate, admires the physicality of Kat, a champion a teammate had selected, and suggested she made him aroused. The taking up of language and behaviour of any given champion is common, and so is the sexuality associated with it. The language is casual, intuitive language that many gamers take up without a second thought. As a woman, I can say this language happens so often that I have become accustomed to it. I wonder, is *League* a social environment in which “a woman [...] can do everything as long as she does it in relative subordination to a man” (Corneliusson 2008)? The difficulties I face in playing a game like *League* certainly suggest that this game culture and its



members feel I am subordinate; however, looking into this further through other gaming narratives in the chapters to come will give us a more definite answer. Hayes (2005) observes, “Women have different interpretations of and responses to overtly gendered practices within video games.” Perhaps my responses to the experiences in a male-dominated plane are different than those of a male player. I may be interpreting the language and the images through my own biases and experiences, rather than how they are intended, as a result of their being designed specifically for the male gaze, and not for me. For the purposes of semiotic readings, I have played male characters, but my players of choice are never male when I am given the option. However empowering having multiple female champions within a game setting can be for a gamer who is a woman, when they become stages for hetero-male fantasies, they also project the many issues with gender that the gaming community continues to face. Here I must return to Butler’s (1990) question “what constitutes the possibility of effective inversion, subversion, or displacement within the terms of constructed identity? What possibilities exist by virtue of the constructed character of sex and gender?” (p. 44), and suggest that the performance and social construction of gender in the culture of *League of Legends* is often wholly that of a dominant hegemonic masculine culture; it becomes too often a confined space with limited gender roles, with little opportunities for disruption, protest, or change by those whose online identity is enveloped, for a battle match, by the body of their champion. My gameplay in *League of Legends* is dictated by the design of my champions, and by the culture of my fellow gamers; at times, this results in a very alienating and unwelcoming gaming space. I have spent a great deal of time reflecting on *why* I continue to play in a gaming space that makes me feel so uncomfortable on a regular basis. I have come to the conclusion that though uncomfortable, my presence is needed to disrupt, report, and challenge the game publisher to do better. I cannot often achieve that disruption as a player in game without causing backlash from other players:

*Today I decided every time someone made a comment about an avatar’s boobs or body, I would interject that they should just play the game and stop being ‘gross’. A juvenile term, but I wanted to see if I could successfully engage fellow players in a dialogue about how distracting this kind of talk is. Several times I was told to STFU (shut the fuck up), though twice I was echoed by other players, and my calls of ‘just play the game’ were repeated. More often than not, I was ignored however. (Journal entry: March 3, 2015).*

But I do have other spaces as a player in which I can express issues with how avatars/characters are portrayed: the web. I enjoy dialoguing on Twitter with many individuals who follow @INeedDiverseGames. This handle shares articles, stories, and games that explore

the need to diversify and accept different interpretations of gender and sexuality in games. Not everyone who responds on Twitter believes in diversity in games. In fact, this can at times be just as hostile a space as the games I have shared here. However, I find I am more successful at engaging players on Twitter than in game. One of the greatest aspects of gaming communities who share conversations on Twitter is that those who design the games can interact with players here, and sometimes express a desire to show that they do care what we think and like, and if a sufficient number of individual gamers push back against the negative experiences, I hope we will be heard. I believe this is what best represents my learning experiences in video games, an unwillingness to walk away from content if I am uncomfortable, but rather a show of disruption of that culture.

## Chapter 6

### Visual Representation and the Body

*Phedria: "Some girls like tits. Some girls like mayhem. Some of us just want to collect herbs in WoW and not have our bits ogled. Well, or our toon's bits ogled."*

As a video game player, I know the copious amount of time a player can dedicate to character creation, evolution, and interaction. The avatar is the player's representative in the story of a game. I have been guilty of spending several hours fine-tuning the looks of one of my *Sims* characters for example. As I highlighted in the Researching the Researcher chapter, when it comes to avatar or character creation, gamers are limited by the tools made available to them by game designers. With a game where storyline is the focus, we may have little to no opportunity to alter our avatar. In a game that's all about creation, on the other hand, such as *The Sims*, or a game that heavily relies on players being able to imagine themselves within the space, like a role-playing game, players are given all kinds of interesting tools to shape and mould their digital representations. However, when thinking on the issues of gender in gaming, highlighting how and why players create their avatars helps to demonstrate the level of acceptance and control different players feel within video games as a whole. By analyzing participants' interactions with avatars, as well as their choices when creating and using those avatars within a game, patterns of performativity, gendering, impersonation, and docility arise.

This chapter explores participants' experiences within games when it comes to avatar creation, character selection, and overall impressions of the digital bodies they interact with in games they love. The data is drawn from participant responses to general questions I asked about digital bodies and representation. Participants highlighted a number of issues concerning gender, digital bodies, and their motivations. Presented thematically, this chapter explores these issues, while reading selected images of their avatars and computer generated avatars from both the participants' points of view, and mine. This chapter engages with the digital body and its experiences in a way that forces us to unpack the meanings placed on the combined (cyborg) body (sexuality, wealth, worth, shape, colour, desire), and the docility (Foucault 1978) of the body as players perform cultural norms or disrupt them. As a reminder to the reader, I met participants online within a selected video game for our discussions. The focus group, comprised

of 11 participants in all, met within *World of Warcraft*. Digitally, we situated ourselves much as we would have for an in-person focus group: in a loose circle, taking various stances. The one-on-one interviews, on the other hand, varied depending on the participant: some preferred to interweave gameplay and interview, while others preferred to divide the session into gameplay first, followed by the interview. The reader must keep in mind that while digitally gathered, participants could all hear each other and share conversations via the audio server I had set up, as well as converse within the in-game chat box. While players got up to move about, dance, nap, or jump around, our focus group otherwise mimicked a real-life discussion group setting, with avatars standing or sitting in a circle inside the main hall of the Blood Elves in *World of Warcraft*.



Figure 43. Focus group participants in *World of Warcraft*.

### Reading the Avatars

In this chapter, each of my participants will be showcased through their experience with and understanding of their choices of digital bodies as players in video games, specifically their gender performances as made evident through their choices of avatars. From discussion of participants' choices of avatars in the interviews it was clear that all seven women often felt the

need to select their offline gender in their characters whenever possible. However, they often felt unable to express their gender identity through that avatar selection, as the gendering of these avatars was exaggerated, sexualized, and unrealistic. Immediately, the disciplining structure of hegemonic masculinity in many video games becomes apparent. My female participants shared how they felt the lack of selection of a female avatar in many games made them more likely to play *any* female character when granted the opportunity. They further suggested that because they often did not connect with the male characters they were sometimes forced to play (as a result of a complete lack of female characters), they would rather not ‘gender-bend’. The women, when given the opportunity to be women, felt they were more represented. That representation may not have been of their own physical gendering, but the idea of a female representation, no matter her gendering, was important to them. The male participants, on the other hand, who expressed a desire to play as male characters motivated the choice as having to do with being better connected to the storyline, something I will explore more throughout the chapter. Finally, I will note that while a few participants chose to play as non-humanoid looking characters in our interactions in game, none sought to use avatars of different skin tones. All selected light coloured, generally light haired avatars to represent themselves. Sometimes this was due to a lack of selection when it came to skin tones, but often it was simply because they wanted to look more like themselves within the game, which the participants themselves will highlight in the following sections.

### **The Body: Whose Body Is This?**

How our digital bodies were situated throughout our interviews and game play became an early subject of analysis for me as I poured over videos and screenshots. While each of the one-on-one interviews initially involved a great deal of game play, when we began to have more serious discussions around the questions I posed, both **Phedria** and **Skwyrl** took up more formal interview positions, choosing to sit within the game, just as we might have done had we been conducting the interview in person, as you can see in Figure 44.



*Figure 44. Kelsey on the left and Skwyrl on the right (one-on-one interview)*

Beyond how players sought to situate themselves within the games for our interviews, I was concerned with how gamers, particularly my participants, go about creating, distinguishing, and defining their digital bodies in relation to their digital identities. While exploring these questions with my participants, it was often demonstrated that expressing one's gender is broken down to an either-or decision in an online role-playing game, where there are only two visual representational options for avatar gender. Often, this is also extended into the types of gender avatars or characters can perform in gameplay or through the narrative of the game. As Butler (1999) describes, the notion of gender as a dichotomous set of biologically determined characteristics separating women from men broadly masks the ways political, economic, and social relations unfavourable and often hostile to women are played out across cultural contexts. In some of the games participants discussed, all avatars are male and all players digitally identified as male. While masculinity takes different forms in games through character types (the warrior; the assassin; the smart professor; the animalistic brute) they are still narrow and reflective of fantasy types influenced by the hegemonic masculine culture of many games. When it comes to female avatars, as we saw in the previous chapter and as shall be further explored here, gendering is so strongly influenced by the invisible male gaze that opportunities to perform gender outside of this scope becomes difficult. The issue with gendered digital bodies is further complicated by the need to negotiate a heteronormative, male/female dichotomy within such a narrow scope of accepted gender identity. Violent language and acts can be performed on my digital representation, as seen in the discussion of rape and champion's bodies in the previous

chapter. How that affects real-world identity, as well as how it troubles the understanding of gender in a digital space like gaming, depends on the individual gamers' experiences with games. Players explained their connection or relation to their digital bodies as a feeling of ownership, or lack thereof.

Ownership of digital bodies in games was never quite clear to participants. By this I mean to suggest that while players felt some autonomy in character creation, ultimately they all suggested that the final decision of what kind of avatar they would create was laid at the feet of the game designers and artists, as well as the gaming industry as a whole. This reflects the nature of the prison of game design; players/prisoners are confined to select choices of appearances and movements, and are simultaneously aware of the scrutiny of their play by others. How participants chose to use their avatars, and explained the negotiation of game structure, reflected either their docility or their cyborg disruption of the games. All the participants enjoyed having the option to create and shape a 'real self' or a reimagined self in video games that gave them the option to do so. However, five of six of the women expressed the need to represent themselves as female within games; unlike their male counterparts who often chose men when storyline was a factor (such as in RPG style games), these women selected female avatars because of the general paucity of female characters in most games. Each of these women expressed that while storyline is important to them to varying degrees, the story is not affected by their avatar's sex or gender performance, mostly because they have adapted to playing in male-centric, heteronormative storyline. The women become docile in order to play the game, or as McLuhan (2001) argues "players consent to become puppets for a time" (p. 238).

When selection allowed them to alter body types, most participants, male and female, expressed that while they did want a fantasy element to games at times, they were overly bored/annoyed with the hyper-sexualized female bodies and overtly macho male ones we saw in the previous chapter as elements of fantasy in games. Exploring the semiotic relationship between representations of the body as gendered avatars, and players' choices and experiences in game, is, therefore, always muddied by the outside influence of ownership. For example, how players respond to instances of lewd or threatening language, sexual violence and other player-driven instances of gendered violence perpetuated on their digital bodies is highly problematized by their feelings of ownership of that digital body, combined with the gaming community they

belong to. Sexual violence towards digital bodies, as we shall see, is a further expression of the disciplining of bodies within video games.

### **Sexual Violence and the Body**

In the focus group session and in the one-on-one interviews, I asked participants to express their views on sexual violence toward digital bodies in video games, whether in the storylines or in interactions with other players. This subject was broached tactfully, as I did not want to cause any undue stress or trigger reactions from participants. I chose to approach it this way after a pre-focus group discussion with **Wishfire**, in which she shared with me an article (Correa, 2014) around the video game *DayZ*, in which a gruesome story of digital rape was shared by a gamer, who happened to be female. She described her character in the zombie apocalypse MMO being held at gun point by two male characters, and being addressed over the in-game audio by a man who ordered her to undress her female character. He proclaimed to her that he was going to rape her, and that he was into necrophilia. She was then forced to listen to him make moaning noises while simulating a rape of her character. She turned the game off. **Wishfire** expressed to me that she often plays this game, but never alone, because of the possibility of behaviour like this. This example illustrates the complexity of sexual violence in games. Is this a rape? Are these players performing a sexual fantasy, or committing a violation of someone else's fantasy? Hegemonic masculinity would suggest that this is just an expression of fantasy and dominance, and about player experience. Is it evidence that women are not welcome in games, or just not welcome in this game? The dynamics of performing rape in a video game, and the impact on the players participating in/experiencing that rape, are difficult to unpack. **Wishfire** believes this to be an act of sexual violence, and just hearing about it affected how she has played games from that point onward.

A Google search of 'DayZ' and 'rape' turned up a number of YouTube videos that recorded similar events, against both male and female avatars (though almost all the tags I read were of female avatars), by male avatars. In addressing this theme, a sub question to the overall issue of gender and gaming became critical.

To ease participants into a conversation around the topic, I shared online resources with them about safely talking about gender violence in digital spaces (see Appendix B), and ensured that if at any time they felt uncomfortable, they could mute their sound and would be signaled



when it was safe to return to the conversation. I then introduced general questions about unwelcomed behaviour or bullying, which opened the floodgates of experiences from various participants. Here, I will focus on the physical aspects of rape on digital bodies and sexual violence in online games, as the dynamics of language, gender, and video games will be explored later in the thesis. I will also note that while our focus group was an open and easy space of sharing, the stories the women participants shared with me regarding their experiences of threats against their digital bodies (and to them, their real bodies) were expressed either during the one-on-ones, in private follow-up discussions, or following the focus group session when three of the female participants stuck around to share things they did not feel comfortable relating in the hearing of men.

In my one-on-one interview with **Phedria**, for example, I discussed with her what annoys her most about games that limit or dictate female experiences after she highlighted the lack of female-positive storylines in games. For her, it was the unfairness of how rape and other violence towards women's bodies is continually used in TV and movies, but especially in video games, of how it is "just a prevalent theme in media, the violence against a woman's body is constant in video games." She explains it thus:

OK so there's this female city elf character in Dragon Age, who is basically attacked and almost raped by the city Lord...yeah, and that pissed me off to no end as I played it, so then when I played through the game as her character, I was just pissed off at pretty much everything.

**Phedria's** in-game choices from that point in the game onward became a mission of revenge "and [I] definitely played it as she didn't like humans, and was mad, cause I was just mad, I was pissed off." This experience of violence deeply affected **Phedria**, and her choices from that point onward became expressions of the anger she felt. Her choices became deliberately disruptive and she took up revenge as a tool to invoke her anger, despite the restrictions of the plot. She plays the game differently ever since this incident; she performs 'woman' differently from the way the game has intended, in order to create a sense of agency for herself, and her character, in the narrative. **Phedria** noted that this negative experience happened in her all-time favourite, game based on storyline and the ability to play as various female characters with different storylines. To her, this experience has taken away from the fantasy and fun element of gaming, because it has made things too real, and muddied her ability to tune out

real life experiences. Here, **Phedria** explains, the game comes with no ‘trigger warning’ and male culture dominates, even though the game also features a potentially subversive gay elf relationship. She contends:

And you know what? There is no trigger warning on that. There is no discussion on the game case that says ‘hey, rape happens in this game’. You know, a game about slaying dragons that is touted for being the first mainstream game with a gay elf relationship. But it’s not about the female experience, even then. It’s celebrating another aspect of male culture, though totally one that is demonized by players, for sure. It’s just super frustrating.

**Phedria** is frustrated by the way games reinforce the vulnerability of the female body. Feminine gender performed in a hypermasculine space creates a weak female figure, open to the advances and abuses of the male form. If the female body is not placed in jeopardy by the ultimate threat of violence against her body, then the fantasy element of rescuing that female within the game is polluted. During the focus group session **Phedria** mentioned the strong desire for trigger warnings when games venture into these kinds of storylines. While no one really challenged or asked her to expand on this, **Anonymous** did message me afterwards to share how he felt about the notion of digital experiences impacting his real self and body. Here is our messenger exchange (as it happened, including spelling mistakes):

**Anonymous (A):** You know the talk about rape threats and whatever?

**Kelsey (K):** the in game rape threats against certain toon?

**A:** Yeah, that’s screwed up, but it’s the internet. There’s always been screwed up people in soceity, you can’t change that. Internet gives them an outlet for it. Hell, you’ve technically got more agency for vengance in the game than in IRL [in real life]. IRL you’ve got courts and stuff. Somebody fucks with you in a game, you get back. Get even.

**K:** So, games are spaces for outlets of issues that would be problematic in real life?

**A:** Of course! That’s why we make some of these messed up games like *DayZ* and *GTA* mods that involve nasty shit. It’s so we don’t do it in real life. You know, when porn went mainstream there was a reduction in sexually violent crimes.... I just think people take it all too seriously. So what if your character got killed or t-bggged [short for t-bagging, when a player situates their male avatar over a dead opponent and squats to simulate putting their genitalia on the face of the dead opponent] or whatever? It’s a game, it’s not you.

**K:** What about when the threat is made over audio, and the person has to hear it?

**A:** It’s not pleasant, and whatever, but I mean, I get tld they are going to cut my dick off, and I don’t get worked up over it.

Vandenberg (1998) observed while watching similar play that “the ease with which the real can be rendered not real, by the simple signal, ‘This is play,’ reveals the contingency and fluidity of the social construction of reality” (p. 303). Gaming culture is rife with intimidation, smack talk, and violent posturing. For **Anonymous**, and most of the male participants in my study, this becomes an everyday joke or ‘play’ within the digital spaces they frequent. I myself have been guilty of trash talking when playing games such as *League* because it is a regular, accepted interaction within the game. However, where the line is drawn when it comes to violent threats, name calling around sexuality, or sexual violence against one’s opponents, appears to differ between female and male players. Who gets to draw the line is not so clear. I also wonder if perhaps female players feel more closely linked to their avatars (and possibly specifically to their feminine avatars) because hegemonic gender norms continually create this closer relationship by forcing female players to feel such ownership over the body? Female players, in this instance, could be considered more ‘bodily’, more attached to the representation of the body, than male players, who often use distancing tactics from the bodies of avatars. None of my participants reported using sexually violent language themselves, and while all could report an instance where an identified male player had used language or threats based around sexual violence, none reported having experienced a female player doing so. In her anthropological examination of players’ motivations in *World of Warcraft*, Bonnie Nardi (2010) examined language use by female players within the game and noted:

Female players generally avoided hardcore masculinist rhetoric. They did not belittle other players by calling them “little girl” (or “little boy” for that matter). They sometimes used “gay” to disparage (much less often than males), but I never heard a female call anyone “homo.” Female players avoided the language of what one player referred to as “the female denigrations,” by which she meant words such as cunt or slang terms for genitalia such as clit (see Thelwall, 2008). Female players did not joke about rape (p. 157).

Why is it that female players feel uncomfortable about the notion of rape in games? **Phedria** believes female players see the experience with rape as ‘too real’ and connected to their physical bodies. Hearing or seeing rape threats within the game disconnects the feeling of fantasy and fun, and crosses a line for most of my female participants. She shared this in a

private message in game while listening to the focus group discuss experiencing violence against their avatars in game:

I get there is an element of fantasy world like in games, but like, fuck, I've played games since I was 4. I played the original Nintendo motherfuckers, so stop ruining my gameplay!!! Lol... I mean, I have no fear of being beheaded IRL but I can be raped, know people who have been, and have that as a reality in life, so it does majorly ruin my enjoyment of escapism in games when fucktards talk to me like that.

For **Phedria** and other female players in the focus group, the connection to real life experiences and potential threats to their bodies as women disrupts the 'play' language of trash talk generally accepted by most gamers. **Skwyrl** discussed her uncertainty about experiences in game against her digital body impacting her real life body, feeling that even when meant as a game tactic, she took "away some sense of wrongness about these experiences. It hangs around well after the game," and it impacted what games she did play. "I've left the *DOTA 2* community because of the gross trash talking in there," she shared. **Phedria** does not always feel safe enough within the games themselves to push back or disrupt this behaviour, but she is frustrated with the way other players engage with this kind of behaviour. "I hate this, and I tell them when I've had enough. But what can I say besides stop? That I'll rape them back?" Because of the gender norms of hegemonic masculinity, the female body is confined within the digital game space by a culture that does not see their need for fantasy and escape from the violence against their bodies that they experience in the real world. Instead, that violence is perpetuated in the name of narrative and fun.

**Skwyrl** attributes this behaviour to the immaturity of certain game cultures, suggesting that the age of players in *WoW*, for example, was younger, and that *WoW* players were more likely to make inappropriate statements, whereas the crowd in her preferred MMORPGs like *Star Wars Old Republic* or *Wildstar* tended to have older players, and therefore more mature interactions. She acknowledges, however, a disturbing need to dominate digital bodies in games, in an effort to intimidate other players. As she puts it:

You know, the corpse squatting? [T-bagging?] in first person shooter games is all about the rape mentality, but in an intimidation kind of way, not in a literal way...but I guess rape is also about intimidation so yeah, I don't really know. It's hard to understand why that needs to be said in a video game. The toon isn't me, but still. Ew.

Dominance display by male players, in both the on- and offline worlds, is reflected in regular in-game occurrences. For **Skwyrl**, who is not an active participant in male dominance

this act becomes incomprehensible. By corpse squatting, **Skwyrl** is referring to the same opponent taunting referred to by **Anonymous** earlier on. **Skwyrl** suggests that she does not fully identify her avatar as an extension of her, but also still finds the idea of using rape threats as intimidation tactics as “gross.” To an extent, then, she acknowledges this language as having an impact on her real life identity. I suggest that her recognizing the problematic nature of the language of violence against her avatar translates to its potential impact on her real life identity. While it is ‘just a game’ as she suggests, this is a component of the game that follows her offline and into the real world.

**Galindlinari** suggested a few times within the focus group discussions that he has seen a disturbing trend in gaming of late of violent talk, discussions, and at times actions within the gaming world, which he is at a loss to explain. **Galindlinari** shares:

I mess around with gender identity and my avatars for fun, for sure, but I do see that games have increased in their need to be extreme...[pause] and I guess so have players. I know that mod of *GTA* [Grand Theft Auto] with the butt rape is pretty shocking, but like anal rape is pretty common place discussion in the general chats in the big cities on here (WoW). Anal pillaging is the term for the joke, or whatever it’s meant to be. It’s hard to get away from the maleness of gaming culture sometimes. It doesn’t affect me, but I know women who hate it. It’s childish.

**Galindlinari** acknowledges several issues with gaming culture here, from gendered representation in games like *Grand Theft Auto*, to rape mods (player-created code that changes aspects of the game) to rape jokes in games, and thus highlights an awareness of things that are problematic. However, expressing the male privilege he benefits from, he states: “it does not affect me.” He sees it as a problem for the culture, and a reason some women might feel alienated, but not a problem for him or his gaming identity. He further suggests that gaming culture has a pervasive *maleness* to it, which dominates its jokes, avatar design and culture, which could be alienating to female players designing digital bodies. For this participant, the inscribed culture of maleness on video games and the avatars players use to negotiate them is clearly seen, but not as a problem for him to negotiate. In the confines of the focus group, **Galindlinari** makes comments about his dislike of hegemonic masculine behaviour, but also acknowledges that as a man he does not mind that he benefits from that culture. His reading of his own female avatar in the focus group, for example, is highly sexualized and reinforces a performativity of heterosexual male dominance over the female form. It is not only the digital bodies that players need to be concerned about, either, as we saw in the introduction. **Dysis**

shared a story about a well-known gamer and streamer named Hafu that shows another element that affects gaming culture:

**Dysis:** Well, I really like her, and I know she's had her own, like I said, struggles and troubles, and if people don't know her here, [**Galindlinari**] you can probably add to this, but she had nude pictures of her leaked, and that kind of went all over the Twitch community, and it was really really tough for her, but a lot of other streamers came to bat for her, and she stayed strong, and stayed streaming and has a strong, good following, but you know, it goes to show that it's tough to put yourself out there as a woman and so I really respect her for being able to do that.

We see in the comments and discussions by **Dysis** and other participants that women face a fight to appear 'professional' enough to be considered legitimate in the eyes of the gaming community, and even then, all it takes for a drastic drop in respect and acceptance is for their bodies to be co-opted by members of the community. Digital bodies, in their place marker roles of self in video games, sustain any number of violent actions or experiences. However, it is those that are explicitly sexual in nature that stick in the minds of most gamers outside of the game, and that sometimes also affects the treatment of their real bodies in other digital spaces, such as Hafu's naked body being put on display by various gaming forum participants.

I also suggest that participants, at least initially, felt fairly indifferent to their digital bodies. Interestingly, this was the case until they began recounting experiences of violence against those bodies that were outside the 'rules' of play in the game. We never quite arrived at how players disrupted their gendered digital bodies, except for with **Galindlinari**, who felt that his gender-bending with the explicit purpose of taking advantage of sexist behaviour was a form of disruption (his choice of words). However, I would note that this gender-bending exercise was simply an impersonation of drag rather than a parody of drag (Butler, 1990), a way to negotiate the hegemonic system of the game, which he acknowledges benefitting from. He knows, in other words, that to perform woman as a hetero-male player wishes to see woman will result in bonus items and treatment. He does not perform woman to actually experience that role. He impersonates what a woman is to hegemonic masculine game culture.

### **The Male Gaze—Men as Subject, Women as Object**

Games designed and played explicitly with the male gaze in mind became a bit of 'hot' topic for the focus group, with many of the men responding to questions on male gaze and gender

selection in games by saying they really did not care what approach they took to the game; they just liked to play. In the end, that was not true. They did care, and at times made selections based on that gaze, which eventually came to light when male participants shared instances where they took up female avatars for personal benefit (such as **Galindlinari**), or for the sheer aesthetics of the female body (as each of the other male participants admitted). It was also the part of games that the women acknowledged annoyed them quite a bit, but that they were nevertheless willing to accept as a part of being allowed into the ‘club of gaming’. The discussion became heated 15 minutes into the focus group session when **Anonymous** stated how ‘stupid’ it was to be critiquing how games were made, and that:

If you all have such a big problem with games, you need to answer one question, and that is, are you a game designer? No? Then shut up. Either learn to code, or accept that this is their art form and they will create what they want to create.

In response, participants began to discuss how and when women should be allowed female-only competitive groups in gaming competitions. This is how the thread of the discussion unfolded:

**Skwyrl**: I don’t know, there were female only guilds in *Eve* and often that was to escape being treated like objects and to escape being treated disrespectfully by the men in the game. I was invited to many female only guilds, and in fact there was even a female only channel, where you had to pass a voice test for exactly that reason, to make sure it was just women. Because some things you can talk about just among other women in a game like that that you can’t with guys. So it became a haven.

**Biospark**: That makes sense to me, but these are competitive groups, right? So it’s more about attention than anything. Or, rather, what they can garner with that attention. Not just the players, but the companies that sponsor them.

**Skwyrl**: Yeah I agree with competitively, it is about advertising, but in many games that are so male dominated, it’s a safe place or shield from that dominant culture.

**Biospark**: Yeah, and I agree for all the like, non-competitive settings that’s awesome, like, well I mean, no. Sorry. It’s kind of sad that they have to exist like that, but it’s excellent that despite that it does.

**Biospark** and **Skwyrl** debate the nature of safety for women within games. For **Biospark**, a professional gamer, there should be no exemptions or special treatment for competitors who are women participating in professional events. **Skwyrl** suggests, however, that at times there needs to be spaces where women feel safe and away from male players within game setting, an escape for the digital body that is disciplined and confined within the confines of hegemonic masculinity that is video game culture. Female participants are confined players (Foucault 1978) who operate within the historical experience of gaming culture: heteronormative

and hypermasculine. **Biospark**, a male player who benefits from hegemonic masculinity, positions himself in relation to it, and while he offered up a strategy for fair and equal gaming experiences, he did not realize why women might not feel comfortable in that environment. The conversation around male gaze, and what it meant to hold the power when bodies are looked at and enjoyed, demonstrated the docility of the majority of players when it comes to how gender is taken up in games: they fail to recognize the narrow, singular space most games grant players to perform within, nor do they recognize how the space disciplines them in hegemonic masculine culture.

In a sample study of WoW players in North America, Yee (2005) found that 23 percent of players who identified as male in real life utilized characters that were female. These male players, in other words, select female characters to be given the opportunity to gaze at them. Not only does the female character serve its own player's desires. Male players are time and time again selecting aesthetically pleasing, sexually attractive digital bodies to gaze at as well (see especially, Yee 2005; DiGiuseppe & Nardi 2007). The servers of WoW are often spilling over with alluring female Night Elves and Blood Elves, while the unattractive ladies of the Dwarf and Orc races were often not seen (Yee 2007; Nardi 2010). Gazing at female characters is, for males, it seems, a significant aspect of the visual experience of play. When asked why they might choose to play a female character, beyond explanations of technique or strategy, the male participants in the one-on-one interviews suggested that gazing at a female character for long periods of play time was more 'relaxing' and playful to them than 'looking at a guy's ass' all the time for ten hours. **KD** explains:

Well, it depends, it depends on my mood. Do you play Skyrim? So like, when I play a game like Skyrim I usually have like two distinct avatars, you know, cause, since I'm a man and like, it's a bit easier for me to identify, or like connect with a male avatar, whenever I want to play seriously, I will play with my male avatar because it's easier for me to immerse myself in the world, and feel like I'm actually slaying dragons and what not. And when I want to relax a little bit and just go play whatever, and just go around the world like killing people or whatever, I use my female character or avatar, because like, let's be honest, after like 10 hours of wandering around Skyrim, it's kinda boring looking at a guy's ass. Well, it's the truth.

When storyline or engagement was the focus of play, my male participants chose to play as male characters, to create a more realistic immersion for themselves. However, past that point in the game, they often played attractive, female characters. It is important to note, however, that



the male gaze of the gaming community is more often than not a heterosexual gaze too. Pushing **KD**'s points above, **Biospark** explains:

I mean, think about who is creating the avatars we play with. It's not usually women, and it's also not a lot of gay men. That's not the community. These designers know that when I'm playing *Mass Effects* or *Skyrim*, not staring at another dudes butt for 50 plus hours is kinda nice.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) might have argued that these models of hegemonic masculinities “do, in various ways, express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires” and that they help to articulate the way masculinities are performed “in everyday local circumstances” (p. 838). Masculinities, it seems, strongly influence the creation of storylines, gameplay, and the visuals of most mainstream video games. The desires and fantasy elements of gender performance in games, it is also worth noting, are influenced strongly by the masculine gaze, as expressed through heterosexual norms.

My in-game experiences, and the reading of my avatars in the previous section supports the argument that how female bodies are crafted, dressed, and portrayed within games is very much driven by who is supposed to be looking at them and why. Proving this point, there is a website that breaks down the cup size and attractiveness of the breasts of female champions in the game *League of Legends*, which **MrWoody** shared with me when we discussed issues with the female bodies in games serving as virtual pornography to players. All 39 female players in *League of Legends* were included, even the humanoid characters with the bodies/behaviour of 5-year old girls. The website has the breasts ranked by cup size and includes a variety of descriptors such as:



卡尔玛：亚洲人里算是比较大的胸型了。不过怎么看起来一大一小？

**Karma:** Pretty large for an Asian woman. But no matter how you look at it, one is bigger than the other?



辛德拉：胸部外扩，差评

**Syndra:** Breasts expanding to the side. Downvoted.

D Cups: "Pomelos" that can't but help make you smile



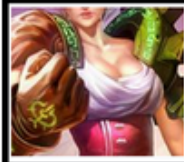
伊利斯：胸下垂的典型，其实很有女王范儿

**Elise:** Showing typical signs of sagging, but she's very much like a queen.



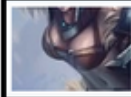
伊芙琳：虽然我很坏，但是我很爽！让你爽到不能呼吸哦

**Vi:** Big breasts, slender waist, the perfect proportions.



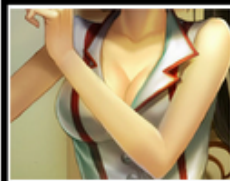
锐雯：如果我在战场上遇到雯雯，肯定先把这块布扯下来哈哈

**Riven:** If I ever meet Riven on the battlefield, the first thing I would do is rip of that piece of cloth.



猪妹：单看胸还是不错的。可是这个英雄让人觉得有点金无呢

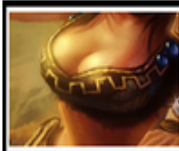
**Sejuani:** At first glance, her breasts aren't that bad. But where's her sex appeal?



阿卡利：制服果断要好评。。

**Akali:** Upvoted for her uniform.

**Shyvana:** Downvoted for her bra.



轮子妈：啧啧，简直呼之欲出.....楼主已单手打字

**Sivir:** Typing with one hand right now.

*Figure 45.* Screenshots from gamer forums.

It is significant to note that these characters are rendered here without faces. A female character becomes a bra; and her 'hotness' or 'worthiness' is based on her clothing. The *League*

of *Legends* character Shyvana, for example, a half-human and half-dragon, was always downgraded because of the style of bra she wears. Sivir, on the other hand, drove the author of the piece to ‘masturbate’ while continuing to type. Riven’s appearance drove the author to desire to sexually assault her on the battlefield. As a *League* player, I found this a harsh reminder of the experiences I have had in game with male gaze and commentary about champions, and women in general. These headless shots of female digital bodies serve as a reminder, for good or bad, of what motivations go into the design and creation of some video game avatars. Research suggests that when female characters appear in video games they most often serve as victims or prizes (Provenzo, 1991; Dietz, 1998) and occupy stereotypical gender roles such as sexualized beings and objects of sexual desire (Beasley & Strandley, 2002; Dietz, 1998; Ivory, 2006). These avatars and bodies are often hypersexualized when depicted (Beasley & Strandley, 2002; Dietz, 1998). Indeed, Glaubke et al. (2001) found that “female sexuality [is] often accentuated with highly revealing clothing” (p.14), ensuring the prominence of the sexualized image of females in video games. Further, Beasley and Strandley (2002) found that 70 percent of female characters in Mature-rated video games and 46 percent of female characters in Teen-rated video games had voluptuous cleavage, and 86 percent of female characters were depicted wearing clothing with low/revealing necklines. The sexual objectification of women in the media reinforces the status quo of the dominant masculine culture of games, and relegates the feminine to the submissive role in our society (Connell, 1995; Inness, 1998).

Female participants in my research expressed frustration with the lack of options when it comes to body types and style of armour, whereas some of the male participants often felt that female body types and styled armour was a bonus. Male participants also felt that because the women they knew who played the games did not openly complain to them about these bodies and clothing, there was really nothing harmful about them. **KD**, in a lengthy discussion on the subject of avatars created for hetero men, and the possibility of harmful effects created in gaming culture, was of two minds when it came to digital bodies. He is worth quoting at length:

**KD:** [laughter] I think that obviously, protagonists in video games are highly idealized, right, but I definitely think there is a problem of objectification of women in video games, like a lot of those Asian-made MMOs have super skimpy armor that barely protects anything, and that’s kind of ridiculous, but the gamer in me, whenever I see a woman wearing high heels and skimpy armor into battle, the gamer in me like face palms that. Like what the fuck is that? But then the straight guy me is like, well, I can’t complain about boobs and ass. So like, it’s not like looking at porn, you know? But yeah.

But I think ultimately that, yeah, we probably should stop...wait not stop, but I think we should give an option to people, that you have the option to dress up your female sexily, and the option to dress her up normally, well not normally but like protectively, you know? ...I don't think that objectification is going to go away any time soon because it's such an easy way to grab money.

Here, **KD** proposes that games should make more of an effort to include immersion as well as desire of entertainment when it comes to looking and playing with digital bodies. However, he also shows a lack of awareness that the options given for digital bodies are to privilege his viewing tastes, and that of other male gamers who want to see "boobs and ass" instead of realistic body types, or "kombat lingerie" (Fron et al., 2007b). Male participants, and players I have engaged with every time I have played an online multiplayer game, engaged in their desired play outcomes happily and readily as the dominant group that dictates how games are created, what options players were given, and even the culture of jokes and language around these digital bodies. As masculinity is embedded in the cultural norms of gaming culture, it becomes invisible to the player, as **KD** shows us. However, its role in the discourse of games, in the narrative, in the gameplay and in the player interaction, create docile, disciplined bodies within the game: male participants who do not question their dominance or benefits within the culture, complacent to the structure put in place; and female players who also choose to submit to the dominant culture of masculinity. Some female participants, it is worth noting, did seek to make the masculine nature of gaming space visible, when discussing the issues they have with body types, gender, and video games. They were exasperated with the standard gendered representation in games, as well as the complete lack of female representation in some games. **Wishfire**, **Skwyrl**, and **Phedria** engaged in the following thread on the issue of standard gender representations:

**Wishfire:** I don't like that fact that there are a lot of games that still don't represent women at all, and when you don't have that option ...there's not much variety. I like to have the variety, beyond the usual big boob skinny waist chick. I like to play my own gender, the real one, not the imagined male ideal one.

**Skwyrl:** I totally agree. I hate being forced to be a male. I hate when there is only one option. And I hate when a female character puts on the exact same armor as a male character and it only covers her NIPPLES. [laughter]

**Phedria:** Uh, yah. Have you looked at the vest my character is wearing? I have a male toon that I've put this on, and it covered everything, whereas I'm wearing this, ribcage protection supposedly. YA, NO. Probably the most revealing piece of armour I've had on a character playing in WoW. But it has good specs, so...

It is clear from this all-female exchange that female participants must be adaptable and willing to deal with the body types they are given, thankful they have the option to play as women at all. Interesting to note is **Phedria**'s final comment on her "Kombat Lingerie" gear, that it has a high rank which protects her character in raids, and while it frustrates her to see it on her character, she does not give up on the item or the game. She adapts. This seems to be the response most of the female participants had when sharing why they stuck with games like WoW: the options are accepting it and work with it, or pack up and leave the game. They like games too much to leave them. However, their time spent negotiating the male gaze, and the male demands on their digital bodies takes its toll and drives them from certain game communities. **Skwyrl**, for example, no longer plays WoW for two reasons. One is the few options she has in avatar creation; the second is the commentary she has endured about the bodies of her avatars as she played. She found it too distracting and too demoralizing. **Phedria** also has toyed with the notion of leaving WoW, her go-to MMORPG, on occasion,. This is due to an experience when demands were made of her real life body in order to gain acceptance into a guild. Relaying her story, **Phedria** explains:

Ya, it was actually kind of flabbergasting how it goes down sometimes.... [pause] back in the day I was running around, and I was in the early Lich King expansion of WoW and I was without a guild and these people started messaging me about their ...I hopped on vent and they were like, oh my god you're a girl, and I'm like, yeah, and why does that matter? And they were like, if you send us pictures of you, we'll give you any gear you want for free, raid gear, anything like that...I was like ahhhhhh that's a little creepy, and I'm honestly really creeped out right now, and kinda just logged [off] and didn't go back for a long time. I had to have a heart to heart with myself about whether it was worth it.

For **Phedria**, the sound of her voice became a source of anxiety, and a way for individuals to objectify her physical body without ever gazing on her. Hayes (2005) observes that, "women have different interpretations of and responses to overtly gendered practices within video games" (p. 72). Too often those responses are to remove themselves entirely from a space that they either feel unwelcome or unsafe in. Nardi (2010) suggests that boys/men propositioning girls/women for nude pictures in games, a common occurrence, leaves girl/women gamers with "two choices; the player can play along and continue to play the game or she can leave. There is no opportunity for reasoned discourse or a way to win through humour" (p. 155). She suggests that this creates a condition for participating in gaming culture and communities, that women gamers must engage in a passive acceptance of abusive behaviour.

However, players also become more determined to disrupt those experiences too. **Phedria**, I would note, is one of the latter, as we will see soon. Experiences of being made uncomfortable by the male-gaze-driven nature of avatars is not an experience exclusive to female players. **Galindlinari** shared a story about another player messaging him to have cybersex because he played as a female Blood Elf.

**Galindlinari** faced what many women players experience in game, and while a little uncomfortable with being approached in this manner, he dismissed it as “horny dudes on the internet, of course.” I did not interpret this as a fear of the male gamer, or a suggestion of homophobia, which does occur in some gamer communities. While **Galindlinari** was unconcerned with the experience personally, he did further note that he saw this interaction as a way to highlight what some individuals get out of playing video games. Participants often discussed the notion of fantasy and escapism during interviews, and a part of that escapism does present itself in the bodies and actions of characters within the game. It allows them to fantasize about, and engage with, digital bodies as they desire them. However, what is often problematic for female players is the notion that *real* women, in control of those digital bodies, can be unwelcome. As many of my female participants indicated, the negative attention or interaction their avatar elicited ruined the fantasy for them. Being unwelcome, moreover, created a feeling of insecurity for these female participants, where disclosing themselves as females meant transferring the fantasy of the game into real life and onto a real female body. The male fantasy included ‘perfect’ female bodies, especially breasts, sexual advances, and even rape. Occasionally, one may even encounter a ‘no women’ policy supposedly instigated to counteract the distraction of female presence in games. A female blogger/player (WorldofWarcraft.com, 2007) reported these policies of a top raiding guild when it came to banning women:

According to GM [guild master] Kungen, there are a lot of reasons they don’t recruit females, but the one he highlights is the need for recruits to have a “high abuse tolerance.” And a bit later in the thread, poster Awake adds that female applicants are avoided because of drama.

Here, male players are ignoring the larger issue of player harassment and poor conduct, and instead taking a position of ‘remove the problem’, the presence of female players. While the female body is welcomed in many games, in its culturally acceptable form, in some instances, it is only the digital representation of that body that is welcomed. Real women attached to that body risk disrupting the fantasy of the female digital body as presented and packaged for a hetero

male audience.

### **Player Choice and Gendered Body Representation**

As the previous two sections have shown, players face an uphill battle when it comes to interaction with their digital bodies in video games. However, players still exhibit a great deal of choice, and at times are able to disrupt experiences of sexism and violence when faced with it in a digital space, and avatars designed to perform gender as interpreted by hegemonic masculinity. We have seen how gaming culture and game design barriers can be frustrating and alienating for some players, but players are not without agency, and do find ways to challenge those barriers. **Skwyrl** summarizes “I’m big and wide on purpose. I alter the bodies whenever I can.”

Like **Skwyrl**, several of the female participants felt they had the opportunity and the need to express themselves or their desire to disrupt the normative narratives of games. Here, female participants took the lead in disrupting game messages or restrictions, which they did through the creation and design of their avatars. In contrast, male counterparts more often showed indifference to using their digital representations in any kind of subversive or rebellious manner. For instance, participant **KD** was not concerned in the least about selecting or designing a character that represented him in our gameplay on *League*. For him, as **Biospark** also stated, it was all a matter of matching up potential and strategy:

**KD:** I, the LoL avatars don’t really matter to me. Male, female, Kids, monsters, fuzzy little thing, it doesn’t matter, as long as it is appropriate for the situation, appropriate for the game and the match up I’ll just play them. It doesn’t really matter what gender or what race they are. I mean, I’m an Asian dude, but I don’t get caught up in whether players look like me...

For **KD**, given his privilege as a man and a gamer, gender is of little consequence. As a male who benefits from the dominant culture, he has the ability to perform his gendered identity comfortably in games. Akin to what Foucault thought, I would argue that video games cannot be thought of as spaces that move the gamer outside of the political and social matrix of gender. The instances that clearly reproduce traditional gender roles and privilege for male players may not be visible to the players, but they are present. **KD** also suggests that his racialized identity as “an Asian dude” is not affected by the games he plays as “games are designed in Korea and Japan, so like, I get those options in games too.”

In video game culture, gender is performed most often through the social and cultural



interpretations of hegemonic masculinity, and the privilege men enjoy as gamers upholds a narrow gender performance as a consequence (Butler, 1999; Risman 1998, 2004). The essential feature of gender from a sociological point of view (Lorber 2005) is its positioning in the service of inequality. The women in the study expressed their need and desire to play as female characters in whatever game they were engaging with, for a variety of reasons, but the inequality they felt within the gendered structure of gaming was the number one motivation behind those choices. They suggested the need to connect to characters and storylines, and the frequent lack of this opportunity as reasons why they seized it where they could. “I’m always a girl if I can be,” **Jirri** explains. Like all other female participants, **Syfte** agrees: “Yeah me too. Always pick it [female figure].” The women had various motivations for why they needed to play as women, depending on the games they interacted with, or the statements they were attempting to make with their character selections. For **Phedria**, her decisions come from a desire to have real interactions with the storylines of games, whereas **Skwyrl** was interested in disrupting the stereotype of ‘warrior babes’. In the focus group interview, this is how my (**K**) conversation went with **Phedia** and **Skwyrl**:

**Phedria:** I always play as a girl. I don’t like playing as guy characters, it’s just not a narrative that I’m comfortable with. So I always try to play as a girl character.

**K:** Is it because you don’t often get the chance to play as a girl character?

**Phedria:** I think so, yeah, cause like, especially looking at video games on like Xbox and stuff like that, which I also play a lot of, it’s like Oh here’s this great game, YOU HAVE TO PLAY AS A BOY...

**Skwyrl:** I was teasing my husband, who always picks like huge characters to play, and he was like ‘babe, I need to identify with it’ and he’s a big, physical guy. And I totally get that because I need that too, in some form. He doesn’t do well with little wispy things, and I hate that too... because I need to challenge their stereotypical characters, and the bodies they choose.

As Hall (1996, p. 4) notes: “Identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called the constitutive outside that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term—and thus its ‘identity’—can be constructed.” “Deconstruction” here means that no idea or understanding of “self” can exist without an “other,” and that instead of individual, disconnected identity “solitudes,” the two are perpetually tangled with one another. The cultural layers of production, reproduction, and consumption here intervene and complicate things as the environment and resources of the body alter with the

deconstruction of the body. **Skwyrl** needs to signify her body as ‘different’ and ‘other’ than that of the culturally acceptable body; yet she uses language to show the ‘other’ in her mind would be a different race than that which is acceptable in the gaming world. Here, she shows that what is perceived as ‘other’ in the real world, i.e. anything other than white, is also the ‘other’ of the gaming world. **Phedria** uses her agency as a gamer to promote and select games whose storylines are not focused on a traditional male narrative, or games that while invoking a female narrative like Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raiders* series, still focuses too much on what male gamers want to play. For **Phedria**, simply including one female narrative is not enough. Playing as a female avatar in games with rich narratives and female characters that allow her to more fully perform gender as she wishes is her way of forcing some disruption on the gaming culture she loves so much. For **Skwyrl**, the ultimate disruption of ideal body types in video games is her creation and performance of abnormal, different avatars. While she always elects to be a woman in game when given the option, her women are always meant to be different. For example, this screenshot from our one-on-one interview shows myself in a traditionally aesthetically pleasing human female body and **Skwyrl** in a very different body.



*Figure 46.* Skwyrl and Kelsey sit down to interview.

Yet still, despite her selection of a green giantess with large thighs, bald head, and big,

muscular arms, her breasts are still quite large, and her waist perfectly narrow. **Skwyr!** also suggests later on in our conversation when viewing her character that “she looks super black.” The character she selects to be ‘different’ appropriates racialized black stereotypes. The agency of choosing a female avatar and creating her to be ‘wrong’ in the eyes of most players is still not fully hers, as she must still negotiate the design of the game. However, as **Phedria** further explains, being a woman in gaming means taking any and all opportunities to disrupt the gender ideal, and shake off the docile body to express herself and her gameplay on any given day. She states that this is sometimes really difficult to do, but that she does it:

**Phedria:** Generally, I think about the type of character I want to play. So like, if I want to play a girl who is a bit of a badass, I will try to make her look like the stereotypical badass. Like I will give her a Mohawk and stuff like that, like I don’t generally go for the ‘what I look like’ design, nor the general ideal of what one should look like...

**Phedria** becomes the cyborg of the storyline, co-opting it and enacting her desired performance, and she creates her avatars and characters to suit. She “rewrites and reinscribes” (Butler, 199) her avatars, influencing her gameplay, to subvert the written narrative of the game design. This was a lesson she learned early on in her WoW career, she explains, when she had a great female guild leader who was an influence on how she started to approach the game. That matriarchal figure imparted to **Phedria** the need to disrupt the ‘norm’ of gender in games. Few guilds were run by women at that time, and to **Phedria**, a teacher, this kind of mentorship began to be an important influence on her portrayal of self in games.

### **Representing Oneself: Digital Bodies and Performing Gender**

All of my participants were, for the most part, people who wanted to be sure some elements of themselves and their personalities shone through with their character designs and selections. How they performed gender was wrapped up in their ability to represent themselves in the manner and fashion they felt most connected to. Male, female, new gamer, old gamer, they all had distinctive and important requirements for their experiences in games. These requirements extended from figure selections based on storyline to being able to visualize themselves within the games. Here, comparing **KD** and **Skwyr!**’s priorities in designing their characters gives us a glimpse of the theme of this thesis: the trouble with gender in gaming. For **KD**, that selection is much less concerned with having a character that totally physically represents him than it is with making the character realistic enough that the choices, values, and options he gets within the

game resemble his real life self:

**KD:** Well, [pause] I personally, when I play a video game that features a male protagonist I really don't compare myself to them... I really don't connect myself appearance wise to those characters...but what I do feel connected to when I play is that, especially games like *Mass Effect* or *Dragon Age* that offers you choices, I feel connected when I get to make a choice because those choices are reflected in game, and reflect my personality.

To **KD**, a character that emulates the choices he could see himself making within game is much more important than one he feels visually represented by. Imagination and putting himself in the shoes of the character, rather than having the character *be* him becomes the focus of his selections. This narrative, of male players unconcerned with who they *looked* like in game, but rather, who they *were*, was replayed often by male participants. As I observed, in our one-on-one interview in *League of Legends*, **KD** did not necessarily reinforce this selection approach. He chose champions strategically, yes, but did not seem as concerned about creating a narrative that connected back to him. He took up the mask of the champion, *Shaco*, and his maniac personae, and play-acted as the character as he gamed. His actions and speech changed dramatically when gameplay began. He impersonated *Shaco*. Perhaps this has more to do with the style of game than the choices to be himself.

**Skwyr!**, on the other hand, is attracted to ways of representing herself in games, but at the same time, wishes to portray an 'other' self, one that performs her feelings of otherness in the real world.

**Skwyr!** I don't know if it's about representing myself as much as it's about identifying with my character, I guess, it's half and half. I guess I have a certain body type... Like I'm really curvy and I'm a little heavy right now so...I'm not going to identify with a character that's like flat chested, and a boyish figure, as you can see from what I made my character look like today.... I think I really tend towards the aliens...because that's me too, I'm different. I refuse to play humans in game mode. Because it defeats the purpose of gaming, for me...I don't self-identify with humans, at all. I never have. And I probably never will. I've never felt like I belong on earth, I guess.

To **Skwyr!**, her gender performance is wrapped up in the experiences her physical body remembers and holds, a lesson of self-worth she cannot translate into the digital realm. She struggles with body types, and analyzing her real body against her digital body, looking for the perfect way to represent herself, but at the same time, being someone other than herself. Her need to be alien and weird, but at the same time physically close to her true body is an interesting juxtaposition. On the one hand, she does not want to be human, she does not want to be like the

real self she is in the everyday real world; on the other, she still wants to be physically represented, in the shape and look of her body. **Skwyrl**'s avatar choices become a gendered performance, a palate for variable modes of cultural articulation of her gender as she interprets it, as well as the surface upon which her struggle with cultural forms are written through her choices of body. She rejects the embodiment of gender norms, and as such, throws off the mantle of docility imposed upon most players in video games. I would argue that here, **Skwyrl** takes up the *cyborg pedagogy* to disrupt and rewrite her gendered digital identity. Much time, energy, and focus goes into creating this self/non-self-representation within the game. In our focus group session, both male and female participants indicated this struggle with wanting to be somewhat represented by their avatars in games:

**Dysis:** I've always wanted to recreate myself as much as possible, so that I'm playing, me, I guess, in these games, and it doesn't matter whether it's the avatar in *WoW* or *Mass Effect* or whatever, I always try to make it look like me as much as possible. So I actually spend quite a long time in the avatar creator for which ever game that I am playing.

**Jirri:** Yeah, I think it's important to make a character I will connect with

**MrWoody:** That's not my experience. I just don't even care.

**Galindlinari:** I randomize until I'm ok with it. **[Several male voices agree]**

**Wishfire:** its funny cause for myself, the more options there are, sometimes the character creation can be hours for me, if I'm not careful, depending on how much there is to do. I never, I don't tend to make my characters look like myself, my real self at all.

**Skwyrl:** I also one of those three hours to make a character people, I prefer the games that have a lot of different options in character creation. It drove me crazy to come back to *WoW* and there was like 'pick one of these three heads' I was like, are you kidding me right now? **[laughter from the women]**

**Syfte:** I also really enjoy making characters, I find it's one of the parts of the game I get more excited about, at the beginning, to make my character, and I get really into it, and I don't necessarily try to make it look like me but I feel like I can relate to the character better, and get into it more if it's someone that's similar to me, like I might make my character short, or smaller, you know?

It is clear here that, in certain games, like the RPG *Skyrim*, the men will spend more time designing and perfecting their personal avatars; but for the most part, they would prefer to get into the game than waste time on their avatars. For the women, however, who often do not get the chance to play as a gendered female character, when that opportunity arises, they hold on to it with both hands. They will invest much time and energy into making their characters make up for the complete lack of female avatars they are fairly often exposed to. When asked if they have ever chosen to play as a character of the opposite gender to the one they identify as when given the choice, the men were much more flexible than the women in character selection. **Skwyrl**, in

her one-on-one interview, stated it even made her uncomfortable to play as a male character:

**K:** have you ever played as a male character before?

**Skwyrl:** Well, now and then, but I don't like it. It makes me uncomfortable [why?] It's not me. Like, the whole point of MMOs and gaming for me is to immerse myself in another world. It's like what reading used to be for me, you know? But um, yeah it's difficult to identify in that way with a male character, like, I'm not a guy...

For their part, however, male participants seemed much more at ease with the concept of performing alternate gender identities in game. As **Biospark** and **Galindlinari** explain in our focus group interview:

**Biospark:** I always, I think I like making female human characters. I think that started back when I was playing *Guns*, and the model was actually smaller, so from like a purely competitive point of view, like that's why I would pick that model. And I think I just stuck with that strategy. For everything, cause like even now, uh, I play *Guild Wars* and um, I tried making like a male character and I guess it just threw me off to have the male voice, just cause I was so used to not hearing that for so long?

**Galindlinari:** I'm not gonna lie, my friends and I, back when we first graduated and like we were really like, heavy into WoW, we made a couple female Dreneis, and uh, this guy like, came while we were leveling and started hitting on us, so we just like, rolled with it and spent like 4 hours pretending we were females and he gave us like each 150 gold and was like, showering us with pets, it was hilarious.

Gender-bending in games, for the most part, is a completely acceptable practice for male players. These gender swaps are not about experiencing a 'female' side of gaming, but are rather, for these male participants, motivated by a competitive advantage, whether due to the skills or size of the female avatar, or the assistance that is given to female characters in games. They do not disrupt the performance of gender when they swap. If anything, these impersonations of women reinforce the gender norms embodied in gaming culture. However, the women did not seem to buy the 'damsel in distress' interaction with female players that the male participants shared and believed to happen often. **Skwyrl** and **Jirri** explain:

**Skwyrl:** See I don't know about you other ladies, but I rarely have experiences like that, in game, because I don't, quote unquote milk being a girl, like, so, it's crazy to me that most of the chick in game that get treatment like that are really guys pretending to be girls. In my experience.

**Jirri:** I play with my boyfriend and his friends, and they know I'm a girl, but in the rare times alone, I don't get offered things. Like ever.

The women also highlighted another issue about identifying as women in games. While they all sought to recreate themselves or their personality via a female avatar, most were hesitant to actually identify themselves as women to other players within a game for fear of the

consequences. In the focus group session, **Syfte**, **Skwyr**, and **Wishfire** had the following exchange:

**Syfte:** I try to not tell people I'm a girl, like I'll avoid talking in team speak or saying anything that would let people know that I'm a girl because I don't want to be treated any differently. And I find that people think automatically if you're a girl that you're not going to be as good, or they won't take you as seriously, so I just avoid it at all cost.

**Skwyr:** It's true, especially in *Eve* I find that I would always avoid going on TS and then even right up to the moment where I had to speak, I would never let on that I was a girl.

**Wishfire:** When I first started playing WoW ...I had made a female, and I had this weird guy who just kept following us, and just kept hitting on my character, and this was in the first iteration of WoW online, and it put me off to a point where I didn't want to play. It's really creepy... it is really off putting, and it can come across as, oh, I can't think of the word...

**Skwyr:** Stalkerish?

It is clear here that how female bodies are treated in game greatly impacts how players interact with female avatars. The treatment of women in gaming creates another layer to the confinement of players. Most of the female players in this study admit to docility, to allowing their digital identity to be controlled and confined by the prison of masculinity. For the male players in this study, ironically, there are many advantages to be gained by playing a female body. Whether ability or treatment by other players, the men seem to see it only as a positive for them. For the women, however, there existed a feeling of fear around their avatars in connection to themselves: no matter what choices they made with their digital bodies, real life consequences of their gender identity still influenced how they chose to go about being 'female' in video games. However, gender swapping was not seen as a desirable alternative for the women, because they already felt overly pressured to engage with male characters and male-driven storylines. Better, they felt, to be a woman when given the chance; but to not identify themselves as women beyond that, for fear of policing, harassment, or outright mistreatment.

### **Gaming Gender Standards, Gaming Culture, and Semiotics**

In this final section of the chapter, I look more closely at my participants' gender performances via their digital bodies, and focus on the historical experiences that digital bodies hold. Foucault (1978) suggests that "deployments of power are directly connected to the body—to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures; far from the body having to be effaced, what is needed is to make it visible through an analysis in which the biological and the

historical are not consecutive to one another [...] but are bound together in an increasingly complex fashion in accordance with the development of the modern technologies of power that take life as their objective” (pp. 151–152). I would argue, based on participants’ experiences with the gaming industries standards of gendered bodies, that part of the problem with gender and gaming lies in the dominant historical culture of gaming and digital bodies. While participants struggled with ways to perform their identities, be it their real-life gender or values, in a digital space the underlying factor that inhibited their connections often involved the overall design and standards of bodies in video games. When asked questions that challenged her to read the texts and bodies of the games she engaged with, **Phedria** explains:

Have you played the new super smash brothers? Do you know what Princess Peaches’ main attack is? Blowing kisses. I mean. Come on. The others have like, lightening based attacks, or flame based attacks, things they don’t do in their normal game play either, or they can throw giant trees at you, but no, she throws kisses at you, and you fall over. That is her attack.

**Phedria** recognizes the limits placed on characters through which she is forced (as the player of Peach) to perform a stereotypical reflection of gender in game. Princess Peach, the damsel in distress in the Mario Brothers video games series, is never a character with much agency or power. Instead of disrupting that narrative, this new game reiterates the dominant narrative of ‘female characters are weak’ while giving the male characters in the game powers and skills completely out of context to those male characters’ original video game narratives. **Phedria** continued the discussion by pointing out the avatars we were utilizing in our interview, as well as the bodies of other players around us. Her reading of the various characters in our periphery while playing WoW reveals the standard of body the gaming industry generally imposes on players, regardless of their identified gender. Here we see the performance of ‘woman’ as interpreted through hegemonic masculinity again when examining the bodies and stances of the female avatars in Figure 47. When comparing characters that are similarly outfitted, as we see in Figure 48, two types of gender representation emerge: hyper sexualized females and hyper macho males. Corneliussen (2008) remarks, “Gender is present in *World of Warcraft* in many ways, but it is not necessarily insistent or obvious.” I, and my participants, would disagree. Gender is performed in the avatars’ bodies, the movements of avatars, and the treatment of avatars within the game. It is blatant and obvious. **Phedria**’s subsequent reading of two Blood Elves (Figure 48) of the same class within the game, I would argue, further serves to



contradict the notion that the allowed forms of gender in the game are not insistently enforced:

My Night elf that you see right now, let's look at this as an example, of the frustrations I have with fashion. Let's look at my character's vest, it is NOT worn that way on a male toon. On me it is a low cut, does not protect many vital areas, but looks sexy. Or look at both our body stances right now, there's no way that we'd stand like that on a normal basis, that is just the ideal ...I mean they look like Barbie dolls. With nice big hips, tiny waists and nice big boobies. Like, let's go find a male character and go stand next to a male character. Oh look, here's one over here. Oh look, he has all his bits covered, how nice for him. He's wearing the starter edition, the same stuff as we started off with, but he has full coverage.



*Figure 47. Phedria and Kelsey (right) in WoW.*

In fact, players learn the performance of gender by reading the bodies of characters around them in the beginner arena, just as **Phedria** does by comparing the two rogue Elves in Figure 48:

Or look at this guy over here. He's a rogue too, just like me, or this girl over here, Kyra, but hey, check out her midriff. Yeah, so that's something that pisses me off. Its like basically you have the worst armor ever as a female that does not actually look good at all. It's how the game designer did it, it's basically like I know, let's make a really cool vest that gives him plus 3 protection, and on the guy it'll look like a vest, and on the girl, it'll be corset. It makes no sense.



Figure 48. Comparing male and female Blood Elf Rogues.

These bodies and their performance of gender are not exclusive to certain games, either. Even the most progressive of games known for diversity of characters, gender, orientation, and race, like *Wildstar*, is still embedded with a standard of what it means to be ‘female’ in video games. This is obvious in **Skwyr!**’s reading of various body stances and types within her chosen game, *Wildstar*. While doing so, she noticed an alien Granock (see Figure 49), similar to her character, exhibiting the hand on hips, slightly balanced to the side look of female characters all over the gaming universe. However, she also noted that racialized black traits had been given to the Granock alien race: corn rows, large bottoms, and often wide noses. This was something she had not noticed before:

**Skwyr!** I don’t know if you’ve noticed this human and Granock talking beside us, but the Granock keeps pulling all these hip poses that kept like catching my eye as a bit overtly sassy woman. Weird. See? She keeps putting one hip out...I think even her hair and such, she’s stylized after a sassy black woman. She even has corn rows. But like it’s also the mod for all the female characters, always with a hip position that is saucy or something like that.



Figure 49. Female Granock character in *Wildstar*.

While inscribing racialized black traits on an alien avatar is not in itself an inherent racism, it is indicative of an obvious lack within most of the gaming world: of bodies which allow players to perform gender and sexuality outside the cultural norm, and that are not characterizations, stereotypes, or sexual objects. Often, however, even agency in the form of having the option to represent their gender, albeit a very narrow definition of it, is taken from women players. In the group discussion, I asked the question, “What about games that don’t give you gender options?” The following discussion ensued:

**Skwyr!**: Hate.

**Syfte**: Totally hate it.

**Dysis**: I hate it so much

**Skwyr!**: Me too

**Dysis**: I play as me, and if there’s no female, then it’s not me, and I just...I don’t even know. Like, it hasn’t happened to me to recently, oh wait, yes, *South Park*, the latest game, you can only be a male kid, and that kinda ticked me off. But I played it anyway. Bitterly. Haha

**Phedria**: Ya me too.

**Biospark**: I don’t care, really. It doesn’t affect me. Like *DOTA* it’s all about the abilities, it’s not nothing to do with the physical look of the character. Uh, trying to think, well like *Mass Effect*, I choose to play male. I don’t know, cause it’s a story and I see myself more in there, it’s not like a competitive thing, but for others, well I enjoyed *Tomb Raider* and it didn’t bother me to play as a woman,

**MrWoody**: but the thing is you’re playing as Lara, right, you’re not self-identifying, which is what the girls are talking about, and from that aspect, I understand why the girls don’t like the fact that you can’t play as a girl in many games.

**Wishfire**: ...but notice there are only a handful of stories where you play as a woman,

and a predominant amount where you play as men in the main story. Even without choices, whose stories are valued is a problem for me as a gamer... and the thing is, they are all made to look a certain way in games, and I don't want my character have breasts like that go one forever, or have a particular over sexed look, and I don't always want to have that character, that over sexed over the top character.

**Dysis** shares that when a recent game did not give her the option to play a non-male character, she played the game anyway, though bitterly. The issues female participants continue to raise about the lack of representation and the opportunity to have control of how one engages with storylines and digital bodies in video games is important to note. This problem comes up again and again, and the data suggests that the female players play despite their feelings about this lack of control or representation. The storyline and the ability to create/design one's avatar also limit the players' ability to break free from the confines of the game world. Based on the accounts of participants, and the analysis of images thus far, there is only one dominant narrative in the majority of games: a male, heteronormative storyline, which leaves little room for other voices and identities to shine through. Here, we begin to see that the trouble with gender and gaming is how gender is performed in games: cultural limitations, as well as design limitations influenced by culture, restrict players to the point where performativity morphs into gender norms. The bodies of avatars become typical, predictable, and only representative of a feminine ideal as dominant masculinity interprets it. However, despite the gaming industry's constant dismissal of criticism about whose voices matter and when, players of varying genders continue to rebel against these forms. As **Jirri** also explained, what motivates players to begin playing in the first place varies a great deal between men and women. She noted that most women she knows who play (as is the case with 2/3 of the participant women in this study), began to play video games because their boyfriends, husbands, or significant others did. They already aimed to engage with someone else's motivations for wanting to play games. Women, therefore, begin gaming already orienting their performance around a male narrative. It is unsurprising, then, for these gamers to continue to engage with male narratives in any number of games; frustrated, annoyed, and yet still willing to spend hours at a time creating and changing their digital representations to combat 'Kombat Lingerie', the male gaze, sexual violence, and a lack of opportunities to express and engage with stories and bodies that represent them. As we will see in the next chapter, female participants acknowledge that much of this frustration is ultimately wrapped up in their need to reject similar treatment in real life. We will note also in the final

analysis chapter on language that some of the male participants, when confronted with the spillover of their video game behaviours into real life, also acknowledge how problematic their language choices can be in the gaming world. The male participants in the study also made note of their surprise that people who are marginalized in games continue to play. In the following exchange, **Anonymous** is even surprised that anyone who isn't heterosexual and male is still playing:

**Anonymous:** To be honest, I'm still surprised anyone besides a straight dude plays most of the main title video games that are out there. I mean, when the motivations and driving force behind most of these characters is either tits and pussy, or murder and mayhem, I don't get why girls want to even play them.

**Phedria:** some girls like tits. Some girls like mayhem. Some of us just want to collect herbs in WoW and not have our bits ogled. Well, or our toon's bits ogled.

This chapter has striven to uncover the several ways in which gamers are docile bodies in games, performing gender according to the confined avatars they are given. It has also shown the moments when participants have taken up their cyborg identity to disrupt the standardized performance of gender. By and large, however, participants dealt with gender performativity of hegemonic masculinity by adopting a 'shut up and play' ethos. Often the women wished to push back against the gendered interpretations of both male and female characters they interacted with or played as, but were limited in their abilities to do so. However, they still found ways to disrupt, e.g. by designing avatars that were not always physically appealing to other gamers.

Some of the participants shared that they spent hours reinventing their digital selves to find ways to disrupt the normative view of male/female bodies in video games, e.g. by creating or adopting non-humanoid avatars, or ones that otherwise deviated from the gendered norms of video games. It becomes obvious, overall, that female players feel constrained by the regulation of gender and body in games; while male participants have on occasion adopted female avatars, female participants have struggled to hold on to some form of gender identity by insistently playing as women whenever possible. For them, it was the only agency afforded to them in a heteronormative male-governed space. Our male participants, who for the most part acknowledged issues with the way bodies are represented in games, did not feel affected by or imposed upon by game design or gaming culture when seeking to represent themselves. They also struggled to identify in what way gender performances through avatars was limited. The women in the study, however, grappled with many aspects of bodily representation in games,

from design to physical violence against their avatars to not identifying themselves as women for fear of repercussions in game and in real life. Reading digital bodies and how participants negotiated them shows, as **Galindlinari** suggested, that the overwhelming culture of maleness, the hegemonic masculinities, expressed in digital bodies in video games is one of the major issues with gender and gaming.

In a broader, educational context, understanding that maleness occupies the space of video games is important. It means that when we engage with video games in our classrooms, for example, without first unpacking and understanding the culture from which most entertainment-based games derive, we fail to prepare ourselves or our students for the problematic elements that can come with gaming culture. We must also acknowledge that certain students will possess more cultural capital in video games than the rest, due to the negotiation of identity in games. If, as George Gerbner (1985) suggests “we are the stories we tell” then the stories being told in video games, through video games, and through interactions with video games, are shaping who we are. That, if anything, should be a reason to unpack the power relations of video games, and digital bodies.

## Chapter 7

### Power Intervenes in Gaming Culture

*KD: “give a man a mask, and he will show you his true face” (Oscar Wilde)*

Learning to use an avatar in a video game like *World of Warcraft* means learning to be embodied in a video game with a body that is not your own and learning to use your actual body to enable the new embodiment. However, the body that players must learn to occupy is always impacted by the history of bodies within the digital space, by how they have been disciplined/shaped and trained by the culture of the game. Derrida (1994) notes that hegemonic discourses are haunted by obsessions, and that these hauntings are part of every hegemony. So, too, are the dominant disciplinary and identity discourses present in the mainstream games introduced by participants. Identity discourses in games are shaped by the dominant culture, and haunted by the ghosts of the players, which forces the recognition that player and character, physical and virtual, are not as divided as they are often assumed to be. Cassel and Jenkins (1998) suggest that female gamers tend to respond with “what they are supposed to say” (p. 19) when interviewed about gaming and gaming culture. I argue that the power dynamics of hegemonic masculinities and the disciplined space of masculine culture within gaming haunt players to the point that they embrace their docility in the game.

This chapter explores the shaping and training (Foucault 1978) of gamers’ play, positioning, and negotiation of gender in games further. For example, the positions participants chose both while in the focus group session and in the one-on-one interviews paints a picture of disciplined bodies that often negotiate the digital space based on their perceived power as a gamer. Participants shared stories and engaged with game play in ways that demonstrated the disciplining of digital bodies and play in video games, but also shared moments of cyborg resistance against parts of gaming culture and video game play that bothered or upset them. This qualitative examination of players disciplined within the confines of the game revealed that there are several components to negotiating the digital body and power in gaming: a) how participants were taught to engage with video games, or first negotiated the disciplined space of games; b) the assumptions participants made about male or female gamers and the gender performances of other players in the game; c) the Panopticism of digital spaces like video games, how it shapes game design, and how players are affected by it; and d) the performativity and impersonation of

gendered gamer identities ('girl gamers') and how female players are disciplined by their sex. With these themes in mind, a closer reading of Foucault's (1978) theory of power is conducted, with a focus on the roles docile bodies play in reinforcing power in gaming culture. Docile bodies are the bodies of individuals made to conform to certain roles and performances through systems of discipline, and bodies "may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved" (Foucault 1979, p. 136). However, the power of hegemonic masculinities is not complete in video games, because "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (p. 94). Bodies composed of these potential subversive acts of cyborg resistance, ones that disrupt the regime of power, allow for the disciplined subject to not completely lose her agency when power is exercised over her; her body becomes a site of possible "resistance."

An interesting component that came into play for me as the researcher was the power dynamics between the participants and myself, which I will cover before examining the participant data. Two of my female participants in the one-on-one interviews, **Phedria** and **Skwyrl**, were game focused, but open to sharing stories and errors, laughing at confused actions in game, and in general, created a feeling of comradery. I took my cues from the participants, and as they introduced me to the gaming world where our conversation took place, I also allowed myself to be welcomed and taught the ways of that gaming world. My interviews with two of my male participants, **KD** and **Biospark**, did involve much laughter and teasing as I bumbled through more complicated games like *Gauntlet*; however, I was relegated to more of a follower role, as both of these players were of superior skill. My interview with **KD**, for example, involved a lot of exchanges of ideas, and gameplay discussion, but was also a learning experience for me. He was expert in the game *League of Legends*, which I am familiar with, and play often, but he took this opportunity to impart some of his superior skills. His approach was automatically one of teacher/student, without first waiting to see what my skill level was. As a researcher, I played along with this stance. As a female gamer, I found it patronizing. I have reflected on this episode a few times, and still cannot be certain I deferred to him out of politeness, or whether I took the path of least resistance. Taylor (2003) suggests one of the pleasures for women gamers is the chance to engage in combat, a gaming arena which allows them to challenge and strike down gender norms by experimenting with their aggression potential. As a player who engages with games to act out my frustrations in combat, it was



interesting to negotiate play alongside male gamers who took up the role of ‘teacher’. My skill became the focus of the conversation; my errors and choices something my male participants were interested in dissecting. Early in the one-on-one interviews I could feel the narrative of “female gamers aren’t good players” permeating the space.

The gameplay itself involved a lot of coaching, chastising, and advising. Reviewing the video of gameplay, **KD** was easily able to turn off the idea that ‘this is an interview’ and turned on his *League* voice, as he later called it.

**KD:** I wanted to push you a bit. I wanted to see how good you were.

**Kelsey:** Is that because I’m researching games, or because I’m a girl who plays League?  
[laughter]

**KD:** Probably both. You held your own. But you don’t play ranked, do you?

This exchange, following our round in *League*, in which I did not perform well under pressure, demonstrates to me the general approach most of the male participants had to talking about gaming and gender, which this chapter will show. They were open, honest, sometimes pushy, often apologetic, but also blunt and occasionally unaware of what they said or did in games. In the interactions with the women, I saw two instances of ‘say what they want to hear’ during the focus group portion of game play; they did not want to rock the boat or make anyone uncomfortable. The rest of the women were angry about their treatment in video games. Unapologetically so: they wanted me, their fellow gamers, and anyone else who would listen to hear that they know what the trouble with gender and gaming is, and that it is the constant struggle for acceptance against a hetero-white-male landscape that dominates the gaming world, and often ignores and alienates its minority groups, players who are not male, players of minority racialized backgrounds, and players of varying sexual orientation. An interesting thing was that the female participants also noticed the exclusion of other groups. The female othering, while the most blatant due to media coverage and commentary, is not the only one, and they are aware of it, unlike most of their male companions. Often, the origin story of how female players first began interacting with gaming outside of their relationship with a male player, begins their stories of isolation, and determination, in being gamers.

### **How to Play Video Games: Lessons from Partners, Strangers, and the Gaming Community**

Gamers’ narratives, more often than not, involve the words ‘escapism’ or ‘fantasy’. In the 7 hours and 45 minutes of interviews recorded, ‘escapism’ was used 326 times, while ‘fantasy’

was used 192 times. For my participants, gaming and the gaming community is a place to forget your cares, and check out for a time. Games are viewed purely in terms of a self-justifying leisure (Levy 2006). Often the issues participants have with video games become forgotten as they discuss their favourite narratives, games, and play. The men especially were nostalgic for their first experiences with games: they were introduced to games by their older brothers or best friends with better systems, as a natural part of their boyhood. They expressed that this was something they and their friends just 'did'. **KD**: "Oh, I've been playing games since I was 4, maybe? Yeah. That seems right." And even when in their late teens to mid-thirties, there is nothing strange or unusual about men playing games. **MrWoody**: "Most of the guys you know probably at least play a first person shooter, if not like, FIFA or something like that. We all do, pretty much." They can all remember the experience of being introduced to games through the culture of being a North American boy, as **Anonymous** put it: "You can't really be a guy in our society and not have some exposure to an Xbox or like, a PC game. I mean, if you weren't raised here, maybe, but even then. It's pretty universal. Like, I can meet people in Korea when I taught there, and not speak any Korean, and still talk *League* with people in broken English." As Ray (2004) notes, the concept of the computer as a male object is reinforced in children very early in their lives. Hegemonic masculinity not only naturalizes masculine behaviours, but also male discipline areas, such as technology. As video games are disciplined as a masculine space, the participants' affinity to it does not seem surprising.

Our female gamers, however, revealed that their introduction to video games, if not their first exposure to them, was often through a significant other:

**Skwyr!** I seem to just keep ending up dating these boys that were gamers, that would rather play video games than hang out with me, so then finally, one of them was like, well why don't you try it instead of bashing it?

**Syfte**: I mostly play with [**Biospark**] and his friends, and started playing games with him. Yeah I would say I'm a casual gamer, and I mostly play co-op games with [**Biospark**] and some of his friends, and I'll play some games alone like Knights of the Old Republic or Mass Effect

**Jirri**: I kinda started WoW because my boyfriend plays.

**Wishfire**: When I first started playing WoW uh, it was my boyfriend and I, ah, and we both had made Night Elves, now he had made a male and I had made a female.

**Phedria**: I started really getting in to WoW just before I went to teacher's college which was in 2009.... I had got my heart broken, and was not a very happy person, and one of my male friends was like look, why don't you come play WoW with me and my friend, and ... I became a little addicted. I used it as a coping mechanism, then when I broke

myself of that, I just started playing for fun. For me. And not being quite as hard core.

All of the women except **Dysis** shared that playing video games was not an expected pastime choice for them, that they and their friend groups had not grown up with games. However, they all understood and spoke for the desire to relate to companions or significant others, and their engagements with gaming varied from there. The differences between male and female participants in regards to how they related to their first time gaming signals a difference in cultural initiation into gaming culture. Male participants were ushered into gaming as a natural rite of passage and a mantle of masculine culture. The women, however, seemed to suggest that without their introduction to gaming through male friends and family, they would not have found their way to gaming on their own. I would not suggest that this is the case for all female gamers; however, it may be a contributing factor to the feeling of not belonging in the space that the women shared. The invisibility of the masculine in games is made visible in how the feminine enters the space: hesitant, subversive, and lacking in cultural understanding. It invokes a feeling of being given a password to enter a boys' only club. Female gamers may not remain condescended-to invitees, and some become, as Taylor (2006) argues, power players in their own right. A few of the women participants identified themselves as casual gamers who played alongside their boyfriends or husbands, while the majority identified as 'hardcore' gamers who played for their own sake as well as with their partners.

**Phedria:** "Uh, hardcore gamer, duh. Though the assumption is as a girl I just play Candy Crush or whatever." All of the male participants identified as hardcore gamers. Yee (2007) suggests that while men game for more achievement-based goals, all players game to be social. However, despite a desire to be social, the social aspect for women gamers was much more likely to be motivated by maintenance of a romantic relationship. According to Nardi's (2010) observation of gender roles in WoW specifically: "The dominant plane [is] shaped by and for males. How d[o] females fit in? [...] female players squeezed into its interstices" (p. 161). From much of the female participants' narratives, as we will see through the rest of this chapter, the need to 'squeeze' into the spaces allowed for them in gaming reflects the power dynamics at play with regards to gender and gaming. This sometimes means players electing to negotiate traditionally multiplayer formatted games alone, or to escape within their escape from problems with other gamers, as seen in these exchanges between **Wishfire**, **Skwyrl**, and **Dysis**:

**Wishfire:** When I'm playing MMOs these days, I normally play solo, I don't like playing

with other people at all. I will run on my own, dungeons with others or raids every once in a while, but in all honesty I prefer to play alone...I don't know, does anyone else prefer to play solo in an MMO?

**Skwyrl:** Oh yeah

**Dysis:** 100 percent. I've almost played this game for the past 10 years solo. I mean because I've only had to have one or two small experiences where people are yelling at me and telling me what to do and I'm like, OK I'm out. That's it...in fact I just like to explore the world by myself, so I totally agree...I also get to avoid the bullshit all women gamers face. Yes, boys, the bullshit.

Foucault's panopticism opens up interesting areas of inquiry when applied to virtual environments. For example, what are the effects of the administrators not being able to see everywhere? What actions do the administration deem actionable offenses worth penalizing? Are the values of administrators/designers the sole factor in disciplining bodies in games? What happens when members of the community are able to roam outside of the disciplining gaze of the administration? Gamers are able to use chat programs outside of the game to communicate in ways that are unmonitored. Such programs open new avenues to resist the dominant discourses by allowing players to exist simultaneously inside and outside the community's boundaries. However, while such spaces might indeed appear to be "safe," they are still under the dominant gaze. As the conversation evolved, female players began to suggest that the reason they gamed alone, despite often coming to gaming in order to please a male significant other, was to escape interacting with males who were mistreating them, or overtly sexist towards them.

**Wishfire:** Honestly? I also play alone to avoid the bullshit. Like that story I told you about the girl in DAYZ being, whatever, I think of it as a rape, but yeah, I think we get held hostage by others experiences. Reading shit like that makes me say fuck this noise.

**Galindlinari:** It's, I mean, it's kind of everywhere, too, it's not just an open sexism, it's just sort of like an underlying thing...if you go to Twitch or like, how we were talking about the anal jokes, like anal reckoning. All this very, like, stuff that isn't directly sexist but it's definitely like not not sexist. And like rape jokes and...yeah

For all involved, what constitutes sexist behaviour in game is confusing, like **Galindlinari** suggests, partly because the Internet culture itself is riddled with it. The use of terms like "it is not *not* sexism" by **Galindlinari** shows that the disciplining of gender in games is invisible to those who benefit from it, that in this digital space, punishment and discipline are made invisible (Foucault 1977). It is interesting to note that when **MrWoody** pointed out that certain games' culture was more open to women than others, that "WoW is more open to women," in an effort to reassure that not all spaces are alienating, **Skwyrl** was quick to agree

with him. With the men weighing in on whether they felt games were sexist, the women began to be quiet, an occurrence that happened more often as the conversations delved into areas that specifically highlighted issues women had with gaming. According to Broadhurst (1993), gender differences in online communication tend to disfavour women. In mixed-sex public discussion groups, females post fewer messages, and are less likely to persist in posting when their messages receive no response. While our discussions were held virtually, the audio component made all the participants except two comfortable enough to speak often, depending on the scope of the topic; however, the men and one woman kept up a steady discussion in the chat box that was on topic but separate from the focus group conversations. The one-on-ones allowed participants more space to discuss how they felt on these topics. So, too, did the impromptu discussion group that occurred after the focus group, made up of **Phedria**, **Skwyr**, **Jirri**, and **Kelsey** (myself), who stuck around after the other participants had signed off. **Skwyr**:  
wyrlymyself, who stuck around after thable saying things I felt about gaming with the guys around, I mean they seem cool, but they have no clue, right, so they are going to argue about it with me, like every male gamer on this planet does.”

The women expressed that they were more comfortable sharing a bit more on topics such as sexism and gender violence in games with a smaller, female-only group, because, as **Phedria** suggests, “we only faced the disagreement of girls who had different experiences instead of guys acting like we’re delusional,” something which is important to consider both regarding the scope of this study, and regarding future decisions about discussion groups held for similar purposes. **Jirri**: “I felt like I shouldn’t say as much since I’m so new.” A comfortable space that encourages all participants to speak candidly must be provided. Cavallaro (2003) suggests that discourses allow us “ways of mediating between language, power, and knowledge to give meaning to the world according to specific ideologies” (p. 25). However, how participants felt about imparting and engaging with the discourse of gaming reflected the lack of agency they felt as players within that discourse.

### **Power Dynamics: Male/Female Players and Assumptions**

As the players began to share whether or not they felt comfortable in certain spaces in games, evidence of exclusion began to emerge both in discussions and in play, such as the participant

**Syfte** seating her avatar on a cushion slightly apart from the group. I wondered about what assumptions players made about other gamers, and whom they interacted with in game.

As we have seen, **KD** attributes the sex of the champions to the players he engages with. However, he always assumes players are male. He seemed unwilling to acknowledge that there were many female players, assuming they would mostly play “casual games like that Kim Kardashian App game or Angry Birds.” **KD** associated women with casual gaming more often than not in our discussions. This was reflected in the manner in which he engaged with me in our one-on-one play. He assumes the mantle of authority, automatically rejecting the possibility of my belonging in the game without his guidance. His real world body, his masculinity, dictates my actions and exerts control over my digital body in the game. Here, our cyborg bodies are situated between, as connecting links: between the video game player and the game designer; between players; and between us as participant and researcher.

**Biospark**, on the other hand, thought there may be more female players in online gaming than would be willing to admit their gender in game for fear of repercussions. “I know [**Syfte**] rarely acknowledges she’s a girl online, pretty sure that’s the case in games with more competitive edge. I think they probably fear their gender being blamed for bad gameplay.” **Biospark**’s observation of a fear of gender reveal suggests that bad game play, for a male, has to do with skill, whereas bad gameplay, for a woman, has to do with gender, an observation the women in the group suggested, too. **Syfte**: “Even when I play with [**Biospark**] and friends, I’m still a little leery of the Team Speak. It’s like, I suppose the word is ingrained in me. Either I fear the comments for being a girl, like, suggestive ones, or fear the trash talk if I don’t perform well.” These are methods of discipline that, Judith Butler (1997) would argue, highlight the performative and temporary aspects of identities. Players are brought face-to-face with the realization that their identities must constantly be created and re-created, and ever disciplined as they play games.

**Anonymous** makes further assumptions of female gamers as “you know like those chicks that pose with controllers and stuff on instagram? 99.9% of them couldn’t beat an Assassin’s Creed game if it was put on ‘infant’ mode.” For **Anonymous**, girls only game to get attention. He suggests that many women are involved with gaming now because it has become more mainstream. He uses language like “infant” to suggest a predominant feeling that women are not as skilled or capable when it comes to playing video games. **Anonymous** promotes and projects

dominant discourse, policing the confines of gaming culture for any who he deems must be disciplined. When asked to clarify which women he meant, those that he feels are fake gamers or women gamers in general, he refused to answer. **Galindlinari**, on the other hand, an avid Twitch watcher, gamer, and designer, often challenged the group to look beyond a stereotypical view of gamers, male or female. However, the language he uses in this discussion still excludes and labels female gamers:

**Galindlinari:** I have a question, to the group, if that's OK? Do any of you know who Hafu (sp) is, and what do you think about Hafu...a gamer girl, not like a 'gamer girl', but like an actual game playing girl who's good... I definitely respect her, ...there are other female streamers that I go and I watch. I don't respect this person at all because some of the stuff, I don't know, like their attitudes are like...

He shares with the group how much he admires this player and her tactics, and that she is someone he respects. However, there is a need here, influenced by hegemonic masculinity, that suggests that gamers who are women must play like men in order to be 'legitimized' in the gaming world. She must be respected by a male gamer to be deemed a good gamer, instead of 'a gamer girl' of the sort **Anonymous** described. For several of the women involved in the study, including myself, this is a constant occurrence when one declares oneself to be a gamer. Participants acknowledged this constant pressure to perform or meet expectations of fellow gamers, of the pressure of questions thrown their way if they acknowledge in real life that they played games:

**Phedria:** Well, when I talk about video games to other people, I'll get one of two reactions...[to] I'm a gamer, they would either be like pssh yeah right, and just be super dismissive and question my abilities... get... rather personal in a kinda creep way.

This feeling of having to prove oneself, or stand up to presumptive judgement of oneself as a woman who games is also very present in the games themselves. In doing this, female players become the authors of their own subjection, according to Foucault (1979):

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (p. 202–ri3)

**Phedria** highlights experiences of dominance and dismissal from people she interacts with when discussing games in work position. She has also experienced the reverse of that

treatment, which for her as a woman is not acceptance but a form of reverence, such as being named a 'rare and uncapturable unicorn', which is almost equally uncomfortable. Most of the women interviewed had a story or two of times they had been harassed after revealing their gender in game, and suggest a wariness of doing so in any online game, except among friends.

**Phedria** again notes the politics of entitlement of male gamers, of being entitled to having their fantasy and escapism desires being met in game, at the expense of female players, and an unwillingness to acknowledge the effect their entitlement has on other gamers.

**Phedria:** I've had other uncomfortable moments, particularly in raids, like when you play with a large group of people you've never played with before, cause it's just whoever signs up, right... and they would be like WHOA you're a girl? Are you going to marry me? ...it was just a way to make me feel weird and uncomfortable about being there. I guess the word is unwelcomed? It's not something a guy would say to another guy who signed in to raid.

How women are treated by players online, even when they are 'joking', can according to **Phedria** be unwelcome and uncomfortable. Foucault's work on power factors large in this feeling of being unwelcome, especially his theorization of docile bodies and the reflexivity of power. Avatars are bodies subject (like our own) to control and inscription. The invisible masculine culture is imposed on female players with unwelcome language and control, a flexing of power that the men who indulge in virtually would perhaps not use in the real world. As digital bodies are inscribed with hegemonic values and desires, players controlling those bodies are treated in the same way.

There is often no recourse or way out of discussion, nor a signal to give to the other player that would make them realize the repercussion of their actions. Social interactions and identity are, according to Wendt (1994) "at once cognitive schemas that enable an actor to determine 'who I am/we are' in a situation and positions in a social role structure of shared understandings and expectations" (p. 395). One of the issues with gendered power imbalance in gaming, I would suggest, is the lack of ability, often, for players to recognize who they are in the moment of interaction, and what the social expectations of the other players are in that moment.

The assumption in online gaming is that women are willing participants in these kinds of discussions, or that they enjoy it, according to **Wishfire**: "they expect us to giggle and play into it. Sometimes it's just a joke to them, or part of the narrative." She suggested that to men playing games, this is usually a form of comradery. Except for the times when it is not. **Wishfire** says



this “is why women get so freaked out when people stalk them or talk to them like that. We have these one or three examples of someone being a total creeper, and it stays with us, so no, we don’t want to joke with you about taking our panties off, or marrying you. Because it freaks us out.” Players outline that this is the part of gaming culture that they must simply grin and bear, if they want to keep playing.

### **Power Dynamics: Lessons from Designers and Gaming Culture**

Participants also indicated the difficulty of negotiating the gaming culture and expectations of games that were marketed to hetero-male gamers. At least since the 1990s, the percentage of female characters in video games has remained steady at around 15% (Anti-Defamation League, 2014), while 48% of gamers identified as women, according to the Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry Report (2015). In reviewing women in gaming in 2014, the Anti-Defamation League’s findings suggests that video games are “marketed primarily to boys and men, video games do not have a good track record when it comes to positively including girls and women. Female characters are rarely in the games and, when they are, they are often portrayed in negative, stereotypical and one-dimensional ways” (p. 60). The androcentric culture of video games was something I as a female gamer was well aware of before beginning this project. However, I sought to find out how different gamers interacted within the Panopticon, and learned to create their own identities and meanings when performing gender in games. **KD**, for example, was concerned with discussing what it means in pop culture to be a ‘nerd’, and play video games. For him, while at times surrounded by controversy, it has never been more exciting to be a gamer:

**KD:** I think that back a few years ago, being a gamers wasn’t something that like you should be proud of, they were seen as those stereotypical, nerdy, with no life and you know socially awkward, right? And today, the thing is, gamers are still seen as stereotypical nerds, socially awkward people, but the thing is that stereotype only applies to certain types of games.

This ‘muddy’ nature of gaming is something many of the participants kept coming back to, the complicated nature of negotiating their own desire to escape and engage with interesting storylines, versus the baggage that came along with playing games. **Phedria:** “it’s a constant thing I think on...should I still play? Is it worth it? Then I’m like, fuck that noise, of course it is,

right?” They highlighted, too, how much influence game designers had on them when selecting games, from what kind of story lines that were made available to them, to the way they designed their avatars. One particular point made by **Skwyr**, **Phedria**, and **Dysis** was how much control they needed to have to make decisions within a game that reflected the choices they might make in the real world. If games strayed too far into the ‘good’ or ‘bad’ realms, or asked players to engage with an identity they could not connect with, players longed for other options:

**Skwyr**: Who I am in real life directly impacts the decisions I make in game. I would pick something that I would pick in real life, I would pick the light side over the dark side

**Phedria**: I enjoyed the first *Dragon Age*, *Origins*, where you could start off as different characters from the beginning... I played through each gender on each storyline. Just at the beginning, because I wanted to know what their origin stories would be

**Dysis**: I love how much games have evolved, though. Loving video games brought me to my job, but I’m happier with games today giving me a chance to be me.

**Skwyr** states implicitly that who she is in the real world impacts her gaming decisions; none of the male participants voiced this feeling. In fact, they shared they often felt free to do whatever in game, as it was divorced from their identity completely. Except when asked to delve into a narrative that was not heterosexual. The importance, therefore, of the power to select one’s own story and direction in games is very important to certain gamers in this study. **Biospark**: “Yeah, *DragonAge* changed a lot of things in games I think.” **MrWoody**: “haha I loved how pissed off people were about the gay Elf. It’s like games are fucking sacrosanct. They are far from it. It’s good to have change and difference, I think.” While often willing participants of docility, here participants demonstrate a consideration of the self and how individuals—shaped in specific cultural contexts—could come to knowingly and willingly choose actions and behaviours from a range of options, including actions that would produce sanctions. Part of the cyborg notion as a mapping of culture and social reality, is that the cyborg seeks to disrupt and rewrite the ‘map’ of culture. Haraway argues that “situated knowledges” are “marked knowledges” that produce “maps of consciousness” which reflect the ways in which (trans)gender, and affect how knowledge is constructed (1991, p. 111). Games like *DragonAge* to an extent allow players to embrace a rewriting of the map of acceptable gaming storylines. Here, the habitual hegemonic maleness of narratives is challenged in a mainstream game. Player desire to invoke new experiences and stories in the games they play show the disruption, the fight against docility. This division of identity when it comes to video game play is important to note when discussing the implications of gaming culture in the classroom. How participants are

divided on the investment of their personal identity in games would be important for educators to keep in mind. A student who plays video games in the same way as **Skwyr**, for example, could be greatly impacted if using a game in class that monitors her behaviours, successes, and failures.

Besides the gender identity of their characters, players also wanted access to different sexual orientations in storylines, as well as the ability to play as different races, both fictional races like Elves and Dwarfs and racialized minorities who often do not appear as main characters in games. **Phedria** explained that this was one reason she had always enjoyed games in the Star Wars universe because: “Star Wars is the universe to break down barriers. This is always the disruptive genre to gaming because they want inclusive, colourful and different experiences for their gamers, I think. I mean, games where a black Mace Windu is a main character? Never going to happen in *Assassin’s Creed*. But Star Wars will always be a place where all are welcomed, gender orientation or race don’t matter there. I fucking love it.”

In fact, participants highlighted several series that did a good job of pushing against the assumption of, as **Jirri** put it, that “all gamers are males and like boobies”. Here, **Jirri** is acknowledging that most people think games are created for male gamers, and hetero-male gamers. As masculinity is embedded in the cultural norms of most mainstream games, it becomes invisible to the player; however, its role in the discourse of games, in the narrative, in the gameplay and in the player interaction, makes it an important contributing factor in creating the docile bodies/participants in video games. When games do not take up this narrative, players notice it, and my participants suggested these kinds of games were disrupting the norm. However, the perception of how good a job the gaming industry is doing on this depended greatly on where participants’ privilege lay. Male participants were generally positive about narratives and access to ‘different’ storylines within games, in particular when it came to gendered narratives. For **KD**, this is something we must be patient about, allowing gaming culture as a whole to evolve first into accepting the idea of diversity in game as ‘the norm’:

**KD**: “I think that these days you definitely get the games that have likeable female protagonists, like for example the Mass Effects series, even though in the canon Commander Shepherd is supposed to be a man, but still a lot of people like to play Commander Shepherd as a female...well, of course if you were to compare the number of games that contain or feature a female protagonist against those that don’t of course it’s going to be pretty unfair, but I think we’re going towards the right stuff, you know?”

**KD** recognizes the unfairness of representation in games, but suggests that change is happening, enough for him to recognize and see, and he believes this to be a positive direction for gamers from all backgrounds. Perhaps, for some gamers, the consistency of what gendered avatar they choose to play signifies the gender that players are becoming within the game. However, for **Anonymous**, the push for a variety of gendered identities in games was:

Just another way for the femnazi agenda to fucking ruin games...It's not that I have a problem with girls and gaming, at all, I think it's awesome and a bit hot, but like, why are we always complaining about what characters are wearing? Or who is rescuing who? Just play the game. Play it.

**Anonymous** uses a lot of language that shows up in discussions online when discussions around the issues with gender and gaming come up in media, blogs, or forums. 'Femnazi Agenda' in particular suggests he believes there is a specific agenda aimed at changing games as he sees them, as an escape. He repeats often throughout our discussion that players should just 'play the game' and shut up, or get out. This connects very well to a current documentary about female designers and software engineers in the gaming industry titled: GTFU (Get The Fuck Out). **Anonymous** is comfortable stating that unhappy players should just get out because nothing in the current narrative in gaming disrupts his style of play, or his desire to create a certain kind of digital identity. The narrative of the women participants often pushed up against that which **Anonymous** shared, as they pointed out the many ways a lack of gender variety in games affects who they get to be in their chosen digital medium, and the impact it has on how they game and why:

**Phedria:** My first favourite game was Legend of Zelda on the N64, it's a classic...with Legend of Zelda, there's the quests, and mission like objectives, and there's all the temples, and it was just a really fascinating story, with so many fun things about it. [K: did you ever wish Zelda was the main character instead of Link?] Oh YA. Zelda's WAY cooler than Link, when she turns into Sheik and can actually hold her own in a fight.  
**Skwyrl:** and then the whole roleplaying thing, it's awkward to be a male, because then I have to act like one, in a male way.

One game in particular, a very prominent triple-A game that sells millions of copies with every new release, seemed to irk the women the most in its unwillingness to allow players to play as a woman for the game. **Dysis**, at one point weighed in with: "why can't we play as a woman in Assassin's Creed?"

**Skwyrl:** I think there should be a female option no matter what  
**Jirri:** Yup

**Syfte:** I completely agree

**Wishfire:** it's still beyond reason that Ubisoft hasn't gotten the fucking hint yet on this one.

**Anonymous**, the only dissenter to this cry for connection and choice in games, again stated his position that it is the choice of the designer what games will look like, and that players should be happy with this: "It would ruin the vibe of the Brotherhood of Assassins if there was a woman assassin. You're fucking with someone's storyline if you make these changes, so no, no you don't get to play as a chick." One of two things are occurring here with **Anonymous**: either his beliefs are so strong and independent that they are able to operate on their own without the mechanics of discipline in gaming; or, **Anonymous** has so deeply co-opted the desired behaviours promoted by hegemonic culture that he fights against any change in the structure of his prison.

For **Anonymous**, the preservation of the "art form of gaming, and game writing" is a stand-in for maintaining the privilege secured for individuals who benefit from games that "express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005 p. 841) of dominant masculinity. **Anonymous's** commentary suggests a sense of privilege and entitlement towards gaming experiences because they currently fit his ideal of what games should be. He sees a desire for diversity as a threat against straightness and straight narratives in games. Here I return to Foucault's (1998) notion of the body serving as a text that we can read to understand how levels of power are organized: its actions and postures reveal the expansive forces that have formed it.

For **Anonymous**, the power over digital bodies lies in the hands of the original designers, and the gaming community, not outside critique. Even the participants who disagree with **Anonymous** are told to design their own game, if they want control over diversity in gaming. As the reader saw in the last chapter, bodies are designed to meet a certain expectation: the male gaze. The power over those bodies and how stories are told through them in game is also dictated by that same gaze, that same sense of privilege over video games, which creates a feeling of exclusion in female gamers. This view suggests that the author/creator is the authority holder, and if you do not like, it, do not consume it. In the name of equality and fairness, change is repressed with no sense that fairness does not have to be equated with uniformity. **MrWoody** suggests that this feeling of privilege is not simply exclusive to the games themselves, the

community at large too: “From what I always seem to see online, people always, in my opinion, seem to look at gaming like a very chauvinistic thing...that guys are quite sexists.”

I questioned players about the competitive aspects of games, the masculine or sexist actions that can sometimes come with competition, and how other players treated each other. I wondered, was the anonymity of online gaming an aspect that controlled how players behaved?

**Biospark:** Definitely. I think it’s the whole, the Anonymous, non-accountable aspect, to be honest, online aspect.

**Wishfire:** It makes you wonder if the personality that they have online, what are they really like as a person? Is it that their personae in real life is fake?

**Jirri:** I wonder...if you’re constantly being put down by other people, this is place where you don’t know anybody, necessarily, and you can just ream all of your frustrations and whatever on to them? You get to be the bully instead.

Here it is interesting to note that participant **Anonymous** has used a great deal of this type of language and behaviour throughout the focus group. He maintained his distance as the anonymous player, and often shared his personal, more aggressive thoughts with the group. Performance of power in games becomes a question of personal experience versus play-acting. Some players wonder if this need to lash out at others is a manifestation of real-life bullying issues, while others suggest maybe those players behave similarly in real life. **Anonymous** expresses a great deal of frustration around disruption of gaming culture, and seems to register any quest for diversity as a personal attack. Participants in this study, for the most part, did not know each other in the real world. **Anonymous** was free to express whatever he wished without the fear of repercussions from the group. He maintained a position of power whilst acting out a hybrid role of docile prisoner and administrator of discipline.

Positions of power are raised again when the discussion turns to competitive gaming groups, advertising, and all-female gaming teams that plaster gaming forums:

**Wishfire:** I think the idea that women don’t game is nonsense, for obvious reasons, but I mean they show up in competitive gaming, sometimes. Though I don’t get the appeal of all female gaming groups.

[**K: Biospark**, do you want to weigh in on that one?]

**Biospark:** I just have to note that most of the competitive teams just don’t have women. In terms of all female teams that are in the industry, I don’t really understand the point behind all female teams. Because, well, why doesn’t everyone just play together? Is my opinion.

[**K:** what is the appeal/point of an all-female team?]

**Biospark:** All female teams, I think, when they come out from an organization point of view, honestly I think it’s just advertising, and getting attention. Like if it was a ‘regular

team' then it wouldn't have to be advertised as an all-female team.

**Biospark** longs for a gaming world that allows players to just be, and compete on equal footing. He suggests any behaviour to the contrary of this is pandering to the male gaze and advertisement strategies by sponsors who want attention for their brand when they promote female teams within the competitive field. How women are pitted against each other, or support each other, in gaming culture is an important observation that **Biospark** makes: "Really, it's about getting guys' attention when they use women to do this, and I would hate that if I was being used that way." Women who use the hegemony of the male gaze for their own benefit, therefore, are immediately called out for being attention seekers. It is difficult for women who try to 'game' the system that genders their digital bodies in a way that makes them attractive to hetero-male players to actually use those bodies for their own benefit.

### **Power Dynamics: Lessons from Fellow Women**

Another way in which discipline is enacted on players' ability to perform gender in games, according to my participants, is how female players treat and interact with each other. From negative to neutral to positive experiences, learning to play together or against each other often impacts how women choose to play certain games, as well as how they negotiate performing gender identity online. For example, an issue I did not foresee in the focus group interactions was that female participants might feel insecure around each other, and not just around male participants:

**Skwyrl:** I felt intimidated by the presence of women in the focus group, I felt couldn't share as much. Like, when I mentioned that I played Old Republic? That one girl with the beautiful accent [**Wishfire?**] Yeah, she was like, oh I don't play that, that game is dumb. I felt judged immediately out of the gate.

**Skwyrl** entered the focus group with a history when it came to interacting with other players in games, specifically within the game *Eve*. Because of this experience, she saw judgement and negative commentary in most interactions with other women online.

**Skwyrl:** There's a difference between wanting to have a body positive digital body as a woman, and wanting more than your fair share because you're a woman...I want to own being a woman, and would like it if every female character wasn't a bimbo, you know like a Barbie, with big tits and a big ass...but I find girls can be intense about the games. Most guys I've played with are pretty chill, but a lot of the chicks are more hardcore, and seem, I don't know if it's more competitive? I don't know. But they can be really mean to

other girls. And I've definitely experienced a lot of that. So I just avoid my entire gender.

**Skwyrl** sees other female players as tough, protective, territorial, and unfriendly. She agreed that this was mainly to do with her experiences in the game *Eve* and that she had not had this interaction with women in most other MMOs she enjoyed playing. Her chosen game *Wildstar*, for example, was "full of super great people. So friendly so far." The intimacy of Foucauldian power relations is translatable to the hybrid relationship between a player and avatar, where the power of heteronormativity not only facilitates a large degree of control, one body over another, but also over players' interactions with each other's avatars. The difficulty negotiating one's own avatar can be reflected in how players, particularly female players, respond to each other's presence.

**Phedria**, too, indicated a problematic relationship with women and gaming, but this had more to do with her interactions with her gaming group of friends in real life than with anyone she met in the online world:

I have a massive crew of nerdy friends here...all guys ... there was a little bit of weirdness at first of me being there with these guys, the girlfriends not too into it, they were a little freaked out. And it took, there was definitely a getting used to me period.

Again, the influence of how women come to gaming, as a connection to other players, significant others, impacts how they game and with whom. **Phedria** interpreted her outlier position in the group as potentially problematic to the significant others coming to the gaming group alongside their partners. Male players, and female players' jealousy or desire for power within groups, seem to impact how women share power in gaming communities. However, women who create matriarchal groups, where players feel supported and positively motivated, held much more sway over how players felt about interacting with players of their gender:

**Phedria:** in my old guild that I used to run with, it was run by a husband and wife team...and she was the guild master, and she was definitely like a matriarch in like the most classic sense of the word...And maybe I loved that one guild because it was run by that matriarchal type, because she didn't really take any bullshit...she would figure things out, it was awesome, she was a very good guild master.

**Dysis:** I think the only time I'm happy to game with another person is with a fellow female graphic artist I know from work who is like, let's fucking do this, and we get on well. That reliable partnership is pretty much the only thing I will go for with gaming with others, period.

For both women, a community or playing partner that balances the power in groups is



important. **Phedria** especially highlights that a leader who makes sure everyone feels comfortable and safe was perhaps the reason she enjoyed this particular guild so much. The fact that she was a woman may also have had something to do with that. Matriarchal behaviour in a dominant male environment, therefore, becomes an act of disruption, a cyborg pedagogy for negotiating the power maleness has over female gamers by resisting that maleness.

### **Power, Discipline, and Gender**

Players must also negotiate and create strategies for dealing with gender and violent behaviour in game. As we saw with **Anonymous**'s policing of gaming, who is allowed in games, who is absent, and how players use games as safe spaces for escape are constantly interrupted by discipline. I asked my participants a series of questions (see Appendix C) about violent behaviour and talk in games, and how they as players deal with violence. As we discussed their tactics for disrupting how they or others were being mistreated in game, players began to share how fear of experiencing types of violence due to gendered power imbalances began to emerge. These narratives differed depending on the participants. Female participants felt their gameplay was affected a great deal by violent behaviour:

**Kelsey:** So if there is violent behaviour or language in chat, or towards you in a game, what might you do about it?

**Wishfire:** I'll call people out.

**Dysis:** Yeah, call people out, I definitely do that...I've never really felt threatened but probably because I avoid those situations in the first place by gaming alone so much

**Wishfire:** Exactly. That's why I won't do anything like a Youtube channel, or with Twitch...I don't want to put myself through that, I don't want to put myself at risk or feel like I'm in harm's way... I cannot stand some of the things I've seen in party chats, for instance, the sexism, the nasty jokes, the insulting, gross way they talk about women

**Skwyr:** I found that in Eve, there would, people would be bored, so they would be linking like, pornography, either in game or in TS (Team Speak), and you know, usually as the only woman around, I was just like, really, do you guys have to do that? ...

**Phedria:** Generally, I find that if it gets where it's becoming really pervasive... I'll call them on it, or private message someone on a chat channel and say... respectfully, you should think about not doing that, but if they start to turn it directly on me, I'll... log (log out).

These women were fearful of repercussions, but still willing to interfere when inappropriate or sexist issues arose in game. However, they still made choices that either removed them from the gaming community, like **Dysis** and **Wishfire** choosing to not participate

in online streaming because of the negative impact they have seen it have on other women; or, like **Phedria**, fleeing gameplay for a period of time, logging out. As participants have shared, sometimes they will leave games for long periods of time due to the hostile and unwelcoming gendered behaviour. They feel powerless to deal with problems in games proactively, and are driven out rather than face it. The male participants, however, expressed rarely feeling like they needed to interfere or talk to players making inappropriate comments or violent behaviour towards other players. For the most part, they summed up these behaviours as simply part of the game:

**MrWoody:** I can't say that I have ever tried to stop it. Like, I've seen people posting porn and stuff, but I've never really acted upon it. I just ignore it.

**Biospark:** I think the best way that I've had to deal with it is just, yeah, ignoring it. ...because...if you engage ... the aggressor, they're just going to get more annoying.

**Anonymous:** Ah man, I relish that stuff. I mean, calling each other's moms a slutty whore in command and conquer is how I learned to game, its trash talk, it's harassment, it's FUN [shouted]. If you can't handle it, then why are you playing it? Why are you playing League if you aren't expecting to get trolled or have some asswipe think it's funny to hump on your character?

In the position of power, the male participants 'get' the joke, or the insult as the case may be. For them, it is mostly a normal part of interacting in an online game; it comes with the territory. **MrWoody** remains silent and passive about the position of power he enjoys as a male gamer. It is not their bodies, their gender identity or positions that are being mocked, of course, but even if that were the case, such as in **KD**'s example on sexuality—"like when you get called a faggot 800 times in Halo, you don't take that personally, that's trash talk"—it does not seem to affect their identity, and therefore they feel no need to disrupt or interfere with the behaviour at hand. These episodes never place hetero-male players in a subversive position in relation to their own bodies. The power is in mocking the feminine, not the masculine. The gendered division of responses to in-game trash talk extends to how participants reacted to the need or opportunity to play as characters they connected with; the women sought to be disruptive when given the chance, never playing as male if the opportunity to be a female was given. The women shared that the desire to play as a woman, with storylines that cater to different versions of woman, is important to them. They do not play games for sex scenes, and feel bored and annoyed when storylines cater simply to a male-hetero story line where the hero gets the girl, and the hero gets sex. This storyline is driven by male desire and playing into that desire; no consideration is made

for the female desire in these circumstances. However, the female participants find ways to subvert that story line, and the narrative of dominant masculinity by making choices that, while not what they might usually choose as gamers, still serve their ultimate goals, to disconnect from the male gaze and desire storylines. **Galindlinari**, despite the number of times the women have tried to unpack what motivates players' choices in games, is still insistent that his avatar selection is "not sexist":

**Galindlinari:** When I play league, I usually play as a female because most of the support characters are female and that's what I like to play.

**Wishfire:** But, what does that suggest about the creators' idea of women, in the support role instead of say tank?

**Galindlinari:** Huh. Good question. Yeah, I never had thought that one through.

'Tanking' in *League* is a position of power, strength, and invincibility. A support character is just that, a healer, a rescuer, a position that helps other champions in need. With this point, **Wishfire** demonstrates another issue with power dynamics and gender in gaming: women play supporting roles; their desire to be the heroes or be the focus of a storyline is pushed to the side by the needs of the male gamer.

The women in this study become figures that disrupt conventions and binaries in games through whatever means they have. Haraway asserts that "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics" (1991, p. 150). The cyborg is the disruptive identity the women take up to counteract the docility imposed on them by video games and break its binaries. The opportunities to enact cyborg are not as many as the participants would like. Here, the female participants acknowledge the power struggle of gaming culture, the cultural norms and expectations of the design team, which dictate their expression of self and body within a game. Gamers cannot form a true self in such a space; this is where the birth of the gamer cyborg, an individual who takes up a disruptive identity in games, is born. These women find opportunities to become and embody cyborgs, and what they do with their cyborg identities is often a reworking of the gaming culture.

## Chapter 8

### Language, Narrative, and Gender in Video Games

*“Go make me a sandwich, cunt.” Phedria*

At this point in our quest to explore narratives to help answer the question “*what is the trouble with gender and gaming,*” we have seen several instances where in-game communications can be rife with violence, hate speech, and ferocious innuendos. On the flip side, communication and speaking the same gamer language is extremely important to how we negotiate the digital worlds of online games. In his recent text on exploring language and video game play, digital literacies expert and avid gamer James Paul Gee (2014) suggests that “both language and games can illuminate how we think about and live in the world, actually in multiple worlds, including worlds we create” (p. 3). Gee suggests in another text that human “languages are systems that rely on shared conventions about what words will mean” (Gee, 2011, p. 121). In this chapter, I will take up examples of how participants use language and narrative within online games and create the meaning behind the discourses they use in games.

More specifically, I will explore the way gamers speak the ‘same language’ when it comes to terminology and connectivity in real world discussions they might have; then investigate what participants had to say about storylines and narratives in games, and the importance of these to their ability to connect and be literate in particular games. Following this, this chapter examines how gamers use ‘jokes’ within games, which are often insults aimed at other players, as a means of exerting dominance or competitiveness. This will lead us into a discussion of trash talk in games, something we have already touched on, but here I will focus on when players move from humour to anger. The final section will explore how violent language, sexually violent language in particular, targeted at female players, impacts players and their play, troubles existing players and keeps others from joining the gaming community. The main focus of this research project is on gendered experiences in games, however, as players turned out to have had multiple experiences with issues of language and hate speech, I have included reflections on race and sexuality alongside gender. Here I invoke some dialogue from participants that has been analyzed before, but within this chapter will be taken in a different direction to express the multiple interpretations and issues at play when examining the trouble with gender and gaming.

## Speaking the Same Language: Gamer Talk

Perhaps my favourite part of conducting research with gamers, and analyzing their discussions, is seeing the moments of camaraderie and shared language gamers can have. In the introduction, a lexicon of terminology was provided to help the uninitiated reader to understand some of the terms and ‘lingo’ that make up gamer talk. However, my study participants and I did not need a dictionary to understand each other; gamers ‘speak’ the same ‘language’. As an example, here is an exchange during the group discussion when talking about female gamer styles:

**Jirri:** I heard somewhere that girls prefer the sims because they can control the world in it. We like control. A god complex. Because it’s more detail oriented.

**[everyone laughs]**

**Wishfire:** One room, one toilet.

**Galindlinari:** Evil people

**Phedria:** It always does bring out a lot of evil in people, lots of houses set on fire without doors.

**Jirri:** Or swimming pools with no ladders.

**[laughter]**

**Jirri:** hey guys, we speak the same language!

The examples from *The Sims* and the camaraderie in the exchange above only make sense to those who ‘speak the same language’ or who are literate in ‘gamer talk’, though each game does have its own language for players to negotiate. *Halo* terms, for instance, would often be different from any terms or conversations had between *Sims* players. For instance, below is a discussion about how the original *Sims* game allowed gamers to use a cheat-code to remove doors from houses that might trap a Sim character inside if there were a creator controlling the game that placed a flammable object like a potted plant beside a lit fireplace. Or a creator who might use the same cheat-code to remove a ladder from a swimming pool while a character was swimming. In either instance, if not reversed, the Sim character would die, and the family members left behind might face playing a game of chess with death in order to ‘save’ their family member. Sadistic, maybe, but from my own middle schooler conversations on the school bus, every child with access to this video game in the early 2000s definitely tried this once or twice. This kind of shared language and experience, and ability to instantly understand what they might have in common with another gamer, was a part of communication in gaming that participants craved and loved the most:

**Skwyrl:** One of the things I love about gaming culture is the conversations it elicits. It's so much fun to meet somebody that you barely know and be able to say, oh play this, you play that, or I don't know, if you're Horde can we still talk? You end up with an immediate point of reference for each other. There's an immediate kind of kinship with each other, which is pretty rare,

**Biospark:** talking to other gamers is a bit like talking to your family; you have a shared history or past story that the other will get instantly.

**Jirri:** Well, isn't our shared language why we all said yes to this focus group [laughter from group] why we agreed to talk alongside strangers? Because at least these strangers would get us.

As **Jirri**, **Biospark**, and **Skwyrl** share, the kinship of gamers and the immediate understanding of a shared hobby and passion make it easier for them to discuss gaming together. Similarly, as **Anonymous** stated earlier, because of video games, he could move across the world into a culture (Korean) that he felt was completely foreign to him and still be able to connect with someone over the game *League of Legends*. Gamers are used to being able to talk and share with other gamers, and it is my contention that this shared discourse makes them open to also discussing what might be problematic with their favourite pastime. This is an important component to understanding why these participants, these gamers, have some insight into what is problematic with language and gender in gaming.

### **Storyline and Gender: Who Likes to Play Whom, and Why**

Participants were also asked to provide some insight into what gamers like in the stories and narrative of games, knowledge of how storylines affect gendered representation in games, and how both impact gender performances in video games. Research suggests that learners are also more engaged when a narrative story is present within the games (Barab, Arici, & Jackson, 2005). Therefore, I wanted to explore how participants connected with narrative based on their gendered representation. Both **KD** and **Biospark**, as we have seen, express that they do not need to play a game with a storyline in order to enjoy it, but according to **KD**:

[It is] nice every now and then to get lost in a good storyline. That's when I tend to care more about the gender of the character I'm playing. Do you play *Skyrim*? So like, when I play a game like *Skyrim* I usually have like two distinct avatars, you know, cause, since I'm a man and like, it's a bit easier for me to identify, or like connect with a male avatar, whenever I want to play seriously, I will play with my male avatar because it's easier for

me to immerse myself in the world, and feel like I'm actually slaying dragons and what not.

It is important for **KD** and other male players to feel connected to the storyline and the realism of immersing themselves in the fantasy of a game like *Skyrim*, a role-playing game that inserts a gamer into a fantasy world and sets them to completing quests and tasks to ultimately face pre-set 'bad guys' like dragons. **Anonymous** suggests that this is a key component to his play:

I'm really into games like Final Fantasy or the Elder Scrolls series. If I didn't have control over who I was in those games, it would be much harder to get into it. As a fan, I trust the designers and publishers to know what I want to see in games and usually I'm going to get it.

When **Anonymous** expresses his extreme dislike of anyone trying to change how characters are chosen to play games, his need to 'disrupt' what he feels is the new status quo in games comes out:

I'm just sick of hearing this bitching that gender isn't represented in games. Yes, it is, play the games that give you that option, there's a ton. Stop asking the writers and designers who work years at a time on a given game to change shit just for you. You're not special enough, gamer girls. [laughter] yeah that sounds dickish but whatever. I'm super serious about this. You must know the term SJW [Social Justice Warrior], right? Yeah, I honestly think our entire culture is being taken over by this constant need to helicopter over champion causes in which people actually know nothing about the culture, or the people in it, besides their own self-importance....' Why can't we just play the stupid video games?

This presents an interesting juxtaposition of desire regarding storylines in games. On the one hand, it is very important to **Anonymous** that games create spaces for his gendered identity to be expressed, and for him to connect with gameplay. On the other hand, he calls out individuals, particularly women gamers, as being 'whiny' and 'bitchy' for wanting games to do the same for them. He buys into the mentality of maleness in games, where the dominant gender storylines are the ones that matter, and ultimately, the lack of representation of other gendered identities is simply a part of gaming culture that those not represented need to accept and move on from. This predominant response to storyline creation extends into the business of video games. For example, Ubisoft, the creators of *Assassin's Creed* came under heavy scrutiny for not including a female avatar in their latest publication of the game. Their response? It was too expensive to create another set storyline for women. In response to these prevailing ideas that

it's not worth the time or money to create different gendered storylines in games, **Wishfire** shares why this lack of representation has become problematic for her choices and ability to engage with certain games:

**Wishfire:** I want to be represented by a female character, because I don't get the chance to often be a strong female character in gaming. I like being able to choose between male and female, and getting to be both to see the power shifts and play dynamics change. With certain story lines, I look at it more like I'm reading a book, and it's OK to be one over the other, but having those storylines be written for a female gamer...now that would be something. Because even women characters are written for men. I mean I can switch out the characters in my mind, to read the character as a female, but it's still complicated.

Again, the male gaze, or in this instance, male desire, and the politics of who games are created for is raised by a participant. Power dynamics, as we saw in the last chapter, also greatly affect how characters are written, and how storylines are developed. **Wishfire** suggests that even when she plays a female character in a game, such as the popular Lara Croft, a female archeologist/adventurer from the *Tomb Raider* series, she is not negotiating that character through her gendered identity, but rather through a complicated combination of the designers' identities, and the projected audience of predominantly hetero-male gamers that are looking to connect with this character in a very different way than she is. **KD** suggests that male players are interested in how best to beat the game:

I, the LoL avatars don't really matter to me. Male, female, Kids, monsters, fuzzy little thing, it doesn't matter, as long as it is appropriate for the situation, appropriate for the game and the match up I'll just play them. It doesn't really matter what gender or what race they are.

It is interesting to note, however, that most of the participants have signaled the desire to play certain games as male, games mostly based on storyline and role playing. They have also stated that at times they specifically choose the female avatars so that they, as **Biospark** has stated, "have something nice to look at." I would suggest here that when players are unsure of why they make a variety of choices when it comes to gameplay and avatars, it is because they are beneficiaries of the invisible hegemonic culture; they fail to recognize that as males who benefit from the dominant male culture in games, they have the luxury of choice. **Wishfire** reinforces this notion and states that storylines are not written for "anyone other than 17-year-old guy gamers who think girls are just on about looking hot and getting the guy." This inability to create spaces and voices for other gendered identities in storylines makes it difficult for players of



minority identities to connect with those stories, and, according to **Phedria**, this is a crucial part of gaming identity and play, envisioning and connecting with characters through play:

Part of the reason I love *Mass Effects* or *Dragon Age* is because of the consequential gameplay, I love the idea that my actions will have certain consequences. And it's also really great from a gaming perspective, because I then want to find out all the consequences and I will play it through like several times to make sure I find all the aspects and stories that can happen. And like all the possible endings.

For **Phedria**, that constant need to “feel connected and immersed in different characters” is an important part of her digital identity. She believes a game should have consequences and reactions to her choices and decisions, and that she will work to uncover these storylines. Finding out the difference amongst the storylines in the game becomes more important than beating the game itself. **Wishfire** suggests this drive to uncover storylines, however, is complicated by the need to read those digital bodies and storylines through a male identity, with values, choices, and character selections that are male-centric. So for players like **Phedria** and **Wishfire**, playing storylines to explore the consequences and options hidden within a game is complicated by the fact that the female characters they have chosen to play are not always included in all the storylines built into the game. **Skwyrl** also points out that a lot of language in games is male-centric:

It's aggressive, dude language. Like, it's always about what fight you need to prepare for, or how you want to fuck someone up. Or even about the bodies of women being something to get to, like saving princess peach, or like constant innuendos about sex and flirting in games...it's always about how guys would flirt, not about how girls would. It may be silly, but that is something I always think about when interacting with a new storyline.

Male participants have noted their interest in “just playing the game” as they interact with storyline, or as **MrWoody** remarks “we already have the guy view in every game, so we don't have to worry that we won't connect with a story.” The women, on the other hand, have noted the struggle to negotiate the language and desires of male-centric video games as troublesome, and something that affects how they connect and engage with games.

### **It's Just a Joke: Humour and Gender in Online Gaming**

Humour is another part of the language of gaming. The sphere of gaming and play, including how players interact and communicate, is steeped in dark humour. Vandenberg (1998) noted that in play, “it is thrilling to transform the real to the not real, to journey into forbidden areas of darkness behind the public mask of conventionality, and to become aware of the freedom to do so in the process” (p. 129). Particular games have particular running jokes or discussions that, in real life, would seem macabre or inappropriate, such as the very popular t-bagging of an opponent’s dead body. However, because they are part of a gamer culture, they are deemed acceptable by a majority of gamers. Billig (2005) discusses humour, and the opposite response to said humour, as social cues one must learn in particular social contexts. He states: “Laughter and unlaughter are very much part of the processes of learning and imposing the disciplines of social life. In this respect, the social links between humour and laughter take us to the heart of serious living” (p. 175). Different types of jokes reflect cultural norms differently, depending on the social community. Everyday jokes and their reflection of social devices in a community like gaming is an important demonstration of the power of language within the community. For the group with most social power, laughter and jokes are reflective of their humour and values; unlaughter is left to the excluded, those that are outside of the joke, or even the butt of it. According to **Wishfire**, some of these gamer jokes can be alienating and upsetting, depending on their audience. When these issues were raised, the following conversation between **Wishfire** and **MrWoody** ensued:

**Wishfire:** I came from playing, I was playing *Star Wars Galaxy* and then I was looking for something different, um, and then this (*WoW*) came along and got myself and my boyfriend into this game, and, well, the community on *WoW*, well we’re fine here (in the game setting of the focus group) um, but, if you were in any of the cities where trade chat is prominent, after all these years, they still make those anal jokes mentioned earlier. And it makes me want to slap people upside the head. I don’t know if you all know what I’m talking about,

**MrWoody:** No, can you explain? I don’t play *WoW*

**Wishfire:** It’s usually, somebody takes spell that they have, and then put the words anal after it, or anal spell thing, and they post it in the trade chat, and it’s, oh yeah, that’s it (refers to chat box) [see Figure 50].

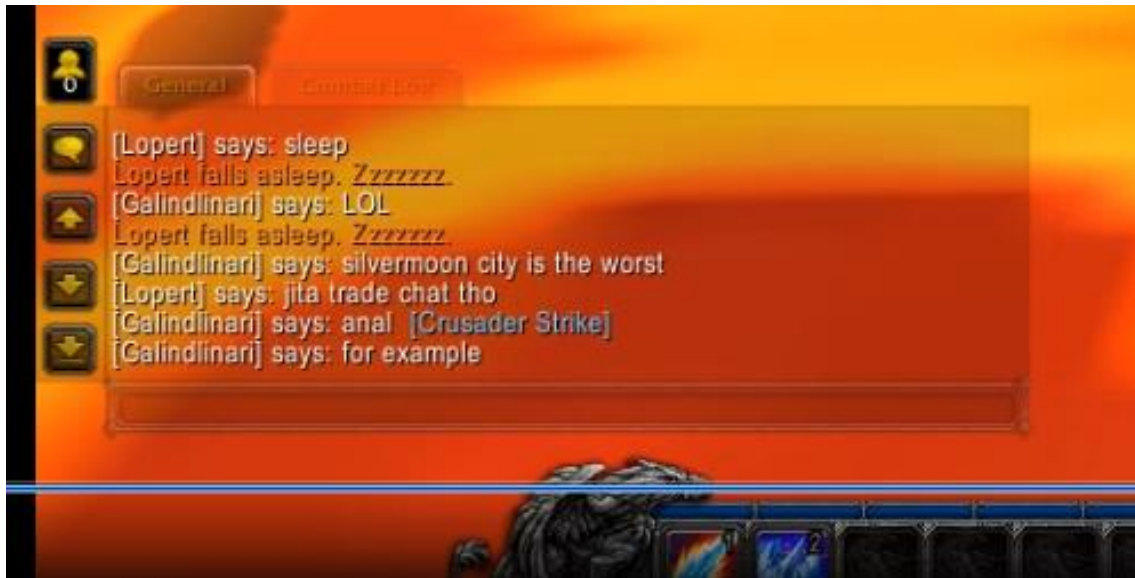


Figure 50. Chat box from focus group session in *WoW*.

To **Wishfire**, humour that invokes rape of any kind is in poor taste and does not belong in the game. The participants found the anal jokes to be suggestive of anal rape. As **Galindlinari** puts it, “Oh yeah. I mean, it’s an action taken against the anus, like Anal Counter Strike. The spells are actions, so that’s exactly what that means, anal rape.”

Using spells and in-game actions to perpetuate anal rape jokes, it seems, is a very popular occurrence in *WoW*, and any time players approach a higher-populated area within the game, they run the risk of being bombarded with them. For **Anonymous**, and most of the male participants in my study, this becomes an everyday joke or ‘play’ within the digital spaces they frequent. I had the following conversation with **Anonymous**:

**Anonymous (A):** You know the talk about rape threats and whatever?

**Kelsey (K):** the in game rape threats against certain toon?

**A:** Yeah, that’s screwed up, but it’s the internet. There’s always been screwed up people in society, you can’t change that. Internet gives them an outlet for it. Hell, you’ve technically got more agency for vengeance in the game than in IRL [in real life]. IRL you’ve got courts and stuff. Somebody fucks with you in a game, you get back. Get even.

**K:** So, games are spaces for outlets of issues that would be problematic in real life?

**A:** Of course! That’s why we make some of these messed up games like *DayZ* and *GTA* mods that involve nasty shit. It’s so we don’t do it in real life. You know, when porn went mainstream there was a reduction in sexually violent crimes.... I just think people take it all too seriously. So what if your character got killed or t-bgged or whatever? It’s a game, it’s not you.

It is interesting to note that disconnect between the male and female views of games and joke language. The men were often unconcerned about violent jokes or language, whereas the women were often uncomfortable or upset by them. The women were well aware that they reacted differently to this issue than their male counterparts, yet it still had a deep impact on their actions and decisions when it came to play, even driving them from the games completely, something **Wishfire** shared with me in a private message during the discussions around jokes and gameplay, because she did not feel comfortable sharing it with the larger group:

**Wishfire:** Some of my online gaming dude friends are obnoxious and I often just roll with it. So I can be equally obnoxious back. But if I'm feeling insecure and uncertain of myself, it becomes difficult and leaves me wanting to cry. That's when I'll logout of a game. This also goes for dudes I don't know in a game. I feel like I have to try and "fit" in when all I want is some respect...So I end up wanting to spend my time alone in a game with loads of other people.

**Wishfire** suggests that men have a particular way of communicating with each other in games that women do not enjoy or wish to engage with; more importantly, this style of communication is alienating enough to her as a player that she will leave the game completely (which she has done since this focus group was held, she has shared) or avoid interacting with other players. This avoidance extended even to the focus group itself, where the fear of the 'joke' drove female participants to speak to me privately instead of with the group at large. When asked why this kind of joking might be uncomfortable for female players, the men of the group used certain descriptors to suggest why this might be: "more sensitive"; "not necessarily as competitive"; "fear of not being accepted"; "feminists"; "not real gamers." These words, often inserted within the commentary and reflection of the male participants, are excluding, and often negative. They are stereotypes of women who game, and defence of how those women react to the male culture within video games that is often alienating to women who game. In the end, the men did not understand how or why female players were made uncomfortable by jokes regarding sexual acts, but while most acknowledged they knew it made them uncomfortable, **Anonymous** suggested that if it was a real problem, maybe they should not game in the first place.

**Anonymous** is a participant that is not afraid of sharing how he feels about anyone trying to alter aspects of a gaming culture he enjoys. His culture of joking in games using derogatory comments about women should not be critiqued or questioned, in his opinion. It is interesting to note that

the jokes and humour he wishes to uphold are never negative reflections on his gender, and therefore reinforce his sense of position of power and male gamer identity. The perpetuated power of the dominant gender identity in games also greatly impacts what the gamer community deems as acceptable language and jokes, often creating a hyperculture of social issues in real life, in this case the issue with rape jokes perpetuating rape culture. Who laughs, in these inside gamer jokes, is often unimportant to the community as a whole, because those in the privileged position, those who decide what laughter (Biligs, 2005) is considered acceptable, are already laughing.

### **Trash Talking and Violent in a Game: Dealing with Trolls and Flamers**

Golub (2007) reports that discourse such as that centred on gaming recognises an “intense camaraderie.” Trash talk, language that challenges and goads fellow players and opponents, is, for many of the participants, an annoying but expected part of gaming culture. Perry (2012) describes a theory of trash talking called “greater internet dickwad theory” attributed to online writer John Gabriel as “when a normal person is granted anonymity and an audience (both of which a player gets from gaming), their behaviour quickly turns from socially acceptable to potentially offensive and scathing” (p. 9). Perry states that the moment players are granted the anonymity of the Internet, as well as an audience to play to, they will commence trash talking. Trash talking is also often used as a motivator for players who are “not pulling their weight,” according to **KD**. Cuss words and taunts, according to **MrWoody** are necessary, almost cathartic aspects of gaming:

While constant in-your face swearing is distracting at times, I think swearing connects you with the stresses the character is facing, human reaction. Remove swearing, and the game loses soul. It's simply one of the offshoots of competitiveness, while it may be toxic it has its place. Like when people experience pain, swearing increases their pain threshold, perhaps there's some link between expressing anger and competitiveness through swearing as a way to motivate oneself and their team?

**MrWoody** can readily dismiss the toxic element of trash talking in favour of the more positive outcomes of swearing and shouting at other players, and yourself, while playing. This dismissal relates to the fact that his gendered identity allows him the privilege of choice and decision when it comes to laughter and interactions in the game play. As a member of the majority, dominant

consumer group of gaming culture, and hence not often the butt of the ‘joke’ or the language used to trash talk, he can remove himself personally from the equation. An interesting aspect of the discussion around trash talking in games, I would note, is that the women expressed more personal annoyance around trash talk, as the language in trash talk often involved their gender:

**Wishfire:** I get heaps of name calling. I got that in DOTA 2. Have to turn off the voice chat or ignore it. Really pathetic people. Like, it’s always about someone’s mom, or fucking a pussy, or me making someone a sandwich.

**Phedria:** Generally, I find that if it gets where it’s becoming really pervasive, like normally I try to ignore it and I don’t try to engage...if they start to turn it directly on me, I’ll like log (log out).

Again, trash talk became another alienating aspect of gaming, causing these women to ‘turn off’ or log out. To cope and remain part of the gaming community in these games, it became as **Jirri** puts it, something they had to learn to, “just put up with, or get out of games. It’s not going to change. Like, it was terrifying to come in to raids for the first time as a healer, I got yelled at a ton. But I had to make the choice: Do I want to keep playing this? Can I handle this crap? Yes. Ok. Suck it up girl, let’s go back in.” For **Jirri**, trash talking is alienating and frustrating; it has even made her reflect on whether it is worthwhile overcoming it to continue to play in a game. For the female participants, gendered language used in games, from jokes to trash talk to outwardly violent language, a decision must always be made as to whether they see gaming as worth the abuse.

However, this topic greatly inspired talk from the men, as they dominated the discussion readily arguing and challenging each other’s opinions on trash talk. These exchanges were more fervent than those related to other topics of discussion. The question I posed to the group on violent language and trash talk fired them up, and they debated the best ways to deal with it, or encourage it, depending on their desired outcome. Simply put, they see trash talk as a tactic, just like choosing a certain character type might be; it can all be a part of the strategy of gaming. The fact that their understandings of the place and purpose of trash talk differed says something about their relative ‘comfort’ with this aspect of ‘gamer culture’ and dominance. **Biospark** says that certain games are just hostile places, and his way of dealing with that hostility “is just, yeah, ignoring it. But maybe it’s the game type” that he engages with that are just hostile-type games.

**Biospark**, the professional gamer of the group, has a tactic for dealing with hostility, but

believes that some types of game have more of a culture of trash talk; not all games are divisive and hostile. The competitive nature of a real-time strategy game like *DOTA*, in which one team is pitted against another to conquer territory, brings out the hostility in players, in his mind. **KD**, believes it's also part of the general gaming culture, and is something he has always done as a gamer:

I've been playing video games since the age of 4, all kinds of different games, and like, obviously you always see trash talking, and flaming going on, insults about your sexuality, and then your mom and what not, but it's just part of the game culture...so like I've never felt unwelcome at all in a game. I mean, people are definitely harsh on you, when you, when you play badly, and say like, you fucking NOOB just uninstall....Even if someone trash talked me or made a death threat, it happens all the time, like I'll fucking murder you, it's like yeah, go ahead, you don't even know where I live. They may say that, but at the end of the day, it's just a barking contest, like who can bark the loudest, you bark but you aren't going to bite, so I don't really care.

**KD**'s use of the barking analogy is interesting; he suggests that there is an intimidation factor in trash talking that is about making yourself seem more of a threat than you actually are in order to win. **Galindlinari** believes that this 'barking' behaviour is somewhat integral to some styles of games:

**Galindlinari:** Trash talking can be so vital, though. Like, how are you supposed to psych people out playing CoD (Call of Duty, an online first person shooter that is played in multiplayer mode)? You need to intimidate, to make them a little edgy, right? [laughter from the group]

**KD:** I agree. I see a lot of people trash talking. My roommate, we play LoL together once in a while, and that guy trash talks. I don't, but when I play with him and he trash talks and other people trash talk back in the game, and I'm sitting next him, and I'm like, dude just calm down. Let it go, relax, this is fun. And the guy is like, fuck that, fuck those guys, I'm going to trash talk and keep trash talking.

There are conflicting points of view even with the men on whether or not trash talking in games is a welcome or necessary aspect of gaming. Both **Galindlinari** and **KD** suggest that trash talking is embedded in a need to be dominant, to bark the loudest, so to speak. The intimidation of other players is important to some gamers as it gives them what they see as 'an edge' over opponents, no matter what kind of game they are playing. Some of the participants demonstrate that there is a time and place for such behaviour; others were driven by the need to make each and every game about dominance and competitiveness. None of the women voiced that they felt

the need to trash talk within a game setting. However, that is not to say that women do not trash talk in game. **KD** stated that one of the “worst, most vicious trash talkers I know is a girl;” **KD**’s referral back to women in this discussion is interesting. Often in our discussions, he would refer to a female player he knew that reinforced stereotypes or gave permission for certain dominant behaviour in games to be ‘OK, because a girl does it too’. However, despite this need to accept the dominant behaviour of trash talking, **KD** often sees himself in the role of peacekeeper, as he points out following our play together in *League*:

Like you saw in the game we just played just now, you saw that there was Aatrox and Garen, and you saw that they were at each other’s throats during the game, and I would go in and break them up, and I always like do that, I try to restore the focus to the game. I feel like no one wants to really trash talk, but everyone wants to have the last word.

When a player’s skill comes into question, trash talk, **KD** suggests, is a mode of defence, allowing them to have the last word, to feel like they are still showing their superiority as a player in the game, even if someone else is telling them they are not a good player, or erred in their tactics or play. Trash talk then, is about saving face, and putting on a powerful, stronger face than those you play against, as the men evidenced in their discussion of barking complex and game dominance. Again, this appears to be a mainly male behaviour, engaged in usually by men, in order to dominate other male players within video games designed for men. It not only creates an unwelcoming space for most women who want to engage with this space, but says something troubling about gender and men, in its assumption that men must be dominant, aggressive, and forceful towards each other in order to be perceived as ‘winners’ and strong, no matter the cultural space. Trash talk is another form of macho behaviour. However, it is not a behaviour accepted in all spaces of gaming, as **Biospark** explains to the rest of the focus group:

In tournament play people are generally very well behaved. Because there are rules against being a huge douche, or using inappropriate or derogatory language. It just doesn’t happen. Especially at LANs ...Hard to talk shit when someone can actually come fight you. [general laughter] The anonymity is gone...you can see the tangible effect of something you say on a person to their face, that changes the language and interaction completely, I think.

Here I refer back to Bilig (2005) and cultures of humour, to the notion of having to ‘buy in’ to the joke in order to consider it funny. The politics of permissibility in trash talking in



games is important to distinguish. In certain spaces, as the participants noted, trash talking is not allowed. The male participants, however, can create space to engage or not engage with this trash talk whenever they choose to, they can play peace keeper, or bark alongside other trash talking players. Women gamers cannot create the same space of disengagement in game and therefore at times have to disengage from the game itself. Language that attacks gender identity ensures that women feel alienated and are often unable to take part in the 'joke' being shared. Butler (1990) asks: if power and structure inform our identities of sex or sexuality, or even the very foundation of our personhood, then what does pushing against the 'norms' of this power structure look like? Here, we see what it looks like: women in gaming are unable to successfully dismantle the power structures of gender in gaming.

**Biospark** points out that professional gamers are never anonymous, even when not participating in in-person tournaments, Professional gamers always know who other players are, who their sponsors are, and are also often monitored by judges or referees, depending on the game tournament rules. **Biospark** notes that in LAN party tournaments especially, when you can see your real, live opponents using name calling as a tactic, it is embarrassing and awkward. Here, empathy and the opinions of the crowd around you play an important part in policing behaviour that is left unchecked in regular gamers' experiences. The differences between a live body and a digital body, therefore, become quite distinct in the realm of trash talking. The permitted discourse of barking is considered unseemly and unsportsmanlike in the arena of real-life competition. Perhaps anonymity, then, is an important factor when it comes to trash talking, and the type of language and behaviours generally taken up by gamers in video games. **Phedria** suggests that the mask of anonymity hides a number of sins:

I think it's the fact that there is such anonymity. Because, like let's face it, if I see you as, you know, Research Chick, on my screen, it doesn't give me any indication of who it is behind the screen, right? So it's that kind of feeling, of almost invincibility, because you can do and say whatever you want within that world, provided it's not like crazy harassment or anything like that...which is still hard to prove in game. There's generally not a lot of repercussions.

Anonymity and a feeling of invincibility can make for a combination of behaviour, she suggests, that crosses the line of appropriate behaviour. **Phedria** refers to my in-game handle of Research Chick, a name created for me by a male colleague when I first began engaging with

games as a researcher, but which now appears problematic and a signifier of gender and potential alienation. She seems to suggest that because I am anonymous and other players do not know me, the fact that my gender is indicated in the name of my avatar could present “opportunities for people to harass [me].” Hayles (1999) suggests that “changes in bodies as they are represented in literary texts have deep connections with changes in textual bodies as they are encoded within information media, and both types of changes stand in complex relation to changes in the construction of human bodies as they interface with information technologies” (p. 24). For Hayles, then, we have a complex interweaving of the technological transformations of the body and its cultural depictions. The implication of this is that we cannot understand digital bodies and their experiences as being something distinct or outside of cultural imaginings of the body and embodiment. Cultural imaginings inform how players experience and treat digital bodies; the female body in trash talk in game is no exception. Perhaps it is the combination of these imaginings brought by individual players from the real-world cultures in which they move, combined with the need to be dominant in game, as the men suggest, that takes trash talking into the realm of violent language with a gendered edge: sexually violent trash talk.

### **Violent Language and Gender: What Does the Word Rape Mean Anyway?**

As we have already explored, Vandenberg (1998) suggests that play—and here I name verbal or written exchanges in games dubbed trash talking as play—has a built-in escape hatch, that the ‘real’ can be rendered ‘not real’ by a simple signal of “this is play.” To most of the male participants, this signal is easily read, and a language of play they learn early on in their experiences with video games. Mocking gender, as we have seen, is built into the gaming landscape, from jokes about players’ mothers, to player names that mock the female body such as the following player names taken from a sample in my gaming journals: **BigtitsAdams**, **yourmom221**, **xxschoolgirlsxxx**, **JuicyCunt**, **mobetchesmoproblams**, **fingaherhard**, and **CrocoDyke** (pictured in figure 51.) Each of these names are player handles I have encountered while playing the game *League of Legends*. Each refers to a female body part, or mocks female roles, sexuality, or cultural stereotypes about women.

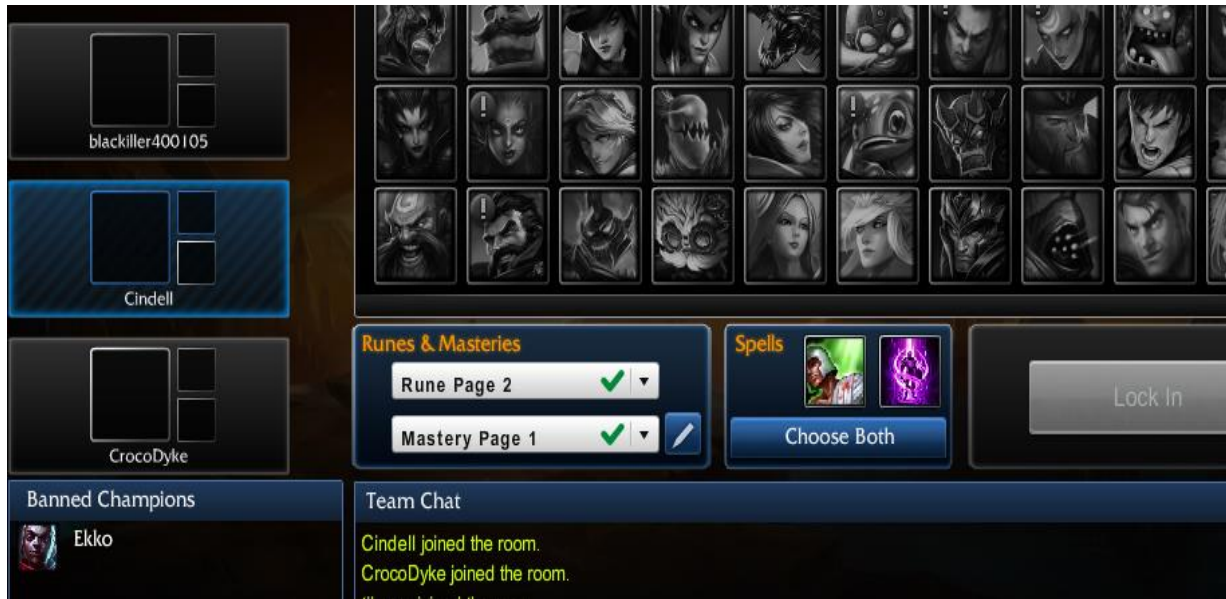


Figure 51. Player named CrocoDyke joins my *League* team.

Stone (2014) argues in his examination of the treatment of the *Resident Evil* character Alice, that the cultural implications of rape jokes, in some cases considered play by participants, play an important role in their pervasiveness: “Whether our cultural products encourage us to laugh at, celebrate, or be horrified by sexual abuse, they betray a deeply felt anxiety surrounding the subject” (p. 113). Concern over the use of the word ‘rape’ in games, to male participants, doesn’t become felt until the signal switches from “this is play” to “this is no longer play.” I would suggest that for several of the male participants this switch did not occur until they engaged in this focus group, and heard from other players that it negatively impacted them. **KD**, for instance, insisted that the use of ‘rape’ was simply meant to connote in-game dominance, and not real rape:

I think in League of Legends, the rape word is kind of popular, despite it supposedly being censored by the game designers, or those that run it, but I haven’t I mean I definitely see people use the term rape in the context of the idea of dominating, or dominate other players, like for example: We totally raped you back there. That means we totally kicked your ass back there. I don’t see them using the word rape in the context of forced sex ever. And really when they use that word, I don’t think that they mean it the way you would think or we would think that word actually means, you know? Even though I think throwing out a word like that casually isn’t a really good thing, I don’t think they actually mean rape, *Rape*.

**KD** highlights that the use of the word rape in the context of gaming is about power and

control; he states the word implies dominating or winning over another player. For him this is not seen as a negative or an expression of a desire to really commit rape. He does not understand that the threat of real rape, to those who have experienced it or live in a world where they may easily become the victims of it, *is* about power and control, as **Skwyrl** goes on to explain to the group:

Predominantly I think it's used for, it's about intimidation, more so, than it is about actual rape. Because, they have no idea what real worry about that feels like, so they can joke about it.

She suggests that because male players do not experience the worry or fear of rape in their real lives, they can easily use it as a joke of dominance in game, without recognizing that they do so from a position of power not shared by those who society places in the vulnerable position of potentially becoming victims of, or already being the victims of, real rape. According to Bourdieu (1991), language is accorded value by the market it is used in, and as such the “value of an utterance depends on the relation of power that is concretely established between the speakers’ linguistic competences, understood both as their capacity for production and as their capacity for appropriation and appreciation” (p. 503). Here, I would argue that because the majority of gaming culture, the market in which the rape joke is being used, values the utterance as part of the dominant culture of the market, the minority value of the joke, i.e. how women feel about it, is lost to the greater power of male privilege, power, and control. While women otherwise speak, appropriate, and appreciate the dominant language culture of video games, they do not hold the currency needed to have their meaning behind that utterance pushed to the forefront of the language market of digital online spaces. As the cultural space changes, so, too, does the value of the utterance; just as trash talk is modified when anonymity is withdrawn, when players get to see the impact of their rape jokes on a real person, as we will see later, they change their use of the word in game.

However, participants like **Anonymous** continue to repeat that games are not supposed to be a place that is welcoming to all, but only to the original gamers and controllers of the language marketplace, to those that have invested time and energy every day in their game communities. Not only are certain people in control of the language market of humour, trash talking, and even violent language in games, but they also decide who is excluded and chased from the gaming spaces. Control over the language market, therefore, becomes control over the

entire culture of gaming. Gamers who are upset by “hilarious names like cuntpuncher are forgetting the essence of games is about humour and letting go of the real world as much as possible. This is a PC free zone.”

Consequently, dominance and power forces non-male gamers to make many other choices than just whether they want to hear jokes about rape; it also forces them to make decisions about their extended digital identities. That position of powerlessness related to the language used to threaten and describe acts of violence on their digital and real bodies affects their overall experiences of digital identity. The freedom to create a Twitch account, or a YouTube series, without real fear of repercussion is more easily enjoyed by male gamers. **Dysis**, **Skwyrl**, and **Wishfire** all felt that they made deliberate choices to avoid parts of gaming culture for fear of violence and harassment.

**Dysis**, **Wishfire**, and **Skwyrl** felt that their gender identity had to be protected from the experiences women such as Hafu (the Twitch star mentioned in earlier chapters who, because of her popularity in the Twitch world, became a target of online hacking) are subject to in the gaming community as a whole: women’s minority status within the space makes them easy targets. Nor is this community welcoming to those of other gender identities, such as the transgendered community, something I have myself become the witness of as a gamer. While our participants highlighted what rape language drove them to decide outside of the games they love, their experiences of sexually violent language in games is quite shocking:

**Phedria:** One time I joined into a random party for CoD. On headset, one of the guys was like "whoa, girl!" And kept saying he would come save me if I got cornered. I had higher scores than him that round. He a kind of got quiet for the next round, and by the third go told me to come suck his dick...and he went with the old adage "go make me a sandwich, cunt." I disconnected, not worth my time to be harassed

**Wishfire:** I got this message just yesterday playing “AY GURL LEMME DEFINE DICTATE FO YA. AY GURL HOW MY DICTATE LAST NIGHT” followed by “AY GIRL! You wanna be Raiden on my Solid Snake?” [This second comment references two popular video game characters, from *Metal Gear*]

**Jirri:** I never thought I’d have to face as many in game comments about my boobs as I do in real life. Escapism my butt [laughter] honestly, I’m a grown woman, so I knew what to expect showing up in a video game. I think I sometimes hope it won’t be like that.

**Dysis:** I’ve seen players in game talk about wanting to rape the soldiers that are computer generated, saying things like, “Oh I wish I could rape this bitch faced bitch”.

**Phedria:** if you go to the like the main major cities in *WoW*. If you look at the general chat, there is so much hate speech and homophobic slang it is unbelievable. It's overwhelming, even. Or like, I'm going to rape this soldier, one of the computer generated women standing guard in the city.

From personal rape threats laughed off as jokes to general chats that are dominated by violent rape threats and plans, players are constantly exposed to and immersed in rape culture. **Phedria** highlights instances of audio harassment while playing Xbox, being trash talked and sexually harassed by a man whom she was beating. This reinforces a very recent study done on misogynistic players in video games that attributes trash talk towards female players to male players with relatively poor playing skills, (Kasumovic & Kuznekoff, 2015). **Wishfire** is able to immediately share instances of graphic and sexually explicit messages she has received in game from other players; **Dysis**, in her example, demonstrates that rape and sexual violence are marketable game perks that drive sales of some games, such as *Grand Theft Auto*. As **Jirri** notes, even though they face this language and behaviour in most games, they must 'suck it up' and ignore it if they wish to stay and play. The women express that on any given day that they sign on to a game or create a new character they hope and wish that they won't encounter this aspect of game culture, but they are always aware that a game could take them down the rape culture route.

They recognize it in the extremely popular mainstream games like *GTA* that almost seem to celebrate digital violence against women and in the games they praise for having wonderful storylines and access to character creation, like *DragonAge*, that still exposes them to the narrative that women are sexual objects potentially subject to rape. Even in a fantasy world you have come to escape in, there is no escape, it seems, for women from this aspect of their real-life problems and worries. The differences in reaction between male and female players in this study when it came to sexually violent language reinforces how male players benefit from the dominant male culture, while female players are often left to react or become defensive in their performances of gender in games. We began this chapter discussing the commonality of gamer language, but when gendered trash talk is introduced the mutual understanding is lost. The desire to see sexually violent language and jokes as just another form of intimidation or dominance dictates how the men in this study respond to the question about rape jokes; they are dismissive and disinterested in recognizing its negative impact. Language that is sexually violent, intimidating, and explicit also leaves the female participants further frustrated by the fact that

their reactions are not being recognized. Their attempts to disrupt this language are fraught:

**Wishfire:** Oh please. If you aren't getting that being constantly bombarded by this crap isn't a super negative thing then you just don't care about half of gaming population. I know I've played games twice as long as some of the men in this group, judging by your age. My voice matters too.

Perhaps the most poignant of responses to the group as a whole, **Wishfire** speaks out of frustration, at the gamer community that continues to use a certain kind of language that alienates players from its games, and frustration with game designers who persistently perpetuate storylines with rape and violence against women. This effectively speaks to the overall gendered culture of gaming, and women's alienation: from avatar body types to storylines to the gendered language deemed acceptable by the community, women gamers face a number of vexations. While in recent years, some gaming companies have made an active effort to court female designers and storytellers, economically, there are no consequences for production houses that continue to exclude other narratives and perpetuate stereotypical design tactics. As creators of culture and stories, I believe publishers and designers should be obliged to create spaces that are welcoming and inclusive; after all, they shape the cultural norms that exist in video games, which in turn, I would argue, have consequences on culture in the real world.

While the issue of language and gender continues to be one area of gaming culture that most gamers feel they have no ability to disrupt or change, **Biospark** suggests that it is an area that gamers can really start to grow, if given the right motivation:

Its super common to hear people say a lot of inappropriate and not cool stuff in games. Like even I began to notice it and catch it, like back when I played TF 2 (*Team Fortress 2*) like we would call out targets as like, 'oh he's raped' as in like I just dealt a ton of damage to him, until like finally, one day, one of our players' wives was listening to us play, and she was like, uh, he's WHAT, and then like I don't know before that it never occurred to us that it was bad, and then we just, stopped after that. We were just kinda disappointed a bit in the way it sounded to her, and realized, oh, maybe we shouldn't, this isn't the kind of language we should be using.

**Having someone 'put skin on' (or make real) this gendered experience altered how Biospark** and his teammates saw their 'jokes', from a language of dominance to language that could be genuinely threatening and alienating to those that heard them. For him, understanding what the word rape meant to a real person that he knew changed how he approached language in game. His story, shared with the rest of the focus group, eased a bit of the tension the group was

experiencing. While it did not change the mind of all participants, it showed some participants a way they could bring up and discuss issues around violent language in games:

**Phedria:** Huh. That's pretty badass. I'm glad she said something to you guys. I think that will be my approach from now on, to like, connect that with calling people out, and say like, what if I'm a victim of rape? ...Because I have had players in CoD frequently tell me to suck their dick or cock, or call me a cunt. Strangely enough, only when I'm beating them.

It is when the perception of dominance is threatened that language to reinstate dominance comes out. As **Phedria** suggests, how language is used in games needs to change for the health of all players' digital identities. An interesting question here, after recognizing how difficult it is for women to disrupt and push back against this language, is whether they avoid disruption because it makes them more visible and increases the amount of gendered and violent criticism they may incur as a result. **Skwyrl** is the only participant to mention how this problematic language can be uninviting for individuals other than gendered women:

I think it might be just as difficult to be a gay person in gaming culture now than a woman, because there's enough women that we kind of can make a difference in the culture, in the language used, we can push back. But being a gay man...I mean there is still a lot of inappropriate language about like oh I'm going to rape him, or he's such a faggot, or you know what I mean? It makes it uninviting for them too. I know very few gay men that game.

It is interesting to note that while all the women expressed concern about ethnic minority representation in the discussion of avatars, no participant besides **Skwyrl** addressed how language used in game might or might not be welcoming to people of varying sexual identities. Several of the male players, namely **MrWoody**, **KD**, and **Anonymous**, mentioned the pervasiveness of trash talking involving expressions such as "homo," "you dumb faggot," and "hey gay boy." From PC games to console games, derogatory language with a homophobic bent seems to be a typical trash-talk style. **MrWoody** thinks that homophobic trash talking is part of the gaming culture, and that it is due to:

the changing definition of the word, if you've seen the South Park episode about fags you'll know what I mean but in short, people used to use the word to call people homosexual which was the insult, but I feel a lot of people don't think of it as that I feel a lot of homosexual words are being used outside of their gay meaning to insult because they now just have negative connotation for instance I may say somethings gay, but not think of it relating to homosexuality at all.



However, this culture of homophobic trash talking is not one male players found problematic, as it did not affect them personally. Perhaps, as **Phedria** suggests, this is just one more area where power and control in games, and who holds it, needs addressing. Language, and how it is used in games, therefore, becomes a key component of gender and gaming; the language market of dominant, male-centric humour, trash talking, and violent sexual language creates a cultural market that women hold little currency in. While they are rich in the language currency of games, women often do not see themselves capable of taking up the language currency of the dominant male gamer in order to disrupt it through their own play.

## Chapter 9

### Conclusions

#### Part One: Pedagogies of the Cyborg

Framed around the complex nature of gaming culture, this research project focuses on gendered experiences within the contexts of gaming. Specifically, I explore gendered and sexual violence perpetuated within the context of gaming, where I look at the contexts in which learning to negotiate gaming culture and gendered discourses occurs. The analysis throughout teases out examples of hegemonic masculinity, docility, gender performance, and disruption in the taking up of cyborg identities. In troubling the concept of gender (Butler, 1990) in the context of digital gaming culture, my research project seeks to answer a series of questions through a selection of gamers' narratives and experiences with gender and gaming culture. Playing on Judith Butler's *What's the Trouble with Gender* (1999), I asked: *what's the trouble with gender in gaming?* To take this deeper, I asked:

- 1) How do people perform gender in online games, and how do these performances disrupt and trouble, and/or conform to gendered role expectations?
- 2) What and how are acts and language of violence being performed through players' digital representations? When these acts are performed, how does this experience affect how the player plays the game, and do they affect the players outside of the game? In turn, how do players negotiate the violence that is directed towards them, their avatars or other players?

Each of my chapters brought answers, as well as more questions for future research.

#### Researcher-as-Instrument

I analyzed the complicated dynamic of dealing with instances of sexism and racism through my own experiences as a gamer/researcher. As a result of this close analysis, I came to question my cyborg pedagogy: while I was at times willing to disrupt and intervene in moments of racism or sexism, was it the safety of relative anonymity that allowed me to take up a position of anti-racism? As a 'cyborg' for this moment, do I enact a "seizing [of] the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (Haraway, 1991, p. 175) to push back against the real-life

categorizations that players drag into gaming culture? I suggest that I have often been selective of when I have intervened. More often than not, my presence has not been one of disruption, but rather, of docility (Foucault 1975), as one unwilling to be made a target of derision, oppression, or to be outright rejected. This position is not unlike my female participants', but it was important for me to establish what my role as a gamer looked like when comparing my disruption to participants' versions of disruption. The established gender norms in games are for heterosexual males, and when I choose not to hide behind the assumed maleness of all gamers, when my voice signals my 'subordinate' position as female, as woman, I am often attacked, mocked, harassed, or abused. In my repetition of the performance of 'silent woman within a game,' my gender is forgotten, washed away by the invisible masculinity of gaming spaces, and the prevailing gender norms become internalized; in this way the gendered subject, me and whatever avatar I have selected to represent me, become docile bodies. Play is also altered by my performed gender through the sex and gendering of my avatar. In experimenting with differently sexed avatars, I soon came to realize my 'treatment' or interaction with other players was altered. The invisible masculinity of the space dictates how everyone plays within the game, and players must be aware of that hegemonic power over them as they willingly negotiate the game.

It also became obvious what this invisible masculinity did to the avatars I took up in the game, further influencing and affecting my experiences of play. Examining the bodies of my female avatars as "inscribed surface[s] of events" (Foucault, 1980, p. 153), it becomes apparent that their bodies reinforce this video game as a space of exclusion for anyone not part of hegemonic male culture, which exposes gamers, young and old, to distorted views of digital bodies, and genders them explicitly to reinforce the dominance of masculinity and the passiveness of femininity. This is further complicated when acts of sexual violence are perpetrated against my avatar. Because I am a woman who has real-life experience of the language and violence present in this digital space, I react as though the threat to the digital body that represents me is made against my physical body. My avatar's experiences become my experiences. Her body becomes my body. However empowering it may seem for a gamer who is a woman to have multiple female champions within a game setting, when they become sites for hetero-male fantasies, they also project the many issues with gender the gaming community continues to face. Here I must return to Butler's (1990) question "what constitutes the possibility of effective inversion, subversion, or displacement within the terms of constructed identity?"

What possibilities exist by virtue of the constructed character of sex and gender?" (p. 44), and suggest that the performance and social construction of gender in the gaming culture of *League of Legends* takes place wholly within the dominant hegemonic masculine culture; it becomes too often a confined space with limited gender roles, and few opportunities for disruption, protest, or change by those whose gaming identity is enveloped, for a battle match, by the body of their champion. It is also important to note that since conducting my research, I have begun to observe similar positioning on my part in other digital spaces. My docility has increased on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, even when commenting among my peers. Further study of the silencing of women in digital spaces and of women's willing performance of 'silent woman in digital space', should be undertaken to discover how this pattern influences the use of digital tools and spaces as learning objects.

### **Visual Representation and the Body**

The experiences of my participants when negotiating digital bodies, how they identified with those bodies, and their performances of gender with those bodies, were often varied. However, all seven women in this study felt the need to reflect their real-life sex in their choice of characters whenever possible. They did so despite the fact that they often felt unable to express their gender identity through that avatar selection, as the gendering of these avatars were exaggerated, sexualized, and unrealistic. The disciplining structure of hegemonic masculinity in many video games was felt by participants from the beginning of most games, during the avatar selection. Despite this, ownership over their digital bodies was important to female participants. Male participants, on the other hand, although they felt some affinity towards male characters when engaging in storylines, treated their avatars as objects to be picked up when ready to play, and set aside again.

Ownership of digital bodies in games was never quite clear to participants. By this I mean to suggest that while players felt some autonomy in character creation, ultimately they all suggested that the final decision of what kind of avatar they would create was determined by the game designers and artists, as well as the gaming industry as a whole. This issue of the ownership of the body became very important when trying to discern if acts of sexual violence against an avatar could be considered rape. I was left asking: is this a rape? Are these players performing a sexual fantasy, or committing a violation of someone else's fantasy? Hegemonic masculinity would suggest that this is just an expression of fantasy and dominance, and about

player experience. Is it evidence that women are not welcome in games, or at least not in this particular game? The dynamics of performing rape in a video game and that impact on the players participating/experiencing that rape are difficult to unpack. This should be explored in future research, connected to the experiences of players.

I also wondered, when considering ownership, if perhaps female players felt more closely linked to their avatars (and possibly, specifically, their feminine avatars) because hegemonic gender norms continually create this closer relationship by forcing female players to feel such ownership over the body? Female players, in this instance, could be considered more 'bodily', more attached to the representation of the body, than male players, who often use distancing tactics from the bodies of avatars.

Participants often discussed the notion of fantasy and escapism during interviews, and a part of that escapism does present itself in the bodies and actions of characters within the game. It allows them to fantasize, and engage with, digital bodies as they desire them. This further complicates players' understanding of ownership over avatars, because they are the conduit of the play and the fantasy the player engages with. However, what is often problematic for female players is the feeling that *real* women, in control of those digital bodies, are unwelcome. Female players combatted this by taking up the *cyborg pedagogy* to disrupt and rewrite their gendered digital identity. When reflecting on participants like **Skwyrl** I note that much time, energy, and focus goes into creating this self/non-self-representation within the game.

Male players expressed a complete willingness to play as female characters. They shared that they did this fairly often. These gender swaps are not about experiencing a 'female' side of gaming, but rather, for these male participants, are motivated by a competitive advantage, whether due to the skills or size of the female avatar, or the assistance that is given to female characters in games. They do not disrupt the performance of gender when they swap. The impersonations of women here rather reinforces the gender norms embodied in gaming culture. This chapter uncovered the ways in which gamers are docile bodies in games, performing gender according to the confined avatars they are given. While we saw a few instances where participants took up their cyborg identity to disrupt performance of gender, mostly how participants dealt with the gender performativity of hegemonic masculinity was to just shut up and play.

## Power Intervenes

While exploring how power and discipline intervene in the world of gaming, I argued that the power dynamics of hegemonic masculinities and the disciplined space of masculine culture within gaming haunt players to the point that they embrace their docility in the game. Participants shared stories and engaged with game play in ways that demonstrated the disciplining of digital bodies and play in video games, but also shared moments of cyborg resistance in their desire to disrupt parts of gaming culture and video game play that bothered or upset them. In the patterns of my data, the invisibility of the masculine in games is made quite visible in how the female enters the space: hesitant, subversive, lacking in cultural understanding. They may not remain this way, and some become, as Taylor (2006) argues, power players. That masculine influence, however, still invokes the sharing of a password to enter a boys' only club. The women participants expressed that they were more comfortable sharing a bit more on topics such as sexism and gender violence in games with a smaller, female-only group, because, as **Phedria** suggests, "we only faced the disagreement of girls who had different experiences instead of guys acting like we're delusional," something which is important to consider both regarding the scope of this study, and regarding future decisions about discussion groups held for similar purposes. Perhaps, as expressed by participants, this lack of comfort comes from the feeling of having to prove themselves, or resist the roles they are prescribed as women who game, in the games themselves.

Another thing making women feel like they didn't belong in games was male players making sexual advances or inappropriate jokes about rape. The intent is not always malicious, but arises from an inability of players to recognize who they are in the moment of interaction, and what the social expectation of the other players is in that moment. The assumption in online gaming is that women are willing participants in these kinds of discussions, or that they enjoy it, according to **Wishfire**: "they expect us to giggle and play into it. Sometimes it's just a joke to them, or part of the narrative." In the position of power, the male participants 'get' the joke, or the insult as the case may be. For them, it is mostly just a normal part of interacting in an online game; it comes with the territory. Notably, however, the power lies in mocking the feminine, not the masculine. The division of gendered responses to in-game trash talk extends to how participants reacted to the need or opportunity to play as characters they connected with; the

women sought to be disruptive when given the chance, never playing as male if the opportunity to be a female was given.

### **Language**

In the final chapter, the effects of types of language in video games demonstrated ways in which gender is troubled within the culture. For example, the inability to create spaces and voices for other gendered identities than heterosexual males in storylines made it difficult for players of minority identities to connect with those stories, which, according to **Phedria**, is a crucial part of gaming identity and play, envisioning and connecting with characters through play. Language, and how it is used in games, therefore, becomes a key component of gender and gaming; the language market of dominant, male-centric humour, trash talking, and violent sexual language creates a cultural market that women hold little currency in. A limitation to this study would be examining the queer intersectionality of this same experience with gendered language. Due to time and focus, I was unable to explore this aspect, but future work will include what participants shared in regards to sexuality and language in games.

As we have seen, gaming and rape are at the centre of the trouble with gender and gaming. Female gamers found it very difficult to negotiate storylines, gameplay, and other players that invoked rape. A question which arose from this for me was, after recognizing how difficult it is for women to disrupt and push back against this language, whether they avoid disruption because it makes them more visible, and increases the amount of gendered and violent criticism they may incur as a result. Consequently, dominance and power forced non-male gamers to make many other choices than just whether they want to hear jokes about rape; it also forces them to make decisions around their extended digital identities. That position of powerlessness in their bodies and language used to define acts of violence on their bodies extends to experiences of digital identity. The implication of this work is that we cannot understand digital bodies and their experiences as being something distinct or outside of cultural imaginings of the body and embodiment. Cultural imaginings inform how players experience and treat digital bodies; the female body in trash talk in game is no exception.

### **Part Two: Pedagogies of Community**

Examining how players interact with each other in games and gaming communities through this research project has uncovered a great deal of information about how gamers learn to engage

with, and negotiate through, a digital community. I call this section Pedagogies of Community, because how and why gamers negotiate community in games and outside of it proved integral to discovering how players performed gendered identities. This project took root in the pedagogical practices of my grade 12 World History class, watching students collaborate and make decisions together using a Napoleonic War simulation video game. I wondered how they would negotiate the community of digital games with digital identities, and watched the hybrid behaviours of real life and video game life merge in the classroom.

Given that, the opportunity to share what digital communities mean to video game players, and how they learn to be a part of them, is an important one. Community in and outside of video games creates a rich culture where individuals of all walks of life may connect and understand each other, through the language of gaming. As **Anonymous** put it: “It’s pretty universal. Like, I can meet people in Korea when I taught there, and not speak any Korean, and still talk *League* with people in broken English.” Massive Multiplayer online games *need* community; through the style of play—from cooperative activities to digital mass gathering spaces—they demand; they are cooperative learning communities. One cannot engage with a MMORPG without interacting with fellow players. The nature of community and team play have informed my methods throughout this project. Interacting with gamers as a fellow gamer allowed for a richer discussion as a community member: Each participant expressed a desire to be involved in sharing and impacting how their community would go forward in the digital realm, even those who seemed to disagree with their fellow community members. My role as researcher-as-instrument was woven into the analysis of this study because I too am a member of the gaming community; my experiences and biases as a player needed to be shared alongside those of my participants.

An important insight arising from the data collection process for me as a researcher was that gamer identity and representation is wrapped up in the larger community of gamers, whether those in the focus group, or gaming culture as a whole. How participants felt they belonged to that community, and were accepted by that community, had an effect on how they viewed their digital identity, especially where gender was concerned. Being accepted into the gaming community is a bit like being accepted into a particular club. Negotiating this acceptance becomes one of the biggest hurdles women gamers face. **Galindlinari** explained it as one of the biggest problems gaming culture faces:



**Galindlinari:** It's kind of an elitist type thing, and it definitely goes down to being like, the not popular person, and so you find an identity in gaming, and then anything against gaming, you like, if it's against gaming, it's against you personally type attitude. Gaming is seen by many players, and most of the male participants in this study, as a safe space.

However, the power struggles of who is accepted, and under what conditions, seem to dominate the landscape for all players. The female participants expressed that there were a number of times that they had felt unsafe, and that they had had to develop a number of tactics to avoid that feeling: only playing with other women, never using their voices in chats, playing MMORPGs solo (contrary to game style) and leaving certain games altogether.

Raising issues around safety in gaming can create backlash from subgroups of players who are not interested in creating a safe, diverse gaming culture. As my study began to take shape, and the recruitment process began, two would-be participants removed themselves from this study because of the use of the word gender in my research call. They were fearful that the discussion and focus group would become a hostile, unwelcoming space for them, as they had very strong views on feminism and video games. I respect their need to feel safe when participating in online/in game discussions, but wish to highlight the fact that while they feared feeling unsafe in a discussion group that might simply challenge their views, #GamerGate diehards e.g. make many online spaces unsafe for a number of researchers, gamers, reporters, and educators by the means of threats of rape, doxxing, and death. I also wish to highlight the fact that talking about gender and gaming with gamers can be complicated, and even confrontational. While this research project was meant to create a better understanding of gamers' experiences of performing gender while gaming, it also serves to highlight the problem that occurs with so many people invested in this pastime for a variety of reasons, with a variety of investments and emotions attached to it. The need to feel safe and accepted within the community of gamers became, therefore, a fairly significant part of my participants' experiences.

The different sections of this study have shown that, when it comes to issues with gender and gaming, the community gamers belong to is key to their ability to feel accepted in games, and, ultimately, outside of games. Male and female players' jealousy and desire for power within groups seem to impact how they powershare in gaming communities. However, matriarchal groups, where players feel supported and positively motivated, were one of the only spaces my participants expressed themselves feeling safe in, and able to just play the game how they chose.

When gamers, especially female gamers, feel alienated by the community within a game,

they take actions to protect their real body/selves from their digital body by ‘faking’ identity, or removing themselves from certain games and/or interactions with others. Women who put themselves out into the gaming world must always come up against the stereotypes the community holds of them. Before belonging to any new community of gamers or guilds, they need to prove their standing within that community, and fight to appear legitimate in the eyes of the gaming community. Even then, in a position of respect and legitimacy, your body can be co-opted by members of the community and that respect level and acceptance can drop drastically, as we saw with professional gamer Hafu. The male participants also used language which showed a need to differentiate between types of gamers who are women, according to the rules of the gaming community. Here, a woman must earn respect and prove herself not to be just ‘a gamer girl’, like **Anonymous** stated. This creates an intense environment, where women who game must learn to protect their identity within the community. Women gamers in this study shared a number of different ways they avoided sharing their sex during their gameplay, or negotiated the community’s ideals of them as gamers.

To be a woman in gaming is to quickly learn how to protect your digital body and digital identity from the community, while at the same time investing time, energy, and gameplay in that same community. In my experience, in online gaming, the language of gamers can alienate based on gender, race, and sexuality. This, to me, indicates a greater need to teach digital learners, and young people investing a lot of their time to digital identities within these communities, what it means to be a good community member in video games. If educators who are gamifying their classroom, and bringing concepts of gamification into their school cultures, do not recognize that actual gaming culture with its complicated relationship with gendered (and racialized) bodies is embedded, they could miss the signals of its perpetuation in their classroom. Further, as we review the timeline of the evolution of online activities like trolling, the connection between #GamerGate and gendered violence in the video game world on the one hand and the rise of gendered violence online on the other, I believe, will be clear. Steve Bannon, former editor of Breitbart News, has admitted to watching the vitriolic behaviours of gamers participating in the online conversations about #GamerGate and recognizing he could tap into that behaviour to feed the rise of the online troll while helping Donald Trump get elected (Snider, *USA Today*, July 18, 2017). Rogers (2013) suggests that as research on digital communities evolves, researchers should recognize that there is no separation between the cyberworld and the so-called real world;

instead, he adds, what we have is a rich, vibrant space of identities and cultures to be explored and critiqued digitally, which is not separate from real-world data. I would contend, however, that while experiences in the digital realm are often similar if not identical to real-life experiences regarding how gender is performed and normalized, they are occurring in a different space. While the player's identity is connected to their real-life identity, the space in which the experiences are unfolding is unique and must be treated as such. This is an important factor when examining how gamers interact with and negotiate video games. Membership in the gaming community is open to anyone with a gaming system and a desire to log in to play; but if those community members were more attuned to how their actions and words impact their greater community, perhaps we would begin to see a version of gaming culture that is safer and more open to all.

### **Part Three: Pedagogies of Gender**

The issue with storylines, gameplay, and digital bodies in video games is that there is only one dominant narrative in the majority of games: a male, heteronormative storyline; gameplay that invokes a disciplining of the bodies of players to subvert them; masculine plots; and avatars which are gendered with the male gaze in mind, and through which players can perform only a very narrow idea of what it means to be woman. This leaves little room for other voices and identities. However, despite the constant push back against the hegemonic masculine standards in gaming, and players questioning whose voices matter and when, players of various genders, sexualities, and races are still having to engage with these forms. When this study began, I hypothesized that gamers were taking up modes of disruption to create more positive experiences for themselves within a culture that is pervasively alienating. As my study has shown, moments of disruption and subversion in response to acts of violence are happening in some cases, but it has also demonstrated that there is a greater need to understand what these acts of violence mean to different gamers. Judging from the responses of my participants, how players respond to gendered play and threats of rape in game is highly depended on their feelings of ownership over their avatars. More often than not, male participants brushed these experiences aside; female participants, however, were deeply tied to their lack of ability to freely perform gender or combat the pressures of being a woman who gamed.

For **Phedria**, the sound of her voice became a source of anxiety, as it gave other gamers an opportunity to objectify her without even seeing her. **Phedria** suggests that the moment she projected her voice was the moment she became a woman within a game; the sound of her voice was an identifier, and separated her from the cultural norm of male-sounding voices. Even if she were to enter a game as a male avatar, and type ‘male’ thoughts to her fellow gamers, real-world experiences of what a woman sounds like make her a woman the moment she uses her voice. She can no longer wear the mask of maleness in the game. This creates a complex issue for gamers outside the ‘norm’ of male gamers. Even the most determined agents of disruption within my study highlighted numerous areas in gaming where they chose simply to walk away and ‘log’ instead of negotiating moments of harassment or violence. Haraway argues that the cyborg identity, from which I have built my theory of disruption for this project, is a site of hybridity for mixing identities. Part of the cyborg pedagogy is the act of mapping culture and social reality, and then seeking to disrupt and rewrite the ‘map’ of culture. Female players, for the most part, demonstrated their disruptive behaviour through the physical appearance of their avatars, making choices that often ‘othered’ their characters in the eyes of the greater gaming community, but that allowed them some control to push back against the avatars created through hegemonic masculine discourse and with the male gaze in mind. However, instances of violent sexual language or experiences of rape threats paralyzed most female participants into inaction. These instances of extreme violence, while infrequent, dictate how participants engage with the digital community of gaming. As **Dysis** stated, her fear of repercussions and harassment far outweighed her desire to create a Twitch streaming profile. The women gamers’ acts of disruption, while celebrated, did not outweigh the number of sexist episodes, the in-game violence they experienced, the negative impact of their own experiences, or those they heard had happened to other players. The negative side of being a female gamer was highlighted more often than their successful disruptions of gaming culture.

For the male players in this study, ironically, there are many advantages to be gained by playing a female body. Whether ability or treatment by other players, the men seem to see it only as a positive for them. The men also demonstrated little interest, ultimately, in disrupting the narrative of gender in gaming. As they were able to navigate, engage, and see themselves continually within the gamer community and game storylines, they had little drive to make sweeping changes to games. While they sympathized with the women gamers and at times

altered game play to counteract negative behaviour in games, as these experiences rarely had a negative impact on their game play, they suggested they had no real interest in becoming cyborgs. For the women, however, instead of apathy or complacency in their gameplay, there existed a feeling of fear around their avatars: no matter what choices they made with their bodies, real life consequences of their gender identity still impacted how they chose to go about being 'female' in video games. In most instances, the ability to perform woman outside the norms of hegemonic masculinity were few and far between. However, gender swapping was not seen as a desirable alternative for these women, because they already felt overly pressured to engage with male characters and male-driven storylines. Better, they felt, to be a woman when given the chance; but not to identify beyond that, for fear of policing, harassment, or outright mistreatment. These experiences challenge the perspectives of Cyberfeminists (e.g., Plant, 1998), who see digital technologies as a space for the blurring of boundaries between humans and machines, and between male and female, enabling their users to choose their masks and assume alternative identities. In video games, in particular when voice is used, women felt silenced because of their experiences of harassment when their sex was revealed through the sound of their voices. A tool made for cooperative play and community becomes, in this instance, a tool of oppression. Female participants responded similarly when asked about their real-life experiences around games. When they tried to talk to other gamers, they often faced rejection or alienation. **Phedria** experienced two great extremes when interacting with male gamers as an employee at *The Source*: either immediate denial of her belonging to a community, resulting in her need to prove her worth; or, stalker-like devotion to the 'rare unicorn' female who plays games.

The women in my study often wanted to push back against the gendered interpretations of both male and female characters they interacted with or played, but were limited in their abilities to do so. The politics of representation in the community, therefore, demonstrate that the interpretation of the body, and avatars, is solely reflective of one type of performance: one which embodies and performs hegemonic masculinity. These bodies in turn are reflective of the storylines within most games the participants discussed, as the nature of the male gaze in turn impacted how stories in games engaged with those bodies.

The women in the study grappled with many aspects of bodily representation in games, from design to physical violence against their avatars to the desire to not identify themselves as women for fear of repercussions in game and in real life. Here, the secondary research question

asking if ‘acts of violence can be performed on players’ digital representations’ was clearly answered with a resounding yes. How players responded to these acts, however, greatly depended on the agency they felt they had through their digital representation, and within the gaming community as a whole. Here I remind the reader of the various images of gendered female avatars, with slender waist lines, large breasts, and a hip popped out in various games from *World of Warcraft* to *Wildstar*. The complicated nature of ownership is reflected in my gaming analysis of *League of Legends* champions: while they are my digital body in game, and threats against them become things I carry away from the game, their bodies are not reflective of who I am as a gamer, and are not created with me in mind.

They are designed for the eyes of other players, male players, and exclude me as a woman from the process. Game designers do not have me or my female participants in mind when they design avatars for games, for the most part.

### **Final Reflections**

The trouble with gender and gaming can be likened to a puzzle with pieces scattered across various players’ experiences and performances in games. From this study, I can state that the problem manifests itself in three distinct areas:

1. Ownership of digital bodies: how bodies are designed by game creators impacts how players get to play their gendered identities. The designs are in turn impacted by gaming culture that focuses strongly on the male gaze. This ownership of the digital body is also a factor in female gamers’ experiences of violence against that body. While they do not always feel connected to their digital representations, when acts of violence outside of normal game play are enacted on them, the connection to their real bodies is strongly felt. Those digital experiences continue to affect the players outside of the game.
2. Power and Storylines: An interesting issue that players highlighted throughout this study was the importance of feeling they could connect to games through performance and storyline. This became one of the greatest issues gendered female players had with the gaming industry and gaming culture. They felt they did not have the power or influence to demand storylines and games written from their perspective or

motivations. Again, the male gaze and male fantasy play a big role in what content games have. Some of the male participants saw this as problematic, too, but others saw no issue with this, as they spoke from positions of privilege; even when they saw the gendering of avatars, their narratives were rarely excluded, and they had the option to play whatever characters they felt engaged them most. Even when they played female characters, those characters were written with male performance of gender in mind: female characters like the champions in *League* or the solo character Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* are still designed and written with men in mind. Women participants felt that playing as a woman character was better than never getting the option, but few games were ever written for a woman's point of view or storyline. This creates a politics of privilege, where the majority is always privileged over the minority within gaming culture.

3. Finally, the trouble with gender and gaming is one of language: how language is used to either create experiences of camaraderie and humour or alienation and violence became a hot topic for the participants. How language was read, and heard, within a digital space was a big factor in this study. Language and jokes could be a great way to connect players, to intimidate and win in game, to tease friends, and to show appreciation for each other's playing skills. It could also be vulgar, mean, and disruptive to all players' gameplay, when over the top and annoying. However, the most problematic aspect to language and gender was the derogatory and inflammatory comments centred around sexuality and feminine gendering. The use of the female body as a topic for trash talk, jokes, and name calling (e.g. through negative comments about mothers and sisters) were popular with many male players. It is an innate part of their gaming culture. However, sexually violent language used to intimidate and 'dominate' other players is often alienating and frustrating for the female participants; it also calls up experiences of sexual violence against their own bodies when their digital bodies are threatened in this manner. It also suggests a culture of gaming that promotes physical sexual violence against women. **Dysis** suggested this was part of the gaming industry, with games that cater to these experiences, such as *Grand Theft Auto*. Perhaps the story that impacted the participants the most was the story of the audible rape of a female digital body in the

game *DAYZ*. It reinforced to some of the participants the need to be cautious and protective of their digital bodies as well as their real ones whenever they engage with the games they love.



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## Appendix A

### Research focus group questions (prompts)

1. How active are you in gaming culture outside of just playing games? What kind of media do you participate in? (ie. Blogs, twitter, youtube, etc.)
2. What kind of games do you play? How often do you game?
3. Do you get involved in a games 'culture', or make friends in games?
4. What kind of culture is gaming culture to you? Is it accepting? Do you see any problems with gaming culture?
5. How do you create an avatar when you start a new game? How important is it to your gameplay?
6. How do gamers go about creating, distinguishing, and defining gender in relation to their avatar?
7. What kind of avatar creation process do you prefer while gaming?
8. What do you think about games that do not give you the option to play as whatever gender you want? What about games that have male/female options? Games with male only option?
9. Do you think there are 'boy games' and 'girl games'? Explain why or why not
10. Do you ever play as a gender other than your own while gaming? What is that experience like? Does it change the game play for you?
11. How do you feel women are represented in gaming?
12. Who gets represented in gaming storylines, and why?
13. What role do game designers and publishers have in representing different kinds of people in their games?
14. Do you think gaming culture has a problem with sexism?
15. Has anyone ever made you feel unwelcomed or uncomfortable in a game?
16. Have you ever experienced name calling or bullying while gaming that had to do with your gender? Have you experienced someone else being treated this way?

## Appendix B

### Call for Research Participants: Narratives

Message to be Disseminated to my Facebook 'Friends List' via the Facebook Messaging Interface

Dear Facebook friends,

I am seeking volunteers to participate in a research study that is looking at gamers' identities online. Participants in this research should fulfill the following criteria:

- (i) Gamers of any gender identity of any nationality
- (ii) Must be 18 years or older
- (iii) Resides in Canada
- (iv) Play and engage with more than two video games with avatar creation

I am conducting this study as part of my Ph.D. research which is looking at video games, and how we build our digital identities in games. Using this group, I would like to focus on digital identity of gamers in online video games by interacting with your game play to create narratives, and examine your representations (avatars) in the world of online gaming. I will do this in two ways:

1) Discussions on 'Talk nerdy to me': Here we will talk about online games such as World of Warcraft or League of Legends, and discuss creating avatars, choices around how a gamer constructs his/her identity, especially gender identity.

I'm open to suggestions for games, questions and you are free to debate and discuss among yourselves, too.

2) Observe and interview five players gaming with their favourite games: I would like to explore five different gamers, and to do so, I will observe your game play, as well as interview you about your gaming identity. This would require a two-hour one time commitment.

If you consent, our interviews will be saved as a text file, and notes of our conversations will be made. Please note that this research is solely for academic purposes, and you are ensured full confidentiality of your data collected for this research. This means your name or any indication of who you are will never appear in any published or non-published documents; and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

Copies of research participant consent form, research commitment form, are available to provide further information on this research along with contact details of my affiliated institution. A consent form must be signed by you and your parent(s) upon understanding and agreeing to the proceedings of this research study. Please also be aware that the data will be securely stored in my supervisor's office at the University of Ottawa, and that all digital files will be password-protected to ensure that I am the only person who can access it.

I seek your assistance in this research and would greatly appreciate your participation. If you have any further concerns, you may always refer to my thesis supervisor Dr. Awad Ibrahim or the University of Ottawa's Office of Research Ethics and Integrity ([ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca); phone: 613-562-5387).

Sincerely,

Kelsey Catherine Schmitz

Principal Investigator, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa

## Appendix C: Top 20 Google search hits under “Gender and video games” search query

- 1) Charlie Hall March 5, 2015 <http://www.polygon.com/2015/3/5/8153213/the-games-industry-is-wrong-about-kids-gaming-and-gender>
- 2) Denis scimeca September 19, 2013 <http://venturebeat.com/2013/09/19/gender-inequality/>  
Emma Jacobs July 2015 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/8001f64c-ffa0-11e4-bc30-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3n3a1nzRL>
- 3) Anita Sarkeesian <http://www.feministfrequency.com/>
- 4) Innes McNeil June 14, 2014  
[http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/InnesMcNeil/20140614/219244/Gender\\_Disparity\\_in\\_Games.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/InnesMcNeil/20140614/219244/Gender_Disparity_in_Games.php)
- 5) Sage Franch October 17, 2014 <http://blogs.msdn.com/b/cdndevs/archive/2014/10/17/the-do-s-and-don-ts-of-designing-gender-neutral-games-and-apps.aspx>
- 6) Eugenia Zobel de Ayala March 6, 2014  
<https://www.hastac.org/blogs/ezobel/2014/03/06/damsels-distress-female-representation-video-games>
- 7) Joe Cain July 23, 2015 <http://www.nuvo.net/ArtsBlog/archives/2015/07/23/oped-gender-and-the-game-narrative>
- 8) Aida Akl September 11, 2015 <http://blogs.voanews.com/techtonics/2015/09/11/girls-make-games-redraws-gender-lines/>
- 9) Rory Appleton June 5, 2015 <http://www.fresnobee.com/entertainment/ent-columns-blogs/video-games/article23197560.html>
- 10) Libby Anne March 31, 2015  
<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/lovejoyfeminism/2015/03/steve-is-a-man-on-minecraft-and-gender.html>
- 11) Dogtrax October 29th, 2014 <http://dogtrax.edublogs.org/2014/10/29/girls-gaming-and-gender-stereotypes/>
- 12) <http://geekfeminism.org/>
- 13) G. Christopher Williams February 25, 2015 [http://www.popmatters.com/post/190850-big-breasts-and-badasses-the-dividing-line-of-gender-representation-/](http://www.popmatters.com/post/190850-big-breasts-and-badasses-the-dividing-line-of-gender-representation/)
- 14) Noisy Rogue <https://thenoisyroque.wordpress.com/this-blog-is-pro-gamergate/>
- 15) <https://gomakemeasandwich.wordpress.com/>
- 16) LinksOcarina October 30, 2014  
<http://www.gamerevolution.com/blog/LinksOcarina/editorial-reflecting-on-gender-equality-and-pushing-forward-93209>
- 17) February 25, 2015 REDDIT  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/truегaming/comments/2xa9a5/gender\\_and\\_computer\\_game\\_players\\_who\\_seems\\_to/](https://www.reddit.com/r/truегaming/comments/2xa9a5/gender_and_computer_game_players_who_seems_to/)

- 18) Cathy Young October 12, 2014 <https://reason.com/archives/2014/10/12/gamergate-part-i-sex-lies-and-gender-gam>
- 19) Alanna Bennett January 24, 2015 <http://www.themarysue.com/wikipedia-gamergate/>
- 20) Eddie Makuch September 17, 2014 <http://www.gamespot.com/articles/conservative-group-to-video-game-gender-critics-st/1100-6422381/>

All retrieved September 28, 2015.

## Appendix D

<b>Research Participant Consent</b>
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**Name:**

**Address:**

**Date:**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, understand that the information I am providing will be used in the Ph.D. work of Kelsey Catherine Schmitz at the University of Ottawa. I also understand that other references to this material, in the form of seminars, talks, or essays, and writing for academic or public consumption may also incorporate this material. I understand that my name will never appear in these materials and I may withdraw from the study at any time.

I have discussed issues of confidentiality, and am satisfied with the degree of anonymity that will be provided.

**Signed:**

**Date**

## Appendix E

<b>Researcher Commitment Form</b>
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**To:**

**Date:**

I, Kelsey Catherine Schmitz, give my commitment to maintaining your confidentiality to the degree that you have indicated is most beneficial to you. I also agree to provide you with copies of transcripts of my discussion with you, and, if you wish, to forward to you copies of material in which excerpts from your transcript are included, or which relate to this research project. I also agree that if you have any concerns in relation to that material you provided me with that I will make every effort to resolve such issues. If you have any further concerns, you may always refer to my thesis supervisor Dr. Awad Ibrahim (aibrahim@uottawa.ca) or the University of Ottawa's Office of Research Ethics and Integrity (ethics@uottawa.ca; phone: 613-562-5387).

**Signed:**

**Date:**