

# THE POLITICS OF GAMERS: IDENTITY AND MASCULINITY IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL MEDIA

BY

MEGAN AMBER CONDIS

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Stephanie Foote, Co-Chair  
Professor Lisa Nakamura, Co-Chair, University of Michigan  
Associate Professor Jose Capino  
Associate Professor Spencer Schaffner

## **ABSTRACT**

Contrary to the popular belief that the Internet is a bodiless utopian space, I argue that gender is actually the most important tool of social organization in video game culture. I gather an archive that includes games, novels and films about gamers, press releases made by game developers, and blog and forum posts made by players to reveal how the gaming subculture rewards masculine presentations that emphasize control over the self, the environment, technology, and the effeminate “other.” On the other hand, women and queer gamers often find themselves occupying unexpected positions and forming strategic alliances with game producers to carve out spaces of their own on the masculinized virtual frontier. As gaming becomes embedded within in mainstream culture, the gendered system of self-representation enacted by gamers will shape popular ideas about what kinds of bodies are thought to be competent, legitimate actors.

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## **INTRODUCTION: THE GAMIFICATION OF GENDER**

This dissertation project examines the practices and rhetorics of hardcore online gamers. I am especially interested in their complex and contradictory views regarding the politics of the body. By mapping the various contours and contradictions therein, we can create a model of how concepts like gender, sexuality, and race can be stretched and reshaped to fit various subcultural contexts. These partially new versions of embodied ideologies mostly function to import familiar power dynamics into these subcultural spaces. However, occasionally these models become so warped as they are stretched over the contours of that space that they become vulnerable. It is in these corners of stress and flexibility, where hierarchy meets anarchy on the virtual playfields of online gaming culture, that this dissertation was born.

Scholars have long studied how gendered ideologies are filtered through and produced by the logics of certain cultural institutions like the law, the education system, and scientific discourse. I, in turn, study how gender politics are being filtered through/produced by the logic of video games as it is explicated and enacted by participants in gamer culture. In doing so, I will illustrate some of the game-like principles that operate in all gender performances. This insight could not come at a better time, as the video game industry is currently “one of the fastest growing sectors in the U. S. economy” (Entertainment Software Association); it is currently “more than twice the size of the recorded-music industry, nearly a quarter more than the magazine business and about three-fifths the size of the film industry, counting DVD sales as well as box-office receipts” (“All the World’s a Game”). Furthermore many other industries are looking to digital “gamification” to create new tools for interacting with customers, driving research and development, and training employees. For example, David Edery and Ethan Mollick describe how video games are used to market new products, gather data about potential

customers, and commodify the labor of loyal fans while Byron Reeves and J. Leighton Reed write about how businesses can use games to improve their hiring practices, facilitate cooperation, and drive worker productivity. Meanwhile, James Paul Gee and Kurt Squire advocate for the use of video games and virtual worlds in the classroom, and Mary Flanagan and Ian Bogost (*Persuasive Games*) describe how games can be used by activists and politicians to persuade audiences and motivate them to take action for a particular cause. Jane McGonigal and Daren C. Brabham imagine a future when the collective intelligence of gamers might be used to solve complex problems, as when, for example, players of the online game Foldit, which has been described as being “like *Tetris* on steroids,” were able to figure out “the structure of an enzyme that AIDS-like viruses use for reproduction,” a puzzle that “has baffled scientists for more than a decade” (Husted).<sup>1</sup> In a culture that is increasingly saturated in the language and the logics of gaming, a culture that is beginning to put the power of gaming to work on a diverse set of problems, we might ask ourselves: what new insight might be gained by imagining gender itself as a kind of Massively-Multiplayer On (and Off)line Role Playing Game, one featuring both cooperative and competitive modes, one that is constantly updated and patched to remain popular and relevant? What kinds of gendered expectations are built into the games that we are using across such a diverse set of contexts? And how might the gamified logics of gender be “hacked” or “exploited” by those players who are frustrated with the status quo?

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<sup>1</sup> For more on gamification as a tool used by corporations for marketing and employee training, see: Werbach, Bogost, *How to Do Things with Video Games*, Burke, and Stanfil and Condis. For gamification in education, see Gee, Kapp, Squire, Sheldon, and Steinkuehler, Squire, and Barab. For gamification in politics and activism, see Galloway. For the gamification of the labor of fans, see Stanfill and Condis.



## **Gender, Performativity, and Play**

In 1990 Judith Butler used an exploration of the subcultural practices of drag performers to illustrate an important truth about how gender works in the broader culture. Butler argues that gender is not a natural biological property of the body but rather exists as a set of “acts, gestures, and desire[s]” which “produce the effect of an internal core or substance... on the surface of the body” (185).

Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (186)

Drag performers, Butler argues, make the constructed nature of all gendered performances visible by exaggerating and thus highlighting the constructedness of their performances, reveling in the supposed “contradictions” of their embodied presentations. Drag

mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity....

The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities. (186-187)

In fact, Butler writes,

in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency. Indeed, part of the pleasure the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender

denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity. (187-188)

In other words, the performative nature of drag acts as a lens through which we can come to understand the constructedness of all gendered identities.

Drag performers are playing with gendered identities and their play provides us with an insight into the gendered ideologies of the broader culture. As I will argue here, participants in the gaming subculture make a similar move, just in the opposite direction. Gamers look for games in every system they encounter, including that of gender and sexuality and the various hierarchies of power built thereon. Thus, the field of gendered and sexualized (and raced and classed) identities becomes one of many playing fields, a space to be inhabited strategically.

### **Brave New (Virtual) Worlds: Speculating about the Status of the Body in a Digital Environment**

This argument runs contrary to that of many academics and early adopters of Internet technology, who predicted that the advent of virtual worlds such as those found in video games and MMORPGs would mark the end of gender (and even of the body) as we know it. These “techno-utopians” (Turner 208) argued that, as more and more of our daily lives came to be conducted online rather than in person, the importance of embodiment as a marker of identity (and thus the various forms of discrimination that have arisen around embodied differences) would fade away, leaving a society run as a pure and objectively fair meritocracy in its wake. Online, people would be judged according to their helpfulness, their intelligence, and their personality, the content of their character and not the color of their skin or the configuration of their genitals.

The cyber dreams of the techno-utopians are framed as “meat-free dreams,” so much so that “cyberculture’s aficionados often appear to have forgotten that they have bodies at all” (Adam 159). As posthumanist scholar Allucqu   Roseanne Stone put it, “the discourse of visionary virtual world builders is rife with images of imaginal bodies freed from the constraints that flesh imposes. Cyberspace developers foresee a time when they will be able to forget about the body” (Stone 525). In fact, their belief that the virtual world is a world freed from the constraints of the physical body is, in no small part, the way in which technophiles provide evidence for their claim that the virtual and the real are or can be separated in the first place. This claim is usually couched in hopeful terms, evoked to explain how the new social order created online will be free of the scourges of racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism.

In the mid-to-late-1990s, techno-utopian rhetoric sang the praises of the disembodied web. The “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” (written by John Barlow, one of the founders of the aptly named Electronic Frontier Foundation) contains a passage outlining the positive political consequences that are assumed to follow from the creation of a society without bodies:

We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth....

Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion. We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonweal, our governance will emerge. Our identities may be distributed across many of your jurisdictions. The only law that all our constituent cultures would generally recognize is the Golden Rule. (Barlow)

Academic and critic Howard Rheingold also praised the web as level playing field, writing that, on the Internet,

race, gender, age, national origin, and physical appearance are not apparent unless a person wants to make such characteristics public.... People whose physical handicaps make it difficult to form new friendships find that virtual communities treat them as they always wanted to be treated—as thinkers and transmitters of idea and feeling beings, not carnal vessels with a certain appearance and way of walking and talking (or not walking and talking). (Rheingold 26).

According to this logic, the primary draw of virtual reality is the power that it gives users to choose to discard the body altogether. This will “level the playing field” of social interaction, it is thought, as discrimination on the basis of bodily traits will be impossible when users are unable to see the actual bodies of those with whom they are interacting.

Other optimistic early adopters emphasized the possibilities of the internet as a space of free play where categories like gender and race could lose their sting as vectors for the distribution of power and resources and be reborn as the harmless stuff of postmodern identity pastiche. In a virtual world where one can craft any type of appearance they like (and as many different appearances as they like), these theorists posited, categories like gender and race could exist free of cultural baggage and function purely as modes of individual expression. For example, in *Life on the Screen: Identity in the age of the Internet*, Sherry Turkle posits that “the Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life. In its virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create” (180). She writes about the possibilities afforded by virtual gender swapping and for the creation of new genders and null-genders which, she argues, “serve as a form of

consciousness-raising about gender issues” (214) by enabling a new dialogue around the subject of identity, self-presentation, and the establishment of social and political norms in the new communities being formed online. And, as Lisa Nakamura describes in *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*, ordinary users, role players in the earliest text-based MUDs and MOOs,<sup>2</sup> thought of racial identity as “a matter of aesthetics, or finding the color that you like, rather than as a matter of ethnic identity or shared cultural referents. This fantasy of skin color divorced from politics, oppression, or racism seems to also celebrate it as infinitely changeable and customizable: as entirely elective as well as apolitical” (53). According to this logic, race and gender are emptied of any broader cultural significance and transformed into mere accessories that one can try on for a while and then discard once they become tiresome.

Feminist and posthumanist theorist Donna Haraway also had big hopes for the possibilities for progressive politics enabled by technology. However, her vision of a possible techno-utopia was a little more nuanced than the ones described above. Rather than imagining a world in which race and gender have ceased to exist or ceased to be relevant nodes in the circuits of political power, Haraway imagines a “cyborg” utopia in which the always-already liminal nature of identity is made painstakingly apparently in the increasingly harmonious union of human and machine. She writes,

The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world... it is oppositional, utopian.... my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work. (292)

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<sup>2</sup> Text-based chat room-esque virtual worlds that were common in the early days of the Internet. MUD stands for “Multi-User Dungeon” (or later, Multi-User Domain) and MOO stands for “MUD, Object Oriented” (or a MUD with a persistent object database) (Rae, 135).

This political work is accomplished through the “fraying of identities” (297) and the destruction of binary dualisms such as “the dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized” (302). Haraway claims that “cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia” (316). In other words, the instability of identity that is created in the human/machine hybrid of the virtual world avatar could possibly dislodge some of the inherited “truths” about gender as an innate biological characteristic, thereby opening the door to new and more inclusive social structures.

Unfortunately, as anyone who has spent much time in a YouTube comments section, a *Call of Duty* pre-game lobby, or the *League of Legends* ranked solo queue knows, none of these utopian dreams have come to pass. We did not come to disregard the body nor did we transform it into a meaningless fashion accessory. We did not break away from the binary logics that govern our understanding of the body; rather we imported them into the digital landscape, reducing the brave new world of the Internet into one resembling the familiar old one. In part, this development reflects the politics of the era in which Internet usage first became popular among non-specialist users. As Lisa Nakamura writes in *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, in the early 1990s, the rise of neoliberal politics and post-feminist discourse had a chilling effect on discussions of social justice around issues of race and gender. And, as with other neoliberal systems, this veil of hoped-for meritocracy promised by a “meat-free” Internet actually privileged white male middle class subjects over all others. In particular, as scholars like Mary Flanagan, Lisa Nakamura, Anne Balsamo, and Susan Bordo have pointed out, the so-called “bodiless” dwellers of the utopian Internet came to be read as straight white males by default.

Thus, those who experienced racial or gender discrimination online were blamed for their own abuse. After all, if they didn't want to be harassed, they could simply choose to pass as a member of the dominant class. By "outing" themselves as female or black or queer online, they were said to invite oppression by inviting the unwelcome body back into online space.

However, as ideologies of gender and race were interpreted and deployed in the subcultural communities organized around the Internet and online gaming, their adaptation into the new formats required by these spaces was not always perfect. As they warped and shifted according to the tenets of the virtual worlds inhabited by gamers, new wrinkles open up within gendered and racialized discourses that may, in turn, create the opportunity for new insights into the nature of the game of gender. Over the course of the next four chapters, I will explore how gamers came to understand embodied identity online in both expected and unexpected ways through the logics of gaming.

### **Gender and Gaming: A Review of the Literature**

There is a substantial body of literature that has developed around questions of privilege, identity, and othering in play, beginning with studies of homophobia and sexism in the world of sports,<sup>3</sup> where "hegemonic masculinity is reproduced and defined" (Anderson 860) through displays of physical prowess and the rejection of that which is perceived as feminine, and continuing with investigations into why video game culture was skewed for so long towards a straight white male demographic to the exclusion of other potential markets<sup>4</sup>. Some of the earliest works in this genre like the edited collection from Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* and Sheri Graner Ray's *Gender*

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Anderson, Bryson, Clarke, Hekma, Messner, Pascoe, and Pronger.

<sup>4</sup> See Bertozzi, Burrill, Cassell and Jenkins, Christensen, Ray, Shaw, and Taylor.

*Inclusive Game Design: Expanding the Market* tried to explain why certain demographic groups like women and girls haven't, until very recently, played electronic video games in the same numbers as boys (although current numbers from the Entertainment Software Association show that almost half of all players of digital games today are women) by looking at game *content*. They concluded that the rules of most video games require players to carry out "masculine" actions of aggression (Cassell and Jenkins 8-9, Ray 37-50) when most female players would prefer games build around "relating and cooperating with others" (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 55), and focusing on "social relations" (Jenkins 289-290, Ray 51-65). Many of these early studies also argue that games (and their attending marketing materials) are "without positive representations of women" (Cassell and Jenkins 10)<sup>5</sup> or the GLBTQ community (Schröder, 2008), and that programmers need to create a more diverse stable of characters if they hope to attract these underrepresented groups to gaming.

However, although this early work on the subject was invaluable for establishing a starting point for feminist and queer critiques of video game culture, it did have a tendency to rely on essentialist assumptions about gender and sexuality. For example, these authors assume that feminine and masculine approaches to play are distinct and are easily mapped onto female and male bodies. Likewise, they assume that players with female bodies require video games that feature female avatars crafted in a particular style (i.e. not sexualized for the male gaze) to fully identify with their avatar. In these essays, the content of the game is assumed to be dictating to the player what gender and sexuality mean in the context of the game world. The player is constructed as a passive media consumer, and their ability to interpret or shape the cultural narratives being produced by the game is downplayed or ignored.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Miller and Summers, Sherman, and Ray.



My project follows a different approach to feminist and queer video game studies: one that takes a more complex, more player-centered look at how gender and sexuality are constructed in games. This approach is often used by scholars interested in MMORPGs, where players create their own avatars and act out their own narratives in a persistent game world (for example, T. L. Taylor and Lina Eklund's work on *World of Warcraft*). They use an ethnographic methodology to explain how gamers, particularly those that are considered "an anomaly" (Taylor 22) by game makers such as women and queer gamers, *actually use* the tools afforded to them by games to derive pleasure from them rather than assuming that the games will dictate their experience to them. This approach allows for an acknowledgment of the power of players to *use* content to craft *their own* interpretations of gender and sexuality within the game world (Eklund).

And yet, my work differs from that described above in that it does not focus predominantly on the relationship between the player and her avatar (or, for that matter, the rest of the game's content). Such an approach risks implicitly recreating the narrative of the simplistic, adversarial relationship between corporations and media producers, who offer a limited number of tools for character creation and are therefore blameworthy for failing to cultivate women as a potential gaming demographic, and users, who are pluckily finding ways to create enjoyable media experiences with those limited tools (Schott and Horrel). Rather than rehashing this oft-told story about convergence culture, this work focuses on how *players* are working *both together and against one another* to determine who can lay claim to the title of "gamer" while media producers sit back and watch, gathering data and trying to figure out which faction of the community to get behind to maximize profits. To study this phenomenon, it was necessary to trace the types of rhetorical appeals made by gamers when they argue for the

inclusion or exclusion of certain groups. These arguments take place across a number of formats, from forum posts to Internet memes to YouTube videos. They even show up in commercial works of fiction and Hollywood films about (and marketed to) gamers. I also study the “official” discourse of game companies as they try to navigate a course through these arguments being conducted by their fans.

### **The Problem of Ports: Adapting Gender Identity to Cyberspace**

If gamers think of gender as a system that functions like a massively multiplayer on (and off)line role playing video game, then to understand how they think about embodiment, we must first understand how they think about games. I propose that there are three game design components that are key to understanding how gender functions in this subculture: lore, mechanics, and emergent dynamics.

A game’s lore often precedes it in the minds of players; it may be communicated to the player via the game itself, but it is also often found in peripheral texts such as game manuals, official websites, comic books, movie adaptations, animated television shows, novelizations, etcetera. Then the mechanics are discovered over the course of play, while emergent dynamics typically take weeks, months, or even years to be discovered. I will introduce these aspects of the game of gender in the same manner.

Chapter 1 takes a look at the “lore” that lies behind gamer culture’s gender relations. To gamers, “lore” refers to the world-building backstory that exists before and around the events depicted in a particular game.<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of the “game of gender” played by participants in video game culture, the lore that orders the world is the story of the material and historical conditions that lead to the perception that computers and video games were masculine pursuits.

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<sup>6</sup> See the popular YouTube channel *Lore in a Minute* for examples (Lore).

Chapter 1 looks at how this history came to be narrated through popular texts like Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*, a novel about gamers whose knowledge of a "geeky canon" of the movies, television shows, games, and comics beloved by geeks and nerds leads them to expect a performance of the gamer identity to line up with a performance of white maleness, no matter what kind of body they might wear in the physical world.

Chapters 2 and 3 describe two of the game mechanics which define how the game of gender is played online. Chapter 2 examines trolling, a game of emotional manipulation in which the "winner" is the one who can maintain an air of cool rationality in the face of provocation. Both the form and the content of this game are organized around gendered tropes, making trolling into a kind of masculinity contest. Chapter 3, on the other hand, looks at the Internet memes that circulate around femininity in the gaming world. Participating in meme culture is like playing a language puzzle or a riddle game. Players demonstrate that they are "in the know" by constructing memes that adhere to the rules and codes of the subculture in which they are embedded. These memes help gamers who are invested in the masculine dominance of online spaces to make sense of the ever-growing population of female gamers by recasting them as feminine stereotypes like the inexperienced novice, the nurturing support, or the castrating whore.

As Chapters 1-3 demonstrate, despite the supposedly "disembodied" nature of life online, performances of masculinity are still afforded privileged status in gamer culture. Gamers are expected to conform or "pass" as a stylized masculine subject (enacted via a textual performance) or face the consequence of social ostracization. However, because the "port"<sup>7</sup> or

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<sup>7</sup> "Porting" refers to the process of converting software so that it can run on a different machine from the one it was initially designed to be used on.

the adaptation of stereotypical masculine tropes from the context of the physical world into the context of a virtual world is not and can never be perfect, women and queer gamers are increasingly finding effective emergent dynamics in the game of gender. Emergent game dynamics are strategies, tactics, and practices that game developers didn't originally anticipate when they were building the game but which emerged organically from the player community. Often, these practices enable players to take a game in entirely new and unplanned directions. Occasionally, as in the case of hackers and exploiters, they enable gamers to "break" the game or to engage in a kind of play that circumvents the game's challenges or enables them to sidestep certain obstacles. Chapters 3 and 4 look at some of the emergent dynamics that are popping up in the game of gender online.

In Chapter 3, for example, I look at examples of countermemes created to "talk back" to the dominant strain of gender discourse within gamer culture while simultaneously signaling the "in-group" status of the meme's creator through their use of the tropes of Internet culture. This enables users to signal their authenticity and their knowledge of the social norms of their group even as they challenge those same social norms. And in Chapter 4, I look at how female and queer gamers are turning the assumption that Triple-A video games can only be profitable if they appeal exclusively to a straight white adolescent male demographic on its head. By demanding representation in games like *Mass Effect*, *Dragon Age*, and *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, and by fighting back against misogyny in both the gaming culture and the gaming industry, these gamers are "hacking" the cultural code of gendered performance. Their example suggests that even the most pervasive, most long-lived, most deeply engrained ideologies can be cracked through a combination of flexible tactics and collective action.

## Thinking Like a Gamer

In addition to helping readers better understand the ins and outs of the gaming subculture, this project will also teach them how to think like a gamer. My account encourages scholars of gender and women's studies to think about how *everyone* might gamify gender at various times in their lives, both on and offline. It will also enable game designers and those who work in the tech industry to think about how the many various types of gamification that we encounter across all aspects of life might have, purposefully or not, been developed in ways that are marked by gender. This is one of the important tasks of the digital humanities; in addition to developing new hardware and software for use in humanities fields (including, often, digital games), scholars need to deploy their own critiques of those tools. We need to ask ourselves: in the rush to gamify our world, might we accidentally be excluding some from the brave new (virtual) worlds we are creating?

## CHAPTER 1

### WHO IS THE ULTIMATE GAMER?: *READY PLAYER ONE* AND THE GEEKY

#### “CANON”<sup>8</sup>

Digital games have been growing exponentially in popularity, turning up in the living rooms and on the computers and smart phones of an increasingly diverse group of media consumers (Bangeman). But not everyone who plays digital games is a “gamer.” Gamers are members of a specific subculture with its own lingo, its own fashions and affectations, and its own complex social structures and hierarchies (see Hebdige). Gamers are often thought of in the tech world as media-savvy tastemakers, early adopters who can be studied by corporations looking to predict which new products will spread beyond the subculture and into widespread, mainstream popularity. They are courted as viable niche market that is now big enough to begin pursuing via specialized products intelligible only to the already initiated (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 23). This means that gamers are now being targeted as the audience for new products and narratives, derived from science fiction, fantasy, and cyberpunk, that take for granted its readers’ familiarity with the codes that define gamer culture and feature characters whose adventures take place as much inside of computer games as outside of them.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Portions of this paper are forthcoming in 2016 from the *Journal of Modern Literature*, Indiana University Press. The forthcoming article will be titled “Playing the Game of Literature: *Ready Player One*, the Ludic Novel, and the Geeky ‘Canon’ of White Masculinity.”

<sup>9</sup> Other examples of this new genre of gamer literature include Neal Stephenson’s 2011 *REAMDE*, Cory Doctorow’s 2010 *For the Win*, and Ben “Yahtzee” Croshaw’s 2010 *Mogworld*.

*Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline (2011) is one such work, set in a dystopian future that has been devastated by an “ongoing energy crisis,” “catastrophic climate change.... Widespread famine, poverty, and disease” and “half a dozen wars” (1). To escape from this bleak state of affairs, Americans turned away from frightening geopolitical realities and sought solace in the OASIS, the “Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation” (48), “a massively multiplayer online game that... gradually evolved into the globally networked virtual reality most of humanity now used on a daily basis” (1).

The OASIS was dreamed up by a brilliant but reclusive video game designer named James Halliday, co-founder of the software company Gregarious Simulations Systems. When Halliday passed away, he left behind no biological heirs. However, on the date of his death, he released a video challenging the entire population of the OASIS to find his Easter egg (a surprise hidden deep within the game, see Montfort and Bogost 59-61). The first person to find the egg would become the inheritor of Halliday’s vast fortune and the new head of Gregarious Simulations Systems. To help get his millions of fans started, Halliday released a lengthy diary chronicling his various pop culture obsessions as a clue to the kind of knowledge players would need to solve his puzzle. His hope, according to his surviving former business partner, Ogden Morrow, was to get “everyone to share his obsessions, to love the same things he loved” (122). And, true to his wishes, the instant the contest was announced

a new subculture was born, composed of the millions of people who now devoted every free moment of their lives to searching for Halliday’s egg. At first, these individuals were known simply as “egg hunters,” but this was quickly truncated to the nickname “gunters” (8).

The central character of the novel, Wade Watts, (OASIS user name: Parzival) is one such gunter, a dedicated researcher who spends every spare second outside of his high school classes searching for clues about the location of the Easter egg, which is tucked away behind three hidden gates that can only be opened by three hidden keys.

Arrayed against the gunters are the employees of a “global communications conglomerate” called “Innovative Online Industries” or “IOI (pronounced *eye-oh-eye*)” (33). As Wade describes it,

a large portion of IOI’s business centered around providing access to the OASIS and on selling goods and services inside it. For this reason, IOI had attempted several hostile takeovers of Gregarious Simulations Systems, all of which had failed. Now they were trying to seize control of GSS by exploiting a loophole in Halliday’s will (33).

Gunters like Wade think that IOI’s corporately-funded efforts to find the egg and hinder individual searchers violate the spirit of Halliday’s game, and furthermore, they fear the changes to the OASIS’s (somewhat) user-friendly business model that an IOI takeover would undoubtedly entail. And so, although Wade and his fellow gunters initially resist working together as a team, they ultimately pool their collected knowledge, enabling Wade to beat IOI’s army of employee egg hunters and preserve Halliday’s vision for the OASIS.

That collected, collective knowledge (and the way it is cataloged and narrated by Cline) is the focus of this chapter. Cline’s novel appeals to a specific group of readers—those who are a part of the digital gaming subculture—by claiming to have authoritatively captured the image of that culture. This claim takes the form of a narrative with encyclopedic scope (Mendelson 1267-1268), one that makes reference to a huge number of other texts that swirl around the



gamer subculture, including everything from video games to fiction to film and television to comics.

Edward Mendelson defines an encyclopedic author as one whose work attends to the whole social and linguistic range of the nation, who makes use of all the literary styles and conventions known to his countrymen, whose dialect often becomes established as the national language, who takes his place as the national poet or national classic (1268).

They “attempt to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets that knowledge” (1269). For example, Mendelson’s list of encyclopedic works include Dante’s *Commedia*, Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, Goethe’s *Faust*, Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*<sup>10</sup> (1267). Although *Ready Player One* does not aspire to contain an encyclopedic account of a national identity, I argue that it performs a similar function for a subcultural one. It is an encyclopedic narrative of the Nation of Nerds. And Cline is positioning himself as one of their “national poets” or spokesmen.<sup>11</sup> Through the professorial

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<sup>10</sup> For more on the connection between geek culture and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, see my essay “Failure to Launch: Not-So-Superheroes in *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Superfolks* in *The Journal of Popular Culture* (Condis).

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in the wake of *Ready Player One*, Cline is already hard at work positioning himself as a kind of geek icon. As of this writing he has already sold the movie rights to his new, as yet to be completed book project, “Armada,” which is being described in the press as “the ultimate wish fulfillment to every videogame fan on the planet” (McNary and Sneider). It was also recently announced that Cline will be hosting a “wish-fulfillment” reality tv show program

character James Halliday, Cline organizes the collected knowledge of this nation into an alternative literary canon, a pop culture canon by and for gamers. Halliday's egg hunt, and thus, Cline's novel serve as a kind of classroom wherein student-readers are to learn about the origins of gamer culture, test their knowledge, and prove their geeky credentials through their mastery of the texts Cline identifies as foundational to gamers.

Part of this mastery includes not just knowing *about* the texts in question but also knowing *how to read* those texts, how to organize and interpret them (Bérubé 33). In the case of *Ready Player One*, the preferred orientation of the reader to the text is not one of critical distance.<sup>12</sup> Rather, readers are encouraged to identify closely with the texts, to become absorbed in them as thoroughly as possible. To read, according to Cline's methodology, is to "play the game" of the text, to enter into the role of the text's main character and walk through the world of the text *as* that character, looking out from his eyes, seeing the world as he sees it, taking the actions that he takes and feeling what he feels. One then proves they have read and understood by *performing* the text in their own lives, thereby extending the identification that took place when the text was consumed by re-enacting it. Familiarity with and conformity to the

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aimed at geeks, nerds, and fans of all types called *Geek Out*. On the show, Cline will "send ultimate super-fans to the zenith of their obsession, be it music, video games, TV series, comic books or the like." (Marechal) As the celebrity host, Cline is positioned as a sort of Halliday-esque figure, a geeky authority who has the power to bestow gifts on those who prove their worthiness by demonstrating their fannish bona fides.

<sup>12</sup> In fact, as we shall see in Chapter 2, those who closely read and critique video games like feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian are often the victims of trolling and harassment campaigns. For more, see Condis, "Trolling Gender Trouble."

performative codes that are inscribed within the texts Cline archives (and therefore, within *Ready Player One*, which functions as a kind of master narrative embodying the most common features of all of these texts) becomes synonymous with one's membership in and one's place within the hierarchy of that subcultural community. In this way, gamer culture reproduces itself (Guillory 6) as each new initiate is brought into the fold only when they demonstrate their ability to fit in.

I further argue that the performative codes identified and reinscribed by Cline that define gamer culture are tightly tied to the performative codes used to define categories of gender and race. I refer here to the principle of "performativity" as theorized by Judith Butler. Butler reveals the constructedness of categories that can seem to be so natural, so ubiquitous, that they must have always been around. For example, categories like race and gender are traditionally explained as social divisions that are unproblematically derived from the physical realities of our bodies. But Butler argues that these categories are actually nothing more than patterns of behaviors and experiences that are attributed to various groups, that race and gender are not identities that arise out of our bodies but are rather positions that we occupy which are built out of the cumulative residue of our own choices and actions and those we observe in others (Butler xv-xvi). We observe how these identities are performed and exchanged and read by others and therefore we learn the expectations that are placed on our own performances. And by successfully performing the "correct" identity, we become legible to others as subjects (23). In the case of *Ready Player One*, I argue that Cline's text makes the "gamer" identity legible by linking it to an existing performative category. To successfully perform as and be read as a gamer, according to the logic of the novel, is to successfully perform as and be read as a white male.

To be fair, it is true that, as a text that aspires to be encyclopedic and all-encompassing, Cline's novel also spends time describing the experiences of those who do *not* comfortably fit (Condis 1180) into this performative pattern. Some of his characters, including Art3mis (pronounced "Artemis"), Aech (pronounced like the letter "H"), Daito, and Shoto, Wade's virtual companions in the OASIS initially seem to defy the stereotype that gaming is exclusively a white male activity. However, the novel ultimately whitewashes the questions that are posed by the specific challenges these characters face, collapsing their stories into that of the young white male protagonist, turning them into a support staff<sup>13</sup> for *his* quest, contributing to *his* victory and, in the end, benefiting from *his* generosity (as opposed to being acknowledged as collaborators without whom the contest would have been lost). In other words, the novel does contain images of gamers that differ from the one enshrined in the canon stereotype. It even sometimes ruminates empathetically on the challenges that those gamers face when they try to participate in online communities where the default assumption is that most, if not all, participants are white males. However, in the end, the novel uses these images in service of consolidating the centrality of the performance of white masculinity as the ultimate and most pure expression of the gamer subculture. In this, Cline can truly be said to have captured the image of the video game subculture which, as I will argue in subsequent chapters, faces frequent controversy over its tendency to be an unfriendly place to women and people of color.

### ***Ready Player One: The Game?***

Before I proceed with my analysis of the novel, a note on my method might prove useful. *Ready Player One* is a nested narrative requiring both an abiding familiarity with the many texts it references and a willingness to venture outside of the novel into the various accompanying

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<sup>13</sup> For more on this, see Chapter 3.

marketing materials and online hubs associated with the book. Taking my cues from Cline, this chapter will contain multiple nested critiques of various “levels” of texts: texts the book references and assumes the reader is already familiar with, the text of the novel itself, and its paratexts or the texts that announce and advertise the book to potential readers (Genette and Maclean 261-262), including a fan contest and various web portals they invite the reader to explore.

*Ready Player One* was aggressively marketed as the culmination of a catalog of texts that serve as the foundations of gamer culture. The book sets up a knowledgeable “inside” group of geeks who “get it” against an uncool, out of the loop, mainstream. Potential readers are explicitly asked via book jacket blurbs and promotional websites (Cline, *Ernie’s Blog* and *Ready Player One.com* Tumblr): to which group do they imagine themselves belonging? And, as in the novel, “belonging” requires that the reader prove their mettle by demonstrating that they have sufficient mastery of the text. They must be able to do more than simply read the text in a superficial, perfunctory way. They must also be prepared to play (and win) the textual games that the text offers. For example, Cline tested his audience’s puzzle-solving gamer credentials by developing an online scavenger hunt filled with retro video game challenges mimicking the one depicted in the novel (“Congratulations! You have found the First Gate.”). The prize was an ultimate geek collectable from Cline’s own collection, a refurbished 1981 DMC DeLorean, and, perhaps more importantly, the bragging rights that come with being recognized as the ultimate *Ready Player One* fan (and therefore, the master of the hundreds of texts and games referenced within its pages).

This contest began by requiring readers to find an Easter egg in the form of a URL hidden within the text of the novel (Cline, “Ready Player One Easter Egg Hunt – Contest

Announcement”).<sup>14</sup> This URL led to the first of three virtual “Gates” where reader-players had to complete increasingly difficult video game challenges. These included a *Ready Player One*-themed Atari 2600 game called *The Stacks* (Torres) as well as a Facebook game called *Ultimate Collector: Garage Sale* developed by famed developer and virtual ruler of the wildly popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game *Ultima Online*, Richard Garriot<sup>15</sup> (“The Second Gate Opens!”). The final challenge sent reader-players away from their computers and out of their homes, demanding that they find a real world arcade (or obtain an Atari console) and “set a new world record high score” or “a new world record for the fastest Perfect Game” on a classic title featured in the novel (“The Third Gate”). Completing each challenge would unlock a

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<sup>14</sup> In *Ready Player One* Wade found a clue to the location of the first hidden key in Halliday’s journal, *Anorak’s Almanac*. The clue was a short poem spelled out from letters marked by tiny notches. Cline used the same trick for his own Easter egg hunt. The first line of text in each chapter of print versions of the book is printed in a special decorative font. Some letters among those within these special lines also have little notches cut out of them. If you string those letters together, they spell “anoraksalmanacdotcom” (or anoraksalmanac.com), the website where the first video game challenge in the contest could be attempted (“Congratulations! You have found the First Gate.”). Interestingly, by naming his website after *Anorak’s Almanac* and making the prize a restored DeLorean like the one owned by Halliday in the novel, Cline casts himself as our world’s Halliday, the geeky authority whose approval readers must win if they are to be considered “true” hardcore gamers. My apologies for “pulling a Pendergast” (Cline, *Ready Player One* 65).

<sup>15</sup> According to Cline, Richard Garriot was, in part, the inspiration for the character of James Halliday (Cline, “How Lord British Inspired Anorak”).

clue that would point players in the direction of the next gate. As this elaborate paratextual project implies, if readers wish to fully participate in the novel's narrative on all the levels of engagement that are available to them, if they want to truly *complete* the experience the novel provides, they need to be prepared to engage in an active kind of reading practice, one that shuttles them between multiple forms of media (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 93-130), one that requires they act out in their own lives a performance of what the novel's protagonist goes through. Just as in video games, it is possible to finish the novel with various levels of completion. Some will read the novel as a standalone text and stop there. But the most devoted fans of the text will seek out the extra content, thereby extending their experience in Cline's world and getting the chance to act out the roles of the characters for themselves. These readers are engaged in a friendly competition with both the text and each other to catch all the hidden references and find all the novel's Easter eggs, thereby proving their affinity with the gamer subculture that the book claims to both define and serve. One cannot simply consume Cline's narrative. It must be played.

### **Games Within Games: Fans and the Economy of Knowledge**

Part of this play includes decoding the many intertextual references the novel makes to other media. In addition to defining what it means to be a gunter/gamer/fan within the fictional world of *Ready Player One*, Cline uses Halliday's canon as a test of whether *his readers* are fit to call themselves gamers. The density and subtlety of the references to Halliday's favorite texts sprinkled throughout the novel demands a kind of ludic reading practice in which allusions must be sought out and "solved" (their referents discovered) if readers are to follow the speech of Wade and his fellow gunters. Those clues that enable Wade and his friends to solve contest-related puzzles are explained within the text, but many are left mysterious, demanding readers to

test their knowledge of popular culture or to go out and investigate when they encounter a hole in that knowledge. The references serve as a gate-keeping mechanism: readers prove themselves to be a part of the gamer in-group described in and valorized by the novel if they can demonstrate encyclopedic knowledge of Halliday's/Cline's canon. Those who cannot are forced to study up on canon texts, just like Wade and his fellow gunters, and those who find themselves unable to master the material are looked down upon as neophytes or poseurs.

In fact, many readers have been moved to make fan-guides to help others navigate the text, providing explanatory links for many of the more obscure references in the novel (Parzival, Smith, Stinkyink, *Gunterpedia*, *Planet Ludus*). These sites also allow their creators to take on the mantle of expertise in relation to those more "casual" fans who come to them for information. Each site is named in such a way as to grant its maker a kind of authority within the fictional context of *Ready Player One*. For example, *Parzival TV* (Parzival) is named after the fictional YouTube-style video channel Wade maintains in the novel. This channel, Wade reports, is constantly monitored by other players for clues about what he might have discovered during the hunt. By naming him or herself Parzival, the fan who runs *Parzival TV* rhetorically steps into Wade's shoes as the number one puzzle-solver of the *Ready Player One* universe. Another site aims to take on Halliday's authority by naming itself *Castle Anorak* (Smith) after the virtual home base of the OASIS's creator. In other words, it is a space reserved for only the most elite, most knowledgeable, most skillful fans.

Of course, in addition to being used as readers' handbooks to the world of *Ready Player One*, these sites also became study guides for readers who were interested in participating in Cline's meta-contest. Thus, by creating and maintaining these fan sites, these readers are not only providing a service to their fellow readers. They are also, in a way, bragging about their



superior knowledge of the texts the novel references, declaring themselves to be the best players of Cline's game, the most hardcore fans of *Ready Player One* and of geek culture in general. In fact, one site, the *L33t Hax0rz Warezhaus* (Stinkyink), named after a black market hacker's site used by Wade in the novel, sells strategy guides<sup>16</sup> to *The Stacks*, the Atari 2600 game that is the first challenge in Cline's real world DeLorean contest. Finally, several of these sites sort out hardcore readers who are willing to do the work to figure out the origin of every last reference from casual fans who are undeserving of winning Cline's contest due to their lack of commitment by requiring their visitors to solve a puzzle if they wish to enter the site. For example, to gain access to the main site at the *L33t Hax0rz Warezhaus* (or, in English, "Elite Hackers' Warehouse"), you must "Pr0ve Y0ur W0rth by Ent3r|ng th3 Pa\$\$w0rd" (translation: "Prove Your Worth by Entering the Password," see footnote 17 below for more info on "leetspeak"). If you guess incorrectly, you are given a clue referencing the 1983 film *WarGames*,<sup>17</sup> one of Halliday's/Cline's canon texts: "Shall we play a game?" (Stinkyink). In

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<sup>16</sup> For more on strategy guides and cheat codes and the debate over whether or not they are seen as legitimate by both the videogame industry by hardcore gamers themselves, see Mia Consalvo's *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*.

<sup>17</sup> In *WarGames* a young hacker must teach a supercomputer about the futility of nuclear war, which the computer thinks of as nothing more than a game of strategy, through a lesson in tic tac toe. The protagonist, David Lightman, gains access to the supercomputer when he correctly guesses its programmer's secret backdoor password: "Joshua." This is also the password that will allow one to enter the *L33t Hax0rz Warezhaus* site. Also, note the prevalence of leetspeak on the page. "Leetspeak" is a substitution code wherein numbers or punctuation marks are substituted for letters. For example, in leetspeak, the number 3 replaces the letter "e," which

other words, it is not enough to simply pay money and buy a player's guide so one can get better at Cline's game. One must demonstrate a base level of geeky knowledge and skill at puzzle solving to be allowed the privilege of purchasing help (Wade and Aech's relationship with their gunter rival, I-r0k demonstrates this attitude in the world of the novel).

Other *Ready Player One* fans express disdain for any but the most hardcore of gamers. Parzival blogged the following about the extreme difficulty of the Third Gate in Cline's DeLorean challenge, "let's hear it for Ernie – for totally keeping it true and for not dumbing things down to appease the masses." Parzival thinks that the extreme difficulty of the challenge makes it less likely that an "outsider," someone who doesn't think of themselves as a "gamer," could win Cline's contest, and he strongly approves of that outcome. Only in-group members are worthy of Cline's prize.

Even the advertising materials for the book emphasize these same in-group and out-group divisions, suggesting that the ideal audience for the novel consists of those who are already initiated into gamer culture. For example, on his personal website, Cline describes writing *Ready Player One* as "an effort to establish the true magnitude of his geekiness," thereby positioning his novel as an attempt to prove its *author's* worthiness as king of the nerds (Cline, "Bio"). Another strategy the novel's publisher came up with uses book jacket blurbs: each reviewer self-identifies as a member of the geeky gamer subculture. For example, Patrick

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means that Wade's love interest pronounces her name "Artemis" after the Greek goddess of the moon. It is primarily used by hackers, computer programmers, and gamers. The "leet" in its name is short for "elite." ("leetspeak"). Thus, by deploying leetspeak, the creators of the site are using a rhetorical cue that constructs a privileged in-group who can read the hacker language and an opposing (and confused) group of outsiders who cannot.

Rothfuss writes “This book pleased every geeky bone in my geeky body. I feel like it was written just for me” (qtd. in Cline, *Ready Player One* back cover), thereby setting himself *and* the targeted reader apart from the “mainstream” or the non-geeky while also implicitly cementing their bond as fellow geeks (for if you are a geek like Rothfuss, then this book might have been written “just for you” as well). Paul Malmont takes a similar tack when he praises Cline for “somehow manag[ing] to jack into the nervous system of some great warm collective geek-dream nostalgia of the ‘70s and ‘80s” (qtd. in Cline, *Ready Player One* front matter). John Scalzi creepily describes the book as a “nerdgasm” (qtd. in Cline, *Ready Player One* back cover), and Christopher Farnsworth describes the novel as “Pure geek heaven.... A story that will resonate in the heart of every true nerd” (qtd. in Cline, *Ready Player One* front matter), an attitude which seemingly posits the existence of a “false” nerd with whom the story will not or cannot resonate.

Some of the blurbs actually function as miniature puzzles, the implication being that those who are stymied by said puzzles need not bother to pick up the book until they’ve brushed up on their geekery. In fact, the first game the blurbs ask readers to play is to identify how the reviewer being quoted fits into gamer/geek culture (and therefore why their opinion as a reviewer should be trusted). Each of the quotes listed above and each of those I describe below come from another author of “nerdy” fiction (mostly science fiction and fantasy) who, it can be assumed, by virtue of being chosen as featured reviewers, are themselves deserving of being considered a part of Cline’s canon. In fact, several of these authors also wrote game-like novels that require a great deal of geeky knowledge and ludic participation on the part of their readers. For example, Paul Malmont is known for meta-textual novels like *The Astounding*, *the Amazing*, and *the Unknown*, in which famous science fiction authors like Robert Heinlein and Isaac

Asimov become the protagonists of exciting adventure stories. Readers are expected to already know all about the oeuvre of these authors going in. Will Lavender also wrote a blurb for the novel, and he is known for what he calls “puzzle thrillers” like *Dominance*, which is itself another very meta-textual piece in which students venture inside of a novel to solve a mystery.

Next, readers are tested by the blurbs on their familiarity with geeky pop culture references. For example, Paul Malmont’s blurb references the 1984 cyberpunk classic William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (as well as the more recent 1999 film *The Matrix*) by using the phrase “jack in” to describe how readers might immerse themselves in the novel. Some blurbs are nothing *but* references, the assumption being that the praise for Cline’s novel is obvious to those who recognize the greatness of the other texts being referenced. For example, Will Lavender writes “Here, finally, is this generation’s *Neuromancer*”<sup>18</sup> (qtd. in Cline, *Ready Player One* back cover). To those who aren’t “in the know,” who don’t share the same cultural references or tastes, such blurbs are confusing and impenetrable. Praise like this only makes sense to those who are already familiar with the referenced text *and* to those who ascribe it with value as a seminal text of the gamer subculture. Lavender assumes that everyone who would read *Ready Player One* has already read *Neuromancer* and thought it was awesome.

Finally, Cline’s own Easter egg contest serves to divide mere readers from true fans. The contest was conducted very publicly. Each Gate was associated with its own Leaderboard where those who successfully completed the challenge could post their picture. These pictures remain online even now, long after the contest ended, “for posterity’s sake” (Cline, “Gate 1

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<sup>18</sup> The author William Gibson is listed in *Ready Player One* as an integral part of Halliday’s “recommended gunter reading list” (62), and *The Matrix* films are described as one of his “Holy Trilogies” (62), films that all gunters should know inside and out.

Leaderboard”), to serve as bragging rights. The winner of the final challenge was further celebrated on national television when Cline awarded him the DeLorean on G4, a video game-themed cable television network (Johnson). And now that a film version of the novel is gearing up to come out, Cline is asking his fans to commit even more time and energy to the *Ready Player One* universe by providing them with a MUD version of the OASIS where they can role play as gunters and Sixers (*The O.A.S.I.S. M. U.D.*). Thus, the book-experience demands more of its readers than that they merely identify with the protagonist. It actually requires them to engage in the same game-playing that Halliday requires of his fictional fans. We readers must also prove ourselves worthy inheritors of the mantle of fandom.

### **Halliday’s Game: A Test for True Believers**

Within the text of the novel, the hunt for Halliday’s egg is itself a reading exercise, a challenge which requires that players cultivate their interpretive talents as opposed to their trigger fingers. To prove themselves worthy as the potential rulers of the OASIS, they must demonstrate their fannish devotion to the old-school gamer culture that inspired Halliday to become a programmer in the first place. In short, Halliday tries to ensure that the fan who will take his place will perform the role of “gamer” in the same way that he did by requiring that they identify as closely as possible with his youthful self. In this way, he hopes to guide the reproduction of the social structure (Guillory 6) that he created for gamers in the OASIS, reasoning that if he can install a leader with absolute power who shares his values and his views on gamer culture, then he can be relatively assured that this leader will continue to guide that culture in the same way that he would have if he were still alive. His strategy for accomplishing this is to require that fans become intimately familiar with the cherished popular cultural artifacts that defined his own childhood if they wish to decipher his riddles. He essentially asks his fans

to re-live his own youth ~~Type equation here~~in the hopes that these experiences will shape their perspectives on gamer culture into something that more or less resembles his own. He even goes so far as to send gunters to a digital recreation of his childhood home, having them sit down in his old computer chair and play on a replica of his TRS-80.

The gunters recognize the demands being placed on their reading practice and they shape their social hierarchy as students of these texts around them. They call Halliday's favorite texts the "canon" (39-40), and knowledge of canon texts functions like a currency or a badge of status: Cline writes, "Gunters loved to play the game of one-upmanship and were constantly trying to prove they had acquired more obscure knowledge than everyone else" (43). "We were constantly trying to out-geek each other with our knowledge of obscure gunter trivia" (39). As such, the number one job of a gunter is to study Halliday's journal, *Anorak's Almanac*. The Almanac is the hunter's "Bible," the illuminating text that dictates which movies, comics, and video games are included in the canon, and like the Bible,<sup>19</sup> it is constantly quoted by devoted gunters, literally by chapter and verse. The texts mentioned in the Almanac are described by Wade as the "hallowed artifacts, pillars of the pantheon" (13), the keys to deciphering Halliday's puzzles. Often, an intimate familiarity with those texts, their creators, and their history confers an in-game advantage on the knowledgeable gunter. This canon functions much like the ones found in a university setting in that it serves as the foundational syllabus of a discipline or an area of study; in the wake of Halliday's death, an entire new scholarly field arose around the texts in his canon, a discipline around which high school classes are based, and which regularly produces highly paid experts and professional scholars called "oologists" (33).

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<sup>19</sup> The Bible, of course, is itself a text whose present form is the result of a long series of debates over which texts to include as canonical and which to exclude as heretical (Ackroyd and Evans).

By favoring popular cultural texts over texts traditionally prized by academia, Halliday's canon embodies the "from the bottom up" system of determining cultural value that media studies scholars have argued is a positive, potentially revolutionary mainstay of fannish subcultures. As Henry Jenkins writes in his seminal work *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, a "fan" is someone who, in violation of the broader culture's standards of "good taste" (16), affords popular cultural texts the same kind of care and consideration that a scholar would afford the great classics of the traditional Western literary canon:

Fan culture muddies these boundaries [of taste], treating popular texts as if they merited the same degree of attention and appreciation as canonical texts. Reading practices (close scrutiny, elaborate exegesis, repeated and prolonged rereading, etc.) acceptable in confronting a work of "serious merit" seem perversely misapplied to the more "disposable" texts of mass culture. Fans speak of "artists" where others can see only commercial hacks, of transcendent meanings where others find only banalities, of "quality and innovation" where others see only formula and convention (17).

Rather than accepting the word of a traditional cultural authority like a university professor about which texts are worthy of attention and study, fans look to their own tastes and those of their fellow fans to make such determinations. They give products of mass popular culture the same respect as products of high literary culture. Halliday's journal, therefore, provides gunters with a model of exemplary fan behavior through its obsessive, detailed "observations of various classic videogames, science-fiction and fantasy novels, movies, comic books, and '80s pop culture" (7). He gives the texts he has selected the kind of careful reading that is typically reserved for "the great works" of a culture as identified by literary experts. Furthermore, Halliday incentivizes others to engage in the same kind of fannish behavior by testing their knowledge with puzzles,

framing his journal, which is free to access, as a sort of study guide. And, to zoom out one order of magnification, Cline incentivizes *his* readers in the same way by encouraging them to use *Ready Player One* (a widely accessible piece of mass culture) as a guidebook to his own alternate reality game.<sup>20</sup> At first glance, the founding of an alternative, popular cultural canon seems like a great equalizer between so-called high and low culture in that this canon values a program of study that is much more easily accessible (intellectually and economically) than a traditional literary curriculum. It is composed of texts written in a common, modern vernacular. These texts are inexpensive and they require no fancy pants university training to read. Thus, it is easy to imagine that this canon encourages a truly democratic and meritocratic new literary tradition in which socioeconomic status does not factor in as a determinant of who has access to cultural knowledge. Seemingly everyone has an equal chance to win Halliday's (and Cline's) prizes if only they work hard enough at studying the material. No one will lose their chance because they couldn't afford to enter into a program. Instead, elite status in gamer culture, it is hoped, will be determined by hard work and passion.

### **Canon Wars: Exclusion and the Function of Cultural Capital**

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<sup>20</sup> An Alternate Reality Game or ARG is a puzzle solving game dispersed over multiple websites that presents players with a mystery and very little direction about how to proceed. Players must cooperate with one another, sifting through data that is presented on these sites and encoded *within* them to solve the mystery. These games often require players to perform physical actions like search for certain coordinates or make telephone calls from real world payphones to advance the game forward. Some of the most famous and popular ARGs like *I Love Bees* and *The Beast* were complex viral marketing campaigns (for the video game *Halo 2* and the film *A. I.: Artificial Intelligence* respectively). See Szulborski for more.



However, as literary scholars know, the drafting of *any* canonical list, regardless of whether it is composed of “high” or “low” culture texts, is fraught with controversy. For example, the history of the Canon Wars in the humanities departments of universities in the United States demonstrates that there are multiple salient questions regarding access to a literary education. In addition to issues of class, we must also consider issues of gender and race. Scholars like Gregory S. Jay, bell hooks, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. all looked at *which* texts were being included in the literary syllabi of the American university and speculated about what messages were being sent to students by the inclusion and exclusion of certain texts or authors or subjects. They concluded that by maintaining a literary canon that overwhelmingly represents white male authors and characters to the exclusion of other groups, professors risked giving students the impression that to be counted among the literary elite one must *be* white and male (or to put it another way, that students would come to imagine “great writers” as exclusively white and male). Similarly, they argued that this limited pool of texts defines American high culture as only those texts that are *about* white male figures (and not those that chronicle the experiences of women and minorities). Finally, they argued that limiting the canon in this way discouraged women and people of color from entering into academia, because their absence from the syllabus made it difficult for these students to imagine that their presence was welcome in the university.

John Guillory explains how these particular exclusions came to be enshrined in the syllabi of academic professionals by investigating the history of the institution within which the literary canon is embedded: the university. He argues that the traditional purpose of the study of literature in the university is to give students access to cultural capital, which Pierre Bourdieu defines as the *social* (as opposed to monetary) markers that enable their bearers to access the

privileges of the higher classes (1-2). A program of literary study provides its student with the twin tools of linguistic capital, which grants the ability to manipulate speech and writing in the preferred mode of the upper class that we refer to as “Standard English” (Guillory ix), and symbolic capital, which grants the ability to show off knowledge of particular cultural artifacts that have been designated as valuable markers of taste and quality, AKA, the canon (ix). In other words, the original purpose of studying the canon is to distinguish oneself as the type of person who “has” canonical knowledge (and is therefore in possession of the taste and refinement that marks a member of the upper class).

Extrapolating from this critique of the institution of the university, Guillory argues that the reason for the exclusion of women and people of color from the traditional Western literary canon is not *only* or even *primarily* an artifact of direct and overt prejudice on the part of a cabal of mean-spirited professors of literature (though surely such discrimination does occur sometimes and is a serious problem in its own right). Rather, it is a predictable artifact of the historical exclusion of those groups from the tools of literacy. Guillory writes

By defining canonicity as determined by the social identity [the race and gender] of the author, the current critique of the canon [espoused by scholars like hooks, Gates, Jr., Jay, and Robinson] both discovers, and misrepresents, the obvious fact that the older the literature, the less likely it will be that texts by socially defined minorities exist in sufficient numbers to produce a “representative” canon. Yet the historical reasons for this fact are insufficiently acknowledged for their theoretical and practical implications. The reason more women authors, for example, are not represented in older literatures is not primarily that their works were routinely excluded by invidious or prejudicial standards of evaluation, “excluded” as a consequence of their social identity as women.

The historical reason is that, with few exceptions before the eighteenth century, women were routinely excluded from *access to literacy*, or were proscribed from composition or publication in the genres considered to be serious rather than ephemeral (15).

In other words, for the vast majority of literary history, there were vanishingly few texts by women and people of color available to be chosen for canonical inclusion. Thus, it is not surprising that a pedagogical construction designed to “reproduce the structure of social relations” (Guillory 6) with their various inequalities in access to prestige and power in tact would, in turn, reproduce the exclusionary practices of the literary cultures of its own past (thereby making them into the exclusionary practices of the literary culture of our present). The question is not *whether* a canon will exclude one group or another, for the very *purpose* of a canon of study is to act as a gatekeeper for the cultural elite. The question is, *who* will be excluded and what are the historical material conditions that created their exclusion? This will vary from system to system as different disciplines and subcultures draw up their own canons to separate the learned from the hoi-polloi. In a word, canons and meritocracies are mutually exclusive entities.

### **Who is a Gamer?: A Breakdown of Cline’s Geeky Canon**

In the case of *Ready Player One*, the canon compiled by Cline through Halliday reflects the particular historical material conditions that shaped the origins of gamer culture. These conditions overwhelmingly favored the participation of college educated white males over everyone else. The first computer games were created in college laboratories in the 1950s and 1960s, where only “a small part of the population: generally white male engineers” (Antropy 22) “had the access to the machines, the comparative leisure time, and the technical knowledge” required to play and to program (Antropy 5-6). This “headstart” has carried over to today, for

although the so-called “digital divide” that rendered women and people of color less likely to have access to an Internet connection has all but disappeared (Nakamura, *Cybertypes* 13-14), it is still the case that “early adopters” and “elite consumers” with high level gaming and technical skills are “disproportionately white, male, middle class, and college educated” and “exert a disproportionate influence on media culture in part because advertisers and media producers are so eager to attract and hold their attention” (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 23). Although this “explosion of use... has all but eliminated the sense of a default, normative identity in *all* parts of cyberspace” (Nakamura, *Cybertypes* 14, emphasis mine) there are still vast swaths of the Internet, like the spaces populated by gamers, that tend assume a white male user as the default.

This explains why Cline’s/Halliday’s canon selections are so demographically homogenous. The list embedded within *Ready Player One* imagines the gaming subculture as “naturally” white and male because it uncritically reflects and reproduces the historical and material conditions that led to its texts’ origins. Thus, by lending its authority only to certain texts by and about those who inhabit historically privileged bodies within gamer culture and by excluding, ignoring, or ghettoizing texts by and about those who inhabit other types of bodies, *Ready Player One* reproduces the social system that produced it, a social system in which *true* geeks, archetypal geeks, are geeks modeled on their progenitors: white males.

Nearly all the texts listed in the novel as worthy of mention in *Anorak’s Almanac* were created by and feature as their main protagonists young white males. The image of the “ideal gamer” that Halliday’s contest purportedly seeks thus comes to be imagined as most likely white and male, since that is what all of the models the gunters are asked to study happen to look like. For example, over the course of a 3-page rant about Wade’s obsession with studying *Anorak’s Almanac*, our hero lists dozens of texts named in Halliday’s journal. He felt compelled to

research each of these texts to increase his chances of finding the egg. As the examples accumulate, a pattern emerges: Every single one of the twenty authors, eleven film directors, and one stand-up comedian listed as worthy of study are men, and all but one are of European decent. The ten musical groups listed as Halliday's favorites are fronted by white male lead singers. There are a few films and tv shows listed that feature somewhat diverse ensemble casts (*The Matrix*, *Star Trek*), but overall, Halliday's (and Cline's) "syllabus" is astonishing in its failure to include texts by and about women and people of color. In fact, the only women mentioned in this entire screed are ones that Wade identifies as specifically *not* a part of his research. Rather, they are sexy eye candy<sup>21</sup> he watches to take a break from his studies.

I watched a lot of YouTube videos of cute geeky girls playing '80s cover tunes on ukuleles. Technically, this wasn't part of my research, but I had a serious cute-geeky-girls-playing-ukuleles fetish that I can neither explain nor defend (63).

In the face of this tidal wave of examples, the specific and purposeful exclusion of content featuring women from the list of texts that "count" as legitimate objects of study is striking.

Also striking is the systematic undervaluing of Japanese contributions to gamer culture. There *are* a few Japanese anime and manga pieces in Halliday's canon. Their inclusion can also be explained by looking back at the historical material origins of gamer culture. In the 1970s, when an oversaturated console market in the U.S. nearly sunk the video game industry entirely, Japan kept gaming alive, ultimately reintroducing America to video games through the immensely popular Nintendo Entertainment System (for more on this history see Scheff and Eddy). However, in Cline's novel, Japanese texts are marked in multiple ways as being ancillary to the central (white male) canonical texts. They are treated as supplements to the primary

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<sup>21</sup> For more on this, see Chapter 3.

canon, and are therefore less valuable as caches of cultural capital. Familiarity with them implies that there is a certain well-rounded completeness to one's geeky studies, but is not necessary to be successful in the hunt (or, to put it as Guillory might, familiarity with Japanese texts does not provide nearly as much possibility for social mobility within gamer culture as does familiarity with American texts). In fact, the one time that direct engagement with a text of Japanese origins is required for players to progress through Halliday's puzzle, the Second Gate's *Black Dragon* video game-themed challenge, it is the English language, North American adaptation, not the Japanese original, that is featured.

Cline uses video game logic to mark Japanese works as supplementary extras as opposed to required texts. The novel depicts Wade teaming up with a Japanese duo of fellow-gunters, Daito and Shoto, to tackle a quest for in-game items based on the classic Japanese science fiction television program *Ultraman*. According to Wade, "it was... a Japanese-language quest, created by GSS's Hokkaido division" that "launched several years after Halliday's death, which meant that it couldn't have any relation to the contest" (204). Wade's description of this quest line distinguishes it as a side quest. In video game parlance, side quests are optional bonus areas of a game that often yield rare or ultra-powerful secret items. However, players need not complete these areas to beat the game or even to advance the main storyline. They are "extras" both in the sense that they are an addition onto the base game story and in the sense that they are extraneous. It is only knowledge of the canon of Western texts like John Badham's *WarGames* (1983) and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (theatrical release 1982, Director's Cut 1992) from the U.S. and Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones's *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) from the U.K. that directly contributes to player success in the egg hunt.

*Ready Player One*'s marketing also seems to assume its primary demographic consists of white males. For example, *all* of the named authors who provided review blurbs on the back cover of the novel and in the front matter, the ones who identify themselves as gamers, are white men. Only one reviewer breaks this pattern: Charlaine Harris, a white middle-aged woman who writes the vampiric romance novels that have been adapted by HBO into the popular television show *True Blood* (Harris). Furthermore, Harris's review is the only one that explicitly *refuses* a geeky gamer identity. Harris writes, "This non-gamer loved every page of *Ready Player One*" (Cline, *Ready Player One* back cover). In other words, when we are asked to imagine the ideal readers of this novel (gamers), we are encouraged by the marketing materials to think of them as white males. Others might enjoy the read, but they are not fully equipped to understand its nuances.

### **Playing a Role: Video Games, Identification, and Performativity**

Of equal importance to the questions "Who are the main characters featured in texts in the gamer canon?" and "Who created these texts?" is the question "How do we read them?" Or perhaps a better way of phrasing that question would be, "How does Halliday expect the gunters to read these texts, and, therefore, how does Cline expect *us* to do the same?" Halliday uses his egg hunting challenge as a series of pedagogical exercises, walking gunters through tests designed to get them to interact with his "syllabus" (the canon listed in *Anorak's Almanac*) using a particular reading strategy. He doesn't ask his "students" to adopt a critical theoretical stance as a professor of literature might. In fact, he doesn't want readers to have much critical distance from the texts at all. His "classroom" (the OASIS) is designed to foster appreciation of and audience identification with the texts in question.

At its most broad level, identification is “a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them” (Cohen 245). To identify with a media character we must become absorbed in a text. “We forget ourselves and become the other... we assume for ourselves the identity of the target of our identification.... Sharing their perspective and internalizing their view of the world” (247-248) for at least as long as our reading or viewing experience lasts. To put it another way, identification allows an audience a “vicarious experience” (249) of the events of the text as seen through the eyes of a character. Audiences are often encouraged to identify with one particular character over another via specific presentational strategies employed by the text (251). Authors might encourage readers to temporarily adopt the perspective of one character or another through focalization (the presentation of the events being narrated from the limited, subjective perspective of a single character) or through exclusive first-person narration, when the internal thoughts and feelings of only one central character are revealed to the reader (Oatley 445). And in the more visually-oriented medium of film, identification happens through the suturing of the gaze of the camera (and, therefore, the gaze of the audience) to the gaze of a character (see Benjamin, Heath, Metz, and Mulvey).

With video games, however, identification is much more foundational to the participant’s experience. “Video games do not only display mediated environments in which characters perform” as novels, films, and television shows do, “but they also enable and invite users to act by themselves in the environment and to become an integral part of the mediated world” (Klimmt, Hefner, and Vorderer 353). When a game is enjoyable and players are fully absorbed in the act of playing, they “do not perceive the game (main) character as a social entity distinct



from themselves, but experience a merging of their own self and the game protagonist” (354).<sup>22</sup> Hence, the gamer’s response to a failed attempt to complete a level is typically “I died,” and not “my character died.” Like literature and film, games strategically cultivate our identification with a protagonist through things like the intimate link between our own inputs on a game controller and the character’s action in the game world; we tell the character what to do via a series of button presses and the character does it (358). Sometimes, we are visually inserted into a character such that we spend the entire game looking out from his or her eyes, controlling where he or she looks as we move through the game world (for more on this, see Galloway).

The strong emphasis that gaming as a medium places on identification explains why identification is the preferred mode of reading for Halliday. In crafting his gamer canon, Halliday turns the experience of various novels and films into an immersive, game-like experience. This project is then extended and intensified by Halliday’s selective translation of some of these texts into role playing games. In fact, two out of the three Gate challenges force players to identify with and *literally* perform the part of the lead in one of these texts: *WarGames* (First Gate) and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Third Gate). These challenges are like an actor’s version of games like *Rock Band*, *Guitar Hero*, or *Dance Dance Revolution*, wherein

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<sup>22</sup> Some video games and virtual worlds with a focus on role playing like *Second Life*, *World of Warcraft*, and the *Mass Effect*, *Fallout*, and *Fable* series do not give players a single fully-fleshed out character to inhabit but rather hand players a set of tools they can use to craft their own bodies, personalities, histories, and skill sets. Of course, the limits encoded in the software place boundaries on just how much control the player has and therefore on how much agency the player has regarding the kinds of roles he or she can play. For more on this, see Nakamura, *Cybertypes* and Boellstorff.

players must reproduce the performance of a musician or a dancer as accurately as possible.

Players in Halliday's game must supply the correct line of dialogue at the correct moment to be allowed to continue, and they can earn bonuses for chaining together correct answers, delivering a line with the correct accent or inflection, or for supplementing the lines with gestures or actions that mimic the ones performed by the actors in the original films. However, a successful play-through of one of these "Flicksyncs" (112) requires more than mere knowledge of plot or even the scripted lines. They directly reward *identification* with (or emersion within) the young straight white male protagonists of these films.

Anna Anthropy observes that the vocabulary of video games already emphasizes the prominence of identification and performance by mimicking the vocabulary of the stageplay (think of videogame watchwords like "'the player,' 'stages,' 'set pieces,' 'scripting'") (60).

Anthropy argues that when a group of actors put on a play, each

individual performance... will always be different: different actors will perform the same role in different ways. Every performance and interpretation of a particular play is different—sometimes in minute ways, sometimes in radical ways—but we consider the play itself and the scene itself to be the same.

Compare this to a game story, particularly a videogame story. Every player will perform the story called *Super Mario Bros.* a little differently (and the same player will perform the story differently each play), but the role of Mario and the actions Mario is capable of taking remain the same (60-61).

The player has some agency in shaping the performance, but must operate within the parameters set by the game designer. Just as an actor must think, feel, and act from the perspective of their character if they want to craft a believable performance, the gamer must align with the role the

game assigns them to progress through and ultimately win a game. But an actor has significantly more agency with regards to their role compared to a Flicksync player. Any performance that does not hew to the original exactly is penalized. As a genre of game, they do not simply *propose* that readers identify with a particular protagonist. They *require* identification. A player who chooses to use the Flicksync framework to tell a different story (or even to tell the same story in a different way) will quickly receive a “Game Over,” a judgment that, within Halliday’s framework, signifies a failure to prove one’s worth within gamer culture. The trouble comes when one realizes that the deck has been stacked, that each and every instance of identification and subsequent performance that Halliday (and therefore, Cline) requires puts his player-reader-students into the same kind of subject: a white male one.

In fact, in the case of the movie *WarGames*, the plot of the film gunters are asked to “play” is itself about the rewards given to those who identify with the white male gamers who came from the generation before them. In the film, the process of solving puzzles by stepping into the role of a white educated upper-class male elite computer user (does that plot sound familiar?) is depicted as a common strategy of elite hackers. Matthew Broderick’s David Lightman (naturally) models the reading strategy Halliday asks gunters to employ to be successful in his game by devoting every waking hour to studying the background of the computer programmer whose system he intends to hack. He is only able to crack the security system once he figures out the backdoor password: the name of the programmer’s deceased son. The film visually suggests that this kind of mimicry is easiest for those whose bodies already closely resemble each other. The notion that computers are a white male pursuit is driven home through a series of images of David’s face being reflected in a computer monitor. The ubiquity of these images almost make it seem as if the computer itself has the face of a young white male

(and, indeed, the super-computer at the center of the film is personified as another young white male, Joshua) or functions as a reflection of white masculinity (*WarGames*).

*Ready Player One* takes this imagery one step further by deploying it within the Flicksync game modeled after the film. When Halliday's game begins, it temporarily replaces the user's regular avatar with an avatar modeled after Matthew Broderick's David Lightman.

I found myself standing in an old video arcade, playing Galaga....

Keeping one eye on the game, I tried to make sense out of my surroundings. In my peripheral vision I was able to make out a Dig Dug game on my left and a Zaxxon machine to my right. Behind me, I could hear a cacophony of digital combat coming from dozens of other vintage arcade machines. Then, as I finished clearing the wave on Galaga, I noticed my reflection in the game's screen. It wasn't my avatar's face I saw there. It was Matthew Broderick's face. A young pre-*Ferris Bueller* and pre-*Ladyhawke* Matthew Broderick.

Then I knew where I was. And *who* I was.

I was David Lightman, Matthew Broderick's character in the movie *WarGames*. And this was his first scene in the film.

I was *in the movie* (Cline, *Ready Player One* 108).

To win the Flicksync game, a player must *literally* "see" him or herself as a young white male hacker.

By requiring gunters to step into the shoes of a young elite gamer/hacker who is himself stepping into the shoes of an older programmer, Halliday is teaching players what kind of strategies will serve them best during the egg hunt: the gunters that can most easily adapt to these

roles (and by extension, the gunters who can most easily put themselves into Halliday's mindset) have an advantage in the hunt.

Furthermore, this systematic requirement of identification with a white male perspective to participate in gamer culture is echoed in Cline's decision to narrate his novel in the first person through the eyes of Wade. Cline asks us, his readers, to enter into his narrative through an act of identification with Wade Watts. We get Wade's perspective on the egg hunt, Wade's thoughts and feelings, through his first person narration and no one else's.

Cline seems to recognize that this particular embodiment of the canon within the challenge posed by Halliday will put gunters like Art3mis at a disadvantage. In fact, Art3mis makes an off-handed comment in a text message to Wade about her desire to play as another character in the film: Ally Sheedy's Jennifer (Lightman's love interest). Art3mis writes, "The First Gate was pretty wild, wasn't it? Not at all what I expected. It would have been cool if Halliday had given me the option to play Ally Sheedy instead, but what can you do?" (126). And again, when Wade plays through the *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* Flicksync, Halliday's rules only require the players to put themselves in the parts played by the white male members of the Monty Python comedy troop, while Art3mis demonstrates an interest in "the seventh python" ("The Python Page!") Carol Cleveland's musical performance, which Wade is not required to attempt. .

My argument here is a close cousin to the one made by Laura Mulvey about the patterns of identification constructed by classic Hollywood cinema. Mulvey argues that the habitual linking in these films between the gaze of the camera, the objectifying gaze of the male hero, and the gaze of the audience coded the *act of looking itself* as masculine, got us used to thinking of ourselves as occupying a position coded "male" during our movie-watching experience, used to

thinking about looking as the *kind of thing that men do*. I argue that what Cline is showing us in *Ready Player One* is one possible explanation of how the gaming industry came to establish a pattern of identification that has coded the act of playing as masculine. That is to say, if playing a video game has come to mean jumping into a strong relationship of identification with a white male character (because, due to the historical and material conditions described above, this has, until very recently, been the default assumption made by game producers about what gamers want from a game), then the very act of playing might easily come to be seen as a performance of white maleness itself (Burrill), a convention that we think of as signifying the social category of “white male.” It becomes a performative code that we use to define what white masculinity *is*. Masculinity *is* the kind of subject position that plays video games.

### **Surface, not Substance: The Curious Case of Cline’s Use of *Blade Runner***

This reading also explains why the Second Gate challenge, built around the cult classic *Blade Runner*,<sup>23</sup> does *not* feature a Flicksync game. *Blade Runner* is a film *about* difference and privilege. Adapted from Philip K. Dick’s 1968 novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, *Blade Runner* follows Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), a hunter of rogue artificial beings called replicants who were built to do the jobs human beings couldn’t or wouldn’t do. Replicants are not allowed to set foot on Earth for fear that they will turn their superior physical and intellectual powers towards rebellion (McNamara 422). As many film critics have observed, the hierarchy that separates humans from replicants in *Blade Runner* can be read as a metaphor for the types of power divisions that separate various classes of human beings from (and privilege certain classes over) each other (see Barringer, Jermyn, and McNamara).

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<sup>23</sup> *Blade Runner*’s influence on videogame culture can be seen in games like *Perfect Dark*, the *Deus Ex* series, and the *Shadowrun* series.

Over the course of the movie, our human “hero” Deckard only reads as sympathetic when he moves away from his “continued enjoyment of the privileges of whiteness” (McNamara 431) and maleness and towards the realization that replicants are deserving of better, more equitable treatment. In fact, the film occasionally hints that Deckard cannot be terribly confident about his own status as a human being, that he, too, might be a replicant crafted specifically to perform the particularly unsavory job of violently “retiring” (*Blade Runner*, Theatrical Release) his fellows. His burgeoning realization of this possibility initially pushes him to police the boundary between humans and replicants all the more strictly, but later enables him to imagine the possibility of an existence outside of the hierarchy of power that he has spent his entire life upholding, a life alongside the replicant Rachel instead of a life hunting her and her kind.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the choice to list *Blade Runner* as a text in Halliday’s/Cline’s canon not only opens up opportunities for users to identify with a position *other than* white maleness, it seemingly *demand*s that attention be paid to questions of diversity, identity, privilege, and performativity, as those are the themes that permeate this particular text. Indeed, when Wade first discovers that *Blade Runner* will be the framing text for the puzzle to unlock the Second Gate, he assumes that the game will make him play the part of a replicant (perhaps Rachel herself) trying desperately to pass a Voight-Kampff test, to pass as human, and, metaphorically, to experience what it is like to be denied the privileges associated with being a member of the dominant demographic group in

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<sup>24</sup> At least, the original theatrical release does. The Director’s Cut denies the audience a visualization of such a happy ending, leaving Deckard and Rachel to face an unknown future and an uncertain escape. However, the Director’s Cut also contains more direct evidence that Deckard is himself a replicant than does the theatrical release in the form of the famous unicorn dream sequence.

the gaming subculture. Such a role would put gunters like Wade into the position of identifying with a non-white, non-male perspective, both literally (it would embody him as a woman) and figuratively (it would embody him as a replicant, the coded stand-ins for groups who aren't favored with the kinds of privileges typically accorded to white males) for the first time in Halliday's hunt.

When I walked up and sat down in front of the [Voight-Kampff] machine, it turned itself on. A thin robotic arm extended a circular device that looked like a retinal scanner, which locked into place directly level with the pupil of my right eye. A small bellows was built into the side of the machine, and it began to rise and fall, giving the impression that the device was breathing.

I glanced around, wondering if an NPC [non-player character] of Harrison Ford would appear, to ask me the same questions he asked Sean Young in the movie. I'd memorized all of her answers, just in case (Cline, *Ready Player One* 253).

Such an identification would cast the gunter as a revolutionary or an outsider breaking into a place he or she doesn't belong: in the narrative of *Blade Runner*, Earth; in Halliday's game, the Second Gate.

However, positioning the gamer in relation to Halliday's Gate in this way would undermine the trajectory of the egg hunt thus far, a trajectory wherein successful identification is linked with inclusion and privilege, with white maleness. This means that Halliday is constrained in the ways that he can deploy the cultural artifacts associated with *Blade Runner*. This portion of the egg hunt must end before it really has a chance to begin.

I waited a few seconds and nothing happened. The machine's bellows continued to rise and fall. In the distance, the security klaxons continued to wail.



I took out the Jade Key. The instant I did, a panel slid open in the surface of the Voight-Kampff machine, revealing a keyhole. I quickly inserted the Jade Key and turned it. The machine and the key both vanished, and in their place, the Second Gate appeared (253).

Halliday and, therefore, Cline have written themselves into an awkward, anti-climactic, and unsatisfying position. They can reference the film's locations and key props, which are iconic in the annals of science fiction film history, but they cannot actually drop the players into any of the major characters in the film, lest the image of a gamer constructed by Halliday's pedagogy so far be brought into question. In fact, Wade's approach to the Voight-Kampff machine actually puts him abstractly into the unsympathetic role of an unremorseful Blade Runner. One akin, perhaps, to Deckard's boss, Bryant, the "kind of cop who used to call black men 'niggers'" (*Blade Runner*, Theatrical Release) the kind who mows down "skin jobs" (252) without giving a thought to the human emotions they are capable of experiencing. Indeed, the only remorse Wade feels as he slays "fifty NPC Tyrell security guard replicants" is directed towards his pocketbook: "my bullet bill this month was going to be huge" (252). Wade (and Halliday and Cline) are playing with the surface features of the world of *Blade Runner*, the distinctive pyramidal Tyrell Building, the Voight-Kampff test, the replicants themselves. But they aren't identifying with Deckard's concerns about identity and the performative nature of humanity (if a replicant looks like a human to others and thinks it is a human itself, can it be said to actually *be* human in all the ways that really matter? If so, can it any longer be considered just to subjugate them?). And in passing on an opportunity to delve more fully into the world of *Blade Runner*, the novel also passes on the chance to invite gamers (those depicted in the book and those who read it) to identify an alternative, more critical perspective on gamer culture, a perspective that is

sympathetic to the problems that women and people of color face trying to “belong” or to “pass” within a gamer culture that requires they perform a version of white masculinity.

### **Aech’s Dilemma**

To be fair, the novel *does* contain a character who grapples with this very issue. Wade’s best friend Aech, a black lesbian who passes as a young straight white American male in the OASIS, must find a unique way to sidestep the assumptions taught by Halliday’s canon about what “real” gamers are like if she is to live her chosen (virtual) life as a respected, even famous, hardcore professional gamer and egg hunter. Unfortunately, her story is also something of a missed opportunity. She quickly discovers that it is only by hiding her real world identity that she will be afforded the kind of respect and privilege in her community that her gaming skills alone should have afforded her. Her experience confirms that gaming is coded as a performance of white masculinity.

Cline puts a lot of effort in the early chapters of the novel into describing Aech’s gamer bona fides. In these descriptions, Wade uses a masculine pronoun because he assumes that Aech’s real life body is male, just as her avatar’s body is.

Aech’s skills as a professional gamer are world-renowned. Aech made quite a bit of dough competing in televised PvP [Player vs. Player] arena games after school and on the weekends. Aech was one of the highest-ranked combatants in the OASIS, in both the Deathmatch and Capture the Flag leagues. He was even more famous than Art3mis (37-38).

Aech’s fame as a professional gamer (combined with her deep pockets, which enable her to host her own large private chat room), makes her immensely popular, even respected, amongst her fellow gunters.

Over the past few years, [Aech's chatroom] the Basement had become a highly exclusive hangout for elite gunters. Aech granted access only to people he deemed worthy, so being invited to hang out in the Basement was a big honor (38).

However, Aech has a secret, one that she only reveals to her best friend Wade when circumstances force her meet up with him face-to-face in physical space: Aech is a black lesbian who hides her identity online to make her career as a sponsored professional gamer possible. She explains to Wade that her mother, a black woman from Atlanta, Georgia, taught her from a young age that passing as white and male was the key to a black woman's success in a world where the vast majority of business was conducted via avatars online.

Her mother, Marie, worked from home, in an online data-processing center. In Marie's opinion, the OASIS was the best thing that had ever happened to both women and people of color. From the very start, Marie had used a white male avatar to conduct all of her online business, because of the marked difference it made in how she was treated and the opportunities she was given.

When Aech first logged into the OASIS, she followed her mother's advice and created a Caucasian male avatar.... A few years later, when she started attending school online, her mother lied about her daughter's race and gender on the application (320).

The face that Aech presents to her fans in the OASIS is much more in keeping with the face of a stereotypical gamer, the face that Halliday's canon has taught gunters to expect to find on one another: a (straight) white male face. Even Wade's initial reaction is to disbelieve that someone as hardcore as the Aech he knew could exist within the type of body Aech actually has.

"Christ, Aech," I said, smiling. "I knew you were hiding something. But I never imagined..."

“What?” she said a bit defensively. “You never imagined what?”

“That the famous Aech, renowned gunter and the most feared and ruthless arena combatant in the entire OASIS, was, in reality, a...”

“A fat black chick?”

“I was going to say ‘young African American woman’” (319).

In this exchange, Wade tries (and fails) to demonstrate that he is comfortable with Aech no matter what her race and gender might be. However, his initial hesitance to *name* her race and gender and to put the exact character of his surprise at her revelation into words betrays his discomfort. He also tries to show himself to be sensitive to racial issues by using politically correct language (“young African American woman” sounds less harsh to his ears than “fat black chick”), but it is crucial to note that, no matter which words Wade uses to *describe* her race and gender, Wade still sees them as incompatible with his image of what a hardcore gamer is. He “never imagined” that a gamer as skilled as Aech could be black and female (and, as she later reveals, queer).

Interestingly, when Cline first describes, from Wade’s perspective, what Aech’s avatar looks like at the start of the novel, he has his narrator be very explicit about her race. Wade says, “Aech’s avatar was a tall, broad-shouldered Caucasian male with dark hair and brown eyes” (38). This is the only time in the novel that a main character’s race is mentioned if they are white, presumably because Cline wants to ensure that readers are suitably shocked and surprised when Aech’s actual race is revealed. Daito and Shoto’s Japaneseness is remarked upon, as is the blackness of Aech’s physical body. But the descriptions of Wade, Art3mis, and even the villainous Sixer Sorento make no mention of race at all. This is in keeping with what critical race theory describes as how privilege comes to be accorded to whiteness: through a combination

of ordinariness and invisibility (for an example of this type of argument, see Dyer). There are “black gamers” and “Japanese gamers” and “female gamers” but there are no “white male gamers.” Those folks are just called “gamers.”

One might think that Aech’s story might open up space within the narrative of the novel to critique such an un-inclusive definition of gamer culture. However, Cline forecloses this possibility by focusing more on how Aech’s masquerade affects *his narrator*, Wade than on how it affected *her* as she lived it. Wade says of Aech’s grand reveal,

A wave of emotion washed over me. Shock gave way to a sense of betrayal. How could he—*she*—deceive me all these years? I felt my face flush with embarrassment as I remembered all of the adolescent intimacies I’d shared with Aech. A person I’d trusted implicitly. Someone I thought I knew (Cline, *Ready Player One* 318).

Wade’s feels essentially no empathy for Aech’s dilemma. He makes no attempt to put himself into her shoes (to identify with her as he so easily does with the fictional David Lightman) or try to understand why she did what she did. Instead, he decides that the best thing for their friendship is for him to move on and forget all about her revelation. For example, after he “forgives” Aech for the sin of her deception, he shows no interest in hearing her explanation for her elaborate ruse.

“There’s a reason I never told you, you know.”

“And I’m sure it’s a good one,” I said. “But it really doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t?”

“Of course not. You’re my best friend, Aech. My *only* friend, to be honest.”

“Well, I still want to explain.”

“OK. But can it wait until we’re in the air?” I said. “We’ve got a long way to travel.

And I’ll feel a lot safer once we’ve left this city in the dust” (319).

In this conversation, Wade confuses the notion that Aech’s race, gender, and sexuality don’t matter *to him* (in that they will not ruin their long-standing friendship) with the notion that they *do not matter*. It seems obvious that Aech’s race and gender matter a great deal *to her* in that she has predicated her entire life online (which, remember, comprises her economic livelihood and her entire social network) on a false claim to a particular racialized, gendered position: white maleness. Indeed, Aech’s insistence on telling her story, despite Wade’s protestations that her reasons “don’t matter” suggests that she wants to finally be able to tell someone her story *for her own sake*, not because she feels the need to justify her actions to Wade.

Indeed, Wade claims to have known her “in the most intimate way possible” and to have connected with her “on a purely mental level” (321) despite knowing nothing about the pressure to hide herself that she felt daily. In fact, by labeling the friendship they developed under the cover of her supposed white maleness as “purely mental,” Wade once again falls into the trap of rendering whiteness and masculinity invisible, as though Aech’s original presentation was bodiless, not itself gendered and not raced. He even goes so far as to make an active decision to continue their friendship as though she had never made her revelation to him. “Even though I now knew Aech was actually a female in real life, her avatar was still male, so I decided to continue to refer to him as such” (330). In other words, Wade’s claim that he is comfortable with Aech no matter what kind of body she wears in the real world, that their friendship could never be “changed by anything as inconsequential as... gender, or skin color, or sexual orientation” (321), is untrue, as he is apparently unable to cope with or adjust to her revealed femaleness. He essentially stuffs her body back into the virtual closet for the sake of his own

comfort, thereby proving Aech's theory that she must hide herself to make and keep friends in the OASIS correct. Just as with the section on *Blade Runner*, Aech's story seems like it might offer an opportunity to re-evaluate just who "counts" as a gamer. But this opportunity is quickly foreclosed and shuffled off out of sight so that the white male gamer's story can continue on.

### **Serving as Support Staff: Gamer Girls and Geeks of Color Implicitly Endorsing White Maleness as the Über-Geek Standard**

In fact, the conclusion of the novel acts as a final dismissal of these issues by "demoting" all of Wade's fellow gunters into a supporting role. They go from *participants* in the egg hunt to helpers in *Wade's* hunt. This construction mimics the ones described by Edward Said in *Orientalism* and Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Both books argue that one way in which cultures sketch out a self-definition through literature is by crafting the image of an outsider that is weak, inferior, and therefore rightfully relegated to a subservient status. Said's and Morrison's arguments were crafted in the context of questions about race, the nation, and colonialism, but they work on a subcultural level as well. Part of how *Ready Player One* proves that Wade is the world's best gamer is by showing how he measures up against other gamers who don't quite rise to his level. These gamers fail because they are unable to adequately identify with and perform white masculinity.

At the conclusion of the novel, Cline kills off the avatars of Art3mis, Aech, and Shoto (and even kills off the physical body of the player who controls Daito), leaving Wade alone to race Sorrento and the other Sixers for Halliday's prize. The women and people of color do get to *witness* the contents of most of the final gate. Art3mis even provides key info about a hidden exploit in the Atari game *Tempest* that Wade uses to make the Gate challenge easier and allows Wade to use her avatar's shoes of flight to help him reach the Third Gate. However, Art3mis,

Aech, and Shoto are not *present* for these events. They are merely outside observers, ghostly voices whispering guidance and encouragement into Wade's headphones as they watch on a videofeed while *he* completes the final quest to claim the egg.

Furthermore, Cline constructs his ending in such a way as to have Art3mis, Aech, and Shoto implicitly *endorse* their support staff status. As the end of the quest for the egg nears, Wade tells his friends that he has an announcement to make:

I just wanted to say that I know how the three of you must feel right now. It isn't fair, the way this has played out. We should all be entering the gate together. So before I go in, I want you guys to know something. If I reach the egg, I'm going to split the prize money equally among the four of us (348).

Aech and Shoto are blown away by this notion. Their reaction is described initially as "stunned silence" (348), and once they get their bearings their initial instinct is to reject Wade's gift as overly being overly generous: "'Are you insane?' Aech asked. 'Why would you do that?'" (348). Their reactions suggest that Wade's decision to share the prize is a magnanimous act, not a simple act of fairness or of just compensation for the help they will provide. This suggests that they *agree* with the proposition that a victory would ultimately belong to him alone.

Art3mis initially resists this framing. She attempts to make sense of Wade's offer as a trade off: they will offer coaching in exchange for a cut of the prize money. "'Let me get this straight,' Art3mis said. 'We help you clear the gate, and in return, you agree to split the prize money with us?'" (349). She even asks to get his plan "in writing" (349), evoking the language of a contract to describe the arrangement Wade is proposing. However, Wade refuses her attempted reframing, insisting instead on casting his decision as a gift and not as a transaction. "'Wrong,' I said. 'If I win, I'm going to split the prize money with you guys, regardless of



whether you help me or not.” (349). Note that this framing takes away the notion that Art3mis and the others could be said to *earn* a piece of the prize through the help they provide. Rather, if *Wade* wins the prize, then *he* will share it out. *Whether or not* he gets help from his teammates, he still reserves the right to claim victory as his own, making the spoils his own to disperse as he pleases. Ultimately, Art3mis relents and accepts Wade’s frame, smoothing over the momentary conflict by saying that her request for a contract was just a joke. She capitulates to Wade’s narrative, relegating herself, Aech, and Shoto to a “support staff” position (though she does assert herself somewhat when she reminds Wade to credit them as his helpers when he talks to the media).

Further cementing the notion that Wade is the victor and the others are merely his support staff are the parts of Halliday’s prize that Wade does *not* share with his fellows. Once Wade finally completes the Third Gate, he interacts with a computer-generated version of Halliday’s avatar, the wizard Anorak, who tells him all about his avatar’s new powers in the OASIS. Wade is now unique amongst citizens of the OASIS in that his avatar is “immortal and all-powerful” (363). Anorak also reveals a “Big Red Button” (363-364) that will be accessible only to Wade, as no other avatars are allowed entry into the room where it is housed. “If you press it,” Anorak warns Wade, “it will shut off the entire OASIS and launch a worm that will delete everything stored on the GSS servers, including all of the OASIS source code. It will shut down the OASIS forever” (364). This portion of their conversation is rendered inaccessible to Wade’s watching friends, as Halliday programmed the final interaction of the egg hunt to be unrecordable. When Wade finds himself able to communicate with Art3mis, Aech, and Shoto once again, they ask him what Halliday’s program told him, but Wade is cagey about it, telling them “Nothing much.... I’ll tell you about it later” (365). Of course, the novel ends before Wade

gets around to revealing Halliday's final gift. This information, this power, is apparently reserved, according to the logic of the novel, for über-gamers, for the truly hardcore, for young white men. The support staff need not know of it.

## **Conclusion**

*Ready Player One* reveals how our idea of what exactly a “real gamer” looks like is, in large part, derived from a “geeky canon” of texts that are sacred to the gamer subculture. In this chapter, I have sketched where this canon comes from and how it works to limit the status of all but a few privileged participants in that subculture. This limitation is harmful to the excluded, who miss out on one of the gateways to interest in computer science that can lead to economic opportunities as well as to increased confidence in their ability to live and work in an increasingly digital world (Jenkins and Cassell 8). It is also harmful to gaming as a medium, which struggles to achieve the kind of serious attention it deserves as an art form because games are often thought of as little more than toys for boys.

In Chapter 2 I will describe how some players, like *Ready Player One*'s Art3mis, who do not fit this canon-crafted image are pushing back against this stereotype. In the real world, as in the novel, gamers like Art3mis face a great deal of backlash from their fellows because they do not fit the image of a gamer that has been constructed by/for the community via the canon that Cline both recognized and validated in his novel. But gamers like Art3mis continue to work against this backlash in the hopes that they can create change in the gamer community akin to the changes canon revisionists are trying to make within the academy. Both groups work to expand the definition of “who counts” as a member in good standing of their communities, changing the distribution of cultural capital affected by the canon in an attempt to make that distribution more equitable and democratic.

## CHAPTER 2

### “GET RAPED, FAGGOT”: TROLLING AS A GENDERED META-GAME

My first chapter described why and how literary and filmic productions about (and beloved by) the hardcore video gaming community imagine the most successful performances of gamer identity as performances of white masculinity. In this chapter I argue that gamers police their own masculine performances (thus enforcing the standards of performance modeled by those foundational texts) by surveilling the behavior of themselves and their friends and by encouraging each other to affect a disdain for anything that could be considered “feminine” or “gay.” They enact what CJ Pascoe calls the “repeated repudiation of the specter of failed masculinity” (5) lest they be read as failures and ostracized from the group. Part of this work involves repeatedly “proving” one’s heterosexuality through the production of homophobic discourse as gamers regularly “lay claim to masculine identities by lobbing homophobic epithets at one another” (Pascoe 5). This is plain to anyone who has spent time in gaming circles and listened to the insults that fly during play. However, I argue that such exchanges are more than merely an unpleasant side effect of gaming’s competitive atmosphere. Gamers frequently turn masculine policing into a meta-game in its own right, a game in which one improves one’s own standing both by enacting masculine performances of dominance and self-mastery *and* by successfully baiting others into *losing* status by letting their mask of masculinity slip. Thus, the gaming community can be seen to both import assumptions about gendered codes into their identities even as they apply the logics of their favorite pastime to their model of how gender performance works. This results in a singular set of performative gender codes that is unique to online gaming culture.

The primary game mechanic in this gendered meta-game is commonly known as “trolling,” or the posting of “inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community, such as an online discussion forum, chat room, or blog, with the primary intent of provoking other users into a desired emotional response or of otherwise disrupting normal on-topic discussion” (Cambria et al). In the spaces frequented by participants in the video game subculture, trolling is an exercise in gendered performance. For example, trolls will attempt to solicit responses from their victims using gendered taunts (“bitch,” “fag”) and by alluding to rape and domestic violence as a metaphor for their dominance in a game. In addition, female gamers, developers, and feminist-identified video game critics are often selected as targets for troll infestations or attacks by hackers.

However, I argue that trolling in the video game community is an expression of gendered performance that goes beyond the simple use of sexist rhetoric. Instead, I argue that, on a fundamental level, trolling is a gendered discursive act, no matter what kind of language the troll uses to cause offense and no matter what population the troll targets. The “game” of trolling sorts participants into two camps: those who refuse to “take the bait” demonstrate a cool-headed rationality, a mastery over the self that is traditionally associated with the performance of masculinity. Those who fall for the bait and “feed” the troll, are imagined as overly earnest and emotional, overly feminine. In other words, the game is set up to reinforce the idea that competent Internet users and elite gamers are defined precisely as those who enact a masculine textual performance (no matter the sex of their actual body) while the chumps and “newbs”<sup>25</sup> of the gaming world are those who are unable to maintain a masculine performance under pressure.

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<sup>25</sup> “Newbs” (sometimes spelled “noobs” or “nubs”) is short for “newbies,” a derogatory term for inexperience or unskilled players.

In a digital environment where the body on the other side of the screen is unknowable, policing mechanisms like trolling are extremely well-suited to the purpose of gendered discipline because they function via rhetorical posturing. A gamer need not prove that they have a male body to win at the game of trolling. He or she need only acquiesce to the proposition that a masculine textual presentation (a writing style that values traditionally masculine traits and dismisses all-things feminine as undesirable) is the key to earning respect in the gaming community. Of course, not all gamers are active trolls. However, the normalization and the widespread acceptance of the presence of trolls in the community and on the Internet at large creates a chilling effect on female participation in the culture by positing that gendered abuse is to be expected in the virtual halls of gaming culture and that expressions of outrage about such abuse are a nothing more than a sign of naiveté and inexperience.

Note that this does not mean that all trolls are necessarily men and that their victims are necessarily women.<sup>26</sup> In fact, since trolling takes place online, it is impossible to tell who the trolls “really” are demographically. Even those trolls who disclose information about their supposed race, gender, and age can hardly be trusted. As Whitney Phillips explains, their claims to particular identities might simply be a part of the construction of their troll persona. Rather, it

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<sup>26</sup> Although, statistically women and female-presenting users are much more likely to face trolling than are men and male-presenting users. According to the non-profit research group Working to Halt Online Abuse, between 2000 and 2008, 72.5% of those who reported experiencing online harassment identified themselves as female while online only 22% identified themselves as male (1). Likewise, a 2006 study conducted by Robert Meyer and Michael Cukier at the University of Maryland found that accounts with feminine usernames received an average of 100 troll messages a day while masculine-sounding names only got an average of 3.7 (467).

means that both the form of trolling (the rules of the rhetorical game) and, often, its content (gendered insults, references to gendered acts of violence, etcetera), encourage participants to conform to textual performances that align with what our culture thinks of as masculine and to disdain and denigrate those marked as feminine. Thus, a woman who successfully trolls someone raises her status in the troll community by pulling off a masculine performance of aloofness, while a man who falls for a troll's bait exposes himself, at least in that moment, as unacceptably feminine by indulging in an emotional outburst. In other words, trolling is not about the imposition of a hierarchy based on biological gender (which, again, is impossible to verify online in the first place). Rather it is about conformity to a set of standards for behavior and self-presentation that are organized around performative gendered lines which are being imported into cyberspace. It might be impossible to tell if a poster is "really" a woman, but the game of trolling allows participants to imagine that they *can* tell when a poster is acting "womanly," and it incentivizes players to avoid behaviors that might be seen as "womanly" lest they lose face.

Note that this set of discursive rules makes it difficult for in-group members to articulate (or even conceptualize) dissent. According to trolling logic, membership in the community means that (and is proven by the fact that) one has the same unemotional masculine-coded reaction to provoking and sexist statements as everyone else. There is little space for disagreement over the codes that govern group membership because group membership only becomes visible through conformity to those codes. One can either roll with the trolls or risk being targeted by them. Thus, trolling works as a silencing disciplinary mechanism on the wider community. Those who disagree with trolling tactics are incentivized to keep quiet about it lest they be singled out as "outsiders" themselves.

## **Trolling 101: What is a Troll?**

Trolls<sup>27</sup> go about their unpleasant and disruptive activities using a unique methodology. Claire Hardaker (218) argues that trolling is not exactly the same thing as purposeful rudeness (which is meant to be understood by the recipient as a slight or an attack) or as an accidental faux pas (which is simply an etiquette mistake on the part of the communicator and not an intended provocation). Rather, trolling is a complex communicative act that targets two separate audiences at once: the victim, who must be convinced that the troll's inflammatory statement is sincere (and thus is in need of correction or rebuke), and one's fellow trolls, who must be able to

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<sup>27</sup> Susan Herring, Kirk Job-Sluder, Rebecca Scheckler, and Sasha Barab define a troll as “individual who baits and provokes other group members, often with the result of drawing them into fruitless argument and diverting attention from the stated purposes of the group” or “disrupt their discussion space” (371). According to Susan Herring et al, the term “troll” originally referred to “the practice used in fishing where a baited line is dragged behind a boat, although some Internet discourse refers to the troll as a fictional monster waiting under the bridge to snare innocent bystanders” (Herring et al. 372). The word “troll” is currently quite the buzzword, and its association with high profile anti-bullying and online harassment campaigns has led to some scholars like Jonathan Bishop claiming that the word is becoming overused. In fact, Farhad Manjoo argues that the term has become so watered down in common usage that it has come to be nothing more than “a name given to someone who disagrees with you on the Internet,” an ad hominem attack used to dismiss or discredit anyone who goes against the majority opinion. However, by comparing academic definitions of trolling with definitions created by self-professed trolls, I hope to arrive at a working definition of the term that distinguishes true trolls from merely disagreeable people.

recognize the actual intended purpose of the post (which is to generate “bites” or “certain, usually sincere, responses... such as anger, shock, and curiosity... in other words, a demonstration by the respondent that he had unwittingly been deceived by the troller’s professed pseudo-intent, and was unaware of her *real* intent”) (Hardaker 233). Michele Tepper writes

When it takes place within a single, closed community, trolling can sometimes be accepted and reinforced in the... subculture because it serves the dual purpose of enforcing community standards and of increasing community cohesion by providing a game that all those who know the rules can play against those who do not. It works both as a game and as a method of subcultural boundary demarcation because the playing pieces in this game are not plastic markers or toy money but pieces of information (Tepper 40).

In other words, trolling becomes a mechanism within these communities that is used to distinguish between long-time, loyal, “hardcore” (see Chapter 3) members of the community and “newbies,” inexperienced users who have yet to “pay their dues” and earn the respect of their fellow posters. After all, “if no one can be prevented from reading or writing to the group,” or from participating in an online game, then

there must be some way of distinguishing between those posters to the group who are actually ‘in’ the group and those who are still ‘outside’ it, and all this must be accomplished through asynchronous textual production, with none of the verbal or visual cues that are so crucial to traditional notions of subcultural formation. (Tepper 45)



Tepper describes “the hoped for response” by a troll<sup>28</sup> from a newbie as “an indignant correction” (41)

It is through such a correction that the complicated play of cultural capital that constitutes trolling begins. The corrector, being outside of the community in which trolling is practiced, believes he is proving his superiority to the troller by catching the troller’s error, but he is in fact proving his inferior command of the codes of the local subculture in which trolling is practiced. (Tepper 41)

Trolls originating in one online community also sometimes join together to strike out at other communities, thus defining themselves in opposition to the group they have targeted (Herring et al.). Such trolls might post disruptive comments designed to throw the targeted community into chaos or they might simply hack into their target’s website in an attempt to shut the community down. These incursions serve the dual purpose of infuriating the target *and* boosting the cultural capital of the troll (at least among his or her fellow trolls).

### **Surveillance, Discipline, and Power: Gamer Slang and Masculine Anxiety**

Trolling works through what Foucault calls disciplinary power, or power that functions through surveillance as opposed to direct force. It is a productive power exercised through the creation of social structures and norms that encourage certain outcomes to flourish while discouraging others. One of the ways that disciplinary power functions is through the creation of knowledge: vocabulary, categorization, and naming. As I describe in Chapters 1 and 3, if one wants to be acknowledged as a member of a subcultural group, one must prove that they can

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<sup>28</sup> Tepper describes both the troll and the troll’s victim in her account as male. Whether she intended this or not, her account reinforces the twin notions that the Internet is a predominantly masculine space and that trolling is itself a contest of masculine performance.

“speak the lingo,” that they understand the slang, the rhetorical tics, the common references and inside jokes that define that group. The slang that defines gamer culture contributes to a rhetorical system in which the performance of masculinity (and the rejection of femininity and queerness) is one of the means through which one sutures oneself into the community. It is not enough for one to simply *feel* sufficiently manly or to identify with positive examples of masculinity. One must continually and vocally reassert one’s masculinity to others by rejecting that which is considered insufficiently “manly.”

In fact, the imagined origins of Internet culture as rooted in what T. L. Taylor calls “geek masculinity” suggest that the game of trolling developed as a way for those male subjects who found themselves locked out of the privileges associated with successful performances of hegemonic masculinity in the physical world (because of their failure to achieve certain masculine markers such as bodily strength and athleticism) to (re)claim a new style of manhood. As T. L. Taylor argues, “while computer gamers have been historically conflated with the technically savvy... their identity (as with geeks writ large) is also typically framed in opposition to traditional athletic masculinity” (114). For many years, the geek and the nerd were held up as images of failed masculinity to be avoided at all costs. In fact, they were often coded as victims of some kind of affliction or disability. Geeks wore glasses. They had braces on their teeth and corrective footwear on their feet. They were either too fat or too skinny and weak to be skilled in athletics. They were clumsy and accident prone, sexually inadequate and socially and emotionally underdeveloped. “Measured against hegemonic masculinity... these guys would be found wanting” (Taylor 117). In fact, according to Mel Stanfill, geeks have traditionally been portrayed in popular media as being so infatuated with their favorite movies, comics, television shows, and video games that they are precluded from having “proper” sexual relations with

women. In other words, geeks and gamers often found themselves rhetorically positioned as the insufficiently manly subjects against which hegemonic masculinity was measured.

Thus, we can read the development of technology-based games like hacking and trolling (and video gaming in general) as a means of reconstructing “manliness” to mean the mastery of technology (as opposed to the body) and the ability to dominate in textual or intellectual games (as opposed to athletics). Popular movies, television shows, and books like *Real Genius*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, *Weird Science*, *TRON* (described briefly in Chapter 3), and even *Ready Player One* (described in detail in Chapter 1), recuperate the male geek by constructing a social space where he can beat the villain (typically a representative of the traditional hegemonic masculinity, usually either a popular jock or a rich, powerful authority figure like a military man or a CEO), get the girl, and rise to the top of a new hierarchy of masculinity. In these narratives, gaming, hacking, and trolling function as new brands of “sport” that value quick-wittedness and technological prowess over brute strength.

One such textual game commonly played by trolls consists of what C. J. Pascoe calls “fag talk” (54). Pascoe writes

Fag talk and fag imitations serve as a discourse with which boys discipline themselves and each other through joking relationships. Any boy can temporarily become a fag in a given social space or interaction. This does not mean that boys who identify as or are perceived to be homosexual aren’t subject to intense harassment. Many are. But becoming a fag has as much to do with failing as the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess, and strength or in any way revealing weakness or femininity as it does with a sexual identity. This fluidity of the fag identity is what makes the specter of the fag such a powerful disciplinary mechanism. It is fluid enough that boys police their

behaviors out of fear of having the fag identity permanently adhere and definitively enough so that boys recognize a fag behavior and strive to avoid it. (54)

In other words, one might be seen as a “fag,” as insufficiently masculine, for any number of reasons that may or may not be related to sexual preference. In fact, fag talk is constantly circulating, landing temporarily on almost every cultural participant, each of whom must then foist the label off onto someone else to restore their status. Like a game of tag, all players occasionally take a turn at being “it.” However, the most skilled players are the ones who can avoid being “it” the majority of the time or who can pass the role off to someone else quickly.

Pascoe also uses the language of games to describe masculine performances centered around the rhetorical figure of the faggot: “In this way the fag became a hot potato that no boy wanted to be left holding. One of the best ways to move out of the fag position was to thrust another boy into that position” (61). Fag talk is not necessarily or even primarily directed towards actual GLBTQ kids nor is it typically directed at girls. Rather, straight boys direct the threat of faggotry at *each other*. Pascoe notes that “most boys engaged in these sorts of practices only when in groups” of other boys. “When not in groups—when in one-on-one interactions with boys or girls—boys were much less likely to engage in gendered and sexed dominance practices. In this sense boys became masculine in groups.... When with other boys, they postured and bragged” (107).

Trolls in gaming culture deploy fag talk including gendered and sexualized insults like “pussy” and “fag” in a wide variety of situations. For example, Elena Bertozzi writes that, for gamers,

cultural norms are often reflected in banter, jokes, idiom and insults. ... When males play in groups, gendered terms such as ‘sissy’, ‘pussy’ and ‘fag’, are used as normal and

acceptable putdowns. ... In digital gameplay, male conversational exchanges often emphasize the establishment of maleness through choice of language and the explicit enunciation of heterosexist norms. (478)

In 2006, a survey conducted with the approval of the University of Illinois bore out Bertozzi's observations. Jason Rockwood found that

when asked what forms of homophobia people have seen in the gaming community, here are some of what the surveyed said:

87.7% - Players use the phrase, "That's so gay."

83.4% - Players use the words "gay" or "queer" as derogatory names.

...

When asked how frequently players experience homophobia, those surveyed who responded "Always" or "Frequently" equaled 42%. Add in "Sometimes" and it brings up that total to 74.5%.

When asked how often those players respond to the homophobia they witness – 50.9% total responded "Never" or "Rarely." (Cole)

More than 60% of respondents believed the gaming community was either “Somewhat Hostile” or “Very Hostile” to gay and lesbian participants (Sliwinsky).

### **Revisiting *Ready Player One*: Fag Talk and Compulsive Heterosexuality**

As an encyclopedic narrative about gamer culture, it is unsurprising that *Ready Player One* also depicts gamers participating in fag talk. Gunter slang uses girliness as synonym for incompetence and tastelessness. For example, in an early scene in which Wade and Aech argue with a rival gunter named I-r0k, each verbal combatant attempts to assert his (for at this point in the novel, no one knew that Aech was actually a woman) superiority rhetorically by positioning

the others as less masculine than himself. Aech sarcastically tells I-r0k that he is “about as elite as [his] great-grandmother” (42) and I-r0k dismissively refers to Wade and Aech as “girls” (43) and “fags” (44) in an attempt to regain face when they best him in gunter trivia.

The supposedly “friendly” banter between Aech and Wade is even worse. When the long-time friends get into a disagreement about whether the 1985 film *Ladyhawke* counts as a part of Halliday’s canon, Aech argues that it could not possibly be one of their hero’s favorites because “It’s a chick flick disguised as a sword-and-sorcery picture. The only genre film with less balls is probably... freakin’ *Legend*. Anyone who actually enjoys *Ladyhawke* is a bona fide USDA-choice pussy!” (41).

This passage, like the ones outlined in Chapter 1, once again demonstrates that readerly identification with the *wrong* types of texts, texts from “feminine” genres (“chick flicks”) that emphasize love and romance,<sup>29</sup> signifies a failure to adequately perform the gamer identity (more

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<sup>29</sup> One can also see this dynamic taking place in the physical world in spaces typically associated with geeky masculinity. Take, for example, the anti-*Twilight* protests at the 2009 San Diego Comic-con, “where a small group of (mostly male) attendees protested *Twilight* fangirls’ presence” (Scott 59) via cardboard signs and chanted slogans (Ohanesian). In her dissertation titled “Revenge of the Fanboy: Convergence Culture and the Politics of Incorporation” Suzanne Scott describes the importance of these protests to those who study gender:

Circulating around these protests are several gendered implications about generically ‘appropriate’ spaces for fanboys and fangirls to inhabit, who feels culturally entitled to demarcate between ‘authentic’ fan culture and forms that are too mainstream/feminized, and how the popular press has facilitated that sense of entitlement by framing San Diego

masculine sword-and-sorcery epics like 1982's *Conan the Barbarian* and 1983's *Krull* with an emphasis on conquering through violence instead of on love conquering all are explicitly named as a part of Halliday's canon). And, as Aech's case in particular demonstrates, it is imperative that gamers prove their masculinity through *verbal* banter because, on the Internet, other means of embodied performance are unavailable. You never know what kinds of bodies are operating the avatars of your fellow gamers, and so the possibility that girls and women (and even the dreaded "faggots") might successfully deploy a performance of gamer masculinity themselves is known to be possible. This necessitates the intensification of fag talk, since other, physical means of discipline are unavailable. For example, Aech does not bear a man's body, but she is able to convincingly occupy a masculine position within gunter circles, and she is afforded all the privileges and respect that such a masculine performance has earned for her. However, because fag talk and the masculine policing of her friends like Wade makes up such a large part of her masculine performance (in addition to things like the masculine presentation of her avatar and her strong identification with masculine positions in gamer canon texts which enables her to possess mastery over the OASIS and Halliday's puzzles), Aech's performance is helping to support a social structure that would likely reject her were her embodied self revealed.

**Industrial Fag Talk: Compulsive Heterosexuality and *Dragon's Crown*, Microsoft's *Killer Instinct* E3 Demo, and *Cross Assault* Harassment**

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Comic-Con as a masculine space, and its male attendees as Hollywood's most prized focus group. (59-60)

This framing is akin to that which, as we shall see in Chapter 3, separates "hardcore" gaming from "casual" gaming along gendered lines.

In addition to disciplinary fag talk, Pascoe identifies “compulsive heterosexuality” (a play on Adrienne Rich’s concept of “compulsory heterosexuality”), or “ritualized demonstrations of mastery over girls’ bodies” (23) that, once again, take place through discourse (stories, real or imagined, about sexual escapades and affectations of coolness encapsulated by phrases like “bros before hoes”). Like fag talk, discourses of compulsive heterosexuality use women and girls as their instrumental *objects* but are primarily *directed towards* other boys. Their “sexual bravado” (85) is not an expression of desire or lust but a demonstration of power (10) measured in comparison to the rhetorical expressions of sexual dominance made by one’s male friends and rivals (or perhaps a more accurate formulation, one’s friendly rivals).

A recent controversy over the character design art for the Vanillaware and Atlus’s 2013 action role playing game *Dragon’s Crown* exemplifies the imagined threat that compels gamers to perform an over-the-top version of masculinity. Furthermore, the case demonstrates that homophobic fag talk, compulsive heterosexuality, and masculine performance are just as entrenched in the gaming press and the gaming industry as it does amongst individual gamers. *Dragon’s Crown* features several characters with comically exaggerated physiques, but when the game’s trailer was released in April of 2013, one character model’s animations in particular drew the ire of many commentators. The Sorceress, whose model features huge, nearly bare breasts that flap wildly (and independently of one another) and a dress with a slit reaching up to her waist, is both a caricature of and a loving tribute to exploitive fantasy art akin to that featured in pulpy and frequently pornographic science fiction and fantasy periodicals like *Heavy Metal* magazine (Kuchera; Schreier, “The Artist Behind *Dragon’s Crown*”). When *Kotaku* journalist Jason Schreier criticized the artwork, saying that he didn’t want the game to “perpetuate the ugly ‘boys’ club’ mentality that has pervaded gaming for almost three decades now,” he did so by



questioning Vanillaware president and *Dragon Crown* artist George Kamitani's masculinity, dismissively writing that The Sorceress must have been designed "by a 14-year old boy" (Schreier, "Game Developers Really Need to Stop"). By phrasing his critique in this way, Schrier might think he is striking a blow for feminism in gamer culture, but he is actually reinforcing the notion that failed or insufficient masculinity (like the kind that might be performed by a 14-year old boy) is something to be held up for ridicule within that community.

Kamitani's response to Schrier's criticism simply drives this point home further. On his Facebook page, Kamitani posted an image of three burly, shirtless dwarven characters from *Dragon's Crown*, commenting that "it seems that Mr. Jason Schreier of *Kotaku* is pleased also with neither sorceress nor amazon. The art of the direction which he likes was prepared." The implication is that anyone who criticizes *Dragon's Crown's* depictions of women is exhibiting signs of faggotry. Even in this debate, which is ostensibly *about* the depiction of women in a video game, the *real* terms of the debate take place on the field of masculinity: what does the creation of such an image say about the masculinity of its creator? What does the criticism of that image say about the masculinity of the critic? On both sides of the argument, video gaming is rhetorically rendered as a masculine territory.<sup>30</sup>

This framing ignores the ways that the trolling discourses of gamer culture affect actual women. Virtual archival projects like *Fat, Ugly, or Slutty* (gtz) and *Not in the Kitchen Anymore* (Haniver), on the other hand, catalog deliberate attempts by "gamer dudes" to harass and target

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<sup>30</sup> For more on how video game culture is constructed as an always already straight white male space, even in pieces designed to point out the difficulties faced by female gamers, queer gamers, and gamers of color, see Lisa Nakamura's "Queer Female of Color: The Highest Difficult Setting There Is? Gaming Rhetoric as Gender Capital."

female gamers. The gathered examples show a wide variety of policing strategies deployed in performances of compulsive heterosexuality within gaming culture, from the overt sexual objectification of women to body policing to discourses of rape and domestic violence<sup>31</sup> (for more on this phenomenon, see Chapter 3).

Many critics and gaming journalists (Anonymous; Hernandez, “Three Words I Said”; Thorn and Dibbell) have written about “the tendency of ‘rape’ to be used by gamers as slang for victory over an obstacle or fellow player” (Salter and Blodgett 406), as in a winning combatant celebrating their success by shouting “you just got raped!” into the microphone attached to their headset. Rape discourse even occasionally shows up in professional promotional campaigns for games. For example, at the E3 games conference in 2013 (the same year as the *Dragon’s Crown* controversy) Microsoft, the makers of the Xbox brand of video game consoles, unveiled a new installment in the long-running fighting game franchise, *Killer Instinct*. During the demo, Torin Rettig, a male producer on the game, played a match against Ashton Williams, a female community manager from Microsoft, and the “trash talk” Rettig engaged in to spice up their fight for the audience devolved into a rape joke: “Just let it happen, it will be over soon.” Microsoft later apologized for the “off the cuff and inappropriate comment” (Greenfield) that was meant to be “friendly gameplay banter” and not “bullying and harassment of any kind” (Ngak). However, the fact that a phrase so commonly associated with rape might be thought of by industry professionals as “friendly banter,” that a programmer would see no problem with directing such

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<sup>31</sup> This last is a tendency that can be traced back to some of the earliest examples of online role playing, as Julian Dibbell pointed out in his famous piece “A Rape in Cyberspace,” in which he recounts a famous case of how one virtual community chose to deal with an outbreak of textually-constructed sexual assaults.

a phrase towards a female opponent who was seemingly selected specifically to be beaten badly at the game onstage (she jokingly complains about her lack of preparedness to compete against an experienced player and programmer throughout the demonstration), and that an audience would consider this the “laugh line” of the presentation point to the normalization of rape discourse in gaming culture.

This uncomfortable on-stage representation of gendered power dynamics strongly resembled those captured during the online reality show *Cross Assault* (Goldfarb). This 2012 program about professional fighting game players was sponsored by Capcom (the creators of classic fighting games like *Street Fighter* and *Darkstalkers*) and gaming news site *IGN*.<sup>32</sup> The show, which followed two teams of gamers as they competed for a \$25,000 prize, was conceived as an elaborate advertisement for a new game: *Street Fighter X Tekken*. On the first day of broadcasting, the show featured competitors on Team Tekken sexually harassing their teammate Miranda Pakozdi during a practice session. Pakozdi was continually pressured to act as “eye candy” for the presumed straight male viewers of the live-streaming video feed. For example, her teammates suggest that she should challenge another female competitor to a mud wrestling contest, she is pestered to reveal her bra size, etcetera. Her team’s coach and the instigator of the majority of these exchanges, fellow competitive gamer Aris Bakhtanians, even jokingly referred to the broadcast as “the harassment stream” (crossassaultharass).

At first Pakozdi’s reaction is to (somewhat nervously) laugh off these comments, but as the harassment continues she gets more and more irritated. Her responses grow short and terse

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<sup>32</sup> *IGN Entertainment* describes itself as “a leading online media & services company obsessed with gaming, entertainment and everything guys enjoy” (“About IGN”).

and she begins to push back against her coach's lewd suggestions (which he insists he is making on behalf of the male viewers of the stream) as in this exchange:

**BAKHTANIANS:** "Play for her thighs [as the prize for winning the match]."

**PAKOZDI:** "no."

**BAKHTANIANS:** "Play for shirts. Loser takes their shirt off."

**PAKOZDI:** "Hell no."

**BAKHTANIANS:** "Look, I'm the coach here, Miranda. I don't wanna hear anything out of you."

**PAKOZDI:** "Okay, no. I'm trying to play, Aris! You're messing me up."

**BAKHTANIANS:** "You need to be able to focus when people are heckling you!"

**PAKOZDI:** "That's fine! But, like, this is just creepy."

**BAKHTANIANS:** "You need to be able to play when people are harassing you."

**PAKOZDI:** "Thanks for that, Aris..."

**BAKHTANIANS:** "Take off your shirt."

...

**BAKHTANIANS (to the viewers of the stream):** "I tried asking if she has a skirt so we can hook you guys [in the chat] up tomorrow, but she didn't bring a skirt."

**PAKOZDI:** "Nope."

**BAKHTANIANS (to PAKOZDI):** "Maybe we'll go to the store and get you a skirt."

**PAKOZDI:** "I'm good."

**BAKHTANIANS:** "I'm serious! Can I go to the store and get you a skirt? I'll pay for it."

**BAKHTANIANS (to viewers):** Do you see what I do for you guys, chat? I'm gonna try and get her a skirt guys. I got your back. Out of my own pocket, I'm gonna buy her a skirt. If I can't buy her a skirt, I'll *make* her a skirt out of napkins.

**BAKHTANIANS (to PAKOZDI):** You're wearing a skirt. Miranda, you're wearing a skirt tomorrow."

**PAKOZDI:** "I don't have a skirt."

**BAKHTANIANS:** "I'm gonna buy you one." (crossassaultharass)

Disturbingly, Bakhtanians also enlists the broader fighting gaming community to pressure Pakozdi into tolerating his behavior. He implies that by taking offense to his statements, she is failing to conform to the expectations of the community in multiple ways. First, she risks failing at the competitive level because her "overly emotional" responses to his taunts distract her from her game. A better competitor, he implies, would be able to "rise above" the taunts and ignore them to concentrate on the game. By exhibiting an emotional response, Pakozdi marks herself as an inadequate teammate. Second, he uses the audience watching the stream as a weapon to pressure Pakozdi into indulging him. He implies that her protests about sexual harassment are akin to disloyalty to her team and to the broader fighting game community watching the show. Bakhtanians constantly invokes "the chat," the viewers who are watching the show as it streams live and who comment on the action in a chat room attached to the stream. He encourages the chat room participants to join in as he pesters Pakozdi and narrates back to her their contributions: "This chat is, like, evolving. There's already people who have names registered as parts of your body.... They're getting grimmer and scummier" (crossassaultharass). "Are you a part of this team, Miranda?" he finally asks, a question that might apply to the competitive team, or to the "team" of the fighting game subculture (crossassaultharass). If the answer is yes, he

implies/threatens, then she should refrain from pushing back against his antics and acquiesce to his (and, according to his construction, the fans') desires by tolerating the harassing language.

A few days following the broadcast, Bakhtanians rationalized the harassment as a legitimate part of gaming culture in a conversation with Jared Rea, the community manager of *Twitch.tv* (a website featuring live-streams of professional and amateur gamers). In this exchange, Bakhtanians responded with indignation to the idea that the fighting game community should work to become more inclusive towards female players and spectators. He declares that sexual harassment and fighting games are “one and the same thing” (iplaywinner): “The sexual harassment is part of a culture. And if you remove that from the fighting game community, it’s not the fighting game community.” “These things are established for years” he told Rea, adding, “It’s not right... it’s ethically wrong” for the community to be asked to change its trolling behavior in order to court a bigger, more diverse group of potential participants.

And I know you think that, oh, what do you know about ethics? All you do is say racial stuff and sexist stuff. But, you know, those are jokes, and if you were really a member of the fighting game community you would know that. You would know that these are jokes....

The beauty of the fighting game community, and you should know this - it’s based around not being welcome. That’s the beauty of it. That’s the key essence of it.  
(iplaywinner)

Bakhtanians posits trash talking, and sexual and racial harassment in particular, as a kind of hazing that competitive gamers must pass through in order to make it onto the “inside” of the community.<sup>33</sup>

### **Google Bombs, Beat-Em-Ups, and Dickwolves: Trolling as a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game**

In addition to policing their own spaces, trolls also sometimes venture into other online communities in order to target those that they perceive as a threat (or at the very least, a nuisance) to their culture. In recent years there have been several<sup>34</sup> extremely high-profile instances of trolling aimed at feminists who criticize the gaming community. One of them was the *Penny Arcade* Dickwolves scandal, wherein a well-known, long-running webcomic dedicated to gaming culture ran a strip that featured the rape of a (male) slave by a lycanthrope as a set up to its punch line (Holkins and Krahulik, “The Sixth Slave”). When a feminist commentators on blogs like *Shakesville* (Millie A) criticized the comic, *Penny Arcade* creators Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik (aka “Tycho and Gabe,” the two main characters of the comic) and their fans reacted with a multi-pronged trolling attack. First, the duo published a second comic (see Figure 16) mocking the supposed concerns of (straw) feminist commentators (Holkins and Krahulik, “Breaking It Down”). This comic was designed to be a troll: it frames those who expressed concerns about the original Dickwolves joke as overly-emotional, irrational, and illogical:

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<sup>33</sup> This practice is not unlike that which Hank Nuwer describes as the hazing practices that are commonly associated with sports teams or sororities and fraternities.

<sup>34</sup> For more, including information on the recent high profile #GamerGate controversy surrounding game developer Zoe Quinn, see Condis, “Trolling Gender Trouble.”

**TYCHO:** Hello. This is Tycho Brahe, of *Penny Arcade*. We recently made a comic strip where an imaginary person was raped imaginarily by a mythological creature whose every limb was an erect phallus. Some found that idea disturbing.

**GABE:** We want to state in clear language, without ambiguity or room for interpretation: we hate rapers, and all the rapes they do. Seriously, though. Rapists are really the **worst**.

**TYCHO:** It's possible you read our cartoon, and became a rapist as a direct result. If you're raping someone right now, stop. Apologize. And leave. Go, and rape no more. (Holkins and Krahulik, "Breaking It Down")

In the blog post accompanying this second comic, Krahulik also insinuates that his critics must come from a place "outside" of *Penny Arcade* fandom. He expresses doubt that any who had read his strip for a significant length of time would actually be offended by the joke, implying that everyone who *did* take offense were Johnny-come-latelies whose unfounded opinions could safely be ignored by true fans:

What surprised me most about some of the reactions to our Dickwolf joke was not that people were offended. But that this was the comic that offended them. In each case the emails I got started with something like "I've been a long time fan" or "Been reading the comic for years..." and then they go into how this particular comic really bothered them. I just don't understand that. Did the comics about bestiality, suicide, murder, pedophilia, and torture not bother them?... What comic strip have they been reading all these years? (Krahulik, "Tragedy is When I Cut My Finger")

The implication behind this line of argument is that critics of the strip *had not* actually been reading for years, that they were actually new readers (or perhaps first time visitors who had read



about the comic for the first time on a feminist blog), outsiders to the *Penny Arcade* community and therefore ideal targets in the game of trolling.

*Penny Arcade* supporters also entered into the rhetorical battle by flooding feminist online spaces and violating their posted rules of conduct (led by Krahulik himself in one instance, see McEwan) and by Tweeting rape threats and death threats at them (Stanton, “Here is a Project”) in an attempt to demonstrate to both Holkins and Krahulik, who function as “power brokers” (Salter and Blodgett 404) or celebrities in the video game community, *and* to each other that they are devoted fans and hardcore gamers (as exemplified by their performances of aggressive masculinity). They demonstrate their alignment with *Penny Arcade* (and by extension, with the broader gaming culture that *Penny Arcade* represents) by exhibiting an aloof attitude themselves and by disrupting the peace of their virtual “enemies,” generating reactions of anger, violation, disgust, even fear.

At one point the *Penny Arcade* store even began selling Dickwolf t-shirts (See Figure 17) to its fans so that they could publicly show their support for the duo’s epic troll at the upcoming Penny Arcade Expo (PAX for short), a video game convention that, ironically, markets itself as a safe and inclusive space for all (“Safety & Security”). Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett wrote about these t-shirts that, “The spots-team design... seemed to offer an implicit team-spirit endorsement of rape as a joke” (407) and encouraged “wearers... to view others wearing it as allies” (408). Indeed, Courtney Stanton, one of the troll’s targets, described the shirt as a means of intimidation:

I have to wonder at the creative meeting that spawned the final design – in my mind, it was a 10-second event that consisted of, “maybe we should have the word ‘Dickwolves’ on it somehow-” and then the fire alarm went off and they had to evacuate the building,

never to continue the discussion. Given the hostile attitude Gabe and Tycho have continued to display toward the issue, I can't help but feel like they just want anyone who spoke out to walk into PAX East and be confronted with a wall of "Dickwolves" text at the official merch table.

...

The shirt design is a sports team style design using the word "Dickwolves" where the name of the team would usually go and with a little wolf-head logo, as if it was a team mascot (see also: every other sports shirt ever). Is there *any way* to read this shirt *other* than, "Go Team Rapists"? (Stanton, "Here is a Shirt")

In true troll fashion, someone in *Penny Arcade* fandom actually took up the rhetoric Stanton was attributing to the t-shirts to further provoke critics of Mike and Jerry, creating a Twitter account called "@teamrape" (with a screen name of RareAnimalPreservE, configured so that capitalized letters would spell "rape") in an attempt to rally fans and convince them to wear Dickwolf t-shirts to PAX. The shirts were yet another troll, albeit one co-located in both the digital world and the physical one.<sup>35</sup> It would function as a test of all PAX attendees. Those who were offended by their presence would, in the eyes of the wearer, be outing themselves as someone who "didn't get the joke" in the original comic and, by extension, someone who "doesn't get" *Penny Arcade* fandom and gaming culture in general.

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<sup>35</sup> Although *Penny Arcade* did eventually pull the shirts from their store, saying that they didn't want to make anyone feel unwelcome at PAX (Krahulik "Dickwolves"), Krahulik recently reignited the controversy in an interview with *Penny Arcade* business manager Robert Khoo, when he stated that "pulling the dickwolves merchandise was a mistake" (Hernandez, "Penny Arcade Artist").

Another high profile incident revolves around the vitriol directed at feminist commentator Anita Sarkeesian from the website *Feminist Frequency*. When Sarkeesian solicited funds via *Kickstarter* (a platform for funding independent projects where creators ask for money from backers, who receive rewards for pledging increasing amounts towards a project's budget) for a series of videos criticizing the portrayal of women in video games (Sarkeesian, "Trope vs. Women in Video Games"), she found herself targeted by trolls long before she was even able to release her first video. For example, she faced a barrage of negative comments on the YouTube video announcing the Kickstarter campaign which included "many variations on common sexist troll posts like 'get back in the kitchen' 'tits or get the fuck out' and the old standbys 'slut,' 'whore,' and 'cunt'" (Sarkeesian, "Harassment, Misogyny, and Silencing on YouTube"), and a flood of pornographic images including drawings of Sarkeesian being raped by video game characters which were sent to her over social media (Sarkeesian, "Image Based Harassment"). A photograph of her was also turned into an internet meme in the form of an image macro<sup>36</sup> (Sarkeesian, "Image Based Harassment"). Her Wikipedia page was vandalized as trolls "chang[ed] the text, chang[ed] the page categories, chang[ed] the external links to reroute to porn sites and add[ed] a drawing of a woman with a man's penis in her mouth captioned with 'Daily Activities'" (Sarkeesian, "Harassment via Wikipedia Vandalism"), and she was Google bombed<sup>37</sup> so that "her top Google search result return[ed] the sentence 'Anita

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<sup>36</sup> An image macro is a photo template with space for a caption that allows users to create variants on a single joke or meme.

<sup>37</sup> Google bombing refers to the practice of creating numerous links relating to a particular keyword in order to drive Google results of a search for that word to a particular location. Often

Sarkeesian is a feminist video blogger and cunt”” (Plunkett). She endured DDos attacks<sup>38</sup> on her website and hackers attempted to gain access to her email and social media accounts (Sarkeesian, “Image Based Harassment”). Hate sites aimed at Sarkeesian posted her home phone number and address in an attempt to intimidate her (Lewis, “This is What Online Harassment Looks Like”).<sup>39</sup>

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Google bombing is used to prank targets by driving searches towards embarrassing or satirical results.

<sup>38</sup> “A distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack is one in which a multitude of compromised systems attack a single target, thereby causing denial of service for users of the targeted system. The flood of incoming messages to the target system essentially forces it to shut down, thereby denying service to the system to legitimate users” (“Distributed Denial-of-Service Attack (DDoS)”). Another target of such tactics was the *Gamers Against Bigotry* website, which was hacked to display racist slurs and graphic sexual images on its front page (Lewis, “*Gamers Against Bigotry*”). Hackers also wiped the site’s database of pledges collected from gamers who promised “to not use bigoted language while gaming, online and otherwise” (*Gamers Against Bigotry*).

<sup>39</sup> Sarkeesian’s case is strongly reminiscent of that of another prominent woman who faced an army of gamer trolls: Kathy Sierra. Sierra was once

a well-known programmer and game developer [who] maintained a popular blog on software development called “Creating Passionate Users.” In 2007, anonymous individuals attacked Ms. Sierra on her blog and two other websites. Posters suggested she deserved to have her throat slit, be suffocated, sexually violated, and hanged. They posted her home address and Social Security number. They posted doctored photographs of Ms. Sierra: one picture featured her with a noose beside her neck; another depicted her

But the most disturbing example of trolling Sarkeesian faced was the creation of a game in which players could *Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian*:

On July 5th 2012 an interactive domestic abuse style “game”... was uploaded to the NewGrounds website by one of the site’s users. It invited players to “punch this bitch in the face” and with each click a photoshopped image of me would become progressively more bloody and battered until the screen turned completely red. The “game” was then proudly circulated on various gaming forums by those engaging in the sustained harassment campaign against me. It remained on NewGrounds website for about 24 hours before being removed. (Sarkeesian, “Image Based Harassment”)

The game’s description justifies its existence via an us-versus-them logic pitting gamers against feminists in a battle over self-expression and freedom of speech.

Anita Sarkeesian has not only scammed thousands of people out of over \$160,000, but also uses the excuse that she is a woman to get away with whatever she damn well pleases. Any form of constructive criticism, even from fellow women, is either ignored or labeled to be sexist against her.

She claims to want gender equality in video games, but in reality, she just wants to use the fact that she was born with a vagina to get free money and sympathy from everyone who crosses her path. (Lewis, ““This is What Online Harassment Looks Like”)

By using the format of a game to contain this violent revenge fantasy, the troll attempts to ride the line between provocation and playfulness. The images used in the game are horrific and

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screaming while being suffocated by lingerie. After the attacks, Ms. Sierra canceled speaking engagements and feared leaving her home. (Citron 380-381)

revolting and yet they are labeled as a form of “play” (the final screen of the game tells the user, “Thanks for playing!” and invites them to “Play Again”). By rhetorically positioning this kind of cruel harassment as a game, the troll gets to have their cake and eat it, too: they can evoke the desired reactions of outrage and disgust from their targets via the over-the-top violent imagery while creating a veneer of plausible deniability that their commentary on Sarkeesian is not a *real* threat but rather “just a game” or “just a joke.” Thus, anyone who has an emotional reaction to their game must be joyless sticks in the mud who “don’t get” gaming culture or who “can’t take a joke.”

Indeed, in a TED talk about her experience with trolls, Sarkeesian identified the trolling mentality writ large as a kind of game. She said that finding herself targeted by the trolls of the gaming community was like finding herself suddenly cast in the role of “the villain of a massively online game” (Sarkeesian, “Anita Sarkeesian at TEDxWomen 2012”).

All of my social media sites were flooded with threats of rape, violence, sexual assault, death. And you’ll notice that these threats and comments were all specifically targeting my gender. What’s even more disturbing, if that’s even possible, than this overt display of misogyny on a grand scale is that the perpetrators openly referred to this harassment campaign and their abuse as a game....

Now we don’t usually think of online harassment as a social activity but we know from the strategies and tactics that they used, that they were not working alone, that they were actually loosely coordinating with one another. This social component is a powerful motivating factor that works to provide incentives for players to participate, or perpetrators rather, to participate and to actually escalate the attacks by earning the praise and approval of their peers. We can kind of think of this as an informal reward system

where players earn “internet points” for increasingly brazen and abusive attacks. Then they would document these attacks and they would bring them back to the message boards as evidence, to show off to each other – kind of like trophies or achievements.

(Sarkeesian, “Anita Sarkeesian at TEDxWomen 2012”)

Even the attempts at hacking and vandalism she faced could be thought of as ludic (if destructively so) in nature. According to Orly Turgeman-Goldschmidt, hackers often consider their hobby to be akin to a game that they play against the security systems of their victims as opposed to a violation of their victims’ personal privacy, and A. E. Adam refers to hackers who describe their activities as “pranks.” Moreover, hackers exhibit game-like behavior by competing with one another to top each others’ exploits and establish hierarchies within their communities (Burrill 116-131). The true “audience” for their performances of technical virtuosity is not the hacking victims; it is the community of hackers to which they belong, just as the true audience for the troll is not the target but other trolls.<sup>40</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Whether they are trolling for newbies in their own communities or infiltrating another community’s virtual space, trolls see their actions as moves in a grand game, or in the case of the video game subculture, a meta-game that takes place inside of and around the electronic games

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<sup>40</sup> Like trolling, hacking can be thought of as a textual performance of a “Wild West brand of masculinity” (Adams). As A. E. Adams notes, in many popular accounts the hacker is imagined as a modern day cowboy, a rugged individual, penetrating a digital space and asserting control over it, reshaping it via a combination of intelligence, technological superiority, and force of will. In other words, hacking is culturally positioned as an enactment of masculinity that is especially well-suited to the digital age.

that they play. Trolls imagine themselves as trickster figures who play as a persona that is rude and obnoxious (or perhaps simply ignorant) to entertain themselves and their friends. Through this persona they can “expose” their victims as humorless bores and to “make them... look even more clueless than they already do, while subtly conveying to the more savvy and experienced that [they are] in fact a deliberate troll” (Wang). In other words, as one troll wrote in an anonymous “Troller’s FAQ,”

The people who are going to get the maximum enjoyment out of your post are other trollers.... It is trollers that you are trying to entertain so be creative - trollers don't just want a laugh from you they want to see good trolls so that they can also learn how to improve their own in the never ending search for the perfect troll (Wang).

The victims of trolling are simply the game tokens being exchanged by the trolls in their effort to prove their mastery over this rhetorical game of “identity and deception” (Donath 45).

I read the use of trolling as a mechanism to police online communities (and particularly the online gaming subculture) as a highly gendered act. The rules of the “game of trolls” in addition to the content of messages commonly used to troll enforce a set of community standards that value the performance of traits traditionally and historically considered “masculine” like objectivity, calm self-possession, and emotional distance and devalues those traits that have been typically imagined as “feminine” such as emotional engagement and earnestness. After all, the primary way that trolls distinguish themselves from their victims is through the manipulation of emotions. The troll “wins” when he or she is able to elicit an emotional response from the victim while maintaining a cool, level-headed image for themselves. This is true regardless of the content of the troll’s hurtful messages. As described above, many trolls do choose to use gendered insults to provoke their victims. But even in cases where their barbs are gender-



neutral, the aim of the troll's game is to trick victims into temporarily losing their ability to adequately enact a textual performance of masculinity. Gender is the conceptual field upon which the game of trolls is played.

And yet, it is perhaps not the trolls themselves that do the most to curtail female participation in gaming culture. Rather, it is the widespread acceptance of trolling as a part of the culture that acts as the most effective deterrent. Trolling, particularly that which is aimed at women, is rhetorically positioned within the broader gaming community as an inevitable feature of Internet culture, a risk that women knowingly take when they enter into that culture and that they should simply expect to encounter. Danielle Keats Citron argues that "the public and law enforcement routinely marginalize women's experiences [of trolling], deeming the harassment harmless teasing that women should expect, and tolerate, given the internet's Wild West norms of behavior" (373). Citron writes that trolling victims are dismissed as "overly sensitive complainers" (375) and "drama queens" (396) who "assumed the risks" associated with presenting as female on the internet and thus should have known that trolls would be coming their way (375).<sup>41</sup> One might characterize this aloof attitude as, itself, a massively multiplayer act of trolling perpetrated by the community as a whole. The message being sent by this

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<sup>41</sup> One set of commentators at *The Escapist*, a digital magazine about video games and geek culture, amusingly phrased this sentiment thusly in reference to Anita Sarkeesian: "If I slather myself with honey and put fish in my pockets and start pushing at bears, I don't really have a case when suddenly I get mauled.... When you go on the Internet with an opinion you are going to get backlash" ("No Right Answer: Is Anita Sarkeesian Wrong?"). Note that this metaphor posits trolls as a mindless force of nature and not as the a group of conscious individuals making the active decision to harass and threaten another person.

wholesale dismissal of women's experiences of harassment in the gaming community is, to use the trolls' parlance: "if you are too butthurt to hang with us, then leave. After all, trolling is inevitable."

But trolling is not inevitable, nor is it seen as a desirable feature of the community by many game producers, who are working to implement features that will curtail trolling in an attempt to broaden their player base and make their game more welcoming to newer players (see Chapter 4). For example, the world's most popular Multiplayer Online Battle Arena game, *League of Legends*, has implemented a Tribunal punishment system for players who are regularly reported as trolls. And Microsoft's new console the Xbox One boasts "advanced troll detection" software designed to weed trolls out of the general multiplayer population and pair them with each other (Scullion).

However, while game makers have a monetary incentive to curtail trolling behavior, regular gamers actually experience an incentive to pretend that trolling is an ingrained and unavoidable part of the gaming community and that, thus, female gamers are the ones to blame if they are upset by a barrage of harassers online. Such an aloof, cynical attitude towards trolling itself marks one as an urbane, experienced cultural insider who is themselves immune to the emotional damage the trolls are trying to create in the first place.

It is tempting to imagine the geeky world of online gaming as an equal-opportunity environment, one where women and men exist on an equal playing field. On the Internet, where physical bodies are unimportant in comparison to textual and technical performances, *anyone* can rise to the top of the social hierarchy, be they male or female. However, as this chapter demonstrates, women (and men) are only able to rise provided that they use the anonymity provided by the Internet to construct a persona in keeping with the new (male) geek chic (as

Aech did in *Ready Player One*, see Chapter 1). Participants discipline one another via the game of trolling to value masculine tropes and devalue the feminine. Girls can play right alongside the boys, but only in so far as they can make themselves seem to *be* like one of the boys, and queer people are welcome so long as they work to avoid being seen as “fags” (see Chapter 4).

Ironically, it requires a great deal of labor from both male and female participants in digital culture to maintain a posture of effortless self-possession. Trolling is a game of projected aloof affectation that actually requires a great deal of commitment to play. The cartoon “trollface” that acts as a mascot for trolls everywhere is a white male with a mischievous grin. He confronts the viewer, asking if they have a “problem?” To admit that one finds him troubling is to admit that one has been successfully trolled, that one has lost the game by failing to recognize the joke or to find it funny. The “correct” or “winning” response to the troll is detachment: “nope, no problem here.” Such a posture situates the viewer as a sophisticated reader, someone who is in on the troll’s ruse, an experienced insider. For this reason, the “trollface” is sometimes referred to as the “coolface” (Brad). He tests whether the viewer is “cool” enough (both in the sense of whether the viewer is “hip” to the joke and in the sense of whether the viewer keeps a cool head in the face of the troll’s flaming posts) to hang with the larger group. This “coolness,” which is supposedly derived from *not* caring about what others think of them, is constantly and anxiously invoked in front of an audience of peers so that one’s place in the community can be continually reaffirmed.

In the next two chapters, I will discuss examples of players who refuse the specific brand of “coolness” exemplified by the troll and explore how gamer culture works to explain and contain the ruptures in the social order posed by their refusal to conform to the hierarchy of geeky masculinity. In Chapter 3, I argue that the encroaching perception that gaming culture

will be “feminized” by the current influx of women and girls into geeky cultural spaces threatens those who define their self-worth according to the “game of masculinity” described above. I use examples from the recent explosion of visual and verbal memes about female gamers flourishing online to explain how these new entrants into gamer culture are re-imagined as figures that are less threatening to the status quo. These memes revolve around three stereotypes that circulate about female gamers: that they only play games in the first place because they were introduced to them by their straight male partners, that they are mostly casual gamers with poor taste and poor gaming skills, and that they are mere pretenders who only *seem* to be into gaming because they want to trick gamer guys into giving them money and attention they do not deserve. Such narratives represent an attempt to ignore what Judith Butler has famously called “gender trouble” posed by women who play games by re-casting them as traditional feminine archetypes like the subservient, sexy sidekick, the incompetent, childlike dilettante, and the unscrupulous whore.

## CHAPTER 3

### SEXY SIDEKICKS, FILTHY CASUALS, AND FAKE GEEK GIRLS: MEME-IFYING GENDER IN THE GAMING COMMUNITY

In Chapter 2 I argued that trolling is a mechanism through which a masculine brand of textual identity performance is encoded as the norm in gamer culture. However, because this digital form of masculinity (like all forms of masculinity) is a discursive performance, a set of presentational practices and not some innate essence that is only accessible to male bodies, it is an unreliable mechanism for distributing access to power and privilege exclusively to men. After all, *anyone*, male or female, can deploy a masculine performance, especially in online spaces where performances need not be anchored in a particular physical body. This fact allows for anxiety and worry about one's place within a social order that must be managed via disciplinary systems of discourse. The porous nature of the border marking gaming as a "masculine" activity is acknowledged by guarding it ever the more fiercely. And the demographic data shows that this anxiety might be well-founded. Women are making their way into the "masculine" space of gamer culture in ever-increasing numbers. According to the Entertainment Software Association, almost half of all people who report playing play digital games (45%) are female ("Game Player Data"), and in the coveted 24-35 year old demographic, women now outnumber men nearly two to one according to the Consumer Electronics Organization (Brightman). Female gamers are the secret to the success of the top-selling game franchise of all-time, *The Sims*; sixty-five percent of the audience of that franchise are women and girls (Boyes). Women were also an important factor in the last round of video game console wars between the Nintendo Wii, the Playstation 3, and Microsoft's Xbox 360. According to

Neilson pollsters, the Wii became the “best-selling of the three systems” not by pursuing “the core/hardcore gaming segment” (“Every Gaming System Has its Fans”) but by specifically targeting “women, families and all those not typically associated with ‘serious’ gaming” (“Case Study: Changing the Game”), thereby enabling Nintendo to claim a “9 million player advantage among female console gamers” (Totilo). Meanwhile, all-female gamer clans, most famously the Frag Dolls (“FragDolls”) and the PMS Clan (originally the “Psychotic Men Slayers,” now the more friendly-sounding “Pandora’s Mighty Soldiers,” Kane 166), are participating in professional eSports events and working to recruit girls into the gaming scene (with the help of their sponsors, who are looking to sell gaming equipment and software to a previously untapped market).

All of these examples pose challenges to the gendered discursive system that has developed to distribute the imprimatur of legitimacy and belonging within gamer culture. As I described in Chapters 1 and 2, this system was built upon a network of shared expectations that rewarded those who “played the game” of masculine posturing. If women are breaking (have broken?) into gaming, then what will happen to this social system that has been present in the gaming world from its infancy? The entry of these women and girls into gaming culture threatens the status quo. They are making “gender trouble” within gamer culture (Butler xi)—trouble for the gender *system* we rely on to describe and assign social roles and hierarchical positions to subjects within that culture.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault outlines one way that such systems flex and adapt to accommodate challenges: by encouraging an intensification and a proliferation of discourse around problematic subjects, thereby rendering them knowable (and thus, containable) within that system’s parameters. According to this model, problematic individuals like hysterical

women or sexual perverts who refused or were unable to subject themselves to the dominant heterosexual order were managed not by being censored and ignored but by being thoroughly discussed and scrutinized. Once an “outsider” or an “abnormal” individual could be named and explained, diagnosed as a one of a particular *type* of person with its own regular and predictable features, it could be subjected to systems of discipline and order. In fact, the process of reclaiming via the labeling and institutionalizing of the resistant actually *strengthened and expanded* the system that the outsider was thought to threaten.

In this chapter I will argue that this rhetorical tactic of power is at work in video game culture around the “problem” of the female gamer. The questions that the existence of a new influx of female gamers poses to the gendered hierarchy of gamer culture produces a “will to knowledge” (Foucault, *A History of Sexuality* 12), a desire to explain and hence to contain female gamers, thereby making them legible and knowable within existing gendered paradigms. We see this happening in the “veritable discursive explosion” (17) around female gamers that has been taking place both in the gaming industry and in the community. The product of all of this discussion about girl gamers is a set of overlapping and interlocking descriptions of the *types* of girls who game, a taxonomy of “species” of gamer girls that one might encounter online. Much of the discourse around women in games functions to corral female gamers into one of these diagnostic categories. Fitting her into one of these types aligns her with a familiar, common sense “truth” about performances of femininity that is accepted within the larger gender system. Thus, it renders her knowable *within* that system even as her very presence registers as a point of resistance against it. In fact, her initial resistance and subsequent discursive recuperation serve to reinforce the circuits of power that sustain that system.

One of the primary vehicles for these taxonomic disciplinary discourses are Internet memes, those viral or, as media scholar Henry Jenkins and co-authors Sam Ford and Joshua Green call them, “spreadable” nuggets of content that proliferate on message boards and in comment sections throughout the web. I have identified three “types” of women who have been invented by and are continually cited in memetic discourse in gamer culture: the first is the “sexy sidekick,” the fantasy of what a gamer girl “should” be like. She is the subject of many wishful discussions and the romantic interest in many popular texts featuring straight male gamers as protagonists. Her image is put on a pedestal by the gaming community as the perfect romantic partner for a gamer guy, the feminine standard against which all actual female participants in the gaming community are measured and found wanting in some way. In fact, she is typically described as being into gaming *only because* she has a boyfriend who was into it first. She is designed to prop up the masculinity of her partner, and her purpose is to support him in-game (as a supportive character class) and in real life (as a talisman that proves his virility and sexual accomplishments).

Second is the “casual” girl gamer, the dabbler who is too inexperienced and ignorant about gamer culture to understand its depths. She might play some digital games, but she stays out of the ultra-masculine spaces populated by hardcore gamers, so she can easily be dismissed as not a “true” gamer. And finally there is the “fake geek girl” who isn’t *actually* into gaming at all but is practicing a deception to get something (money, time, attention) out of a gamer guy. She is a villainess, someone who is looking to exploit the gender system to victimize others. These diagnostic archetypes (which appear everywhere from fictional narratives about gamer culture to industry press releases to forum posts and blog comment threads created by gamers) are a means to police women and girls who participate in a “masculine” activity like gaming, to



re-classify them and to narrate their actions in such a way as to render them more comfortably recognizable as performers of traditionally recognized feminine roles: the object of heterosexual desire, the inept, childlike dilettante, and the duplicitous whore.

Internet memes are one source of these gendered stereotypes in gamer culture and they are a prominent vehicle through which such stereotypes are exchanged and proliferated. And yet, because of their ever-shifting, ever-evolving natures as tools of communication, it is possible for even the most regressive of memes to be taken up and redeployed for new purposes. I will conclude my chapter by demonstrating how female gamers have begun deploying “countermemes” decrying sexism in geek culture using the very tools that seeded sexist memes in the first place.

### **Making (Gender) Trouble: Sites of Resistance and the Will to Knowledge**

In her book of the same name, Judith Butler defines “gender trouble” as those “non-normative... practices” that “call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis” (xi), making the rules of the game of gender visible and thereby revealing it as an institution of social power and not a simple expression of some natural, biological order. Performances of gender trouble might involve taking existing signifiers of masculinity and femininity (codes of dress and makeup, of body language and disposition, or of activity and habit) and remixing them in unexpected ways, ways that call attention to the performance of gender *as* a performance or a masquerade (xxii-xxiii). They have the potential to make spectators uneasy because they suggest it is possible to become unmoored within the gender system, triggering “the fear of losing one’s place in gender” (xi) and therefore one’s place in the myriad institutions organized around gender.

Foucault would describe “gender trouble” as an example of resistance, a force capable of “producing cleavages in a society... fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them” (*A History of Sexuality* 96). According to Foucault’s model, power and resistance are not the opposite of one another. They are constitutive of one another. Power “depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance” to “play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations” (*A History of Sexuality* 95), and resistance is only able to affect real change by intervening in power relations as they are practiced and instantiated by institutions. In other words, power perpetuates itself by responding to the challenges posed by resistance even as resistance redirects power into new channels, potentially opening up new spaces, alliances, or institutions. This means that large-scale institutional shifts or changes in who can access power are less likely to be the product of a single revolutionary act and more likely to be the end result of a multitude of iterations of the cycle of interaction between power and resistance.

And one of the most effective ways for power to interact with resistance is to study it. The pressure created by resistance creates a “will to knowledge” (Foucault, *A History of Sexuality* 12) or a desire to speak, think, and write about an object of investigation. This is because as it is surveilled and defined, dissected and theorized, resistance is brought under the purview of existing authorities, institutions and disciplines, who position it in relation to existing schemes of knowledge. In fact, knowledge systems and applications of power are so closely tied to one another that Foucault imagines them as a single entity: power/knowledge. In an interview on his philosophy of truth and power with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquion, Foucault emphasized “truth isn’t outside of power, or lacking in power” (*Power/Knowledge* 131). It is not a neutral entity that we can observe in an unmediated way. Rather

truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its régime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true” (*Power/Knowledge* 131).

Systems of power shape what we think of as “knowledge” and “truth” by creating the very context within which statements can be understood and judged as true or false. That knowledge is then used to justify or even to shape the way power is deployed. Or, as Foucault put it, “‘truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A ‘régime’ of truth” (*Power/Knowledge* 133).

Within the overarching power-knowledge system of gender, which extends into every aspect of our culture, gaming is understood to be as masculine institution. This allows for the production of certain kinds of gendered discourses within gaming culture even as it creates limits on which other types of discourse are legible, on how discourse is presented, and on who is authorized to speak. But the current influx of female gamers into the scene constitutes resistance to that system in the form of gender trouble. Within the gendered régime of power/knowledge that permeates the culture, these gamers are illegible. The threat they pose to the status quo generates a will to knowledge, a desire to develop new narratives to explain their presence in such a way as to preserve the overall system even as that system expands to accommodate their presence. New categories or roles are created for them to occupy that explain

their presence in a masculine institution by attributing it to the presence of what are thought of as traditionally “feminine” traits and drives. The anxiety created by the presence of these women is defused as the questions they pose to the gender system are wrapped in protective layers of discourse that connect them into the power/knowledge system, making them legible and subject to the apparatus of power that governs that system.

### **On the Origin of Memes: The Evolution of the Mind Virus**

The primary form of discourse that I will be analyzing in the chapter is Internet memes. The term “meme” (pronounced “meem”) was first coined in 1976 by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins described memes as a way of understanding the development of the intellectual lives of human beings according to evolutionary theory. Memes can be thought of as bits of culture that spread from mind to mind like viruses, reproducing and thriving (or disappearing and dying out) depending on how suited they are to the “niche” created by the community or subculture in which it exists. Dawkins writes:

Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain.... When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme’s propagation in just the way a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell. (192)

Examples of memes include “such things as popular tunes, catchphrases, clothing fashions, architectural styles, ways of doing things, icons, jingles, and the like” (Knobel and Lanskear 199)

as well as more abstract notions like the idea of God or, as I will argue below, the idea of gender as a social category.

The study of memetics is a controversial field in which there is a great amount of debate around questions of individual agency. Some, like Susan Blackmore in her book *The Meme Machine*, argue that human minds are little more than passive carriers for memes, computers that are operated by their memetic software and not active shapers of the cultural ecology. In this chapter, on the other hand, I will be assuming along with scholars like Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, Joshua Green, Rosaria Conte, Limon Shifman, Michelle Knobel, and Colin Landshear that people can and do (and indeed must) purposefully and creatively contribute to the process of meme selection, propagation, and proliferation. In fact, I will argue here that community and subcultural “social norms, perceptions, and preferences are crucial in memetic selection processes” (Shifman 12). In other words, memes “take off” within a particular community because community members select them for sharing. “Audiences play an active role in ‘spreading’ content rather than serving as passive carriers of viral media: their choices, investments, agendas, and actions determine what gets valued” (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 21). And memes are more likely to be shared when they speak to/with the existing discourses and memes that were already present in a given community. According to Limon Shifman,

At any given moment, many memes are competing for the attention of hosts; however, only memes suited to their sociocultural environment spread successfully, while others become extinct. Dawkins also noted that certain groups of coadaptive memes tend to be replicated together—strengthening each other in the process (9).

The memes described in this chapter are one such group of coadaptive memes or, as Hans-Cees Speel calls them, “memeplexes,” that hang together and attach themselves to gendered anxieties

around community membership and authenticity in gamer culture, satisfying a particular will to knowledge created by the recent influx of women and girls into that culture. Shifman writes,

Memes may best be understood as pieces of cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon. Although they spread on a micro basis, their impact is on the macro level: memes shape the mindsets, forms of behavior, and actions of social groups. (18)

They function as a kind of “(post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as Photoshopped images or urban legends” (Shifman 14). As such, these memes have an impact on the way that women and girls are portrayed in games, the way they are marketed to (or ignored by) game development companies, and the way that women are received in online gaming communities.

### **Know Your Meme: The Lingua Franca of Internet Culture**

In the language of Internet culture, the colloquial meaning of the word “meme” is a little different from Dawkins’s original construction. An Internet meme is an easily reproducible and remixable piece of “observable audiovisual content, such as YouTube videos and humorous images” (Shifman 13), hashtags, catchphrases, etcetera. Shifman defines Internet memes as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (Shifman 41). We can track memes according to three dimensions: *content*, *form*, and *stance* (Shifman 40). Content is the part of an Internet meme that is most similar to the traditional notion of “meme” as coined by Dawkins. It is the idea or the *concept* communicated by the meme. For example, in this chapter, I identify three “families” of memetic content describing female gamers as “sexy sidekicks,” “casual” girl

gamers, and “fake geek girls.” Gamers might make reference to these memes using any number of different *forms* such as the YouTube video, the animated gif, or the image macro. Finally, memes can read according to the *stance* they take towards their subject matter: they can be either ironically detached or impassioned and sincere, can convey adoration or contempt. As we shall see at the conclusion of this chapter, women and girls in gamer culture are known to take up sexist memetic content and re-work it using widely-circulated and recognizable forms but taking a very different stance on the subject of women’s participation in gaming than that of the original iterations they originally encountered.

Furthermore, “an Internet meme is always a collection of texts.... A single video is not an Internet meme but part of a meme—one manifestation of a group of texts that together can be described as the meme.” (Shifman 56). For example, a single, widely shared Photoshopped image is not a meme all by itself. However, if many Internet users begin to Photoshop that same image in different ways (or if they start to Photoshop their own images in similar ways), then the sum total of all such images, with their unique mix of imitateness and individual creativity, is a meme. As such, Internet memes “play an important role in constructing shared values in contemporary digital cultures” (Shifman 62). “In an era marked by ‘network individualism,’ people use memes to simultaneously express both their uniqueness and their connectivity” (Shifman 30). In other words, memes function as a means for community members to simultaneously display their witty creativity *and* to signal their conformity to community norms and their sense of belonging to the broader group. Many Internet memes serve these twin purposes by presenting themselves as language games or inside jokes. Like the game of trolling, (see Chapter 2), visual and verbal memetic games help to distinguish cultural insiders (those who can correctly decode a meme and respond in kind) from cultural outsiders (those who need help

understanding memes, those who lack the technical proficiency or the access to create their own, those who are continue to use memes that have are generally thought to be “unfashionable” or “over”).

Moreover, as both Ryan Milner and Kate Miltner point out, successful participation in memetic discourse requires that one learn a particular set of specialized vocabulary and grammar, that one obtains a kind of “meme literacy.” For example, the coded language of leetspeak discussed in Chapter 1 is a meme in gaming culture that is used to signal one’s elite status in the community. In particular, memes that thrive in the gaming community are those that reference specialized gaming knowledge and/or knowledge of the geeky “canon” described in Chapter 1. The memes described in this chapter tend to conflate gender identity with knowledge (or ignorance) of both gamer culture’s preferred memetic vehicles and the content about gaming culture described within those memes. In fact, as we shall see below, many of these memes are featured in the movies, novels, and games beloved by geek culture.

### **The Gamer Girl of His Dreams: Sexy Sidekicks**

The first constellation of memes about female gamers that I will trace concerns itself with an elaborate and romantic fantasy that has developed around what the ideal gamer girl might look like from the perspective of a geeky guy looking for a girlfriend who shares his interests. One function of this imaginary girl is to transform the arrival of a possible competitor or participant of equal standing in gamer culture into a “sexy sidekick,” a love interest who props up the masculinity of her partner rather than threatening it through competition. She games only alongside her male partner, and she makes her boyfriend look good to his fellows without ever showing him up by being more hardcore than he is. The memetic telling and retelling of stories featuring dreamed-of sexy sidekicks reassures those who might be feeling threatened by the



appearance of women in gamer culture. The sexy sidekick is a prize that is distributed among men (Rubin 1) according to their ability to master technology in general or games in particular. In other words, the initial challenge that female gamers pose to the gendered social order in gamer culture is neutralized as the story told about these fantasy women moves them from a stereotypically masculine position (a challenger, a competitor, a fellow combatant) to a feminine one (an object of desire, a love interest, a helpmeet who supports and nurtures her partner in his masculine pursuits). In fact, stories about sexy sidekicks typically begin with declarations about the presumed scarcity of geeky women (in spite of the numbers cited above), a fact that plays into their romantic desirability. Thus, in the world constructed by this meme, video games are, by definition, a man's pursuit. The sexy sidekick is an aberration, a rarity (which, in turn, is partially why she is so sought after in the first place).

The tale of a sexy sidekick often resembles the story structure of a video game. A relationship with one of these girls is like a battle with a video game boss: her initial hostility must be overcome by the geeky protagonist (using his elite gamer skills) if her affections are to be won. Art3mis fulfills this role in *Ready Player One*. When she and Wade first meet, Art3mis is a formidable opponent of Wade's: her character has attained a higher level than his, she has much better equipment, and she deduced the location of Halliday's first key a full month before Wade did. Wade nurtures a crush on Art3mis from afar, and she briefly entertains entering into a relationship with him before rejecting him when he becomes too possessive for her liking. This inspires Wade to undertake a series of sweeping romantic gestures and begin a regimen of personal improvement in an attempt to win her back. However, she refuses him, citing her desire to remain competitive in the hunt as her reason for rejecting him. While they are in direct competition with one another, their romance cannot flourish because she recognizes that it will

breed resentment between them. It is only once Wade beats her to Halliday's egg and she has accepted a role as a supportive helper (see Chapter 1) instead of a co-equal competitor that she can be happy with him, and the novel ends with the pair meeting up for a kiss in the real world. This is presented as a happy ending, because it entails the protagonist, Wade, getting everything he wants: the prize and the girl. However, Art3mis winds up being trapped within the two systems that she strove to escape throughout the entire novel: the gendered system of values in gamer culture that neglects the accomplishments of women in favor of the accomplishments of men and the heterosexual romance narrative in which women exist to support and uplift their men to the exclusion of their own drives and ambitions.

Another example of the sexy sidekick is Angelia Jolie's Kate in the 1995 film, *Hackers*. Kate is the most skilled high school-aged hacker and gamer in New York City until Dade, the film's hero, moves to town. Dade is simultaneously smitten by Kate, annoyed by her aloofness and aggressiveness (naturally, Kate is portrayed as a man-hating feminist, following in the footsteps of her mother who writes self-help books about the uselessness of men), and finds himself in constant competition with her. The pair start up a rivalry when Dade beats Kate's high score on an arcade game, and from then on they continually try to out-prank and out-hack one another. They make a bet to see who can carry out the best revenge scheme on a Secret Service agent who has arrested one of their hacker friends, and the stakes revolve entirely around performances of masculinity and femininity, dominance and subservience. If Kate wins, she wants Dade to "become [her] slave," doing "shit work" on *her* hacking projects that requires little technical skill (essentially rendering him *her* helpful support). Kate is not just trying to out-hack Dade. She is trying to out-man (unman?) him, and in front of his all-male group of hacker friends no less. On the other hand, if Dade wins, he demands that she go on a date with him,

during which she must present herself as pleasant and feminine; he tells her “you have to smile” and “wear a dress.” Kate, meanwhile, continually makes emasculating comments to Dade, like telling him that her laptop is “too much machine” for him to handle, and sarcastically remarking “I hope you don’t screw like you type.” She even turns around Dade’s sartorial request, telling him that if she wins the bet, *he* will have to don a dress.

As the film progresses, however, Kate finds that she is stymied by a competing hacker’s program that she needs Dade’s help to crack. Once he has proven, once and for all, that he has the superior skill set, she quickly softens towards him and relinquishes her prideful attitude, even allowing Dade to tell a police officer that “she knows shit [all] about computers” and that “she’s just [his] girlfriend” in an effort to protect her. Whereas it is easy to imagine the scornful Kate we saw at the outset of the film taking umbrage at this dismissive statement, by the end of the film she is thanking Dade for helping her in this paternalistic way. The film concludes with Dade and Kate’s first date and, as in *Ready Player One*, the final scene is a passionate kiss. She wears a dress with pantyhose and garters underneath, blue eye shadow, mascara, and lipstick. He wears a jacket and pants. The threat Kate posed to Dade’s manhood as the best hacker in his social circle has passed now that Kate has been thoroughly domesticated. She is no longer a rival to Dade’s position. Instead, she supports him in it by coupling with him, and this support is represented by her submitting to his romantic affections and her adoption of a softer, more feminine self-presentation.

An even more extreme version of the sexy sidekick fantasy centers upon women who have literally been *built* to act as self-sacrificing supports. These fantasies depict the idealized gamer girl as a *game girl*, a digital construction made inside a computer program (because, these texts typically assume, the sexy sidekick is far too rare a bird for one to hope to encounter in the

real world). She is a reward for the superior technical skills possessed by her creator, a piece of virtual “loot” he can show off to make himself look good. Mastery over technology *is the same as* mastery over these women because these women *are* a product of technology. The game girl is always-already submissive to her man because she was programmed to be that way. And unlike films such as the 2004 remake of *The Stepford Wives* in which the worshipful attitude these artificial women have towards their creators borders on the unsettling and are ultimately rejected as undesirable compared to real live women capable of making their own decisions, these girl-bots are portrayed as great inventions, fitting and well-deserved rewards for the geeky male protagonist’s technical prowess.

Take, for example, John Hughes’s 1985 film, *Weird Science*. In this film, Kelly LeBrock’s Lisa is a computer program made flesh. Like a Game Genie<sup>42</sup> whose only wish for herself is to please her two masters, Gary and Wyatt, she was custom-built to teach a pair of geeky guys about sex and relationships (since they are too unpopular at school for real girls to pay them any attention). Lisa is like a practice dummy they can use to “level up” into the kind of men who can get girls, a cheat code they use to initiate themselves into manhood, sexually and socially.<sup>43</sup> And part of what makes her so perfect for this purpose is that she has no desires of

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<sup>42</sup> A device that allows gamers to cheat at console games by, for example, giving them extra lives or allowing players to become invulnerable or invisible.

<sup>43</sup> Disturbingly, this is the same language used by many Pick-Up Artists (Strauss) to describe their relational strategies. In fact, one of the most famous pick-up artists, Erik von Markovik (who goes by the nickname Mystery) is an avid Dungeons and Dragons player. One wonders if these systems designed to “gamify” the dating scene might have their conceptual origins in role playing games and digital gaming culture (“Mystery”). For more, see the Conclusion.

her own. She makes no demands of Gary and Wyatt other than that they find happiness for themselves, and since their happiness is her happiness, they are not made to feel guilty for using her as a tool to prop up their social standing. For example, they use her as arm candy to show off to the jocks that used to taunt them, and Lisa seems not only to be okay with this but to *thrill* at being displayed in such a manner. Her sexual knowledge, her calm competency, and her technomagic powers are all rendered safe and unthreatening, as she *only* uses them to Gary and Wyatt's benefit (though they might not realize this at the time). She represents the fantasy that geeky gamer guys might achieve mastery over women using the same skill set they use to master their computers, a fantasy that was so popular that it was able to sustain a television spinoff series that lasted for five seasons ("*Weird Science* 1994-1998").<sup>44</sup>

Although each of my examples so far have been fairly over-the-top fictionalized versions of the fantasy of a sexy sidekick, the notion that the ideal girl gamer is one who is more interested in romantic attachments than in games themselves has made its way out of the fictional realm and been transformed into a meme espoused throughout the gaming community.

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<sup>44</sup> For another beloved gamer franchise that deals in this image of the worshipful, obsequious game girl, see *TRON* (1982) and its sequel, *TRON: Legacy* (2010). Both films feature a male computer User who is sucked into a digital world and meets anthropomorphized computer programs. In the original *TRON*, Flynn is able to forge a brief romantic reconnection with the digital version of his real world ex-girlfriend (though he never does rekindle his romance with her physical counterpart), and in *TRON: Legacy*, Flynn's son Sam finds a way to bring his virtual love interest back with him to the real world. In both cases, the ability of a gamer protagonist to succeed at hacking programs and winning video games translates into a romantic conquest. Winning the game and getting the girl are synonymous acts, as the game *is* the girl.

Take, for example, the so-called “fact” (actually a “truth” determined by the gendered system of power/knowledge circulating in gamer culture) that girls prefer to play supportive “sidekick” roles in collaborative multiplayer games. A quick perusal through forums dedicated to gaming as well as game-specific boards for titles like *World of Warcraft*, the world’s most popular MMORPG (Birnbaum) and *League of Legends*, the “most played video game in the world” (Gaudiosi) reveals that gamers have bought into this meme as threads with titles like “Why do girls always play healer priests and paladins?” (Glockass), “Why do girls play healers in most cases?” (Nebulae), “Why are Resto Druids and Healing priests always girls?” (Atkins), “Are most healers female?” (Paladinjoe), “Why do girls always play support???” (SorionHex), and “its [sic] so weird why do 99% of girls play support” (KingofAsia) pop up constantly.<sup>45</sup>

There are several regularly circulated answers to this faulty question. The first is that these women only play in the first place because they have a (male) partner who introduced them to gaming: “under this logic, the ‘unnatural’ phenomenon of women wanting to play video games for many hours a week occurs as a side effect of their male relations” (Yee, “Maps of Digital Desires” 86) (see Figures 1-3). Furthermore, it is assumed that these women would rather play a “support class”: someone who is there to heal up their warrior partner’s wounds or to buff up his stats, than a combat-oriented class. This narrative helps to defang the gender trouble posed by a girl who plays games by recasting her gaming as an act of nurturing, an activity that is traditionally cast as feminine.

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<sup>45</sup> Capitalization and grammar of the original posts are retained here.



Figure 1

This illustration jokingly references two assumptions associated with the sexy sidekick stereotype: first, that she got into gaming because her boyfriend introduced her to it. Second, that she will be playing games with him in a supportive role, in this case as a healing character ("Dear Girls").



Figure 2

This is an example of a “Good Girl Gina” meme, an image macro depicting a fantasy of a perfect girlfriend (and which has been criticized by Redditors like LaTeX\_fetish, who wrote a study of the meme called “What makes Gina a Good Girl?,” as being overtly sexual and misogynistic in its depiction of what guys supposedly want from their partners). In this case, Gina is depicted as the perfect girlfriend for a gamer because she is willing to play a supportive healer character. She “wants to spend time with you,” but not by competing against you (“Knows You Love Video Games and Wants to Spend Time with You. Healer.”).





Figure 3

Another example of a girlfriend based meme: this one is a “Misunderstood Girlfriend” or a girl who initially seems to be doing something that would annoy her partner by being overly clingy (which is unsurprising, considering this meme is a derivative of another image macro meme about the “Overly Attached Girlfriend”) but turns out to be doing something helpful and desirable instead. In this case, the set up depicts a girlfriend intruding on a video game (the assumption being that her presence is an unwanted diversion and a liability) and the punch line is that she takes up a supportive role so that she can be of use to her boyfriend’s team. Note that the option of being an equally skilled combatant is not presented here. One wonders which option the unseen boyfriend would dislike more: a girlfriend coming into his game and messing it up with her incompetence or a girlfriend who shows him up by being a better player than he is (“Joins Your Game in the Middle of a Battle. Plays as Healer.”)?

While it is true that, according to the census data gathered by Nick Yee in *World of Warcraft*, women *do* play alongside their romantic partners more often than men do (“Maps of Digital Desires” 86), it is *not* the case that they overwhelmingly choose healing and support roles (“WoW Character Class Demographics”).<sup>46</sup> Rather, this stereotype about female players’ preferences derives from the way that women are often portrayed *in* games. The woman-as-support-character trope is common in classic single-player role playing video games like the *Final Fantasy* series, where often female characters are given default skill sets and statistics that strongly incentivize players to use them for healing and support purposes (i.e.: they are programmed to be better at supporting than they are at participating in combat, or at the very least, it takes much more work to transform them into a successful damage-dealer than it does to level her into a skilled healer, which she is programmed to “naturally” blossom into if given no specific attention). In fact, female characters are so often programmed into support roles that *male players* in *World of Warcraft* who choose to play support and healing roles tend to do so using female *avatars* because they see themselves as conforming to “expected behaviors and attitudes associated with their avatar’s appearance” (Yee et. al. 773). In other words, despite the fact that male and female avatars are statistically and functionally equivalent in terms of their

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<sup>46</sup> According to research conducted by Yee, the most popular character class among women in *World of Warcraft* is the Hunter (24% of female players, damage-dealer class), followed closely by the Priest (19% of female players, healer class) and the Druid (14% of female players, utility class that can transform into various animals, enabling players to take on different roles including dealing physical or magic damage, healing and buffing statistics, or soaking up enemy damage, also known as “tanking”). For a more detailed breakdown of the demographics, see Yee “WoW Character Class Demographics.”

ability to heal or deal damage in *WoW*, male players were more likely to assign healing roles to female avatars because doing so seems to them to be a more authentic way of performing their character's gender.

While *WoW* players share a strong stereotype of women preferring to heal, our findings show that this stereotype isn't true. We did not find a significant difference in terms of player gender. What we did find was that players enact this stereotype when gender-bending. Thus, the stereotype becomes true in the VW [virtual world] — female characters heal more than male characters (Yee et. al., 776).

This phenomenon once again emphasizes the influence that memes have over behavior. The assumption that girls prefer to play support characters derives not from actual statistics about the roles most often chosen by female gamers. Rather, repeated visions of female characters performing in supportive roles across multiple *fictional* narrative contexts combine with the notion that supporting and nurturing dispositions are an integral part of femininity itself to create the belief that female gamers *must* be most interested in choosing to play supportive roles. In reality, the opposite is true: the role being performed (healer, support class) influences which gender of *avatar* will be chosen by the player as they seek to enact an intelligible performance within the field of power/knowledge that organizes experiences of gender and sexuality. The narrative of their play is mapped onto the existing narratives seen in games (and in narratives about games and gamers), narratives that reinforce the notion that the primary engines of action and progress within a game context are/must be coded as masculine<sup>47</sup> and that their helpmeets

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<sup>47</sup> Anita Sarkeesian (feministfrequency, "Damsel in Distress—Part I" and "Damsel in Distress—Part II") notes that another common role reserved for women in video games is the (non-playable) princess in need of rescue by a male protagonist. Although these damsels in distress

are coded as feminine (for more on how women and people of color can get thrust into a “support” role in narratives organized around gaming, see my discussion of *Ready Player One* in Chapter 1).

### **Games that Even Your Mom Will Love: Gendering Casual Games**

In addition to turning female gamers into second bananas to their romantic partners, the supposition that women prefer to play support roles is also linked to the second meme explaining the steady increase of female participation in gaming culture: the rise in popularity of casual games and the assumption that girl gamers are predominantly unskilled, neophyte casual gamers. One female player of *World of Warcraft* named Ori described this link in her blog, writing,

There are two things that bother me about [the stereotype that girls only play healing and support classes]: the first being that there’s always the implication that girls suck at video games, so that means healers must be easy to play, and the other is that there’s the idea that girls play video games to support their boyfriends, who do all the cool stuff while we stand back and top off their health.

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cannot exactly be considered sexy sidekicks because they generally do not quest alongside their male rescuers, they are *like* sexy sidekicks in that their function is to emphasize the masculinity of the game’s hero by contrasting it against their feminine passivity. Sarkeesian says that these stories are “really about the perceived loss of masculinity and then the quest to regain that masculinity, primarily by exerting dominance and control through the performance of violence on others” (feministfrequency, “Damsel in Distress—Part II). In other words, the female victim’s character is only present in the story to provide a reason for the male character to act out a masculine performance and to act as a reward for a successful performance. For more on this, see Sharon R. Sherman’s “Perils of Princesses: Gender and Genre in Video Games.”

Ori's second point is an apt description of the sexy sidekick stereotype, but her first point represents a second meme, one that suggests that one of the reasons that female players are thought to prefer support roles is because they lack the skill to play the (presumably) more difficult classes and prefer a less challenging gaming experience (though there is nothing to suggest that healing and support classes actually *are* any "easier" to play successfully than other classes).

According to Jespar Juul, casual gamers are often stereotyped as unskilled newbies ("noobs" in the parlance of the video game world) who prefer short gaming sessions playing games with simple controls over prolonged, intense, difficult gaming experiences. This cliché of the casual gamer is the mirror image of the hardworking hardcore gamer, who delights in challenge and dedicates hours to refining his skills. And I do mean "his." The video game industry nearly always assumes that the hardcore gamer is male (Juul 26) even as casual games are thought of (disparagingly) as "games for girls." And, to be fair, the demographic data gathered by the gaming industry does show that, for example, downloadable casual games for the PC and for portable devices like smartphones or iPads have a predominantly female player base: "A 2006 study of players of downloadable casual games reported that 71 percent of the audience was female" (Juul 80). However, these numbers can be better explained by looking at the history of the video game industry and the various assumptions that businesses have built into their marketing strategies than by the supposedly biologically inherent tastes and abilities of the female of the species.

Girls and women play casual games because the gaming industry tells them that casual games are the ones that were built especially for them. And the industry tends to build casual games with girls in mind because they assume that the only way to reach a female demographic

is to *introduce* them to the medium for the first time with easy-to-play, watered down games. In other words, casual games have been culturally labeled as appropriate (socially and in terms of mechanical difficulty/playability) for girls while hardcore games are labeled as a masculine pastime. The choice of which game to play becomes part and parcel of one's performance of gender, just as, according to Michael A. Messner, choosing a baby doll or a G. I. Joe is one way for children to demonstrate that they have learned and can perform the appropriate gendered style of make-believe play.

So, casual games are thought of as “games for girls,” and games marketed specifically to girls, which are often called “pink games” because of their over-the-top frilly, feminine art and their showcasing of girl-centered toy franchises (Mattel's Barbie or the Disney Princesses) and traditionally feminine roles (fashion designer, hair and makeup artist, interior decorator, babysitter, and the double-whammy: *Cooking Mama*), typically follow the easy-to-play casual games design model. Historically, this trend dates to the 1990s, during which well-meaning games developers like Purple Moon, who hoped to increase girls' participation in gaming and computer culture by creating some of the first ever games marketed specifically to girls, bought into much of the game industry's essentialist assumptions about girls' (lack of) computer skills. These companies absorbed the industry assumption that a “typical” or “normal” girl would not like video games or have much knowledge about them. Thus, when they went about conducting market research into the types of games that “the typical girl” might enjoy, they ignored the opinions of girls who *already did* play video games (after all, if they played games and knew about computers, they must be atypical, abnormal girls, seeing as they are performing an activity typically thought of as masculine) and gave great weight to the opinions of girls who had no previous experience with gaming. The results of these surveys was a set of “very traditional

feminine stereotype[s]” (Shaw 233), both in terms of the content that a hypothetical girl gamer might desire, with a strong emphasis on “social relations, romance, emotions, and role-playing” (233), and in terms of the low level of technical ability that a hypothetical girl gamer might demonstrate. From these surveys were born a raft of unsuccessful games that were widely considered boring and insipid and that tended to further isolate girls from the rest of gamer culture by portraying their interests as essentially different from those of boys (Eisenberg). In other words, despite the best of intentions on the part of girl-centric game developers, the history of girls’ games was shaped by and came to reinforce the stale cultural narrative that video games are a masculine pursuit by operating under the same essentialist assumption that girls are low-skilled amateur players that prevented the marketing of video games to girls in the first place. Pink games have been stuck in “easy mode” ever since.

In the wake of the failure of companies like Purple Moon, developers like PopCap Games, the creators of immensely popular casual franchises like *Bejeweled* and *Peggle* are among the few in the game industry who are *willing* to take a chance marketing their work directly to women or to make games around existing products and franchises that women and girls already like. This is because, in an industry where triple-A blockbuster-style games can cost as much as \$100 million to make (Cook), large developers are loath to take a chance on a demographic like women or girls who, in their minds, have not “proven” themselves to be loyal consumers of hardcore video games. They prefer to cater to the adolescent male market. Conversely, casual games can be cheaply and are quicker to develop and easier for publishers to distribute than hardcore games (Hyman), and so casual games developers are in a better position to take risks on demographics groups beyond the adolescent male hardcore market. In fact, they have a strong financial *incentive* to pursue these alternative markets, because then they do not

have to compete directly against the bigger, wealthier triple-A game studios, whose attention and advertising dollars are all directed elsewhere (Loeb).

It is not the case that women are somehow inherently unable to play or appreciate hardcore games. Rather, some games studies scholars suggest that women choose casual games because they have been thoroughly socialized to see hardcore games as “for men,” and they want to avoid the social discomfort that would come with pushing into that masculine cultural space (Yee, “Maps of Digital Desires” 94). It is more socially acceptable for women to play (and to be seen playing) casual games than it is for them to play hardcore games, and, as we’ve established, casual game makers are among the few developers who make explicit overtures to recruit female players. These conditions make it much easier for women to choose casual games over hardcore ones.

And that wouldn’t necessarily be a problem except for the fact that the casual/hardcore split is not seen as a neutral one in gaming culture. They are not simply seen as two different styles of games and gamers but rather as separate castes; casual gamers are perceived as *lacking* something that hardcore gamers have (Vanderhoef): lacking ability, lacking commitment that would enable them to transition into playing hardcore titles, or lacking the good taste to discern the difference between a quality game and crap. Casual games are thought to be inferior, watered down substitute games for players who can’t handle hardcore games. They aren’t thought of as “real” games and the people who play them aren’t thought of as “real” gamers. In fact, on message boards with hardcore gamer constituencies like 4chan and the Escapist forums, there is a meme referring to casual gamers as “filthy casuals” (amanda b and Sterling, “Jimquisition: Dumbing Down for the Filthy Casuals”).



And since casual games are seen as “games for girls,” this means that much of the rhetoric in hardcore circles deriding casuals *is in service of* the gendered social order within the gaming community. The new influx of female gamers can be dismissed as unworthy of notice (most of these girls, it is assumed, are “only” casual players) and the behaviors of fellow gamers can be disciplined along gendered lines (casual players are “girly” and hence, occupy a low place in the social hierarchy that values masculine performance). John Vanderhoeff provides examples of this latter phenomenon in his study of how hardcore gamers in online message boards frame discussions about casual games:

In addition to marrying the feminine with the casual space, part of this positioning of the other happens through the labeling of casual games as other in sexual orientation. To these particular gamers, hardcore games not only represent the masculine, they represent the heteronormative ideal. A discourse exists in this community that links casual games with homosexuality.

As Erica Kubik puts it, “the end result” of this disciplinary discourse is the creation of “a normative value to the masculine hardcore gamer, and devaluation for the feminine casual gamer” (136).

This slippage between the feminine and the casual (and the notion that neither has a place in the hardcore gaming community, the only group of gamers that “counts” within the culture) permeates the discourse of the games industry as well. Take, for example, the use of the term “girlfriend mode” by the developers of first person shooters like *Gears of War 2* and *Borderlands 2* to describe a game’s ability to “adjust... difficulty on the fly” so that they can “appeal to the casual audience,” (Kohler) or as John Hemingway, the lead designer on *Borderlands 2* team put it, so that players can share the game with someone who “suck[s] at first-

person shooters” (Rundle. See also Griffiths, “Girlfriend Mode”). The assumption behind this rhetoric is the same as the one behind the the “sexy sidekick” stereotype: gamers are men and their non-gamer girlfriends suck at gaming so much that they need a special, super easy mode if they want to try out their boyfriends’ toys. Conversely, everyone who wants or needs to partake in the easier mode of play is labeled as “girly.” Attitudes like this are reinforced by games like *Resident Evil* which assign different difficulty curves to characters of different genders. For example Derek A. Burrill writes of Capcom’s *Resident Evil* (in which players can choose either a male or a female player character with which to face the zombie horde),

The female officer does not possess the same constitution as the male, so the female officer is equipped with more powerful weapons than the male officer. This clearly indicates that the creators of the game projected heteronormative ideals onto the narrative as well as onto the needs of the player and expected a clearly delineated choice between men playing the male and women playing the female (50).

I would put it slightly differently. Rather than assuming that men play as men and women play as women, I would argue that this hardwired gendered set up demonstrates the association of the masculine with the hardcore, skilled player and the feminine with the unskilled casual player. By virtue of choosing one *mode of play* or the other, one reveals whether or not they have the figurative “balls” to be hardcore. Players of either sex might very well choose the feminine position and thus reveal themselves to be “girly” when it comes to gaming skill even as players of either sex might distinguish themselves as capable of handling the masculine mantle. But despite the uncertainty about the bodies of gamers inherent in such a situation, the valorization of masculinity *as a category* (and the dismissal of its opposite) remains consistent. The hardcore/casual binary is being mapped onto the masculine/feminine binary and both binaries are

subject to discipline. A slippage is created between girliness and casual play such that the presence of one category is expected to be accompanied by the other. And both are performative categories that gamers are taught they should avoid.

Casual game developers also use gendered (though less incendiary) rhetoric to describe their work by eliding “non-traditional gamers” with “the proverbial mother-figure or *Mom*” (Vanderhoef). For example, casual game designer Dave Walls quips that he defines casual games as follows: “If my mom can play it, it’s a casual game.” And PopCap’s Jason Kapalka says that they give new casual games the “Mom Test”: “If our own moms could figure out a game without our help, that was a good sign.” Once again, the least skilled players are assumed to be the female players, even when they are being described by the very game makers catering to those players. In fact, a casual game is here *defined as* the games that are so easy that *even a mom* can figure them out.

Mainstream media coverage has picked up on this rhetoric as well. For example, in a *New York Times* piece on the pervasiveness of sexual harassment in online gaming, reporter Amy O’Leary writes that

Jessica Hammer, a longtime player of video games and a researcher at Columbia University, said the percentage of women playing such games online ranges from 12 percent to close to half, depending on the game type. Industry statistics from the Entertainment Software Association say 47 percent of game players are women, but that number is frequently viewed as so all-encompassing as to be meaningless, bundling *Solitaire* alongside *Diablo III*.

This statement minimizes the massive increase in participation by women in digital gaming by comparing a casual game, *Solitaire*, to a hardcore online game, *Diablo III*. The implication is that

only those who play hardcore games really “count” as gamers, and there are few women in that category. All the other female game players identified by the ESA are dismissed as “meaningless” to a discussion of the gaming community because they don’t play the “right” kinds of games. Even all-time best-selling franchises like *The Sims* are dismissed as “not really counting” as video games because their audience skews female. Instead, playing *The Sims* is likened in the *New York Times* to playing with a digital “dollhouse” (Schiesel), a reframing that “makes sense” of girls’ desire to play within the gendered system that defines gaming by recasting the game as a traditional girls’ toy. This allows the popularity of the franchise to be recognized while protecting the assumption that “real” video games are hardcore titles marketed to men. Coverage like this takes gendered assumptions about gamers for granted and explains data that seemingly disproves those assumptions by discursively re-routing whole swaths of female gamers into more traditionally feminine categories.

But what about the girls who *do* play hardcore games, who identify as gamers and participate in the kinds of activities that appeal to hardcore fans like discussing games on message boards and attending gaming conventions? The presence of women in these traditionally masculine spaces constitutes a greater threat to the way gender is understood within gaming culture than does a statistical shift in the number of people playing digital games of all kinds. Thus, a third meme has developed around these women, one that takes the notion that women can’t be “real” gamers discussed above and extends it to its logical conclusion: that any woman who *appears to be* a hardcore gamer must, in reality, be a fake.

### **Checking Her Geek Cred: Fake Geek Girls**

To fully understand the “fake geek girl” meme it is useful to look back and see how it compares to the other discursive categories discussed above. The sexy sidekick, be she a fictional

character in a book or a movie about gamers or an imaginary *World of Warcraft* player who was drafted into playing a healer by her boyfriend, props up the masculinity of a gamer guy. And the girl-as-casual-gamer casts femininity as the inferior archetype against which the hardcore gamer's masculinity is measured. But neither of these stereotypes can account for the droves of women that are now participating in gamer culture, attending video game conventions, and playing games competitively. These girls are brought under another kind of disciplinary discourse, one in which every aspect of their geeky credentials is brought under intense surveillance, and the burden falls upon them to prove that they are not "fake geek girls," or girls who are only pretending to be into gaming to manipulate (and emasculate) gamer guys. This narrative casts masculinity as the victim of duplicitous and predatory (and yet, at the same time, ignorant, ineffectual, and easily defeated) femininity.

Accusations of "fake geek girlhood" come in a couple of different flavors. The first takes the form of a demand that anyone in an online environment who claims to be a woman in real life must prove themselves to be women in fact. In other words, the geek must prove that she is not a fake girl. Nick Yee found that players who use female avatars in role playing games online, *regardless* of their actual sex and gender identity in the real world, report facing constant interrogation from players trying to discern the "real" sex of the body operating the computer ("Maps of Digital Desire" 93-94. See also Lin 70-71). For example, a user who claims to be female will often be inundated with requests for pictures to serve as proof, often via the dismissive demand that they provide "tits or get the fuck out" (Lindell, "There Are No Girls on the Internet"). He also found that players who use male-presenting avatars do not have to face these kinds of questions on nearly the same scale ("Maps of Digital Desire" 93-94. See also Lin 70-71).

*Ready Player One* makes comedic reference to this current of suspicion directed towards gamers who present as women online by setting up a hypothetical scenario I call the “Chuck Hypothesis.” The novel first introduces Art3mis as the distant love object of the protagonist, Wade (user name: Parzival), who has developed a “cyber-crush” (35) on her based on nothing but her writing and the in-game screencaps<sup>48</sup> of herself that she posts on her blog. Since he has never actually *met* Art3mis in real life, Wade repeatedly voices anxiety that “she” might actually be a “he,” a prospect that fills him with disgust as it would bring his own masculinity and heterosexuality into question.

I knew the crush I had on Art3mis was both silly and ill-advised. What did I really know about her? She’d never revealed her true identity, of course. Or her age or location in the real world. There was no telling what she really looked like. She could be fifteen or fifty. A lot of gunters even questioned whether she was really female, but I wasn’t one of them. Probably because I couldn’t bear the idea that the girl with whom I was virtually smitten might actually be some middle-aged dude named Chuch, with back hair and male-pattern baldness. (35)

Even when Wade first encounters his crush in the game, their meeting is still being mediated through their avatars, and he reminds himself “that the person operating the avatar in front of me might not be a woman at all. This ‘girl,’ whom I’d been cyber-crushing on for the past three years, might very well be an obese, hairy-knuckled guy named Chuck” (88). This possibility haunts Wade and he repeatedly dwells on it in conversation with her.

Art3mis: ...Everyone thinks I’m a man in real life.

Parzival: That’s because most gunters are male, and they can’t accept the idea that a

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<sup>48</sup> Digital snapshots taken from within the game-world that function as photographs of her avatar.

woman has beaten and/or outsmarted them.

Art3mis: I know. Neanderthals.

Parzival: So you're telling me, definitively, that you are a female? IRL?

Art3mis: You should have already figured that out on your own, Clouseau.

Parzival: I did. I have.

Art3mis: Have you?

Parzival: Yes. After analyzing the available data, I've concluded that you must be a female.

Art3mis: Why must I?

Parzival: Because I don't want to find out that I've got a crush on some 300 lb. dude named Chuck who lives in his mother's basement in suburban Detroit.

...

Parzival: The female of the species has always found me repellent.

Art3mis: I don't find you repellent.

Parzival: Of course not. That's because you're an obese man named Chuck who likes to chat up ugly young boys online.

Art3mis: So you're a young man?

Parzival: Relatively young.

Art3mis: Relative to what?

Parzival: To a fifty-three-year-old guy like you, Chuck. Does your mom let you live in that basement rent-free or what? (170-171).

The Chuck Hypothesis (and its real world analog as experienced by players who present as female online) explains the high skill levels of female-presenting players by positing that the

woman who beat your high score was actually a dude all along. It also preemptively protects gamers from accusations of insufficient masculinity/homosexuality by leveling them against the other party first. It is a defensive posture, one that assumes that a gamer claiming to be female is more likely to actually be a male out trolling (see Chapter 2) than an actual woman.

And it *is* true that lots of female avatars in online games *are* operated by men (though not all of those who play as female avatars actually make the claim to be women in real life as well).

These men report lots of different reasons for choosing female personas online, everything from simply wanting to look at something they find attractive while they play (MacCallum-Stewart), a claim that bolsters their own performance of heterosexual masculinity by reducing the female body of the avatar to an object over which they can assert mastery and control (Kennedy and also Burrill 57), to the desire to use a feminine mask to try and extort positive attention, favors, and gifts from other male players (Mac-Callum-Stewart. See also Lin 70).<sup>49</sup> This idea is even the subject of a meme in the form of one of *4chan*'s "Rules of the Internet": Rule 37 states that

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<sup>49</sup> Mika Lehdonvirta et al have a somewhat more charitable description of this same phenomenon in the Japanese MMORPG *Uncharted Waters Online*. They write that men often feel unable to ask for help lest they be seen as inadequate and ineffectual. These men "overcome their inhibition for help seeking when using female avatars" (29). In other words, adopting a different visual presentation online makes them feel more authorized to break out of traditional gendered performances in other ways as "the individual adjusts their own behavior to be consistent with the gender of their self-representation, independent of the perceptions of others" (40). Of course, the fact that these players associated a performance of help-seeking as feminine and a performance of independence as masculine speaks to the general perception within gaming culture that female players are all either newbies or unskilled players.



“There are no girls on the internet... ever” (Anonymous), and another popular derivative states that the Internet is a place where both the “men are men” and the “women are men” (Lindell, “There Are No Girls on the Internet”). Although this “fact” about the demographics of the Internet is typically stated in a tongue in cheek manner (in fact, the digital divide in terms of gender has essentially been erased as of the year 2003, when “the percentages of women and men online were exactly fifty-fifty”, Nakamura 134), it represents a memetic “truth” that is reassuring to gamers invested in that system.

Additionally, this meme and associated theories of gamer culture like the Chuck Hypothesis ignores those online masquerades that are being conducted in the opposite direction; some female gamers choose male avatars, make the claim that they are men in real life, and/or simply refuse to answer questions about their real world genders. Doing so allows these women to avoid “verbal harassment, flirtation, surveillance, and endless efforts to determine the player’s real gender” (Lin 70). As Nick Yee explains

Many female players have learned that it is dangerous to reveal your real-life gender in MMOs because they will be branded as incompetent [in our model: casuals or newbies] and constantly propositioned [in our model: drafted into acting out sexy sidekick fantasies]; In other words, they must either accept the male-subject position silently, or risk constant discrimination and harassment if they reveal that they are female (“Maps of Digital Desires” 94).

These kinds of masquerades aren’t the subject of popular memes within the gaming community because they don’t serve the gendered narrative that the community espouses. The Chuck Hypothesis and narratives like it ignore the ways that sexism and the culture of masculinity in gaming affects people’s strategic self-presentations by overestimating the benefits that women

are thought to experience online and underestimating the negative experiences that presenting as a woman can cause as well as the amount of privilege that adheres to those who perform a masculine persona in the gaming world.

The other flavor of fake geek girl accusations has been receiving an increasing amount of attention over the last year both on news sites frequented by geeks and gamers (Hamilton, Polo, Jimquisition: “Fake Nerd Girls,” and Holkins and Krahulik, “Simulacra”) and in the mainstream press including *CNN.com* (Peacock) and *Forbes.com* (Brown and Griffiths, “Fake Geek Girls”). It takes the form of a disciplinary discourse aimed at girls who are thought to be using gaming as a way to perform a malicious, predatory kind of femininity. The girls are forced to prove that they are not fake geeks. According to this meme, there is a plague of girls who perform geekiness as nothing more than an affectation. These girls, the theory goes, are trying to trick geeky guys into giving them their attention, affection, and sometimes, their money (in the case of professional gamers and streamers, who earn money from their viewers in the form of donations as well as advertising revenue), by pretending to be into video games when they really aren’t. Because of the supposed threat posed by these fake geek girls, all women in geeky gaming spaces become subject to heightened scrutiny and must prove that they are not fakes themselves, thereby making those spaces less hospitable to women and girls. This framing defangs the gender trouble posed by the gamer girl by positing that a sizable number of the new female entrants into gamer culture are motivated not by their own desires to play and compete but rather by a desire to be pleasing to men. If a girl’s being geeky is about seeking the favor of men, then her actions both reaffirm male “ownership” of the pastime and reinforce a broader gendered hierarchy wherein women derive their self worth from what men think of them (Pascoe 104).

In fact, it is important to note that “girls frequently collude... in boys’ discourses and practices of compulsory heterosexuality” (105) and thus echo and reinforce disciplinary discourse like this in an effort to “‘bargain with patriarchy’ by submitting to sexist social institutions and practices to gain other forms of social power” (104-105). In this case, girls like Tara Tiger Brown can use talk of “fake geek girls” to bolster their own geek cred by contrasting themselves against the “bad” girls, aligning themselves with put-upon guys and thereby setting themselves up as one of the good ones. Brown writes:

Girls who genuinely like their hobby or interest and document what they are doing to help others, not garner attention, are true geeks. The ones who think about how to get attention and then work on a project in order to maximize their klout, are exhibitionists.... Don’t pretend to love something because you think it will get you attention. Don’t think that you can take a shortcut because there isn’t one. Dig deep, dig to the roots, dig until you know things that others you admire in the subject matter don’t know or can’t do. Then go ahead and proudly label yourself a geeky girl.

This discourse symbolically disciplines “bad” exhibitionist geek girls and sets the author up as a “true” geek girl, one who conforms with a gendered system of power in which most women are suspicious outsiders and only a select few are worthy of being considered an honorary “one of the guys” (and then only when go out of their way to disparage a straw man version of their own gender).

The image of the attention-starved fake geek girl is most succinctly captured by yet another meme: the image macro series Idiot Nerd Girl. This meme features a picture of an attractive white girl wearing thick glasses with the word “nerd” scrawled on her palm. The image is then labeled with a caption of the girl bragging about her love of geeky movies,

television shows, and video games. But in the midst of her bragging, she undoes herself by revealing that she doesn't actually know much about the geeky text she is referencing (see Figures 4 - 8). Like the gamers described in Chapter 1, she recognizes that knowledge of geeky canon texts is necessary to enter gamer culture, but she hasn't actually mastered any of those texts. She can only make reference to them and hope that this surface level knowledge ingratiate her with the geeky crowd. But her mistakes out her as a poseur. She doesn't deserve gamers' attention because she hasn't put in the work to actually study these texts. Other times, the captions purport to reveal the fake geek girl's thought process as she plans to fool a boy into thinking she is a geeky gamer. This version highlights the fake geek girl's dishonesty whereas



Figures 4 and 5

In these examples, the “Idiot Nerd Girl” gets something factually incorrect about gamer culture. Master Chief is actually the protagonist of the *Halo* series and not the *Mass Effect* series and the character who wields a sword in *The Legend of Zelda* is actually the hero Link. By making these “newbie” mistakes, the Idiot Nerd Girl outs herself as a fake geek girl, someone who is only pretending to be into gaming to impress others (“Idiot Nerd Girl – Image #229,764” and “Idiot Nerd Girl – Image #179,161”).



Figure 6

This Idiot Nerd Girl image plays up the “seeking male attention” angle of the fake geek girl meme while reiterating that gaming is the “property” of boys (Idiot ‘Nerd’ Girl, “Sep 21 STEAL LITTLE BROTHER’S GBA”).



Figures 7 and 8

In these two examples, an Idiot Nerd Girl's claim to be a gamer is undermined by her choice of a casual title, thus making both her an example of a fake geek girl *and* an example of how masculinity comes to be associated with the hardcore gamer and femininity comes to be associated with the less-valued casual gamer (Idiot 'Nerd' Girl, "Sep 21

I'M A PC GAMER" and Idiot 'Nerd' Girl, "Sep 11 PLAY SIMS").

the other version highlights her naivety and ignorance of gaming culture's most beloved touchstones.

The Idiot Nerd Girl meme generates a kind of background radiation of suspicion as it circulates through gaming culture. Instances of the image macro aren't necessarily directed against a single individual. Instead, they poke fun at a hypothetical class of fake geek girls who supposedly exist "out there" in the culture. This creates a disciplinary power/knowledge matrix in which girls find themselves being surveilled and tested against the negative example imagined in the meme.

### **"In Your Subculture, Reappropriating Your Icons": Counter-memes Causing Additional Gender Trouble**

As these examples show, power/knowledge systems like the gendered system that organizes identity and competition in gaming culture are resilient and flexible, able to adapt to new facts and to label and sort new participants in such a way as to maintain its basic shape even as it is been stretched, questioned, and critiqued. One vehicle that these systems use to communicate gendered knowledge are Internet memes. However, because such memes have "polysemic potential," that is, because they have a "tendency to be open to multiple readings" (Shifman 150), it is possible for meme creators to use the memetic forms and content described in this chapter towards different ends. In fact, there is a contingent of creators who use these memes to stir up additional gender trouble. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear call this practice "counter-memeing" or "the deliberate generation of a meme that aims at neutralizing or eradicating potentially harmful ideas" (225). Counter-memeing seeds the culture with positive new ideas by smuggling them in via a palatable or familiar vehicle.

For example, in 2012 Rachel Edidin, an editor at Dark Horse Comics, asked her followers on Twitter and Tumblr to “stage a cheerful coup” (Edidin, “Who Are You to Say She’s Not?”) of the Idiot Nerd Girl meme, using the same image macro to push back against the notion that any girl into gaming culture or geeky culture at large must be a fake (see Figures 9 – 10).



Figure 9

Edidin’s examples recontextualize the Idiot Nerd Girl meme by portraying how the circulation of this meme in gamer culture affects real women and girls (Edidin, “Who Are You to Say She’s Not?”).





Figure 10

This example takes a somewhat more aggressive stance. It both describes what the practice of counter-memeing does (reappropriating the memetic icons of a subculture and deploying them towards new and potentially politically subversive ends) and what those who circulate the Idiot Nerd Girl meme seem to fear about the entrance of women into gaming culture (Edidin, “Who Are You to Say She’s Not?”).

Eddidin writes,

I hate the Idiot Nerd Girl meme because it's not just a meme in the diluted 'net-slang sense. It reflects and recycles and reinforces a bundle of more traditionally defined memes: the sticky and tenacious subtexts and cultural dogmas that justify and normalize misogyny and harassment and make the geek community so seethingly toxic to female members—and especially female newcomers—that it doesn't even need a formal gate to keep them out. (Eddidin, "Idiot Nerd Girl Has a Posse")

We might extrapolate from Eddidin's counter-meme manifesto the idea that gender itself, the hierarchical power structure created to define and differentially treat bodies, is a meme and that the specific treatment of women in gaming culture is merely one of the newer subgenres of that overarching meme. This is the argument of videos like the geeky female performance group Hey! Listen!'s "Urgent PSA: Fake Geek Girls," which links the sexual harassment faced by women at gaming conventions to the broader discourse about clothing used to shame and blame victims of rape and sexual assault (after all, if a woman dresses provocatively, she must have been asking for it, right?) and the music video for the Doubleclicks's "Nothing to Prove," which appropriates the memetic form of Occupy Wall Street's "We Are the 99%" meme (which featured photos of everyday people and a few geeky celebrities holding hand-written signs describing their personal trials) to illustrate the frustrations faced by women and girls trying to break into nerdy subcultures like comics, science fiction fandom, and gaming. Such counter-memes enable their creators to simultaneously signal their in-group status (as indicated by their familiarity with memetic formats) and their desire to protest that group's social norms through an oppositional or ironic stance.

As these examples illustrate, gendered memes (and even the über-meme of “gender” itself as a discursive category) require elaborate and varied constructs as well as great investment and labor on the part of those who create and uphold them, and they are constantly in danger of being reappropriated and redeployed for new and different purposes.

My fourth and final chapter is a case study of the kind of struggle that can occur when the gendered memes that thrive in gamer culture (and that often dictate how and which games are made) begin to be challenged from within. I will describe what happens when competing constituencies of video game players vie to define who “counts” as a member of gaming culture, all the while trying to recruit corporate media producers to their cause. Occasionally these struggles result in what looks from the outside like strange alliances, such as one between queer progressive gamers and their allies, who are looking to challenge the gendered hierarchies of gaming culture, and profit-seeking corporations like game developer BioWare, who are trying to figure out how to best pad out their bottom line: by going after a narrow band of adolescent straight white male hardcore gamers or by actively working to broaden their appeal to more diverse demographics at the risk of alienating the hardcore base? This case study provides an excellent model of how to navigate complex systems of power/knowledge in a convergence culture where access to influence over media producers depends directly on whether or not one is seen as a viable, bankable, reliable consumer.

## CHAPTER 4

### NO HOMOSEXUALS IN *STAR WARS*?: BOWARE, “GAMER” IDENTITY, AND THE POLITICS OF PRIVILEGE IN A CONVERGENCE CULTURE<sup>50</sup>

In *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, new media and fan studies scholar Henry Jenkins lays out a blueprint for participatory culture in which “rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules” (3). Jenkins is often read as an optimistic idealist who praises “the promise of this new media environment” to “raise expectations of a freer flow of ideas and content” (18). According to Jenkins, convergence culture contains *the potential* for more democratic, more inclusive, mediascapes because corporate media producers will have an economic incentive to listen to the suggestions, requests, and demands made by its audience (and even to encourage acts of production or on the part of users). Therefore, that audience accrues a kind of power to shape and contribute to media production that it has never before wielded so explicitly (62-63).

However, Jenkins is not naïve. He points out that “not all participants” in a convergence culture “are created equal.... Corporations—and even individuals within corporate media—still exert greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers” (3). He even briefly acknowledges the problem of what he calls the “participation gap,” the strong

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<http://con.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/04/02/1354856514527205.abstract>

likelihood that “early adopters” and “elite consumers” (who are “disproportionately white, male, middle class, and college educated”) will “exert a disproportionate influence on media culture in part because advertisers and media producers are so eager to attract and hold their attention,” as they are seen as the primary consumers of new media technologies and are therefore thought of as the target demographic for those marketers to court (23). The *perception* (or presumption) that new media users *are* mostly white, male, middle class, college educated, and (although Jenkins does not mention this category) straight leads to a kind of feedback loop in which a media environment is created that discourages the participation of users who identify with other groups, both because they are not marketed to as potential new media users and because they risk being labeled as inauthentic participants by their fellow users. Despite this admission, however, the majority of Jenkins’s book paints media consumers as a relatively unified group standing collectively alongside, negotiating with, and occasionally entering into conflict with its rival stake holders in convergence culture: corporations. He often lumps himself, the reader, and the audiences he writes about under the pronoun “we,” thereby crafting the image of a collective interest group, and he does not spend much time exploring differences among users.

This chapter explores the contours of the participation gap more fully and questions who is able to lay claim to titles like “fan” or “gamer,” how those titles are being contested along gendered, racialized, sexualized, and classed lines, what happens when new users lay claim to those titles, and how some fans are reacting to the loss of their privileged relationships with content producers. I will examine what happens when the channels of communication opened via convergence culture are used to lobby both for and against the inclusion of *other users*, how the power to influence media production that Jenkins identifies is being unevenly dispersed and even contested *within* gamer culture. Of course, producers watch these inter-fandom disputes closely,

so they can determine who to side with to maximize profits. Thus, the outcomes of these squabbles over who and what "fans" or "gamers" really are indirectly affect all media consumers in the form of mass-produced corporate responses to what exactly it is producers believe their fans want (dictated by who it is they are convinced their "true" fans are).

Take, for example, fan responses to BioWare, a North American video game developer, as it attempted to manage discussions of sexuality on their gaming forums. Fan responses first exploded in 2009 with a forum thread about the censorship of terms like "gay" and "lesbian" on the message boards for the Massively-Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (hereafter referred to as an MMORPG), *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (abbreviated by gamers as *SW: TOR* or just *TOR*). *TOR* fans argued over whether an online game is an appropriate venue to discuss the sexual politics and the problem of heteronormativity in virtual worlds. What was often framed by the participants as a benevolent desire to prevent political and ideological conflict from leaking into gaming and ruining its unique attractions manifested as the maintenance of a heterocentric power structure. *True* gamers and fans are assumed to be straight (or, if they are queer, it is assumed that they will remain in the closet while participating in the gaming forum), and out queer gamers and their allies are flagged as disruptive and harmful interlopers. This stance implies that BioWare would be doing its *real* fans (the ones they rely on to sustain their profit margins) a disservice were it to cater to the desires of queer players by making the forum community queer friendly. A similar debate arose two years later when BioWare made the decision to include gay male romance options in their popular single player role playing game franchise, *Dragon Age*.

Ultimately, for both games, BioWare ended up deciding that the business they could gain from *explicitly* reaching out to and including game elements requested by queer players and their

allies would outweigh the business they stood to lose from straight male fans who were upset at losing their privileged status as the sole demographic game developers tried to please. This scenario complicates the usual positions of corporations and users in accounts of convergence cultures, where users are assumed to be a homogenous group pushing for more inclusive, more democratic, more open media environments and corporations are assumed to be reluctantly capitulating to the virtuous demands of the enlightened masses.

### **A Short History of Censorship and Queerness on the BioWare Forums**

BioWare's gay-mer troubles first began in April of 2009, when news of a new thread on the message boards for *Star Wars: The Old Republic* spread like wildfire through the blogosphere. These message boards give fans a place to gather and discuss press releases, form cooperative gaming groups called guilds, and offer suggestions to developers about the directions the game might take. They are regulated by moderators to ensure that discussions remain civil and family-friendly. To this end, the moderators on the *SW:TOR* forum developed and announced an automatic filter that looked for certain words deemed inappropriate. This verboten language included the words "gay" and "lesbian" (Sliwinski).

It is true that the word "gay" is notoriously used throughout the gaming world (Cole) "to describe anything unmasculine, non-normative, or uncool" (Thurlow 26) (see also Chapter 2), and the reasoning behind BioWare's ban on these words may have been aimed at curtailing derogatory uses of the term. Other gaming entities like Blizzard Entertainment and Microsoft have instituted similar policies around such words in the past, even going so far as to ban players who were upfront about their sexual orientations and telling them that it was for their own protection (see Ward and Gilbert). Shortly after BioWare's ban was put in place, a poster nicknamed Elikal started one of many threads on the message board asking BioWare to

reconsider the censoring of these terms. Among the several concerns raised by Elikal's thread (which was the longest lasting and most popular of the threads on this topic by far) was the notion that such "solutions" only help to further marginalize the gay and lesbian community, making it difficult for gay and lesbian players to find each other online if they so desire by marking the labels they have chosen to describe themselves as "taboo" and "dirty" (Fdzzaigl). For example, a poster named Kevlar argued, "a minority requesting that they be represented in a game that is entirely about developing the identity of your character requires loudness. If they don't make their voices heard, BioWare doesn't see the demand, and it doesn't go in the game." Sherle\_Illios took a similar tack, writing, "One cannot open up a world for players to play/live/communicate/tell their stories in and expect these [words such as "gay" and "lesbian"] to *not* exist in it." These gamers argue that it is the forcible closeting of queer players, not the visibility of queer users, that politicizes the game space. However, many other posters jumped in and defended BioWare's decision, arguing that discussions of gay and lesbian issues are irrelevant to the stated purpose of the forums, which is to discuss the upcoming game, because they are inherently political in nature. Ultimately, BioWare decided to reinstate the ability of posters to use these words in the wake of the attention the controversy garnered in the gaming press.

This incident is an ideal case study of the political and social dynamics in a convergence culture because the thread in question was widely viewed both within the *SW:TOR* forum and beyond in the larger gaming community. It eventually even got some attention from outside of gaming circles when Tony Perkins's conservative group Focus on the Family covered the "biggest threat to the empire" posed by "homosexual activists" (apparently Perkins did not realize that, in the *Star Wars* universe, the empire is evil) (Good). Despite its location in an out



of the way, unpopular corner of the forums (the unexciting and utilitarian Website Feedback and Support board on the General Discussion forum), this thread accumulated over 1,200 posts and tens-of-thousands of views, exposure comparable to that of the most popular “sticky” threads (threads with important information that are always located at the top of the forum and are never bumped down off of the front page by new threads) or to the extremely popular official threads offering previews of upcoming in-game content. This fact attests to the importance accorded to this debate by community members, regardless of which side they found themselves on.

Furthermore, work on this particular site is especially useful to gaming scholars in that it serves as a historical document of a corner of internet culture that is no longer accessible. On December 10, 2011, BioWare deleted all archived threads from the *SW:TOR* forums to prepare for the game’s release (Ashral). This means the threads containing the dialogue this article grapples with have largely been lost (although news sites with accounts summarizing the thread remain). As such, this article serves as a valuable record of what *actual gamers* thought media producers should (or shouldn’t) do to cultivate diversity in gaming culture.

### **Will the “Real” Gamers Please Stand Up?: Straight Privilege and Convergence Culture**

The faction of gamers I focus on in this study defended BioWare’s decision to censor the terms “gay” and “lesbian” by arguing that there should be a stark divide between the game space and the outside world and that such terms undermine that division. In a recent article in *Game Studies*, Vili Lehdonvirta critiques this position, which was also once popular amongst academics writing about virtual worlds. Lehdonvirta argues that this position mistakenly imagines virtual worlds as “located outside ‘the real world,’ in many ways mirroring it like a synthetic double, but carrying on independently of it like a distant planet.” To Lehdonvirta, on the other hand, the real and the virtual are inseparable, as gamers cannot help but to bring their

real world selves into the game and vice versa. However, the gamers described here are dedicated to the idea of a virtual world as a space apart, a “magic circle” much like the one described by Johan Huizinga that is set aside for play experiences free from real world consequences. In fact, they see attempts to pierce the barrier between the game world and the real world as a threat to their play. According to their view, the introduction of real-world political concerns into the digital world disrupts the barrier that they’ve tried to erect between their time in *SW:TOR* and the rest of their day-to-day existence. They used the thread make the argument that BioWare should help them maintain that barrier, insisting that there is no place for progressive political activism, or, indeed, any overtly political speech in a space that has been set aside for play.

These gamers learned to view virtual worlds (and, by extension, the Internet as a whole) in this way by absorbing the many narratives perpetuated by early proponents of the new media, including both visionary science fiction writers and hopeful academics who saw the opening of the virtual frontier as a chance for humanity to start anew, building more equitable societies where power would be shared and oppression would disappear (Turner). According to these narratives, a new utopia could be reached online, but only because the virtual worlds were sealed away from the always-already corrupted physical world (see the Introduction for more).

This utopian image imprinted on in the imagination of many gamers, creating what Pierre Bourdieu calls a “habitus” or a set of “deeply internalized master dispositions that generate action.” (Swartz 101). A habitus comes

from early socialization experiences in which external structures are internalized.... As a result, internalized dispositions of broad parameters and boundaries of what is possible or unlikely for a particular group... develop through socialization.... What agents judge as

“reasonable” or “unreasonable” for people of their station in the social world stems from habitus (Swartz 103).

Typically, habitus is conceived of as an embodied practice, one that manifests in everything from posture to body language and gestures (Swartz 107). However, because the gamers studied here are interacting online using only the medium of text, we can think about their habitus as being a practice of *presentation* of information about the body; what kinds of information are revealed and concealed by users who have been “properly” socialized according to the norms of gamer culture. The habitus instilled through the rhetoric of techno-utopia normalizes and labels as “reasonable” the negation of the physical body.

Gamers have been taught to desire (and to expect) a bodiless, apolitical experience within virtual worlds. In fact, many see that experience as the purpose for the existence of virtual worlds in the first place, the source of their entertainment value and of their potential as a model for real world communities. As such, they discipline themselves and their fellow gamers through the creation of social norms built around this utopian ideology. They do not simply abstain from mixing the real with the virtual themselves. They also scold others for doing so out in the open where they can be seen, turning such world-mixing into a social faux pas, an indicator that one is not truly a citizen of utopian internet space. In the case of *SW:TOR*, that scolding was reserved for those who protested against BioWare’s decision to ban the words “gay” and “lesbian” on their forums. The implication is that the forum members who raised those concerns must not be *real* game fans (in that their primary loyalties do not lie with the preservation of the gaming community but rather with some other, unrelated group: in this case, the GLBTQ community) and so their concerns can and should be ignored by game producers like BioWare when they craft rules for the forum.

Often this implication takes the form of an accusation of “hijacking,” the posting of something that is “off-topic.” This was so despite the fact that the subject under consideration in the thread is, in fact, the rules governing the forum and not some broader political subject matter *and* the fact that the thread was correctly housed in the Website Feedback and Support board and not on one of the boards about gameplay topics. Such an accusation carries some weight in that, according to BioWare’s Rules of Conduct (2011), “discussions of political, sexual, or religious topics are prohibited on the forums” and “posts deemed to be inappropriate to a particular forum will be moved to a more appropriate forum or removed completely.” In other words, these arguments carry the threat of moderator intervention or even banning with them. They suggest an alignment of purpose between BioWare and the accuser, who poses as someone merely attempting to helpfully (re)enforce the forum’s code of conduct.

This attempt to draft the authorities that run the forum into seeing things their way (or to stand in for them) is creates a social environment in which queer identified users and their allies are interpellated as “guilty” subjects. After all, if the rules against queer discourse were made permanent, they would function like Althusser’s famous policeman by defining and labeling any who stray away from topics that are approved of as appropriately apolitical as rule-breakers, disloyal gamers, and disruptive community members. Moreover, their arguments that gaming while (out and) queer is harmful to the community represent an attempt to recruit queer gamers into seeing *themselves* as guilty so that they will self-censor. The ultimate aim is to divest gamers who insist on bringing queerness into the game world of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) by questioning their gamer *bona fides*, thereby insuring that queer issues receive little attention from game producers and taste makers and the status quo of gamer culture is maintained.

For example, many gamers took a similar position to the one espoused by punkniner, who wrote, “This is quite possibly the dumbest thing I have ever seen argued about on a video gaming forum. Congratulations. If you want to protest, go to your town hall. The simple fact is, this is a forum about a video game, and there is no purpose whatsoever to bring up this kind of nonsense.”<sup>51</sup> In a later post, he or she takes this point even further and declares that *all* political discussions are out of place on the *Star Wars: The Old Republic* forums:

This is a forum about a Star Wars video game. Will we now be arguing and complaining over abortion rights, or even the presidential election? I'm sure we can somehow tie those into a star wars theme somewhere (Palpatine was elected by a majority vote just like Bush!), and they are just as pointless and off base from the subject matter as the argument set forth in this thread (punkniner).

To gamers like punkniner, any attempt to lobby for a more inclusive stance towards queerness is understood to be an attempt to rudely divert discussion away from the game itself and towards what is perceived as a personal, political agenda: something a “real” gamer would never do.

### **Leaving the Body Behind: Identity Politics and Techno-Utopian Theory**

Importantly, the political discussion in question is not centered on just any controversial issue but rather is focused on issues of embodiment, identity, and privilege. I believe that this thread about the potential suppression of queerness in *SW:TOR* drew a great deal of attention from players because, in addition to evoking the need in some gamers to defend what they see as

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<sup>51</sup> In the interest of recreating the rhetorical environment of the forums as accurately as possible, no attempt was made to clean up spelling or grammar errors in posts made by gamers. However, some quotes have been shortened so as to focus exclusively on the portions that are relevant to this study. I used an ellipsis to indicate where I edited out irrelevant or repetitive content.

the bright line that divides the virtual from the real, it also taps into how elite participants in convergence culture view their relationship to media producers: they assume that this influence is a finite resource, and they dislike the idea that their influence over gaming culture could be diluted as gaming expands in popularity.

Participants in the thread sought to protect what they saw as their own privileged position by tapping into another prominent thread of techno-utopian thinking: that, on the internet, the bodies and identities that we were born with are irrelevant (Adam 159; Stone 113). In fact, their belief that the virtual world is a world freed from the constraints of the physical body is, in no small part, the way in which technophiles provide evidence for their claim that the virtual and the real are or can be separated in the first place. This claim is usually couched in hopeful terms, evoked to explain how the new social order created online will be free of the scourges of racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism.

In the mid-to-late-1990s, techno-utopian rhetoric sang the praises of the disembodied web. The “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” contains a passage outlining the positive political consequences that are assumed to follow from the creation of a society without bodies:

We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth....

Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion. We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonweal, our governance will emerge. (Barlow)

Techno-utopian theorist and academic Howard Rheingold also praised the web as a level playing field, writing that, on the internet, “race, gender, age, national origin, and physical appearance

are not apparent unless a person wants to make such characteristics public” (Rheingold 26).

Discrimination, Rheingold asserts, will be impossible when users are unable to see the actual bodies of those with whom they are interacting.

This, essentially, is the claim being made by many gamers on the *SW:TOR* thread: that BioWare was simply protecting the sanctity of the disembodied and anonymous virtual culture when they set up rules that would eliminate references to queer sexualities. For example, I would argue that this claim is threaded through the argument of a poster named LordByrondathird:

now i don't mean this to be offensive, and i see your point. it's totally legit. but like one person already said, this is about star wars, and its fans. Its not about who's what orientation, or religion, or race or gender. if so, you might be hearing a lot more pro islam, or pro christian, or pro life, or pro feminism and so on. again, i see your point, but this is about star wars. Im sure there's a lot of people like you on here, just like there's plenty of religious people, or femenists, but we're all here because of our love of star wars and The Old Republic.

At the core of LordByrondathird’s post is the idea that discussions of politics and sexuality are unwelcome in the discourse space that he or she believes is reserved for “our love of *Star Wars*” in that they corrupt the purity of a space he or she believes should exist separately from such issues.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, according to LordByrondathird, one of the primary ways in which

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<sup>52</sup> During the peer review process for the publication of a version of this chapter in the journal *Convergence*, one anonymous referee noted that the techno-utopian core of the *Star Wars* film franchise itself is also relevant to these fan-made arguments. After all, one of Yoda’s greatest lessons for Luke about the ways of the Force was that the body of a Jedi is irrelevant. Only the mind and the spirit matter to the Jedi. As Master Yoda put it, “Luminous beings are we, not this

unsavory politics are introduced into the game world is when one is able to identify “who’s what orientation... or race or gender.” When physical embodiment returns, this argument goes, it brings politics with it.

Indeed, the idea that any discussion related to embodied sexuality (straight *or* queer) is unwelcome on the forums and in the game comes up numerous times in the thread. For example, a comment from indelible, quoted here at length, complains that “personal” and divisive issues like sexuality cause unnecessary divisions within the *Star Wars* fan community. He or she then accuses those who would bring sexual politics into the game space of the virtual equivalent of disturbing the peace

I'm inclined to say that - on an online gaming forum - your sexuality is of no concern to anyone else. I'm not going to ask you and frankly, I really couldn't care less. I'm here for the game. I'm not here to have people tell me whether they are lesbian, gay or straight or to start any debates about equality....

You have brought that conflict and imposed it on a group of people who - for all intents and purposes - transcended the whole issue in the first place.... There is no war on these forums that you haven't brought on yourself with this thread. If people start attacking gays and lesbians, it is simply because you have drawn attention to the issue which - in all reality - didn't need attention drawn to it within this community....

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crude matter” (*Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*). Of course, the introduction of midichlorians (*Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*) as the source of the Force’s power in the *Star Wars* prequel films reverses this logic by rooting the Force in the body once more, a development that was roundly disdained by *Star Wars* fans (See Anders).



I'm sorry - I understand you struggle for equality and empathy in the real world, where that sort of issue is important - but here, on a gaming forum... it just isn't the right time or place for a political debate and it certainly isn't the place to encourage some kind of social change, mainly because many of us could give a flying hoot who or what you sleep with.

Of particular interest is indelible's claim that sexuality has been "transcended" in the bodiless virtual world, as it seems that this enlightenment is actually quite precarious if it can only be sustained when gamers employ a don't ask, don't tell policy regarding their sexual orientations. indelible is claiming that gamers who reintroduce the body into virtual spaces by making their sexuality visible are to blame for any abuse that they receive, as that abuse would never have happened if the wider community was allowed to remain blissfully unaware of the presence of queers in their midst.

Furthermore, requests like those made by indelible to censor *any* references to sexual orientation (including heterosexual orientations) would not actually open up space for users to quietly be queer online. Rather, as theorists of the body like Susan Bordo have pointed out, the disappearance of queerness would simply reinforce the assumption of universal straightness among gamers and forum dwellers. Bordo describes the way in which a splitting off of the mind from the body such as the one that techno-utopians assume takes place when we go online has historically been used as a philosophical rationalization for the maintenance of a hierarchical social organization that privileges white straight able-bodied males (2-5). According to this logic, the body itself comes to be seen a site that is feminized, racialized, sexualized, and/or disabled (9), while the "'generic' core" of identity that is supposed to pass as genderless, raceless, sexless, and bodiless (the soul, the mind, the human essence), comes to be read as "white or male... passing as the norm for all" (34). Or, to put it another way, women, queers, racial minorities, and

disabled persons have bodies that *call attention to themselves* through their marked differentness from the supposedly “normal” bodies of straight white able-bodied males. Meanwhile, citizens with “generic,” bodies, white, straight able-bodied males, whose place at the top of the social hierarchy means that their bodies are the bodies to which all others are compared and judged to be deficient (or at the very least noteworthy), are thought to come *as close as possibly* to the ideal of disembodiedness (Dyer 1-2).

Michael Warner describes the inscription of this process with regards to sexuality as heteronormativity: the assumption that straightness is universal and all-encompassing and that queerness is an aberration or an outlying position created by privileging straightness over queerness (xxi). According to this (often invisible) cultural framework, straight culture is seen as “normal,” natural, or non-ideological while queer culture is seen as aberrant, artificial, and hyper-politicized. In the virtual world, heteronormativity takes the form of what Sundén calls “heterotextuality,” the assumption that all users are straight in the absence of any mention of sexuality (130-131). This assumption is only discarded when a user directly outs themselves as queer, a practice which, as noted above, allows the body to return and thereby may draw the ire of techno-utopian users looking to escape bodies and their politics. In other words, heterotextuality is one example of the many ways that users discipline identity formation in online spaces to secure the fantasy of a virtual realm free from difference and therefore free from political conflict. Queerness is erased in favor of a universal silent sameness (which is ultimately read as the default: straightness), and users who insist on re-introducing the existence of queerness into the game space are derided as agitators, bringing unnecessary turmoil into what was (for users who conform to the norm) a pleasantly placid environment. The dislocation felt by queer users in the face of great pressures to remain closeted online are not taken into

consideration. Instead, queer users are asked to put off “their” concerns for the sake of the comfort of larger group. Their insistence that their communities be accepting of queer sexualities in practice, not merely tolerated so long as they are kept safely out of sight, is perceived as a kind of buzz kill, a disruption of the benevolent fantasy that the denizens of online communities have transcended bodily matters.

Thus, it becomes apparent that the rallying cry of “no politics in gaming” actually has huge political consequences within the gamer community. As Althusser points out, “ideology” or “politics” is always the label given to what *someone else* cares about. People think of their own concerns as rational and logical and assume that it is only *others* who are motivated by politics or tricked by ideology. This is what makes ideology so durable: it is difficult to see when it is operating on you. In the case of this debate in the gaming community, heteronormative ideology disguises itself as the rational default position of loyal gamers while those who lobby for the inclusion of queerness are rhetorically labeled as ideologically driven political operatives. This labeling functions to disguise the heterosexist ideological constraints that portray straightness as the normal, natural, default human state in the first place.

### **BioWare Strikes Back: Corporate Responses Encouraging Diversity in the Name of Profit**

These same discourses arose again in BioWare’s online forums in the years that followed and in the wake of the implementation of gay relationships for male player characters in the *Dragon Age* (Kuchera) franchise. This time, some gamers were explicit and direct about expressing their ire with BioWare for being willing to, as they saw it, dilute the influence of their “core demographic” (Bastal) of straight male gamers by producing more inclusive games. In March of 2011, a poster named Bastal responded to the developer’s choice to include these queer narratives on the “Official Campaign Quests and Story” board of the BioWare SocialNetwork

forums by creating multiple threads with slight variations the same name: “BioWare Neglected Their Main Demographic: The Straight Male Gamer.” Bastal chided the *Dragon Age II* developers for including queer content in the game using many of the same arguments based in techno-utopianism and anti-embodiment discussed above.

For example, Bastal begins his<sup>53</sup> argument with the assumption that straightness and maleness is universal and normal (or to put it another way, that the default identity of a “gamer” is a straight male) when he opens his post by writing, “I don't think many would argue with the fact that the overwhelming majority of RPG gamers are indeed straight and male,” and he continues, “its ridiculous that I even have to use a term like Straight Male Gamer, when in the past I would only have to say fans.” In fact, he soon reveals that he does not merely feel as though the desires of his particular demographic of the straight male gamer have been neglected. Rather, he argues that the mere *inclusion of the option* to partake in queer content is an affront to him as a straight male gamer. To this end, he calls for a “‘No Homosexuality’ option” to be implemented in the game so that he can be certain that his personal version of the fantasy setting of Thedas is free from the incursion of queerness.

This time BioWare reacted very differently to a controversy brewing on their forums about whether queerness should be censored in one of their games. *Dragon Age II* senior writer David Gaider wrote a lengthy post in response to Bastal, rejecting his argument that he should have the option to eradicate gays and lesbians from his personal copy of the game world. First, Gaider rejects the assumption that all or even most gamers are straight.

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<sup>53</sup> Bastal explicitly claims to be a “straight male gamer” in his post. Although I have no way of verifying this claim, I refer to him as a male in this article because this is the self-image he choose to project on the thread.

The romances in the game are not for "the straight male gamer". They're for everyone.

We have a lot of fans, many of whom are neither straight nor male, and they deserve no less attention. We have good numbers, after all, on the number of people who actually used similar sorts of content... and thus don't need to resort to anecdotal evidence to support our idea that their numbers are not insignificant.

Even more to the point, Gaider notes that, rather than eliminating political concerns by erasing queerness, such requests actually inject a politics of privilege and hierarchy into the game.

And if there is any doubt why such an opinion might be met with hostility, it has to do with privilege. You can write it off as "political correctness" if you wish, but the truth is that privilege always lies with the majority. They're so used to being catered to that they see the lack of catering as an imbalance. They don't see anything wrong with having things set up to suit them, what's everyone's fuss all about? That's the way it should be, any everyone else should be used to not getting what they want.

This thread demonstrates movement on the issue of inclusion in the gaming community, in part fueled by the feedback BioWare received from queer gamers and their allies during the debate over *SW:TOR*. Furthermore, Gaider's post suggests a responsiveness to user input that is an important feature of convergence culture. However, it is important to note that this responsiveness is directed towards the desires of one group of users and against the desires of another. This complication runs counter to typical accounts of convergence culture in which fandom is portrayed as a single united entity working with (or against) media corporations to further their own interests as consumers. In this case, inclusive, democratic outcomes to the question of whether or not to implement queer content were made possible because BioWare's profit motive coincided with the expressed desires of *some* users, though the company risked the

ire of other users when they made their decision. This outcome was not some foregone conclusion that was predetermined by the technological affordances of new media and convergence culture.

In fact, BioWare even eventually implemented queer content in *SW:TOR* itself after fans mounted a sustained campaign for what they called Same-Gender Romances or SGRs. However, the content came with a twin set of prices attached. First, the content was released as a part of an expansion pack that costs players an additional fee to access (thus demonstrating the necessity of there being the potential for profitability for an act of inclusiveness in game design). Second, the update confines all of the queer romancable characters to a single planet in the *SW:TOR* universe called Makeb (Hamilton). When considered together, these two developments seem to represent a compromise on the part of BioWare developers between those fans who are calling for queer content and those demanding it be kept out of their game. Under this system, players like Bastal who want their personal copy of the Star Wars universe to remain for straight folks only can simply refrain from purchasing the expansion. Furthermore, this set up posits the “straight” version of that universe as the default version. The presence of queerness is thus constructed as an unnecessary add-on, a bonus that fans can pay for if they are so inclined, but not an essential part of the world being co-constructed by players and game developers. In addition, players who want the other additional content contained in the expansion (which also extended the level cap for player characters and extended the game’s storyline) could be reassured that it would be easy to avoid even accidentally running into a queer non-player character. All they had to do was refrain from visiting Makeb, which critics quickly began to refer to as *SW:TOR*’s “gay ghetto planet” (Pearson). This dual system of segregation (economic

and spatial) demonstrates the problematic compromises that are produced by the interactions between fans and creators in a convergence culture.

As these events demonstrate, convergence culture enables much more complex relationships between users and producers to develop than was previously thought. Various factions of elite users who recognize and seize the power to talk back to media corporations through the channels opened up by the development of a convergence culture are not merely lobbying to see their own interests reflected in the media they consume, thereby creating a more democratic and inclusive media environment. They are also using those same channels to try and protect what they see as their privileged position within the convergence culture, to the extent that they fear that the efforts of media corporations to broaden their fan base will dilute their power. And if we fail to include schisms like these in our account of how convergence culture is developing, then that account will be woefully inadequate to accurately model power sharing in the world of new media.

## CONCLUSION

### THE DATING GAME: GENDER PERFORMANCE AND GAMIFICATION IN THE REAL WORLD<sup>54</sup>

I hope to have convinced the reader that gender is an important (if not the most important) factor in the self-definition and social construction of construction of gamer culture. But the question remains: what relevance does such a thesis have *outside* of that particular subculture? What can gamer culture teach us about how gender operates IRL<sup>55</sup>? As I describe in my introduction, the logics of gaming are making their way into a variety of new contexts as marketers, business people, educators, activists, and politicians realize the strength of games as a rhetorical and motivational tool (Bogost). Gamified concepts are even making their way into the world of love and romance as online dating and apps like Tinder become more and more popular as a means to meet people.

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<sup>54</sup> Portions of this chapter appeared in my article for *Al Jazeera America* titled “The Game of Trolls and How to Win It” (March 28, 2015 <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/3/the-game-of-trolls-and-how-to-win-it.html>).

<sup>55</sup> “IRL” stands for “in real life,” which in turn typically is meant to refer to the physical world (as opposed to the virtual ones that are constructed in games and online forums). However, as I hope to argue in this concluding chapter, the line between “real” and “virtual” is actually quite murky. Virtual processes and identities are increasingly coming to inform our real world identities and the logic of “gamification” is taking over many real world relationships and interactions. See also Lehdonvirta.



In fact, some are taking the gamification of the dating scene literally. Pickup Artists or PUAs are groups of young men intent on “cracking the code” of dating. Made famous by Neil Strauss’s best-selling memoir/exposé/PUA guide *The Game*, Pickup Artists can be found meeting up and comparing notes on their most recent “missions” (Strauss, *Rules of the Game* 17) on various forums and message boards (*PUA Forums*, *MPUA Forum*, *The Attraction Forums*) all over the web. Pickup Artistry is also a business (*Real Social Dynamics*, *Venusian Arts*, *PUA Artist*) in which charismatic entrepreneurs present a gamified version of gender relations to their client, promising them that, using their teachings like a sexual cheat code, they can have the women of their dreams. Their goal is to turn the subjectivity of attraction into an “algorithm” (Mystery 2) that they can refine into perfect efficiency. They describe the lines and stories that they deliver as “routines” (Strauss, *The Rules of the Game* 205) and “scripts” (211) (using the language shared by the performance artist and the computer programmer) and “openers” (214) and “gambits” (Mystery 171) (using the language of the chess master). Strauss refers to pickup artistry as a “technology” (*The Game* 42) that guys can use for “cracking the code that is woman” (25) and “short-circuiting the female brain” (*The Rules of the Game* 211). Mystery, aka Erik von Markovik, the subject of Strauss’s book and the host of two seasons of the VH1 reality show *The Pickup Artist*, writes in his book *The Mystery Method: How to Get Beautiful Women in Bed* that human beings are “beautiful, elegant biological machines embedded with sophisticated behavioral systems” (7) and brags that, using his system, his pupils will learn the process of “rewiring her attraction circuitry” (24).

The emphasis on converting the often fluid and amorphous world of social interaction into a quantifiable, transparent computer program makes sense when one considers the target demographic for pickup artistry: geeky guys who feel threatened by “alpha males” (Strauss, *The*

*Game 475*), the supposedly “naturally” confident, physically handsome and muscular men that pickup artists see as their most potent competition. In *The Game*, Strauss constantly refers to himself and his fellow PUAs as “nerds” (7, 42). Mystery confesses as much in his book, writing

If you’re thinking, *Yeah, that worked for you, but it will never work for me; I’m a geek*, don’t worry. I was a geek, too. The truth is, generally speaking, geeks are intelligent individuals who simply haven’t yet applied that intelligence to social scenarios; hence they appear deficient in that area. (7)

And yet, the “geek” persona is also something that pickup artists take pride in; even as they self-depreciatingly label themselves as socially awkward, they also emphasize the notion that their intellectual strength will allow them to out-perform their more traditionally masculine counterparts. As Strauss, who would later take the PUA alias “Style” put it,

Put them [master PUAs] on South Beach in Miami and any number of better-looking, muscle-bound bullies will be kicking sand in their pale, emaciated faces. But put them in a Starbucks or Whisky Bar, and they’ll be taking turns making out with that bully’s girlfriend as soon as his back is turned. (*The Game* 12-13)

Note that, as discussed in earlier chapters, the women in this story are not in competition with the PUA. PUAs are in competition with their fellow men. The women are the object of competition, the game piece to be moved and the prize to be won. In fact, each of these guides makes the assumption that “players” are straight men and that “scoring” (*The Game* 19) or accumulating sexual partners is their aim. Women are also “scored” but only in terms of their desirability to men: an average looking woman rates as a 6 or a 7 while a beautiful model receives a 9 or a 10 (96).

There are many indications in PUA literature that the world of pickup is thought of as a video game or a tabletop role playing game. Like online gamers, PUAs go by aliases, not by their real names (3), the meet up in “lairs” (13) or in password protected “secret online communities where they trade notes on what works and what doesn’t. Their lingo is full of acronyms and specialized jargon; instead of referring to BFGs<sup>56</sup> and KDAs<sup>57</sup>, they speak of AFCs (475) (Average Frustrated Chumps who are unable to close the deal with the women they are attracted to) and LMR (480) (Last Minute Resistance that must be overcome by the PUA once he and his target reach the bedroom). Much of their slang sounds like it comes out of *Halo: Combat Evolved* or *Call of Duty*. They bandy about terms like wing, target, and obstacle (28). Mystery repeatedly tells his students to think of their forays into nightclubs and bars “as if you were learning a new video game” (40). “If your man dies, just hit the reload button and play again” (42). One of his pupils took the metaphor one step further, breathlessly telling his fellow PUAs, “I’m into the game because it’s like Dungeons and Dragons. When I learn a neg [see below] or a routine, it’s like getting a new spell or a staff that I can’t wait to use” (Strauss, *The Game* 89).

Unsurprisingly, the importing of the gendered and sexualized logics of the gaming world discussed throughout this dissertation into the highly gendered and sexualized world of dating has resulted in many of the same patterns of commodification and dehumanization of women appearing in PUA culture. In *The Game*, Neil Strauss seems to be occasionally aware of this, lamenting that he

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<sup>56</sup> In classic first person shooters like *Doom* and *Quake*, BFG stands for “Big Fucking Gun.”

<sup>57</sup> In games like *League of Legends* and *Defense of the Ancients 2*, KDA is the ratio of Kills, Deaths, and Assists that a player racks up over the course of a game.

was beginning to see women solely as measuring instruments to give me feedback on how I was progressing as a pickup artist. They were my crash-test dummies, identifiable only by hair colors and numbers—and blonde 7, a brunette 10. Even when I was having a deep conversation, learning about a woman's dreams and point of view, in my mind I was just ticking off a box in my routine marked rapport. In bonding with men, I was developing an unhealthy attitude toward the opposite sex (96).

However, in his PUA lifestyle guide, *The Rules of the Game*, he embraces this development, telling wannabe PUAs to think of women as nothing more than “walking sources of feedback” (112) in the great game of dating and mating being played amongst men.

PUA culture has even adopted the dominant discourse pattern of gaming culture: trolling. However, they have rebranded the troll post into something they call the “neg.”

Neither compliment nor insult, a neg is something in between—an accidental insult or backhanded compliment. The purpose of a neg is to lower a woman's self esteem while actively displaying a lack of interest in her—by telling her she has lipstick on her teeth, for example, or offering her a piece of gum after she speaks.” (Strauss, *The Game* 23)

Negs, much like troll posts, rely on plausible deniability to function. They are delivered in order to provoke an emotional reaction from the target but are designed to resemble gentle teasing jokes or inadvertent and mild insults, thus providing protection for the PUA if a target were to call him on his strategy.

Examples of negs include comments like:

“Is that a wig? Oh... well it looks nice anyway.”

“I like that skirt. I just saw a girl wearing it a few minutes ago.”

“You kinda have man hands.” (41)

And my absolute favorite: “Those shoes look really comfortable.” (41).

Outside of PUAdom, online dating is also home to many trolls. However, rather than using trolling as a (purportedly) playful way to engage with a target, the trolls of online dating use tactics like threats and harassment to save face when they are rebuffed. In other words, they use trolling as a discursive means to reassert control over a situation in which a woman has expressed the desire to cut off contact with a particular suitor. Expressing interest in a woman online means that men must doff the mask of cool aloofness that protects them. When faced with rejection, they retreat behind that mask, claiming to have only messaged the target in the first place “for the lulz.”

Alexandra Tweten, the creator of the Tumblr *Bye Felipe*, which chronicles the exploits of this type of troll, wrote for *Ms. Magazine* that “it has become apparent that a standard trajectory of discourse with men online is this: Man hits on woman, woman rejects or ignores him, man lashes out with insults or even threats” (Tweten). “They’re trying to make us feel bad about making them feel bad,” Tweten told *The Atlantic*. “They’re just trying to strike at whatever our insecurities are. You were just interested a second ago, and now you’re saying, you have a fat ugly nose” (Khazan). *Bye Felipe* and several websites like it including *Straight White Boys Texting*, and *Reddit’s Creepy PMs* function as gendered hacks of the discursive field around online dating. Their creators use their knowledge of the web and their familiarity with the codes of trollspeak to counter the rhetorical onslaughts women face online, revealing the repetitive, pervasive nature of online harassment and draining the barbs of their sting even as they publicly shame harassers.

Furthermore, such repositories of troll posts are also educational tools; they can serve as proof that being a woman online is tough. One Reddit user named

OKCThrowaway22221 discovered as much for himself when he decided to perform an experiment to prove his opinion that “girls have it easy on dating sites” (OKCThrowaway22221) because they can pick and choose from amongst hundreds or even thousands of men who would be happy to get a date with anybody. When he started to receive messages from guys before he could even finish filling out his profile, he thought he had proven his hypothesis. But then,

as more and more messages came (either replies or new ones I had about 10 different guys message me within 2 hours) the nature of them continued to get more and more irritating. Guys were full-on spamming my inbox with multiple messages before I could reply to even one asking why I wasn't responding and what was wrong. Guys would become hostile when I told them I wasn't interested in NSA sex, or guys that had started normal and nice quickly turned the conversation into something explicitly sexual in nature. Seemingly nice dudes in quite esteemed careers asking to hook up in 24 hours and sending them naked pics of myself despite multiple times telling them that I didn't want to.

I would be lying if I said it didn't get to me. I thought it would be some fun thing, something where I would do it and worse case scenario say "lol I was a guy I trolle you lulz"etc. but within a 2 hour span it got me really down and I was feeling really uncomfortable with everything. I figured I would get some weird messages here and there, but what I got was an onslaught of people who were, within minutes of saying hello, saying things that made me as a dude who spends most of his time on 4chan uneasy. I ended up deleting my profile at the end of 2 hours and kind of went about the rest of my night with a very bad taste in my mouth. (OKCThrowaway22221)

He concludes, “I came away thinking that women have it so much harder than guys do when it comes to that kind of stuff” (OKCThrowaway22221).

An awareness of the way that game-like structure is being imposed on interactions like dating can also yield technological solutions that enable less privileged participants to turn the playing field in their favor. For example, the creators of the online dating app Tinder, released in 2012 by Hatch Labs, (Brown) developed an interface that resembles that of a casual game (PBS Game/Show). It turns user profiles into playing cards that can be manipulated via simple, intuitive controls: swipe right if you like someone or swipe left to skip over them. Unlike other dating apps that require a large up-front investment of time and attention, Tinder lets users jump into the mix right away, swiping in short bursts when they have time waiting in line or riding on the bus. Users are even prompted by the interface to think of time spent swiping as “playing.”

As August Brown puts it in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*,

Users have their own vocabulary: people don’t “sign up” or “go on,” they “play” Tinder. The randomized Matches and swipe-left-or-swipe-right physicality of the interface makes it feel more like a video game than a life pursuit, and you can knock out a few rounds while waiting in line at the grocery store. It’s so easy to pull out your phone, pass it around a crowded bar table and come up with drinking games for people you see (a shot for every guy who quotes *Fight Club*; finish your beer for every profile whose lead photo features a more-attractive friend in the shot).

Most importantly, this game takes into account the gendered disparities in the experience that their users will have with online dating. Users must express *mutual* interest in each other in order to enable direct communication. In other words, men are unable to initiate contact with women unless the women have indicated their willingness to chat first. This provides a layer of

protection for female users and solves one of the major problems that plague online services: women become a scarce resource because they are driven out by harassers and trolls. As one can imagine, such a development can spell doom for a dating service. Thus, it is in Tinder's best economic interest to create an app that will provide a greater level of safety and comfort for female users.

The marketing campaign for the premium version of their app, Tinder Plus, demonstrates that women's experiences with the app are important to developers. Their website features a video in which a young woman reminisces about her recent trip abroad. She meets one boy in London without the help of the app and he turns out to be a disaster, abandoning her to get arrested after a wild night. However, the guy she meets in Paris with the help of the app is a keeper; he is depicted as sweet and thoughtful and he even surprises her by showing up with flowers at another stop along her trip. The subtext of the ad suggests to women that Tinder is a product that will allow you to find adventure in relative safety, a means to screen out trouble makers and users and a short-cut to quality hook-ups that could possibly blossom into something more. This suggests that the app's producers have actually thought through the problems (and dangers) that women face when it comes to dating, romance, and hookups and that they developed their software specifically to help defuse those problems.

What is notable about services like Tinder (and other similar apps like Antidate and Bumble) is that they represent a paradigm shift in app development. Each of these developers recognized the game that trolls play using the interfaces provided by traditional online dating sites. Furthermore, they recognized that trolls were targeting women specifically. Finally, and most importantly, these developers reasoned that there is profit to be made in courting women as users by fighting back against the trolls.



Too often in tech culture there is an assumption that straight white males are the most profitable consumer base available. They conclude that reaching out to other demographics would not be worth the time and resources that it would take to create systems and interfaces that solve the unique problems those groups face online. The developers of dating apps like Tinder, Antidate, and Bumble made the intuitive leap that, in order to be successful at matching up men and women, they would need to provide a platform that was welcoming to and inclusive of both groups. If that meant “leveling the playing field” for women by providing them with safeguards against trolls, then, these developers realized, those safeguards would benefit the community as a whole (and would result in the creation of a more profitable product).

Of course, PUAs are hard at work trying to figure out how to “hack” online dating systems like Tinder (“Tinder – 12 Pick Up Lines that Work,” *Tinder Seduction, Tinder Code*). And so it remains imperative for developers to consider the ever-evolving needs of women (and queer folk and people of color and the disabled and the lower class and other demographic groups that have long gone unrecognized as valuable participants in Internet culture) and to think about how the infrastructure of their online *and* offline communities can be exploited by trolls. Their willingness to do so will be tied to our ability as consumers to convince them that it is worth their time and money to invest in making the web a more diverse place. Gaming mechanics and social hacks can solve many of the problems that originated in gaming culture, but only if we create a financial incentive for developers that are willing to play along with us.

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