

GAMES AND GAMERS: ADULT FEMALE GAMERS AND IDENTITY DISPLAY

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## Introduction

Video games are a multi-billion dollar industry that regularly produces games that outsell other types of media, such as movies. From 1947 when the first patent was filed for an interactive entertainment device, video games and gaming have changed rapidly both to suit the different tastes of players and to keep up with rapidly changing technology. The innovations that brought a generation Asteroids or Pong have evolved in multiple spheres, enabling a user to interact not just with the text of the game itself but also with the context of game development. This context includes the subtext of story, characters, designers, designer agenda, public policy, and others who both inform and create the game along with the player. An additional layer is added with the advent of internet communication and online gaming capabilities. These technological advancements have created a variety of genres for play with “emergent narratives” that allow the player to drive their own experiences in the game (McNamara 2004). Those of us who were, fifteen years ago, happily eating mushrooms and stomping on turtles in Super Mario Brothers have graduated to games like Halo 3 (H3), World of Warcraft (WoW), or the politically hotly debated Grand Theft Auto (GTA) series that are developed with player choice in mind; games have become miniature realities in which gamers immerse themselves.

However, despite the spectacular technology that provides new experiences to all players, games are seen still primarily as *toys* within the mainstream media. The implicit assumption within that value judgment is that toys are only for children. Further, games – as technology – are often characterized as *masculine toys*. The implicit cultural assumptions associated with gaming and games, as shown through the portrayal of

gamers and the conversations taking place in the media, in schools, and in government, leave out a strong and large portion of gamers: adult women.

Within this paper I seek to address one overriding research question: how do adult female gamers form a “gamer” identity collectively and individually? I believe learning more about the processes through which women negotiate identity online will give a greater understanding of how women use the personas they create online and off. Further, I believe this research will reveal more about women’s daily lives and leisure habits. I will be investigating this question at several different levels of the hierarchy of gaming society. I will look specifically at: (a) the industries and people that shape the socio-historical context that creates and constructs an anti-gaming climate, as well as how that climate has been shifting, (b) the development and formation of female gaming communities, with respect to the social controls within female-orientated gaming communities, (c) the constructions of identities by female gamers individually, and (d) the societal ramifications of both the constructions of female gamers and their attempts to reconstruct that identity. This paper is an exploration of identity formation in resistance, specifically detailing and exploring the ways in which women reframe themselves and their identities – both within a community context and individually – within a label (“gamer”) that is rigidly defined and often denigrated by other media producers and even the larger male-dominated gaming community. Further, I intend this paper to be a discussion of the ways in which the inclusion of the internet and women’s abilities to create a gaming “persona.” Women use the internet to express themselves in ways they may choose not to offline as well as form relationships with other women connected by a shared love of gaming.

## Gaming Theory

Within this paper, I used three different levels of analysis to examine gaming and gamers. The top level looked at the constructions and narratives about the activity of gaming and gamers within the wider cultural narratives as shown through media presentations. To consider the ways in which those images were constructed and used, I applied a constructionist perspective to social problems in my analyses. Social constructionism, arising out of Berger and Luckmann's (1966) work, has become a dominant analysis within social problems literature. I used this perspective when dealing with the constructed images of games and gaming as presented within the media or by various interest groups (e.g., politicians, the gaming industry, etc.) to help contextualize the environment in which women are creating their identities as "gamers." I also used a constructionist perspective because I wanted to debunk, in the sense of moral panic literature (Cohen [1972] 2002; Erikson 1966; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Springhall 1998), some of the negative framing of games and gamers. This debunking also helped me locate the position of gaming within women's daily lives by countering those constructions with the realities and lived experiences of my participants.

The second level of analyses is set at the community level. My discussions of gaming communities and collective identity are centered strongly within the deviance literature concerning alignment and accounting for actions (Mills 1997; Scott and Lyman 1968; Stokes and Hewitt 1976). I use the deviance literature to describe the ways in which women differ from the social constructions of gamers and break norms set by those constructions. I also use the deviance literature to explain the ways in which gaming communities achieve social control and show how women evaluate accounts for

their own deviance. I explore this sense of deviance both in terms of women being deviant from wider cultural norms about femininity by playing games, but also the ways in which women may be labeled as deviant even within the female gaming communities.

My final level of analysis is that of the individual gamers. I wrote this portion of the paper from an explicitly symbolic interactionist perspective. I used this perspective deliberately as I believed that the methodology and epistemology of interactionism was the most effective way discover the answers to my research questions regarding identity creation, identity performance and identity transformation. All of my research questions are centered within two general ideas: how do my participants interact with each other and what meanings do my participants place in gaming? Both the search for understanding interaction processes and meaning are central to the interactionist perspective. My research within this perspective is derived primarily from Goffman's (1955; 1959; 1963) work on identity performance and impression management. I use Goffman's (1959; 1963) dramaturgical approach to frame the face-to-face interactions women have with others and the choices they make during those interactions. I also draw from Mead's ([1934] 1962) work, particularly his ideas on significant symbols to explore the ways in which women impute meaning into gaming and games.

In the following sections, I will discuss the constructions of games and gamers shown in the wider media, in particular the movie and television industries. I will discuss some of the consequences of those constructions for the gaming industry. I finish with the ways in which those presentations are slowly shifting from negative to positive.

Games, Gamers and How We Talk About Them

The construction of gamers and games happen in four general areas: media, politics, academia, and popular discourse. I use the word discourse here deliberately because the construction of gamers changes rapidly within the social process of information exchange. Technology is essential to this process; technology aids in the construction of images of gamers, through media advertising, movies, television, and ease of access to online news sources. Technology then helps to allow the conversation about games and to gamers continue through email, bulletin boards, newsgroups, blogs, and even the ability to comment on news reports. This conversation happens both online and offline as people continue to discuss games, their purpose and gamers. For the most part, this discourse taking place in online weblogs (blogs), communities, and in the mainstream media is strictly a rhetorical one, dealing solely with perceptions and images, but there are real consequences to the dialogues happening. These consequences are mostly borne by the gaming industry, often in the form of legislation that restricts sales, and the gamers themselves in how they are treated both by gamers and non-gamers.

### *Gamers in the Media*

The presentation of the image of a “gamer” by the mass media tends to fall under two fairly rigid archetypes: (a) the twenty-something man who refuses to let go of his adolescence as seen through movies such as *Grandma’s Boy* or *40-Year-Old Virgin*, or (b) the angry adolescent that uses games as a trigger or an excuse for violence, most often a portrayal seen in news reports relating to specific incidents blamed on a perpetrator’s “video game addiction.” Games, gaming and gamers have been the forefront of the larger debate on the place of entertainment media since the 1980s, both in America and internationally. This debate centers on the appropriateness of media, from violence in

video games to the use of explicit lyrics in music, versus the right of the entertainment industry to be free from state-imposed censorship. The fight over video games, combined with the fears of stunted growth, obesity or even violence that mass media often perpetuates (usually with the help of politicians) all contributed to the unquestioned and unstated assumption of what a “fan” is and how “fandom” – the name given to groups of fans who gather around popular culture artifacts (taken from the root words “fan” and “kingdom”) – works.

Video gamers cross age and gender lines but are still seen primarily as children’s toys. This is the image shown in movies and even in gaming advertisements, where the people playing games are most often children or twenty-something males portrayed as adolescent. In contrast, research conducted by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), the U.S. association devoted to business and public affairs of video game companies (including marketing and consumer research), reports that “ninety-three percent of people who make the actual purchase of computer games and 83% of people who make the actual purchase of video games are 18 years of age or older. The average age of the game buyer is 40 years old” (2008). A study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that a full “97% of teens ages 12-17 play computer, web, portable, or console games” and that “fully 99% of boys and 94% of girls play video games” (Lenhart, Kahne, Middaugh, Evans, and Vitak 2008:i). Video games are pervasive in American society, both for teens *and adults*. These numbers are startling. If video games are for children, why are adults playing them so frequently? Further, if adults are playing video games nearly as frequently as children and teens, why is the general cultural perception of video game players that of children, or, at worst, adolescent boys?

Popular media continues to construct gamers with two general identities. The first identity is the more benign one, in which a man, often in his twenties or thirties, plays video games to recapture some of his lost youth. Movies such as The Forty-Year-Old Virgin, Grandma's Boy, or Shaun of the Dead or television shows such as Chuck show these men as underachievers, socially awkward and sometimes even reclusive. Even the 1982 movie, Mazes and Monsters, which tells of a college Dungeons and Dragons role-playing group in which one of the male players takes the game *too* seriously is an early attempt at showing the “dangers” of game playing. The subtext of this portrayal is that games, and gaming, can be an anti-social activity that delays the maturity people should have as they grow older. These constructions often show gamers negatively as adults who should have long since given up children's toys. The second major portrayal of a gamer is that of the psychopathic loner. While the “adolescent adult gamer” is more likely to be seen in media that are comedic in nature, this archetype is one that is devoted to horror or drama. Even some of the major procedural dramas on television (e.g., *CSI: Las Vegas*, *CSI: New York*, *Numb3rs*, *Law and Order: SVU*) do their part to link video games with murder or other criminal acts.

The game industry, of course, has its own propaganda machine in the form of advertisements for games, gaming magazines, and funded research. Yet much of the money spent on public relations is spent solely on advertising aimed at people already sympathetic to games and gamers. However, some of these advertisements are racy or shocking enough to draw complaints from conservative media watchdog groups, often resulting in the removal of the advertising (e.g., Kalinowski 2009). This emphasis on advertising leaves little or no protection for the gamers themselves. The gaming

communities, and individual gamers, are often forced to give “reasonable” motives for their game playing.

Motives, as characterized by Mills, are “accepted justifications for present, future, or past programs and acts” (1997:907). Motives are always situational and may shift as situations and social interactions change. For gamers, motives offered are an attempt to gain allies within a particular situation after having been “outed” as a gamer (video or otherwise). A particular type of motive is an account (Scott and Lyman 1968). Accounts, used when an individual or group’s actions are called into question, are specific types of explanations offered for the deviation from situationally accepted norms. Scott and Lyman characterize accounts into two general types: excuses and justifications. Justifications involve taking “responsibility for the act in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it;” while excuses are “accounts in which one admits the act in question is bad, wrong, or inappropriate but denies full responsibility” (1968:47). Both motives and accounts are part of a larger social process called “alignment” (Stokes and Hewitt 1976:838). Aligning actions are taken when there is a discrepancy between the perception of a situation and the normative perception of a situation. In terms of gamers, both excuses and justifications are used as aligning actions, though justifications are more easily found within news media.

Fine gives the four thematic justifications used by role-playing gamers as “educational components of gaming; gaming as an escape from social pressure; games as aids in increasing one’s sense of personal control or efficacy; and games as aids in dealing with people” (1983:53). While Fine’s research on role-players is nearly thirty years old, those four justifications still ring true today. We see these portrayals

particularly in the more recent positive attention given to games in the news media. With the newly released Nintendo Wii console, Nintendo was began advertising the console as a social activity, particularly for *families*. The use of the Wii for physical rehabilitation also provides a positive element to the news reporting regarding games (e.g., Kopenkoskey 2008; Miller 2007). These types of news reports could be classified as showing games as “aids,” particularly in terms of “control or efficacy” (Fine 1983:53). News media is also giving more reports on the widespread use of games. These reports become part of the justifications for gaming by showing gaming as a social activity and aiding in social relationships. The portrayal of a gamer as a “psychopathic loner” is premised on the idea that fans are destructive or mindless (e.g., Mark David Chapman, John Hinckley). However, as both Jenkins (1992) and Jensen (2001) note, fanaticism is displayed in all walks of life, even academia.

Fandom is essentially a hierarchical structure in which “it is normal and therefore safe to be attached to elite, prestige-conferring objects (aficionadood), but it can be abnormal, and therefore dangerous to be attached to popular, mass-mediated objects (fandom)” (Jensen 2001:308). This divide between what is seen as acceptable and unacceptable “is based in an assumed dichotomy between reason and emotion” (Jensen 2001:308). However, this dichotomy seems to be fading with the increase of positive media attention and the growing acceptability of “water cooler talk” about games, television shows, and other popular media sources.

This change is also reflected in the way news media discuss games and gaming. The recent releases of the popular game Halo 3 (H3) brought several news reports regarding the midnight release parties. Phillips writes about the release of H3 in the

context of other entertainment industries: “earning more money in 24 hours than the "Spiderman" movies and the latest Harry Potter tome -- \$170 million, "Halo 3" symbolizes the move of video games -- once the province of socially awkward, pimply faced teenage boys -- into the mainstream” (Phillips 2007). Some news reports, like Phillips’s report, and blogs focused more on the parties and the variety of people waiting eagerly in line (CNN 2007; Plunkett 2007), while several more “serious” reports focused more on the phenomenal sales H3 achieved within the first 24 hours of its release (BBC News 2007).

### *Games and Government*

Since the 1990s, video games have become an easy target for politicians and others concerned with the corruption of children. The image problem of games can be explained by a “moral panic” paradigm. Moral panics, as conceived by Young (1971) and Cohen ([1972] 2002), are when official reaction (through the legislature and press coverage) is out of proportion with the actual severity of the social problem. Public concern about the problem is disconnected from actual harm. The targeted social “problem” was named and used by dominant groups to create safety valves that allow for moral boundary settings and reinforce group cohesion (Erikson 1966). Much of the moral panic paradigm grows out of Becker’s (1963) discussion of the power differentials that generate moral entrepreneurs to create and enforce rules. In the case of video games, moral entrepreneurs are most often politicians, lawyers and other watchdog groups. The advances in technology that allow game developers to create more realistic stories and environments have brought wonder to players and concern to video game and media critics. These critics accuse game depictions of violence and sexuality of causing

desensitization in youth and corrupting their values. By vilifying video games these groups are able to propagate their values and norms, furthering their own agenda.

Politicians are a particularly powerful type of moral entrepreneur. In the mid-1990s, Senator Joe Lieberman held hearings regarding “violent video games,” especially *Mortal Kombat* (MK) and *Night Trap* (NT). MK is a multi-game series originally released by Midway to arcades in 1992. It centers on the *Mortal Kombat* fighting tournament. The game is most controversial for its inclusion of a game-play device called “Fatality,” which is a special finishing move that executes a beaten opponent in gruesome ways (e.g., decapitation, pulling the spine out of an opponent, burning an opponent alive, etc.). MK also became famous for its use of excessive blood and gore within the game play, even before a player was allowed to use a Fatality move. NT was created by Digital Pictures and also released in 1992. NT is the story of co-eds staying at a house for the night as part of a slumber party and being attacked by vampire-like beings. Although nudity in the game was restricted to young women in lingerie and the violence was deliberately unrealistic (Goldberg 2007), in December of 1993, NT was removed from stores in the U.S.

Lieberman’s hearings were the first legislative investigation into video games. While no new legislation was created afterwards, the gaming industry, through the ESA, remained proactive, instituting an industry standard ratings system, similar to the Motion Picture Association of America’s (MPAA) rating system. Game ratings, used by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), run the gamut of “age appropriate” content, from the “EC” rating for Early Childhood, to the Adults Only (AO) rating which big box stores (i.e., Wal-Mart, Best Buy, etc.) refuse to carry. In addition to these general

ratings, the ESRB includes content descriptors such as “blood and gore” or “violence.” All of these efforts are manifestly “designed to provide concise and impartial information about the content in computer and video games so consumers, especially parents, can make an informed purchase decision” (Entertainment Software Association 2006). The ESA runs the ESRP and continues to use this as a tool to stave off further legal regulation. These ratings are not legally binding in the U.S., but most retail outlets make an effort to restrict the sale of Mature rated (M-rated) games to adults only. In contrast, the U.K.’s rating system, British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) are legally binding.

Within the U.S., binding federal regulations of video games has yet to occur. States, counties and cities often have their own ordinances and laws regarding the sales of video games. Missouri, Illinois, Washington, Michigan, Minnesota, Louisiana, and California have all attempted some form of legal regulation of video games, often centering on the sale of violent video games to children. Most of these laws have been found unconstitutional for violating the First Amendment (Schiesel 2007). Internationally, the picture varies widely. Australia, for example, does not have a rating higher than “MA15+,” or setting the age limit for games at a minimum of 15 years old. This results in the banning of most games which are rated M within the U.S. China, notorious for its policies that restrict internet access and usage, has introduced a program that “will start real-name registration for online game players this year” (China Daily 2009). This program is intended to start monitoring how many minors are playing games online, and to see if they are going over the three-hour-a-day usage limit the Chinese government has mandated.

The legislative efforts, both in the U.S. and internationally, have mostly hinged on two types of rhetorical claims: moral ones and scientific ones. The moral argument is that violent games, or games that show sexualized images, are indecent. This “rhetorical idiom” places a very explicit value judgment on the content of games (Ibarra and Kitsuse 2003). A rhetorical idiom is designed so that a claims-maker can establish a problem (e.g., children being exposed to violent games) and its cause (e.g., a perceived increase in the creation of violent video games). Most of the rhetorical idioms used by politicians as claims-makers deal with the perception of gamers as psychopathic fans; politicians are keying into the “rhetoric of endangerment” by constructing games as inciting violence (Ibarra and Kitsuse 2003:30). The rhetoric of endangerment is a category of claim that establishes a social problem as a danger to the health and safety of the public. Incidents such as the Columbine shooting (AP 2001), in which Eric Harris wrote in his journal that he “will force myself to believe that everyone is just another monster from Doom<sup>1</sup>” (Harris 1998), or Devin Moore claiming *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* as his inspiration for shooting two police officers and a dispatcher in 2003 (CBS and Bradley 2005), are used to give illustrative examples of the danger gamers pose to others. This is an explicit framing of *gamers*, rather than the games themselves.

Politicians also tap into the “rhetoric of unreason” when discussing games (Ibarra and Kitsuse 2003:31). Where politicians (and other claims-makers) use the rhetoric of endangerment to establish a threat to *physical* health and safety, the rhetoric of unreason is a strategy used to establish a threat to *mental* health and safety. Jack Thompson, a

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<sup>1</sup> Doom is the earliest example of first-person shooter computer games, released by id Software in 1993. The story centers around a “space marine” sent to Mars, where he encounters demons he must fight to survive. The game was considered an innovation in first-person playing, as the entire game is played from the perspective of the main character, as opposed to a third-person perspective.

Miami-based lawyer who was recently disbarred, is one of the most vocal claims-makers using this rhetorical technique. Thompson, a “crusading reformer” (Becker 1963:147), has been working for over fifteen years against media he perceives as overly sexual or violent, including working within the legal system to regulate the gaming industry. He often becomes involved in legal (and media) battles after shootings in which video games were revealed to be a hobby in which the shooters engaged (AP 1999; AP 2003; Cabell and AP 1998; CBS and Bradley 2005; Kelly 1999). Thompson’s main claim is that games warp the minds of people (particularly children) playing them. Through repeated playing of a “murder simulator,” gamers could be induced into killing “innocents while in a dreamlike state” (Thompson 2005). Thompson’s rhetoric explicitly appeals to “concerns about being taken advantage of, manipulated, ‘brainwashed,’ or transformed into a ‘dupe’ or ‘fool’” (Ibarra and Kitsuse 2003:31). He evokes images of games as predatory that literally rewrite the way the brain is wired and attempts to back his claims with science. For example, first-person shooters, or FPS, are a primary target of concern for politicians and moral entrepreneurs. The emphasis on a first-person perspective allows for greater immersion by the player. This combined with the focus on violence in many FPS games (e.g., war simulations) worries critics; if a person is willing to shoot, harm, or kill a virtual person, what is to stop them from doing the same to a *real* person? This concern has not stopped the U.S. government: the game America’s Army was developed and used as a fun training simulator for potential Army recruits (Halter 2006).

Both politicians and other moral entrepreneurs like Thompson do not simply use rhetoric and anecdotes to make their claims. They also use science to “ground” their claim (Best 1987). Best defines grounds as statements that establish “the basic facts

which serve as the foundation for the discussion that follows” (1987:104). Rhetorical idioms, such as the rhetoric of endangerment and unreason, are often included with anecdotal examples. Politicians and others seeking to control the video game industry (and games by extension) also often use “range claims,” implying that the ubiquity of games creates social harm, by appropriating scientific research into their claims-making (Best 1987:108).

### *Science and Games*

I divide past research on video games and on gamers into three general categories: (a) content analyses of games, (b) research into the physiological and psychological effects of video games and playing video games, and (c) ethnographic studies on gamers themselves. The first two types are more common and biosocial research on gaming is in particular relevant to the discussion of claims-making about video games. If moral entrepreneurs such as Lieberman or Thompson are attempting to make specific claims about games having a *demonstrated negative effect* on gamers, for these claims to be seen as “reasonable” by the populations they are trying to convince, they need data to show that effect.

Most research on the physiological effects of video games looks into the links between game playing and violence, aggression or social disorders (Anderson and Dill 2000; Anderson and Murphy 2003; Dietz 1998; Freedman 2001; Kirsh 2003). The results of these studies have been mixed (see Freedman 2001; Freedman 2002). Despite the disagreement among researchers about the correlation between aggression, social disorders, violence and video games, these results are used both by politicians and the media in order to help make their claims, often touting the “objectivity” of the research.

However, Ferguson (2007) found evidence of a publication bias toward studies that find statistical correlations between games and aggression.

Content analyses are also often biased toward showing representations of video games as negative. Studies and articles using content analyses as methodologies often profile the ways in which gender roles are displayed with negative consequences for the portrayals of women but especially women of color (Beasley and Collins Standley 2002; Burgess, Stermer, and Burgess 2007; Dietz 1998; Ivory 2006; Lee 2004; Mikula 2004; Miller and Summers 2007; Now 2001; Ogletree and Drake 2007; *The Black World Today* 2002). Beasley and Collins Standley (2002) found a significant sex bias in the number of male characters found in the games compared to female characters, as well as differences in which the masculine and feminine roles were portrayed through appearance and clothing. Burgess, Stermer and Burgess's (2007) analyses of video game covers showed male characters appear four times more often than female characters and, when female characters were featured, they were hyper-sexualized. Miller and Summers's (2007) analyses of video game magazine articles found similar results; males were more likely to be shown as heroes while females were more likely to be portrayed in support roles.

In contrast, some of the more recent ethnographic research has been more positive about the role of games within the lives of gamers and particularly within the lives of female gamers. Royse, Joon, Undrahbuyan, Hopson and Consalvo's (2007) ethnography focused on adult female gamers. They found differences in the way women construct meaning in games based on level of commitment to gaming. Women who played more hours of games, "power gamers," showed higher levels of integration of gaming and

technology into their daily lives whereas the non-gamer participants often scorned gaming completely (Royse et al. 2007:562).

The focus of most gaming research has been proving (or disproving) the effect gaming has on gamers. Until recently, there has been little research on the place games have within gamers' everyday life and research on female gamers specifically has been scarce. Explicitly sociological research has focused on the correlation/causation question – do violent games cause violence – leaving the wider analyses to other fields of study (e.g., cultural studies, media studies, etc.). I began this study to start to fill the gap left in exploring women's lives. I also used this research to explore the ways in which the negative constructions of gamers and the political climate surrounding those constructions effect the way women present themselves as gamers, develop their own communities and game within the global context I have just described.

### Methods

Most research on gaming and gamers is part of what Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington categorize as the first and second waves of fan studies (2007). The first wave “did not so much deconstruct the binary structure in which the fan had been placed as they tried to differently value the fan's place in said binary” (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007:3). The second wave of fan studies highlights the consumptive aspect of fan activities and the “replication of social and cultural hierarchies within fan- and subcultures, as the choice of fan objects and practices of fan consumption are structured through our habitus as a reflection and further manifestation of our social, cultural, and economic capital” (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007:6).

Recent research into fans and gaming has started to look explicitly at the popular discourse happening within the gaming community and of fans themselves. The shift is a rhetorical one. Instead of seeing portrayals of gaming and gamers as part of an othering process, more recent research (and media portrayals) shows fandom as part of everyday life. Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington (2007) characterize this trend in research as the third wave of fan studies. I am attempting with this paper to situate myself within the third wave of research, however the general lack of explicitly sociological research on non-sports fans and fan communities (as opposed to media studies or cultural studies research) means that in my analyses I am attempting to do a little bit of all three waves at once.

My positioning within the first wave of research is shown through my focus on *female* fans as gamers within a gaming culture that is slowly acknowledging women as fans. This focus is shown explicitly when I discuss how female gamers construct their individual identities, in terms of the front stage and backstage presentations as well as identity and stigma management tactics female gamers use (Goffman 1959) as well as the accounts women offer for playing (Mills 1997; Scott and Lyman 1968; Stokes and Hewitt 1976). My research is part of the second wave when I look at female gaming communities. While the collective actions of female gaming communities are also centered on managing identity (Goffman 1959), my emphasis is more on how communities establish collective identity through looking at the forms of positive (critical discussions) and negative (ostracism) social control (Erikson 1962; Erikson 1966; Kitsuse 1962). Finally, I place myself in the third wave of research by profiling how my

participants incorporate gaming into their daily lives within a climate that makes the very identity of “gamer” hotly contested terrain.

I initially contacted all participants beginning February of 2008. I sent email invitations to participants, selected from active participants in bulletin boards and gaming communities centered on female gamers as well as women who had expressed earlier interests in being part of my research. I also specifically selected participants to gain an older sample, beyond the convenient college student age samples that are often used in much of the research on female video game players (Anderson and Murphy 2003; Crawford and Gosling 2005; Dietz 1998; Freedman 2001; Royse et al. 2007). Ten respondents agreed to participate in the study. Computer-aided interviews (CAI) were conducted with all participants to allow flexibility in scheduling and reach a larger geographical variety of participants. These interviews were conducted from February 2008 through June of 2008. CAI were saved as a text file for analysis. Any quotations within this paper are direct and unaltered from the text of the participant’s answers exactly as they were typed. All participants were guaranteed confidentiality. I have attempted to choose pseudonyms that are similar in spirit to the online pseudonyms that my research participants chose (Kendall 2002).

My questions were organized in chronological order, beginning with a participant’s first experience with gaming or games. I used this formula to evoke specific stories and narratives from the women I was talking with and gain a sense of how their identities have changed over time as the games and way games are played have changed. My interview format remained relatively unchanged throughout the interviews, though I discovered that I needed to ask directed questions in order to get the stories I was looking

for. To make this change, I often simply reworded the way my question was being asked; for example, instead of asking ‘how did you first start gaming?’ I used ‘tell me about your first time playing a game.’ Data was collected, coded and analyzed using NVIVO 7. I used a coding scheme that focused specifically on examining statements regarding the external constructions of gamers, social gaming for individuals, and the place of the “gamer” identity within women’s lives. I organized my analyses of the interviews around those three specific areas as I believed this was the most effective way of answering my research questions.

In addition to interview data, I attempted to “triangulate” my data by looking at outside sources (Berg 2007:5-8). First, I studied newspaper reports generated about video games, video game culture and the ongoing debate over violence and sexuality within games. I used these articles to examine constructions and framing of both games and gamers by various interest groups. These articles were collected around the release of two games in particular: Halo 3 (released September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2007) and Grand Theft Auto IV (released April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008). Halo 3 was chosen for the mass popularity of the franchise and the mainstream coverage of the release. Grand Theft Auto 4 (GTA4) was chosen due to the ongoing controversy regarding the game content and the use of playing GTA as a legal defense by 18-year old Devin Moore, an Alabama youth who was accused of shooting two police officers and a dispatcher in 2003, further bringing the game into the game violence debate.

The final source of data came from the two livejournal<sup>2</sup> communities for female gamers: “girl\_gamers” and “wow\_ladies.” I was a member of “girl\_gamers” prior to beginning my research and when I began my project I officially announced my intention to act as a participant-observer. My status as “insider” most likely helped to recruit participants as well as ease suspicions about my research agenda. Having never played WoW before, I only began watching “wow\_ladies” once my research began. Unlike “girl\_gamers” where I continued to be a contributing and active member, my lack of familiarity with WoW as a game beyond second-hand accounts left me relegated to being simply a “lurker,” or someone who reads the posts in an online forum but rarely (if ever) participates.

These communities gave me a more in-depth view of the ways in which a collective identity is being formed by female gamers. In-depth CAI gave me insight to individual thoughts and feelings on issues within the gaming community and being a female gamer, but these communities allowed me to see how female gamers interact socially as a group within the climate of critique. These communities also gave me a sense of how female gamers reacted to the outward pressures. In essence, interaction on “girl\_gamers” and “wow\_ladies” revealed internal group social control, in comparison to the wider media reports that showed the external constructions *of* gamers. These communities also served as a gauge of “assimilation”; that is, which positions would the group take when dealing with those external agents of social control in the form of the media and how they negotiated those positions internally.

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<sup>2</sup> Livejournal.com is a social journaling site orientated around communities. It functions much in the same way as other social journaling sites such as MySpace or Facebook, only the emphasis is much more on the text of the entries.

I used Sprague's (2005) four guiding principles of feminist research while conducting this study. I attempted to "work from the standpoint of the disadvantaged" by using gamers voices as much as possible and by studying a group of women who are marginalized for first, playing with "children's toys," and secondly for playing with "boy's toys," roles that – theoretically – places stigma on these women (Sprague 2005:195). I grounded my "interpretation in interests and experience" as an adult female gamer, meaning that my bias is toward positively portraying my fellow female gamers (Sprague 2005:195). I attempted to "maintain a strategically diverse discourse," by exploring various social networks and spheres of the women (Sprague 2005:195). Finally, I attempted to write this paper so that the gamers – if they so choose – would be able to read it and feel as if their voices are the primary component of this paper.

I used my three different data sources to look specifically at the ways identity was managed on the community and individual levels. First, I will explore the ways a community is managed. The two communities that I examined, "girl\_gamers" and "wow\_ladies" were run by moderators, also known as "mods," that set the tone for the communities. The mods have only limited power, however. The true power of a community is through the collective members. In the next section, I will discuss different examples of the use of power in forming communities through both mod action and collective action.

### Community Identity Formation and Management

The subtext of both predominant images within the larger gaming community – not just within the female-orientated gaming community – means that gamers, male and female, must account for their claiming of a deviant identity. I classify the identity of

“gamer” as deviant in two senses; first, because the popular representations – “adolescent adult gamer” or “psychopathic loner” – are portrayed very negatively. Gaming is often shown as having negative consequences for the gamers, beyond the greater social isolation that goes along with gaming (i.e., the image of gamers only being friends and relating to other gamers). Secondly, I use the term “deviant” because of the way the gamers define *themselves*. Gamers actively reject these labels and seek to construct a more realistic definition that allows for the varied identities welcomed within the gaming community. For most male gamers, this is less of a problem given that the construction of a gamer identity within the popular consciousness is strongly male. For female gamers, accounting (Scott and Lyman 1968) for this identity is more troublesome. Teenagers of either gender have a more socially acceptable account for this identity; they are still children, thus are conforming to societal norms by playing with “toys.”

The accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968) women offer are situated based on their own understanding of the “generalized other,” or the “organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self” (Mead [1934] 1962:154). The reflexivity and empathy required of an individual to take on the role of the generalized other is part of what made an individual a “complete self” (Mead [1934] 1962:155). For adult female gamers, the generalized other becomes the gaming community to which they belong *and* the larger cultural group with which they self-identify. The ability to take on the role of the perceived generalized other and act on the perceptions of the generalized other is what drives the specific accounts used. For example, a woman’s perception of what is considered acceptable deviance within the gaming community will vary widely from a woman’s perception of what is considered acceptable while she is at work. She

chooses the specific role she plays in any given situation to reduce the perceived stigma, or spoiled identity, she believes she will experience (Goffman 1959; Goffman 1963). This type of accounting (Scott and Lyman 1968) and impression management (Goffman 1959) are all individual choices based on perceptions of the wider society to which a woman belongs. This leaves me with the question of what processes are taking place *at the community level* to help establish a community identity for female gamers?

Achieving this type of identity management within communities happens through two forms of social control: “formal” and “informal.” Formal social control is when someone in a position of power (e.g., mods) performs a stigmatizing action to maintain internal power dynamics or a unilateral action that otherwise defines the community identity for outsiders (e.g., profile creation). Informal social control is when a community takes a particular action – such as banning, or the virtual form of ostracism, of a member from the community permanently – in an attempt to align the community with the perceived social norms. A community moderator, or “mod,” usually acts after several calls for action have been made by community members. Community identity is also established through the processes of accounting and aligning as the community seeks to “normalize” itself (Mills 1997; Scott and Lyman 1968; Stokes and Hewitt 1976). Finally, community identity is also established through the reaction to the presentation of women in games and the perceptions of the constructions of who and what a “gamer” is by outsiders or the gaming industry. This is a much more transformative type of interaction.

#### *Identity Establishment and the Use of Profiles as Internal Social Control*

The two communities “girl\_gamers” and “wow\_ladies” began with an identity establishing statement. Livejournal offers a “profile” option for moderators, or mods, to

set ground rules, advertisements and enticements to join, and otherwise set the mod's view of a community's identity. "Wow\_ladies" offers the following profile statement:

This is a community for lady gamers of the MMO, World of Warcraft. Please note that due to incidents involving trolls, membership is now on moderated status. **In order to be accepted to the community, please list that you are interested in World of Warcraft somewhere (profile, interests, icon, post). By pressing the Join Community Button you are AGREEING to the rules below, so make sure you review them before you join** (Mods 2005; emphasis in original).

The rules the mods set up include fairly normal ones for internet communities, including instructions for contacting the mods themselves, rules about "off topic" posts (i.e., posts unrelated to gaming or WoW), comments and commenting, and even a rule about men joining the community. By looking just at this profile, before even examining posts, I can tell that this community is likely one that is strictly controlled by the mods. The lack of open membership suggests that the mods are carefully watching posts to ensure that rules are enforced. The mods are also making themselves more remote within their profile. A single email address is given and no individuals are ever identified as moderators. This further suggests that the mods may be attempting to defer criticism of their tactics by establishing an identity that is less accessible to community members or they may be less open about the demographics of the mods.

The profile page for "girl\_gamers," in contrast, begins with a list of the three community mods. The only things that come before this are an acknowledgement to the person who created the community layout and the identity establishing sentence that "[t]his community is for the girls (or guys who are secure) who love to play video/computer/RP games" (absconditus\_six, iambliss, and havoknkaos 2002). Similar to "wow\_ladies," the rules of the community are laid out as well as few frequently asked questions. One question of interest is: "Why is  [havoknkaos](#) a maintainer of a female

**community, if he's a guy?"** (absconditus\_six, iambliss, and havoknkaos 2002; emphasis in the original). Unlike the mods of “wow\_ladies,” the three mods of “girl\_gamers” are giving an impression of transparency. The rules of the community are much less technical than the ones of “wow\_ladies,” and center less on the “dos and don’ts” of posting and more on the “dos and don’ts” of respecting other members. This establishing page gives the impression of a less rigid community, in comparison, and one that is open to gamers of all ages, genders and types so long as the gamers are willing to be respectful.

These profiles are the impression management techniques of the mods. These are meant to be read once by a potential member to assess whether they want to join the community and so the emphasis is not on *content*, per se, and more on *style*. Profiling is explicitly a type of *formal* social control. The mods have unilateral power to use the profile to set the identity of a community, with little or no input from community members. Profiles allow mods a way of encouraging undesirable members to self-select out of group membership. For example, as someone who has never played WoW, I would never have joined the “wow\_ladies” community without the impetus of my research (e.g., the longevity of the community, the relative popularity of WoW, and high community membership). The creation of a community devoted strictly to *one* game, as opposed to “girl\_gamers” which is devoted to *gaming*, would have forced me to self-select out of community membership. The true identity of an online community is formed not just through a mod’s intent but also through the interaction processes that take place within the community.

*Deviant Identities and Community Based Social Control*

For many whom participate in online gaming communities, the community becomes a proxy for a neighborhood. Relationships are formed – some through friendship and some more adversarial – much in the same way a neighborhood grows through a proximity of interests. With female gaming communities, the interests are grown, first, through a connection to the games played, and second through the common gender and gendered experiences of women gamers. Gaming networks and communities can become proxies for families. One of the major criticisms leveled at video games is that they are anti-social activities and that, by playing games, a child’s time with their families is reduced. Games are seen as reducing quality time in families. Without the insulating cushion of the family, a child’s values will become warped through repeated playing of a “murder simulator” and could be induced into killing “innocents while in a dreamlike state” (Thompson 2005). Gamers themselves criticize others with “skewed” priorities, attempting to outwardly align their group with those mainstream positions showing gaming as an anti-family activity.

For “wow\_ladies” the negative aspects of neighborhood and family took on a more nasty turn. A member of the community, owlsamantha, posted a question asking for tips or suggestions on how to balance her children, specifically at meal time, with the WoW guild raids<sup>3</sup> both her and her husband participate in (2006). In the initial question, we see identity management work; owlsamantha is attempting to establish her “credentials” by beginning with a statement that she “just dinged 60 on the server that my

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<sup>3</sup> Guilds are player associations founded around varying types of objectives and goals. Guilds range from a group of members who want a way to communicate easily through guild-only communication options to guilds that are devoted to high level and tactical raiding. A raid is a type of mission where a large group of people, relative to the more normal smaller parties, come together to defeat a difficult boss. Raids often take three to four hours of continuous play before a boss is defeated and require a significant time investment by players.

husband has been playing on since he started playing” (2006). She states her elite gaming identity as a high-level WoW player to show the community she was a “hardcore,” or devoted fan. Once that identity is established, owlsamantha introduces her secondary role as a parent by explaining that “We have two small children who need to eat dinner” (2006). The reaction to her post was only about her *secondary* role, rather than her primary role as a parent. This post caused a flurry of criticism from other gamers, from harsh and blunt criticism such as “Honestly, your parenting skills SHOULD be questioned” (delandi 2006). Another poster alluded to the mainstream perceptions of gamers as irresponsible or juvenile, writing “just because it's GAMER PARENT! \*gasp\* you assume the kid's running around in a loin cloth banging pots together and trying to eat knives, while being fed bits of the thing that used to be the family dog?” (logickbomb 2006). Within this exchange, we see examples of informal and formal identity control, both in terms of the image of the community as female gamers but also individual identities.

Some of the comments in response were written to be critical while still offering advice, such as archsrei’s comment suggesting “letting the kids snack on and off from some time after the 4p dinner, until bed might be teaching them bad eating habits” (2006). This comment sparked a longer argument regarding what was considered a “healthy snack,” and criticisms of owlsamantha not only based on the information provided in her original post but also on her personal journal: ‘Her personal LJ mentions giving her one kid mustard and only mustard because "thats what he wanted"’ (rawness 2006). Owlsamantha’s original post is one in which she seeks to normalize herself by community (e.g., her gaming credentials) and mainstream standards (e.g., she is a caring

mother). In the reaction to aligning attempts, we see the community labeling owlsamantha as deviant because the majority of posters assume – as logickbomb points out – the negative stereotype of gamer parents applies.

Female gaming communities tend to operate in ways so that female gamers come together to try and redefine themselves and their interests differently than the mainstream culture presents those interests. This is usually not an outright rejection of the perceived mainstream values for these women, or even for the communities in terms of their interactions and places within the larger gaming community, because many of the accounting actions (Scott and Lyman 1968) become normative in the larger cultural sense. We see this specifically in the owlsamantha example. The reaction of the majority of gamers is such that in their view women should ensure that the children and household are taken care of. No gamers questioned what the father's role is in the household, as if owlsamantha was solely responsible for the housekeeping and the children. We see a status differential of married with children and single gamers. Those gamers like owlsamantha, who are married or single with children posted tips or suggestions on quick dinners, games to give the children to play and other ideas that would potentially help her. The gamers who identified as generally without children or unmarried, often within their comments or on their individual journal profiles, were some of the most judgmental in the discussion. The normalization taking place during this discussion is such that the single/unmarried gamers are seeking to separate themselves from the “deviant” image of a bad gamer parent.

*Community Image Negotiation As Resistance*

Some interactions seek to be transformative, particularly when discussing gaming, gender and race. Female gamers, particularly adult female gamers, seem almost overly conscious of the way games can hyper-sexualize female characters or demonize characters of color (who may otherwise be largely absent if it were not for games that portrayed them as gangsters, thugs or criminals). In late July 2006, a trailer for the new game Resident Evil 5 (RE5) was posted to the internet. Resident Evil (RE), made by the Japanese company Capcom, has spawned 16 games (including the upcoming RE5) on various platforms, three films, several novelizations, a five-issue comic book, and several other types of merchandise. RE tells the story of a protagonist, which changes every game, and their fight against zombies created by the evil multi-national corporation Umbrella. The format of the games changed in Resident Evil 4 (RE4), switching from traditional zombies to citizens that had been infected and brainwashed to be violent. RE4 also switched locations from a United States based location to an unnamed Spanish-speaking location presumably in Europe, a change that surprised many players, particularly when the new infected now largely spoke badly accented Spanish. This change, however, did not cause near the controversy the trailer for RE5 did.

RE 5 continued that tradition, but changed the location from Spain to what seems to be Africa. The trailer<sup>4</sup> depicted a reoccurring white character in Africa subduing “hordes upon hordes of insane looking, murderous black people” (ghostsanddreams 2007b). The imagery used shocked people, gamers and non-gamers alike, and started accusations of racism within the company and the franchise. When the controversy reached the livejournal “girl\_gamers” community, discussions over racism resulted in the banning of members accused of “trolling.” This is an internet term for users who

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<sup>4</sup> The Resident Evil 5 trailer can be viewed at: <http://www.gametrailers.com/player/22801.html>

deliberately post inflammatory, off-topic or abusive material to provoke emotional responses from others in the forum. Trolling is one of the few activities that will generally result in banning of members from communities regardless of the community purpose or type. Further, calling someone a “troll” is to confer a deviant identity label on them within the context of the community.

Many of the comments were disdainful of the accusations of racism, such as failedxemotions who wrote “I think it's funny how this has turned into a political debate over racism. IT'S JUST A GAME” (2007). I\_am\_pellucid talks about how:

black people have black privilege... Every race, every gender, every religion has privileges that members of groups they're not in do not have. Just because you covet "white privilege" doesn't make it any more potent, valuable, or unfair than black privilege, Hispanic privilege, Eskimo privilege, Irish privilege, or anything else (2007).

Shemale, the community member who was eventually banned, responded directly to this post:

I am love love loving how you're implying that "Hispanic privilege" and "Irish privilege" somehow preclude white privilege. I'd say that you're too stupid to be allowed on the internet, but then where would I get my lulz<sup>5</sup>? There are only a few sources as rich with lol<sup>6</sup> as you are (2007).

This comment, in conjunction with i\_am\_pellucid's response asking for shemale to “Please stop harassing me. If you'd like to actually contribute to the conversation, I'd be more than happy to include you, but as it is you're just being a troll,” that resulted in shemale's banning (2007). This banning was ostensibly explained as a mod reaction to a request to stop harassment, but could also be seen as an example of formal social control. Only one complaint was lodged (publicly) concerning shemale's behavior and no one else in the discussion responded to shemale's comments. This would suggest a more unilateral action on the part of the mods rather than one in response to the mood of the

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<sup>5</sup> “Lulz” is an internet corruption of the word “laughs.”

<sup>6</sup> Lol is internet speak for “laugh out loud.”

community as a whole. Shemale's opinion disagreed with the general feeling of the community that the allegations of racism were unwarranted so the mods took action to ostracize a member of the community that would not follow the community's support of all video games regardless of content.

Nojojojo, a relatively popular and well-known gamer – often called Big Name Fans, or BNFs -- in gaming fandom, also disagreed with the general community line:

I'm shocked and revolted to see a community dedicated to gender equity in gaming reacting like this. I'm hearing the same kind of crap being thrown at me as a black gamer than I've heard for years from men as a female gamer -- "you're too sensitive", "it's just a game, chill out", "you're seeing something where there's nothing", and so on. These same statements can be and have been applied to any female gamer who dared to complain about, say, stupid and sexist depictions of women in video games (for example, Jill running around Raccoon City in a miniskirt and tube top for no logical reason). How can you not see that you're using the same crap – *classic*<sup>7</sup> crap -- that sexist gamers often use to silence women? How can you not see the hypocrisy in this? (nojojojo 2007)

In this debate we can see attempts to change the gaming culture, not only internally, but attempts to reframe games into debates on wider cultural problems. Garland explains that the causality of narrative and form “runs in both directions” (Garland 1990:193). This means that cultural narratives help shape the cultural forms, such as the cultural narrative of gaming being juvenile creates scenes in movies in which adult men are shown as juvenile for playing them. However, the ways the cultural forms change as they are used will also change the cultural narratives. By participating and framing the RE5 debate in terms that has wider implications, nojojojo posits gaming and the gaming community as a facet of internal and external social change. She is pushing, specifically, to reframe the debate about games into one that not only looks just at depictions of violence and

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<sup>7</sup> “Classic” in this quote also included a hyperlink to the following webpage discussing How to Suppress Discussions of Racism: <http://coffeandink.livejournal.com/607897.html>

sexuality but also for gamers and non-gamers to begin a discourse about depictions of race and gender more generally.

Unfortunately, her actions – despite her prestige – had no effect within the community debate. Her comment was virtually ignored, except for a few people who commented, taking her to task for her statements. For example, ghostsanddreams (also the original poster) attempts to neutralize the effect of nojojojo’s statements. Neutralization is an attempt to justify deviant behavior in such a way that the deviant “remains committed to the dominant normative system and yet so qualifies its imperatives that violations are ‘acceptable’ if not ‘right’” (Sykes and Matza 1957:667). In this sense, nojojojo is the deviant within the community and ghostanddreams is attempting to neutralize nojojojo’s statements for her by denying the harm nojojojo says these portrayals of Africans have (Sykes and Matza 1957). Ghostanddreams denies the harm by offering alternate depictions: “I mean, I’ve only really seen like 10 or 15 or so STARS<sup>8</sup> members in all of the games combined and at least 3 or 4 were black if I recall correctly. How many do they need? I can’t really recall any arab or asian STARS members” (ghostsanddreams 2007a). The other negative response to nojojojo came from \_ohthedrama:

Really, white Americans don't have a history of being oppressed.  
hmm. Well, I'm pretty sure that's bullshit.

- 1) White American WOMEN sure as fuck were oppressed for a long ass time, if I remember correctly. And as a woman, I don't have a problem shooting a zombie bitch down, white or whatever color she is.
- 2) I'm pretty sure we're oppressed in parts of Europe and the Middle East. France? Iraq? Some parts of Canada, even?
- 3) HISPANICS AREN'T OPPRESSED? Even today, there are sooo many controversies over illegal immigrants, lawn-mowing jokes, and racism towards them. I think that's pretty bold of you to say they've never really been "oppressed", when today they still are.

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<sup>8</sup> STARS is an acronym for the in-game Special Tactics and Rescue Squad, a law enforcement group.

So honey, although you made some points in that schpeal of yours, I'm gonna have to disagree. These games have nothing to do with race, color, sex, sexual preference, whatever.

They could be purple polka-dotted llama-zombies. I'll still shoot 'em down with my handy-dandy shot gun. ;] (2007)

In \_ohthedrama's response we see a second type of neutralization: condemnation of the condemner (Sykes and Matza 1957:668). Here we see \_ohthedrama shifting the attention from the use of race within RE5 to the way \_ohthedrama perceives nojojojo as trivializing women and Latino/as. \_Othedrama is essentially making the claim that nojojojo, and others who might make this argument, are "hypocrites, deviants in disguise, or impelled by personal spite" (Sykes and Matza 1957:668). The only other responses to nojojojo's comment were two short statements of agreement.

With the dissension silenced or ignored, the community was eventually able to present an allied front to critics outside of the gaming community who leveled the same charges of racism against the game. Like many media producers in other industries, game producers often monitor internet groups for discussion of their games and, occasionally, will react to fan criticism or response. For example, RE5's producer Jun Takeuchi, noted in an interview after the initial controversy that "we certainly didn't anticipate the reaction. We were quite surprised by the reaction that came out. I think everyone understands that we never set out to with the intention to make anything that was racist - that was never our intention" (Totilo 2008). Because communities may be scrutinized by gaming insiders, communities may feel an increased pressure to create solidarity. This leaves one avenue for expression of the identity of a gamer: individual identity.

### Women Playing Games

While gaming communities may provide buffer zones for women gamers, the true definition of identity is found through their own experiences in coming to be a gamer and

how they self-identify as a gamer. There are a progressive series of choices a woman makes to perform as a “gamer.” First, her choice to begin playing games. Second, her choice whether or not to continue playing games socially. Third, is how she presents and identifies as a woman within the gaming community, particularly when playing socially oriented games. Fourth, is her choice whether or not to self-identity as a gamer to non-gamers (i.e., friends, relatives, co-workers) and wear the stigma that comes with the label. Last, her choice about how to relate and interact with the games themselves within the context of their other choices and identities. For the participants of my study, as well as myself as an adult female gamer, the most transformative choice – as far as identity is concerned – comes from the ways in which women are introduced to games. Of the ten women I interviewed, all but one were in their twenties; for most of these women (myself included) that meant growing up as games were developing.

### *Starting Game-Playing*

The introduction to games and gaming were always social. Dreaming of Thorns, 23, recalls that “my first memories of video games are actually of me watching other people play them...I would get pretty enthralled and watch them play games for hours at family gatherings. I guess I was drawn in by the interactivity, and the ability to play out adventures on the tv.” This is hardly uncommon, even for Lostinagoodbook, who is the oldest participant in the sample at 35. She related a story of her first experience with video games as playing Pong at a relative’s house: “it was just so entertaining, you could play with friends, tease one another and it was also a little challenging.” Pink Bunny of Evil (23) talked about how gaming was “something i could do with my dad. he was in the army and gone all the time. and since we moved all the time i didnt really have that many

friends. i tend to escape into video games.” Of the four women who told me that their first experiences with gaming were solitary, only two experienced their first video game unconnected to other people. Icecreambeam (24) explained that the first game she ever played was “Tetris, on the Game Boy - it was Christmas 1991 and I was 7 years old. after playing it in a store I begged for a game boy for christmas, I guess santa delivered.”

Lovelylunai, at 23, came to gaming relatively recently working at a secondhand store when she was “17 or 18. Someone brought [Diablo<sup>9</sup>] in to sell. I bought it back from the store that evening. It was curiosity. I didn't know many people my own age at that time, but the premise of the game seemed like fun.” The other two women, Jokersama (27) and Onemorefirst (27) tried games on their own, but with systems that belonged to other members of their family (sister and father, respectively).

#### *Staying Social or Playing By Oneself*

Once the introduction to gaming was made socially, for most of these women gaming continued to be social, an activity that could be played alone but was, as Lovelylunai puts it, “a way to socialize with more people.” This decision is one of the crucial moments of identity choice for gamers. Rather than simply internalizing the process of identity choice because they like and enjoy playing games, female gamers often deliberately choose and perform the identity of “gamer” in response to the actions of others. For gamers like Lovelylunai, gaming is a way to socialize with others like her in the same sense that gaming communities offer women a chance to define and account for their identities. Other gamers, such as the 24-year old Imatree, find a different

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<sup>9</sup> Diablo is a game series created by Blizzard Entertainment (the same company that produces WoW). The series tells of the conflict between good and evil while the player attempts to stop the devil Diablo from creating hell on Earth.

enjoyment in social gaming: competitive *and* cooperative rather than one or the other.

Imatree says:

[I] always have found the more the merrier. I really have played very few games on my own... I think it might come down to the difference between playing the computer or someone else. The computer will do the same thing every time (generally), whereas a human opponent is changing, and they learn from their mistakes. I also am a big trash talker. It's hard to trash talk the computer. I do think that is why I'm more attracted to team playing. It's also nice cooperative playing because your skills can improve as you follow someone who is better, like in a Halo Coop for example. I have learned a lot of things by playing with others who are better than me.

The concept of “social gaming” is very important in terms of creating an identity in resistance to the normalized view of gamers. Both the “psychopathic loner” and “adolescent adult male” presentation of gamers rely on anti-social behavior and the fear that children will not be socialized normally if allowed too much time with technology. In contrast to the common constructions of a gamer, gaming becomes a social activity; something to do with friends and family. The socialization occurs both in person, by people who play together physically, and online. The only difference between traditional socialization through peer groups met in school or at work is that gamers socialize technologically; the medium that makes the socialization possible is no longer physical.

### *Being a Gamer or a Female Gamer*

The third major identity crux for gamers is about the presentation of self within the larger gaming community (Goffman 1959; Goffman 1963). While gaming culture is a strongly social one, historically speaking, despite the inclusion of many female gamers, gaming culture was also fairly masculine. This may have arisen out of the popular view of hobbyists such as fantasy role-players, strategy game players, war gamers and other types of non-technology based culture and world creation. The more traditional gamers and modern video game players are both driven by a single urge: to create a shared

fantasy (Fine 1983). However, the predominant view of those traditional game players was and still is shown as male. In some ways, that image of gamers as male has carried over into the new generation of shared fantasy. Further, the culture of games, manifested in the ways games are played, can be a very stereotypically masculine one: local area network (LAN) parties allow gamers to come together and play together. Competitions are created around specific games and bring together thousands of gamers aspiring for the title of “best.” Developers are predominantly male. Professional content providers – through online and print gaming magazines – are predominantly male. A content analysis of 12 issues from 2007 of two monthly top-tier gaming magazines, *Electronic Gaming Monthly* (EGM) and *Game Informer* (GI), showed that only 7 percent of the staff had identifiably female names (between both EGM and GI). Most of those names belong to marketing and sales directors, rather than contributing writers and editors. Female gamers are also often verbally harassed online, either in communities or even during game play. The introduction of digital cameras to game play has allowed the beginning of more physical harassment as well.

Within this potentially hostile environment, women have a choice whether or not to self-identify to other gamers as *women*. This is one of the benefits of video gaming, particularly online gaming, in that the avatar self is not necessarily representative of the physical self. Avatars are the perfect way to allow gamers to truly sink into the fantasy of the game. The addition of cheap and easily-accessible voice modulators for gaming means that not only the physical appearance but the voice of an avatar can be set differently from the player.

Taryn, 29, says that she may be initially “underestimated, but that opinion usually changes pretty quickly” when she is confronted with other male gamers. Jokersama was more explicit about her experiences, particularly with male gamers: “...other gamers - who DO tend to be adolescent or 20-something males either there's a hint of condescension, as if I wouldn't know where the on-switch is for my consoles, or would primarily play barbie: the rpg.” Respondents reported more extreme experiences. Icecreambeam admits to being a female gamer online “everywhere except Xbox Live. Any reaction I've ever gotten from anyone there has been very negative: ‘lul u sux cuz u is gurl’<sup>10</sup>.” When asked if she had ever met a female player on Xbox Live, Icecreambeam replied “not a single one... but when I was on it I played Halo 2 which is extremely male (and 12 year old) dominated.” Onemorefirst reported something similar, believing that “the folks with the headphones don't know a girl is listening. Or, if they think one might, they don't really care but [I] think most of them assume everyone playing is male since they call each other ‘pussies’ and ‘faggots’ which bothers me.” Some women refuse to self-identity as a woman at all, while others will, but more cautiously. Lovelylunai talked about how she preferred to game with people she knew because “it is easier, in a way. When dealing with people I don't know, there are a myriad of reactions that may occur when they learn/realize that I am female and/or older than they are. Sometimes those reactions are very distressing or annoying. With people I know I am more comfortable.” Some women decide to use forms of gender play. Pink Bunny of Evil uses gender play by lying about her identity as a woman: “if i am feeling bored ive had the habit of telling

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<sup>10</sup> The format of speech Icecreambeam is using here is a type of netspeak generally called ‘l33t’ within the gaming community. The name comes from a shortening of the word ‘elite,’ and involves shortened words as well as substitutions of vowels for numbers. This phrase is read as ‘laugh out loud, you suck because you are a girl.’

guys that i used to be a girl and now i was a boy, that i was actually a 9 year old boy or that i was a gay guy.” She uses online play to experiment with different identities and change the way others react to her.

All of these strategies fall along a spectrum, from outright refusal to self-identify when gaming as a woman to cautious identification to open identification. Those who refuse completely to identify as female while playing are “passing,” and are assumed to be male as a default in line with the construction of a “gamer” (Goffman 1963). Instead of attempting to account for their actions as a female, these women reject that part of their identity completely and, instead, take on a new, false identity just for gaming. This identity makes it easier for women to blend in with the gaming norm. Some women self-identify as women, but use strategies with which to minimize the stigma associated with their actions as an older woman. Their attempt to negotiate the norms of the masculine gaming community while continuing to hold onto a deviant identity of “woman” can be futile, as many of the negative experiences of female gamers can attest. Worse, because they are taking the “middle path,” women who attempt to negotiate two seemingly opposed identities are often harassed or stigmatized by *other* female gamers:

Drawing attention to one's gender is usually what causes the problem. I notice some people don't believe I'm a girl and when I use the mic they claim I've got a guy friend playing for me. All that requires is a webcam and a proud middle finger, really. Commentary is almost always unnecessary. I think the whole gender issue is actually the fault of the female most times. :| We feed any fire caused by the guys and then make our own. Gender is not a factor when it comes to gaming unless you make it a factor, and the only people that can make it a factor are the ones who are holding the controller. (pantsu 2008)

Here we see someone who essentially rejects the norm, refuses to conform or account for her actions as a female gamer, but also expects other women around her to do the same.

Pantsu is arguing for a gaming experience in which “hyphenization” no longer occurs

(Schur 1983:25). Like other instances of hyphenization (e.g., woman-doctor, women athlete, etc.) being a *female gamer* is a stigmatizing category; the usage of a hyphen assumes a woman “not to have the same overall competence for the prized role that a man would have” and is then grouped only with other women, rather than universally (Schur 1983:25). Pantsu’s unstated assumption is that only women are using the hyphenization. As a researcher, I can see some evidence for her claim. The use of “*girl\_gamers*” and “*wow\_ladies*” are semantic examples of the diminishing effect hyphenization in conjunction with accepted gender roles can have. But the stories women have told, through the interviews or in online discussions, put lie to the assumption that only women distinguish themselves as *female gamers*.

This is the third general reaction female gamers have and can often lead to two types of actions: (a) affective projected masculinity or (b) hyper-femininity. The first type of woman has effectively decided that “if I can’t beat them, I’ll join them.” Rather than attempting to negotiate or account for her actions, this woman decides to act and fit in with the males she is playing with by acting similarly to them. Sychopathicfairy, at 27, is such a gamer:

Some girls are quiet don’t want to talk but put they are female in either motto tag or bio. A lot of those end up quitting or aren’t great at the game. Then some girls are like me, loud, gaming with friends, having a good time and decent to great at the game. Then there’s the bitches. They are rude loud and their gaming ability varies. They usually travel with a bunch of guys who are rude as well or their bf<sup>11</sup>. They hide behind a guy or have to host the game. I make it known that I am married. So no foul play. And some of the rude guys I talk trash back when I feel like it or I mute them.

“Trash talking,” or a form of boasting or insulting hyperbole that is often used in competitive environments, is a sport of many of the hyper-masculinized games such as first-person shooters (FPS) like Halo or Gears of War. With each kill made on the

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<sup>11</sup> Boyfriend

opposite team, an insult is expected as that player has been proved to be the lesser gamer. Often these insults are gendered; insults such as “pussy” or “you’re mine, bitch” are fairly common in these types of games. A female gamer who projects masculinity as part of her identity will use those insults or boasts as a way of controlling her environment and the men around her by fitting in. The second type of woman is someone who goes in almost the opposite direction. A hyper-feminized gamer is a woman who constantly announces her gender, through a feminized avatar, through her speech, and sometimes through her actions. This is the type of woman who may even boast about her gender. Pink Bunny of Evil trash talks in this fashion, telling male opponents “they got beat by a girl, how they will probably never get laid, they are too young to say the things that they say and what would their mom think, you probably just mad cause this is the closest you’ll ever get to a girl.”

The reactions of women gamers parallel other minority identities within hostile environments. Downing and Roush’s (1985) model of feminist identity development details five stages of becoming aware of cultural prejudice and moving to act against it. The first stage, called “passive acceptance,” involves a passive acceptance of traditional gender roles and discrimination (Downing and Roush 1985:698). A woman within the first stage either believes that men are superior and possibly believes that traditional gender roles are better for society. She actively denies other ideas or views that contradict her belief. Pantsu’s comments indicate a woman within the first stage. Her insistence that “the whole gender issue is actually the fault of the female” shows a prioritization of male gamers and an indictment of female gamers for making gender an issue to gaming.

The second stage, “revelation,” is caused when a woman encounters one or a series of contradictions that she can no longer ignore (Downing and Roush 1985:698). While some women transition to the second stage suddenly after a specific experience, most women transition more slowly. During this stage, women begin to feel angry and guilty at being taken advantage of. She may see all men as bad and all women as good. The third stage, “embeddedness-emanation,” is where a woman begins to develop a sisterhood and relationships with other women (Downing and Roush 1985:700). A woman may have trouble disconnecting herself from the dominant white male culture because of her embeddedness in other roles, such as worker, mother, wife, or lover, though Downing and Roush (1985) note that woman of color may find this transition easier than white women. Revelation and embeddedness-emanation are the stages in which women begin to start creating and joining communities of other female gamers. “Girl\_gamers” and “wow\_ladies” are havens created for girls and women who are negotiating their identities as *women* within the male culture of gaming.

The fourth stage, “synthesis,” is when a woman begins to integrate the identity changes they have gone through into a “positive and realistic self-concept” (Downing and Roush 1985:702). The final stage, “active commitment,” is when a woman begins to translate her experiences and identity into action for social change. We can see gamers like nojojojo in these two stages. Nojojojo’s attempt to expand the RE5 debate and make others in the community realize that the oppression women gamers feel is the same that minority groups feel is an expression of a woman actively working toward change.

*Passing or Coming Out: Gaming in “Real Life”*

The final choice female gamers face is presentation of self to non-gamers, such as friends, family, co-workers, or other casual acquaintances. This choice is made in two fashions: the choice to “out” themselves as a gamer and the choice in how a woman chooses to react to the common constructions of a “gamer.” The first decision is the harder of the two, as the second almost always follows the first. When making an argument about games, a woman is usually “outing” herself as either a gamer or someone who has intimate knowledge of games first. The tipping point for this choice seems to be somewhere between a woman’s self-confidence (i.e., she feels fully ready to handle any potential stigma) and past experiences such as seeing or hearing about harassment of others or experiencing it herself.

Dreaming of Thorns, for example, is a woman who negotiates her identity carefully; within certain environments she is open and others, such as work, she is not:

I work with mostly stodgy old men, so no : ) But it is something I mention when meeting people, as one of my general hobbies. I've never really had any negative reactions, or suprised reactions because I'm a girl. Although I do tend to hang out with socially-progressive people, I suppose.

Imatree uses gaming in her workplace openly:

[Y]eah I'm a teacher... I bring it up a lot with my students. When GTA 4 came out a few months ago... I asked for a review from my kids. (I teach 9th graders.) I also have used games in my teaching so most of the teachers around know that I game. I teach history so many of the games like Call of Duty and counterstrike and things like that can really tie in well with certain subjects. They love it. It really helps them to understand like WWI and II for example. Call of Duty is a great game to use to explain trench warfare and the different weapons used. Also the 007 games are great for Cold War and many of the games today mirror our histoical reality. Even GTA 4 can be used in a discussion of how popular culture has changed over the years and current events and things.

In both accounts, we see women who are presenting a particular identity depending on the situation and people around them. They carefully assess the environment and how others around them will react to the revelation of the gamer identity before revealing that

information (Cooley 1964; Goffman 1959; Goffman 1963; Mead [1934] 1962). The “gamer” identity is explicitly a backstage identity for Dreaming of Thorns, only used when she is at home or with people she is comfortable with (Goffman 1959). She commits to the part of “non-gamer.” Dreaming of Thorns has “dramaturgical discipline” in controlling her identity and does not make any mistakes in her presentation as a “non-gamer” (Goffman 1959:216). For Imatree, however, gaming becomes a front stage activity when she combines both work and gaming (Goffman 1959).

Like the differing ways women form their own identities as women, the choice she has whether or not to “come out” as a gamer parallels the process of coming out for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people. Even the language I use, “coming out” or “passing” is a deliberate parallel to the experiences of men and women who choose to acknowledge or deny a specific part of their identity. As a research, however, I am not imposing this language from the outside. Both Taryn and Jokersama talked about their work and home lives in these terms and I continued to use this pattern within my paper. Taryn, who self-identifies as a lesbian, and Jokersama most likely learned the discourse of “passing” and “coming out” from growing up in a world where sexuality was becoming a prominent topic on the national stage.

#### *Accounting for Content*

Once that revelation of a “gamer” identity is made, a female gamer must then account for not just *being* a gamer but more specifically liking games that are often described as overly sexualized and violent, and even exploitative of women and people of color. Jokersama cuts straight to the heart of the matter, explaining “video gaming is viewed as an activity of the young, and specifically of a fringe group of youngsters who

don't have 'normal' hobbies. It's viewed as a solitary, antisocial activity." While Jokersama herself sees the attempts at external social control, such as regulations on the sales of games, as largely unnecessary she does not, however, condone all content in video games: "there are things in video games that make me wince - I wonder why people would want to put that in a game, since I view video games as enjoyment and don't personally enjoy rape or robbery or so on." Jokersama is giving a fairly explicit reaction to the types of accounts the gaming industry (and gamers as well) often offer to justify violent or highly sexualized game content. By claiming that "it's just a game," gamers are seeking to normalize the content of video games whether when in reaction to accusations of sexuality, violence or racist content. The implication to this claim is that gamers – always adults -- are able to distinguish reality from fantasy and are not passive cultural dupes; because gamers are discerning, the content is not harmful. To Jokersama these justifications are "unreasonable" because the content cannot be normalized "in terms of the background expectancies of what 'everybody knows'" (Scott and Lyman 1968:54).

While Jokersama clearly sees the framework in which video games are presented, Taryn "buys into" the rhetoric of endangerment and unreason used by moral entrepreneurs. She says that "I think that the ratings system, while not as objective and widely enforced as it should be, is there for a good reason." While Jokersama immediately sets out that she believes that media framing of gaming as an activity of the young is what permeates the culture, by making this defense Taryn has allowed that mainstream view to become center to the debate. The rhetoric used to construct games as

potentially harmful to children has been successful because Taryn supports the rating system and restricting certain games from children.

Onemorefirst, who just “finished my bachelor's in psychology with a minor in women's studies and [I] just started a job as a family counselor, working with families whose children have behaviors that put them at risk of being taken out of the home, aggressive behaviors, inappropriate sexual behaviors, etc” has an interesting view of the violence/sexuality debate and reactions to it. She says:

when i play a game, it is an escape... it sort of takes place in my mind... it is like reading... i can read violence and not actually condone it... or watch a violent movie... i think the appropriateness of the game is dependent on the player's ability to understand how it might affect him or her... and whether or not that person already has trouble controlling violent thoughts or behaviors... how impressionable the person is... I think i am very much aware of the negative effects the game might have...and so sometimes i don't want to play it... i tend not to want to play the game unless i am stressed... or aggravated...it allows me to work through that... if i am in a pleasant mood, i'd rather play something else...and this is the first game that has ever happened with... so in a way, i am sort of studying that... in my own mind... as someone who is interested in that sort of thing

Like Jokersama, she is able to easily reconcile her own identity with the images presented in games and formulate a strong argument as to why women – herself in particular – would enjoy games. All the women I talked with had explanations for how to reconcile the presentation of video games, the images presented within video games and their own particular views of video games. These explanations ranged from the complex, like Onemorefirst's, to the simple like Lostingagoodbook's: “as a rule i avoid excessive violence and sexual content in all forms of entertainment.” The ease at which participants could provide accounts for game content suggests these are justifications that are often used.

### Discussion

My own account for playing games is probably one of the more simple ones; in the end, I am adult who can distinguish fantasy from reality. With that in mind, I – and most likely every other gamer, male or female – play games because I find them *fun*. That is reason enough; the additions of good storylines, good game play, or social gaming are all value added extras to the experience. My own game play and the identity I project online is most likely a mild form of the ‘affective projected masculinity’ type in that my game play is focused on objectives and goals. Focusing on the goals of the game can often only be accomplished by “passing” and showing equal or superior skills to the boys or men I am playing with. I never take part in trash talk and prefer to work cooperatively toward goals in games rather than competitively. My online community presence is also relatively low-key and often non-gendered. These are deliberate choices that I made, not just in my identity as a *gamer*, but also my identities as a potential employee, as an academic, and as a student of sociology.

Our choices as gamers – or *female* gamers, even – are bounded by the constructions of gaming and gamers. The framing of video games and video game players as childlike, adolescent, and anti-social has allowed for moral entrepreneurs (Becker 1963) such as Jack Thompson to push their own agenda upon the mainstream public. These entrepreneurs are aided by mainstream media and their portrayals of gamers as mostly adolescent and male. Portrayals of adult gamers are almost unanimously portrayals of men who are shown as “not grown up,” “irresponsible,” or otherwise deviant.

For gamers, this framing means choosing community or individual identities that align with the wider cultural view (i.e., passing) or choosing identities that reject the

media constructions (i.e., coming out). The separation of choices creates an internal division within the gaming communities between the two sides. These divisions, such as we see in the “girl\_gamers” community serve to push out dissenters that will not conform to the line that the gaming community wishes to present to the public (i.e., games are not harmful). The creation of norms and values of a gaming community is not simply centered on social control; one of the primary functions of a community is to explore identity expression and shared meanings.

The community is a perfect respite for both the expressive and the private gamer because “we are more or less unconsciously seeing ourselves as others see us. We are unconsciously addressing ourselves as other address us; in the way as the sparrow takes up the note of the canary we pick up the dialects about us” (Mead [1934] 1962:68).

Gaming communities allow women a chance to express themselves, explore their own identity in ways where “gender is an issue in gaming” or “that gaming is an issue to my gender” are absent (etoilepb 2008). Or, if not completely absent, the communities offer female gamers a chance to explore their own identities in safe spaces with others who are also taking on that role and creating meaning for themselves. The identity of “female gamer” in the context of a gaming community becomes a collaborative effort to create a shared identity and meaning.

These communities are especially good for creating a shared meaning; Mead describes all communication as coming from a “set of symbols answering to certain content which is measurably identical in the experience of the different individuals. If there is to be communication as such the symbol has to mean the same thing to all individuals involved” (Mead 1967:54). Female-oriented gaming communities give

female gamers a chance to negotiate those shared meanings about themselves with other people with whom they share two key characteristics: gender and love of games. Because each individual in the community has those two standpoints in common, the creation of a significant symbol and the shared meaning behind that symbol becomes much easier. The female gamers are then able to discuss not only the meaning behind the games (e.g., narratives, characters, etc.) but also their own position and status within gaming society and the greater society as a whole.

Those general consensuses of what a “game” is, or shared experiences of being “female,” provide a baseline so that the symbol (e.g., the game itself) can be discussed with a sense of shared syntax. Gaming communities also provide a sense of pragmatics, or the relation of signs and their effects, on those who use them. We can see this effect simply in the discussions of the symbols used *inside* the games and begin to get an idea why women quietly support an economy that objectifies, sexualizes, and often trivializes them and their voices even to the extent that they are “often offended by stupid woman characters in games. I think that's most of my problem: so many games are targeted solely at men!” (Iyea 2008). Women use these communities not only to share and discuss the *current* meaning behind the shared symbols but also to *transform* that meaning.

The transformation of a hyper-sexualized or submissive female character in a video game is a primary concern of many adult female gamers; “such characters appear to enhance pleasure for a number of these women. Several of the power gamers indicated that they purposefully choose and create characters that are feminine and sexy as well as strong” (Royse et al. 2007:564). In this case, the women use the communities to repossess that representation and remake a caricature into a *character*. Lara Croft, from

Tomb Raider is a character in which many women discuss as both a sexist symbol (i.e., through Lara's unrealistic appearance) and a symbol of empowerment for women (Jansz and Martis 2007; Mikula 2004).

Rather than being passive consumers, gaming fandom encourages fans to take the source media and make it their own, either through discussion, through fanworks (e.g., fanfiction, fanart, fanvideos, etc.), or other types of shared collaboration that simply happen during the social playing of the game. Within a social setting, few games have a linear storyline or linear characters or linear objectives; the sheer act of *sharing* the game, whether through friends with a player in the living room or through online play, changes the game each time a gamer plays it. Games are not interacted with just by one player, but many, and the meanings each player takes and shares with the group will be different. Those different interpretations and meanings then evolve within the group consciousness to create a new experience each time the game is played, even if the game itself never truly changes.

Negotiating an identity through a sense of community solidarity also helps women form the identity they wish to express as an individual. The choices a woman makes, (e.g., to "out" herself or to "pass") are related to the role in which a woman chooses to play when she decides to "play" as a "gamer" (Goffman 1959; Goffman 1963). That "play" is then recreated within the female gaming communities, then the larger gaming community, and eventually within the wider constructions of the gaming identity.

Female gamers tend to fall specifically into those two lines of thought just as the rest of the gaming community at large does. Some recognize the irony of consuming a

media that trivializes women but they adamantly protect the games that they love from the accusations of being “toys” or being for “men only” while using the justification that “it’s just a *game*” as an account for the content of the game. Female gamers build communities devoted to specific games and to the celebration of themselves as female gamers. They actively produce content based on these games, from written fanfiction to video machinimas or fan videos. Not only because, as Taryn says, “the challenge, and the sense of accomplishment. Succeeding at the level objective was definitely an enjoyable feeling,” but also because female fans have built a community to share these games. By sharing and creating communities for themselves, adult female video game players have managed to break down all the stereotypes of who a “gamer” is.

This transformation, and our commitment as academics to researching that change, is important for two reasons. Our society is becoming increasingly more technologically literate. This means more interaction is happening in virtual reality. When we talk about this change in our society, generally we mean only the internet in the sense of chat rooms and web browsing. Games, like WoW, are also part of the technological change we are undergoing. As researchers, we have a duty to examine all aspects of the societal shift; this includes games and how gamers use gaming technology. Our research, such as this study, is part of a growing literature base that details the place of technology in our everyday lives and the new ways people learn and interact because of that technology. Second, because female gamers is a feminist issue. I was unable to include any power analyses of communities in terms of class and race in this paper because I had no way of knowing the race or gender of community participants beyond what they may have included in their profiles. Anecdotally, I have noticed that women

(and the few men who joined “girl\_gamers”) are more comfortable putting their sexuality – or at least their relationship status (e.g., single, married, committed, etc.) on profiles than they are giving race or class. While I could not include any analyses of community interactions that looked at intersectionality (Collins [1993] 2004), the intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality are apparent in every discussion and exchange that happens. Nojojojo’s framing of the RE5 is intersectional, the use of the language of sexuality and coming out is intersectional and the ways that women negotiate those identities and discourses is an important next research step that we should take.

The next step for female gamers is much simpler than the next step for researchers. Women are moving toward the mainstream and making their presence felt; women are now beginning to push for a reconstruction of the “gamer” identity. Within in the whole gaming community, the involvement of women as gamers is marginalized and, for these women, that is their next step: revolutionizing the stereotypes within *and* outside the gaming industry through working in the gaming industry, speaking out in the media, and even doing as I have done: creating their own research.

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## SIUC HSC FORM A

REQUEST FOR APPROVAL TO CONDUCT RESEARCH ACTIVITIES  
INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

## CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

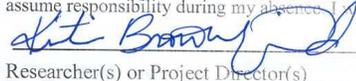
By making this application, I certify that I have read and understand the University's policies and procedures governing research activities involving human subjects. I agree to comply with the letter and spirit of those policies. I acknowledge my obligation to:

1. Accept responsibility for the research described, including work by students under my direction.
2. Obtain written approval from the Human Subjects Committee of any changes from the originally approved protocol **BEFORE** implementing those changes.
3. Retain signed consent forms in a secure location separate from the data for at least **three** years after the completion of the research.
4. Immediately report any adverse effects of the study on the subjects to the Chairperson of the Human Subjects Committee, SIUC, Carbondale, Illinois - 618-453-4533 and to the Director of the Office of Research Development and Administration, SIUC.  
Phone 618-453-4531. E-mail: [siuhsc@siu.edu](mailto:siuhsc@siu.edu)

**Project Title**

Gamer Girls: Video Games and the Women Who Love them

RESEARCH ADVISOR'S ASSURANCE: My signature on this application certifies that the student is knowledgeable about the regulations and policies governing research with human subjects. I am aware of my obligations stated on Form A and will be available to supervise the research. When on sabbatical leave or vacation, I will arrange for an alternate faculty sponsor to assume responsibility during my absence. I will advise the Human Subjects Committee by letter of such arrangements.

  
Researcher(s) or Project Director(s)

01/15/2008  
Date

Please print or type name below signature.

KRISTI BROWNFIELD



1/15/08  
Date

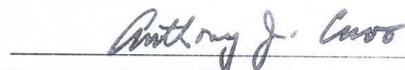
Researcher's Advisor (required for all student projects)

Please print or type name below signature.

Jennifer Dunn

The request submitted by the above-named researcher(s) was approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee.

**This approval is valid for one year from the review date. Researchers must request an extension to continue the research after that date. This approval form must be included in all Master's theses/research papers and Doctoral dissertations involving human subjects that are submitted to the Graduate School.**



2-4-08

Chairperson, Southern Illinois University Human Subjects Committee

Date

VITA

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Games and Gamers: Adult Female Gamers and Identity Display

Major Professor: Jennifer Dunn