Illegitimate, Monstrous and Out There: Female Quake Players and Inappropriate Pleasures

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There have been relatively few explicitly feminist analyses of popular computer games playing as a cultural practice and very few which engage positively with existing female players, their pleasures and their communities. The Cassell & Jenkins edited collection From Barbie to Mortal Kombat (1999) is still the only volume focusing on the issue of gender and computer game culture and largely deals with the issues of how to make *better* games for girls and how to improve female access to games playing rather than engaging with the games and players that already exist (or existed then). TL Taylor's (1999 & 2003) research into female players of the highly popular massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) Everquest is a significant exception to this general tendency. The feminist response to female players of First Person Shooter games (FPS) has been either to condemn them for their adoption of masculine values (as evidenced by hooks in Marriott 2003) or to largely dismiss these players as of little interest to feminism and to privilege instead the creative practices of female game artists (Flanagan 2003). However, by locating these female play practices within a technofeminist framework and by drawing on play and performance theory it is possible to see that computer games can afford many moments of the creation of oppositional meanings and further can allow for the elaboration of an oppositional identity. Computer game playing is a specific cultural practice where the popular meanings of technology, play and gender converge. Although one can never see games as anything but reflective of and embedded within capitalism or patriarchy or technoculture they can at the same time provide the materials for the enunciation and exploration of alternative pleasures, practices, politics and subjectivities.

In the discussion that follows I will be drawing from a case study focusing on the consumption and production practices of individual female Quake players, female Quake playing clans, and the ways in which they have separately and collectively represented themselves to the rest of the online games playing community which has formed around Quake. This case study is part of an ongoing study of female games players and the communities which have developed through their play and play related practices. Here I will be drawing from the online material produced by individual players and particular play communities (web pages, web sites and other more specifically game-related creative practices) and interviews and

correspondence with individual players. This research began in 2000 and the interviews were conducted over an eighteen month period between 2001 and 2003 during which time I also learnt to play the games in single player mode and played with other female players online. I also draw from earlier online archive material on specific female gamer websites such as www.grrlgamer.com. Firstly, however, it is necessary to sketch out the specific context of these practices in order to better understand the ways in which these players and producers are required to negotiate and subvert particular meanings around appropriate feminine behaviour and appropriate feminine pleasures.

Quake (and its sequels) is an enduringly popular example of the 3D first person shooter genre, making use of an innovative game engine which offered new possibilities in terms of the 3D representation space of the game and the speed of gameplay. Quake also offered multiplayer capabilities and eventually the possibility for it to be played online via dedicated game servers (Quake 3: Arena and Quake 3 Gold are the latest iterations offering this online facility). Quake was initially released on June 24 1996 as a shareware version with the release of the official version following a few months later in August. The shareware ethos and the possibility of making changes to the game allowed fans unique access to the production and distribution of new game content for others to share (this process is know as modding – short for 'modifying') and in the process spawned an online community based around these practices. These fan activities have also enabled new forms of relationship between producers and consumers where power relationships between them may become less fixed, less predictable and less easy to control.

Not all computer games have allowed for this degree of code manipulation on the part of the player but as a result of this Quake has been extraordinarily successful in gaining and maintaining a devout network of committed players. The producers of Quake have actively fostered this range of cultural practices and have sought to facilitate the development of the community and the space for the exchange of material. This has made good economic sense for the producers of Quake as it is this community of passionate players that can help to secure the success of a game. 'Disappointment tinged reviews of Quake III, while often nonplussed with the actual content of the game proper, insisted it was worth buying for the support it would inevitably receive from the mod community' (Edge, #126, p. 58). These factors have allowed for the emergence of highly *visible* participatory cultures where there is a

collapse of distinction between the dominant culture (the games industry) and the subculture (games players and modders) not typically associated with cinema-going or television viewing (see Giddings & Kennedy, 2005). There are two critical aspects of this fan/subcultural activity which are important for the discussion of female Quake players that follows – playing computer games involve an engagement and proficiency with computer technology, and computer game practices, competences and pleasures are highly gendered.

To play a computer game you have to master the interface in order to engage with the game at any level, from loading the game through to making the settings suit your play style (at very least analogous with setting up and operating a video recorder for example). This means that a very basic level you have to be able to make use of a mouse, and operate a keyboard simultaneously - these games require that you are adept at the handling of these controls and are incredibly unforgiving of the absolute novice. The moment that you click the mouse to signal your readiness for play you are immediately thrown in to a noisy, chaotic, confusing 3D environment filled with computer generated characters whose sole function is to destroy your avatar as quickly and as efficiently as possible – even on the easiest setting in the game (there are several levels of difficulty available ranging from the novice, through hardcore to the hardest level 'nightmare') the speed and pace of the game has to be adapted to very quickly in order to make any progress and is quite distinct from the gentler more contemplative pace of strategy games or role-playing games. This description provided by one female player neatly captures some of this complexity:

> "you have to be able to use the mouse for more than just point and click you have to sort of be able to use it around in space which is a bit different and its easy to end up looking at the ceiling or getting stuck in corners and becoming frag bait. Oh, yeah, and your left and right hands are doing totally different things, you've got to really know where all the keys are.. at first I couldn't get it all sorted out, changing weapons, jumping, moving around and shooting it was all a bit much and my mouse hand would be doing one thing and I'd have to look at the keyboard to try and find the right keys… then after a while it all sort of clicks and you're just staring at the screen and your hands are going like crazy and you just sort of do it all on automatic and you feel like its you in there, sneaking round corners and fragging that poor little eyeball on legs to bits…" Xena [fragging is the term given to killing another character (or bot as they are sometimes described) in the game]

Extend this to the processes of modification which will require some facility with operating sub programs, understanding game code and operating graphics packages. Even without engaging in modding practices, in order to play online you

will have to be able to navigate through the web to find a server and choose a level to play that is active, each step requiring you to operate the computer with some skill and proficiency. Understanding computer games as an entry point for a familiarity with computers has underpinned the politically motivated 'games for girls' movement. This movement, which began in 1995, was underpinned by the understanding that 'getting playful' early with technology is crucial in helping to gain access to jobs involving technology as adults. Games are seen, in this context, as a means of training users in particular skills which are deemed socially and culturally valuable in this way the development of technical competence and familiarity through gaming is seen as a valuable means to and end. Many others who are actively engaged with trying to improve female access to technology have focused on computer games as a critical means through which to foster technological competence. (Cassell & Jenkins, 1999, Laurel 2001, Rayner Gray 2003, ACM proceedings 2001) A similar discourse of access operates amongst the key figures who have been actively involved in the female Quake community. Vangie 'Aurora' Beal who ran the 'gamegirlz' online resource and played in Clan PMS (Psycho Men Slayers) here makes a fairly typical statement enunciating a firm belief in this set of connections between play, technology and technological competence: "Girls will start off working with computers by playing fun games and will end up being able to fully compete with men in tech skills. Now that's something I like to be encouraging." (Cassell & Jenkins, 1999: 328 all quotations from this edited collection are taken from the end section of the book where prominent figures in the female games community respond to the issues raised by the essays in the volume.)

The computer game thus emerges as the dominant playful medium for experience and pleasure as well as the most profitable commodification of the potentials of computer processing, and, importantly, computers and computer proficiency are symbolically coded as masculine. Coyle argues that "to question the masculinity of computers is tantamount to questioning our image of masculinity itself: Computers are power, and power, in our world, must be the realm of men." (1996:43) Cockburn (1993:39) also emphasizes the way in which technology forms a crucial part of our gendered identity. So whilst not all men are adept with computers (or other highly valued forms of technology) "what is experienced as failure by individual men may not affect the general image of hegemonic masculinity. Those who are masters demonstrate not only that they are 'real men' themselves, but they demonstrate a phenomenon recognized as masculinity and confirm the meaning of the concept."

(Lie 1995: 391). Computer games emerged fully bound up in this gendered symbology.

Game design, content, packaging and marketing all serve to demarcate games playing as a specifically masculine activity. This remains as true today as it was in the early eighties and this is despite the numerous attempts, both commercially and politically motivated, to undermine this notion. Brenda Laurel is one of the few female games designers to be recognized in the wider culture and she was one of the key players in the games for girls movement. Laurel confirms this gendered lineage of the computer game and computer game culture:

> "Computer games as we know them were invented by young men around the time of the invention of graphical displays. They were enjoyed by young men, and young men soon made a very profitable business of them, dovetailing to a certain extent with the existing pinball business. Arcade computer games were sold into male-gendered spaces, and when home computer consoles were invented, they were sold through male-oriented consumer electronics channels to more young men. The whole industry consolidated very quickly around a young male demographic – all the way from the gameplay design to the arcade environment to the retail world." (Keynote address given at CHI 98 conference April 1998.) (http://www.tauzero.com/Brenda_Laurel/Recent_Talks/Technological_Humanism.html

To date the majority of research and writing around female computer game players has tended to suggest that there exists a 'feminine' set of computer game pleasures and preferences – something which is vehemently resisted by many female players:

> 'I keep reading about articles and studies where experts say girls don't like shooting and blasting games but instead prefer quiet, contemplative games with well-rounded characters and storylines that stimulate their imagination. I'd venture to say, however, that these studies are a reflection of how we condition girls to be passive. The image of a woman with a gun is too shocking, too disruptive and threatening to the male dominant order of things'. Aliza Sherman, Cybergrrrl. (Cassell & Jenkins,1999: 335)

'The notion that some forms of activity and entertainment are more appropriate to men and some to women, that some genres can be called 'masculine' whilst others are labelled 'feminine', has a long history.' (Tasker, 1993: 136) Whatever the intention, these studies of 'feminine' play styles and play preferences contribute to the construction of appropriate feminine tastes and behaviours which cannot help but inform the ways individuals understand their preferences as either 'normal' or 'abnormal'. Female Quake players have to live with and reconcile the fact that their pleasures will be deemed unfeminine and inappropriate. In her feminist analysis of

women's leisure Betsy Wearing has drawn on Foucault's notion of heterotopias - "[i]n contrast to 'utopias' which are fictional critiques of society, without any actual locality, 'heterotopias' for Foucault can be 'real' existing places of difference which act as counter-sites or compensatory sites to those of everday activity." (1998: 146) Wearing argues the importance of these 'counter-sites' as a means of experiencing alternative subjectivities and forms of self-empowerment not readily available in other aspects of daily experience and they "provide spaces for rewriting the script of what it is to be a woman, beyond definitions provided by powerful males and the discourses propagated as truth in contemporary societies." (1998: 147) The players themselves are quick to articulate a critique of normative femininity: "People say it's not ladylike to sit in front of a computer or want to play a game where you run around with a shotgun, but why not? I get insulted a lot and told I'm like a boy, but I'm not. I'm just a different kind of girl." (Stephanie Bergman).

Computer Games Player as Cyborg

To understand the specificity of computer games as a distinct cultural practice through which we engage with technology it is appropriate to draw on theories of cyberculture. These theories seek to understand the ways in which technologies (particularly, but not exclusively, computer technologies and biotechnology) contribute to social relationships, cultural practices and subjectivity (Haraway 1990, Stone 1995, Plant 1995, Featherstone and Burrows 1995). Whilst such approaches must be addressed critically, they raise compelling issues that help to account for the experience of playing computer games as both material technologies and as a critical aspect of the technological imaginary. Computer games, like most computer applications, work through feedback between user and software. It has been argued that these games, or more precisely the circuit of game and player in the act of playing, is literally (for the duration of the game at least) cybernetic:

> we do not see here two complete and sealed-off entities: the player on the one hand and the game on the other. Rather there is an interchange of information and energy, forming a new circuit [...] Through the tactile and visual interface with the machine, the entire body is determined to move by being part of the circuit of the game, being, as it were, <u>in the loop</u> (Lister et al 2003: 370)

Computer games are not only populated by 'cyborgs' in the form of technologised superbeings and monstrous hybrids but also produce the gameplayer *as* cyborg. The figure of the cyborg, (as developed by Haraway (1990)), offered us the idea that our new intimate connection with machines could create a space for identity affiliation

and agency which would destabilize conventional relationships between body, machine and nature, challenging the 'command, control and conquer' logic of state/corporate digital domination. Instead of critiquing technology solely on the basis of its embeddedness in both a colonialist, teleological and capitalist set of processes the dawning of the cyber age was met with a sense of new opportunities – the figure of the cyborg was offered by Haraway as a way to move beyond the potentially essentialising association of women with nature. Haraway (1990) offered the cyborg as a new metaphor for subjectivity which could potentially avoid the problematic binaries which pervade around nature/culture, male/female. In doing so she promoted the cyborg as a "site of possible resignifications … to expand the possibilities [of subjectivity] .. to enable an enhanced sense of agency." (Butler, 1992:16) Crucial to this new sense of agency was a rally call for those who were deemed to be marginalized by technoculture to embrace their affinity with technology and to offer new symbols, new uses and practices through which to 'code' this new subjectivity. Female Quake players, their creative practices and the community they have developed should be understood to be relevant to a technofeminist agenda that seeks to offer both new images of technologised embodiment *and* to foster an active engagement with technology amongst women. Haraway argues 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. … [and provide] a powerful infidel heteroglossia. It is an imagination of a feminist speaking in tongues to strike fear … It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, spaces, stories." (1990: 223)

Cyborgian Pleasures

Playing Quake is therefore a means for displaying or performing technological competence and a form of technological embodiment but is also the means through which technological competence can develop further *beyond* the game itself as we shall see. When describing what they enjoy about Quake women use terms such as 'athleticism', 'balance' , 'coordination' 'taking risks' in such a way as to suggest that the cyborgian nature of gameplay is experienced as a set of embodied pleasures. Although it is the avatar that performs these feats of athleticism or coordination within the game space, it is the players skill in controlling the interface that shapes this performance. The sense of agency the players experience is doubled, the player experiences a freedom of movement and sense of authority and mastery within the

game alongside a sense of empowerment through their skill in mastering the technology. These two responses indicate the double nature of their pleasure:

> "I really like the way the other bots in the game respond to how well you are doing – they get really narked if you win and say things like "lets all gang up and kill 'tankgirl' next time" or the machine says "excellent" when you frag a couple of bots in a row. I know it sounds a bit, I don't know, but it makes me feel really good and I feel like I'm really there." (tankgirl)

> "I loved the challenge with Hunter – she's so beautiful, and she says all this sort of spiritual stuff and she's really hard to beat one on one and I felt really proud when I won when playing on 'hurt me plenty' mode which is quite hard." (supergirl)

Many of these women articulate a strong sense of pleasure in surprising male players with their competence and skill when playing online or over LAN (local area networks such as those found in internet cafes) connections. They are aware that they are not expected to be good at these games and gain enormous satisfaction in flouting convention. In this typical response, the player has first encountered Quake with a group of male friends at a cybercafe, become hooked, bought the game to practice at home and then subsequently had the opportunity to play against the same group of male players. "Next time we played together over a lan connection I held up my end and I could see that the blokes were really surprised and even a bit fed up that I was 'fragging' them so successfully…. I LOVED IT!" (Amanda/Xena) These female players - who take pleasure in the mastery of game which is seen as requiring skills which are clearly demarcated as masculine - are aware of the transgressive nature of their pleasure.

From Player to Producer – First You Have to Slay a King

Considering the extent to which first person shooter games are deeply steeped in masculine culture it is no surprise that it created quite a stir when Stevie Case/ KillCreek- a young female game player from Kansas - defeated John Romero [co-creator of Quake] in a series of Quake Death Matches in 1998. He was so impressed by her that he created a web shrine to celebrate her prowess - Http://members.tripod.com/~heimstadt/stevie.com 'The Temple of Stevie KillCreek Case and other Quake Goddesses'. KillCreek's skill and renown attracted a great deal of attention within the Quake community as well as outside – including a feature on Case in the Rolling Stone and a feature in Playboy. KillCreek was subsequently involved in the beta testing for later versions of Quake , eventually worked with John Romero and continues to pursue a career in the games industry. Mastering the

strategic and technical skills necessary to beat the designer of a game as popular as Quake is a significant achievement and KillCreek remains an icon for other female 'Quakers'. Zoe Flower describes what it was like to have Case getting so much attention in the late nineties. "Case was getting all sorts of press and was the basic representative of women in games. I felt that it was a shame that the only woman in the spotlight was a gamer, and not a developer or someone with more influence in the world of game creation. But Stevie Case demonstrated just what it meant to be a woman gamer at the time. It was like she was from outer space, as if aliens had landed." (Zoe Flower 1999 http://www.gamegal.com/zoeflower/zoe5.htm)

KillCreek's success led her to be approached by Angel Munoz who was the founder of the Cyberathlete Professional League. She was signed up as the first member and competed for 18 months during which she was hailed as a 'torchbearer' for other female gamers and particularly for those interested in professional competitive gaming. "Women are starting to realize that they have the same abilities in sports – and things like sport – as men," said Leann Pomaville, a 38 year old former school teacher who runs the girl gaming sites Da Valkyries and Quake Women's Forum. "Quake is a game where your own personal skill makes all the difference, like in a sport." Further serving to undermine the notion of 'masculine' competences - these competitive Quake players destabilize the normative construction of 'masculinity' whilst also demonstrating its 'performative' nature. There are now highly competitive international all-female games tournaments that take place around the world.

Skinning the Monstrous Feminine

> **'**Skinning is the art of creating the images that get wrapped around 3D player character models in 3D games. These images are what give the 'mesh' a solid, realistic look. A good analogy is if you think of the skin as the paper that goes around the bamboo frame (mesh) of a chinese lantern. You paint what you want on the paper and the game wraps it around the frame for you based on the mapping the model has with it.' (Chiq/Milla, female Quake player and skin artist, www.chiq.net)

A particularly adept skinner may eventually see her skin being included in the range of characters on offer to other players through online communities and may receive prizes and acclaim for their art (http://www.planetquake.com/polycount is a site that monitors and nominates particular skins as well as providing guides and downloads of recommended skins and mods). Skinning is not an easy process – some taking as much as 60 hours to complete a skin - like other art forms it is a process requiring a great deal of commitment and engagement. Camilla Bennett is a skin artist (see

her work online at www.chiq.net) whose consumption/play practices have developed into more professional/creative activities. A self-taught skinner since 2000, Milla has developed a high degree of competence and has moved on from designing her own skins to a professional role as a texture artist in the development of the skin for the heroine of Betty Bad (WildTangent) a web-based game, developed skins for Unreal Tournament and produced art work for the company Liquid Development. Milla has also won a number of awards for her skins, and features prominently on the key website which operates as a trading post for 'skinners' and players (Polycount). Milla also operates as a role-model for other female Quake players:

> "I found this one skin artist 'Milla' and I thought – "I want to do that". Her website is the most beautiful and has this lovely front page with this line "skin is armor" which I just loved I don't know why and she's really doing stuff and even getting awards and things for her skins. I like spent ages following all the links and there was like this whole community out there of other women producing really great images.. and I followed up all the links on the Quake sites and taught myself how to download different 'skins' for me to play around with and I even tried to make some of my own – not successfully though…" [buff-e-girl]

This player is just one example among many for whom their gameplay becomes the jumping off point for a greater engagement with technology in general:

> "It really made me want to learn a how to use graphics on the computer – I had never thought that I could or that I would ever be interest, I'd done some online chatting, used the computer for emails and played some free web games and stuff but I had thought of myself as any good with computers…. A friend is teaching me how to use Photoshop on his computer and when I'm okay I'm going to try to do a really good skin and stick it up on the web." [Supergirl]

Chiq/Milla describes her own personal skin: 'Woods woman/warrior in a post-apocalyptic context. She's flaking rust, greasy and has these damn pesky hoverblades stuck to her feet.' The imagery used draws heavily from fantasy/science fiction as well as closely resembling the type of female subject that often crop up in feminist cyberpunk literature. "Female skinners sample elements from the pre-existing female character lexicon and add new flavours into the mix, resulting in fem monsters better suited to their female inhabitants." (Schleiner, 1999 online) These fantasy constructions of identity offer an exploration of alternative subjectivities in which being feminine doesn't necessarily equal being a victim or needing rescuing. Producing skins for their own use of to 'pimp' out to others allows players to engage in the production of images and symbols through which to articulate their own identity, tastes and agency. The skins often become the means through which a

player will express aspects of their identity to other members of the community either through its inclusion in a webpage or during online tournaments.

As I indicated above, it is clear that some feminist critics do not approve of women engaging with games like Quake and see little to celebrate in the creation of images of tough 'warrior women'. In an article which focused on both the recent increase in the number of active heroines in film, television and computer games and the rise in the number of women enjoying shooter games, bell hooks offered a dismayed response: "Most disturbingly, … the female protagonists who engage in physical combat in popular movies, television programs and video games encourage women not to challenge patriarchy … The effect is especially potent in video games … because the games' fantasies are so immersive." (cited by Michel Marriott, New York Times "Fighting Women Enter the Arena, No Holds Barred" May 15, 2003.) I have encountered a very similar response when I have discussed female Quake players at conferences and in seminars. Very often there is an anxiety that these women are merely playing at being like men, a more extreme response was that within the current climate of terrorism and acts of random violence, women enjoying playing violent shooter games was symptomatic of the final decline of civilization. Here we see a notion of appropriate womanhood as 'nurturing' and peace loving alongside an uneasy slippage between 'fantasy' and reality. What happens within this critique is that women who do engage in these practices or take pleasure in them is that they are ascribed a 'false consciousness'. The claim that they encourage women 'not to challenge patriarchy' suggests that these women are willing dupes in their own oppression – their pleasure is pleasure only in their own subjugation. This would suggest that we could establish a specifically feminist game pleasure and a correlative set of appropriate images that could be decided in advance – what is needed is a recognition of the heterogeneity of play practices and pleasures and their role in the providing experiences of empowerment –both within the game and as an engagement with technology.

Female Quake Communities

The online capability of these games has allowed for the emergence of 'clans' (teams of players who compete against other teams in tournaments) who may also develop their own particular clan 'skins' (an amusing example is The Partridge Family Quake Clan http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Cavern/2690). A number of communities have formed through these play practices – some are clan specific others are more open

(Planet Quake http://www.planetquake.com is perhaps the most important example of the latter). "Network shooters like Quake and Unreal enable social grouping into clans that coalesce both locally among friends, workers and family, and also long distance over the Internet. The female clan offers a powerful support structure to female gamers, a place where knowledge can be shared and friendship bonds strengthened that extend outside the scope of the game." (Schleiner, 1999) This is particularly significant in relation to the 'offline' representations and constructions of computer game culture, whether this is television programmes which may feature a female presenter but clearly address a male audience, to the numerous magazines – official and unofficial - which through their style, layout, content and tone indicate their address directly to a male (and frequently adolescent) audience. Scantily clad female bodies are used in advertising promotions for many games; games industry gatherings feature a preponderance of booth babes who are there to entice the 'putatively' male professional (developer, designers, writers, reviewers). As a financially significant player in popular culture, computer games remain the most resolutely sexist in their advertising, marketing and promotions. Yet in the heterotopic world of online game culture, female gamers and game reviewers have found a context which enables them to enunciate their identity, declare their existence and to find others of their kind. Through the creation of webpages, websites, and webrings these women are able to recognise and affirm each others identity as 'gamer' in opposition to an offline context where they are invisible, marginalized and frequently demeaned. This is of particular significance to players who may feel isolated as a female:

> "I was the only female I knew who played and then one day I went on the web and discovered all these sites and women and art and chat about games and I just thought'wow' – there weren't just loads of other women out there playing Quake but they were making stuff with the game as well, new 'skins' for the female game characters, sharing them out with other women and even playing together online in what they called 'clans'." [Xena]

The female Quake playing community demonstrates a playful use of names to demarcate a specifically oppositional female identity within the online community. This is true both of the naming of individuals and the naming of clans or communities such as Chiq, Hellchick, Supergirl, Geekgirl, Clan PMS (Psycho Men Slayers), Da Valkyries: The Women of Quake, Clan Crack Whore, Nimble Little Minxes, The Coven, Hell's Warehouse. The names appropriate female subjectivities and identities that are drawn from real or mythical monstrous female identities (these names are also evocative of the kinds of radical feminist re/mis-appropriation of

previously pejorative terms). In doing so they demonstrate their perception of themselves as countering hegemonic representations of femininity as well as the masculine representation of games culture and games players in general. Female Quake playing personas are chimeric, cyborgian and disruptive, they appropriate the demarcation of the female body as already always monstrous and redeploy these images as a 'tactical assault' on the normative construction of this identity. The images and names clearly draw from a long history of transgressive feminist informed femininity countering notions of femininity as passive or nurturing. By foregrounding both their 'femaleness' and their skill in the game they offer a different set of meanings to computers, computer games, and technological competence. By bringing their own bodies or their fantasized bodies to the play arena they disrupt the assumption of a white male heterosexual player and avatar. They also problematise the dominant image of games playing as a masculine retreat from the 'feminised' body and make the female body figure as an agentic force in this relationship with technology. In doing so they offer compelling representations of cyborg subjectivity.

> "Lethal female body architecture, deft combat moves and an organized female affront in the form of female gamer clans are shifting the gender topography of the shooter. Working the keyboard and mouse behind these female fighting machines are the women players who have dared to cross a rigid gender boundary into a violent gamer culture often understood by men and women alike as a boys' world, (embraced by men affirmatively, often disparaged by women)." (Schleiner, 1999)

This celebration and reappropriation of the monstrous feminine cannot be dismissed as simply 'aping' masculinity – as already suggested their performance of skills which have been deemed masculine can be read as undermining the assumption of a 'male body' as the site of these competences. (Butler, 1992)

A recourse to performance theory enables us to understand the relationship between play, ritual and performance but also to understand the cultural significance of play as a kind of performance. Victor Turner offers an account of both the individual significance of play and performance but also their significance in the formation of communities and the enunciation of community identity. Turner describes various types of play both traditional and modern and seeks to understand their personal and social significance. Like Bakhtin, he understands rituals/festivals and play as the site both as the affirmation of cultural norms and standards but also as the site of potential cultural critique. The special time and space of play is described as liminal or liminoid – they have a different character and are positioned

differently in relation to the dominant meanings of the culture within which they are located. The liminal is characterised as a type of play or ritual that is often compulsory in some sense – either a community gathering or an essential 'rite of passage'. Whilst these activities may contain within them either the 'abrogation or negation' of existing power structures and subjectivities they are seen as a means of more securely anchoring their participants to the status quo. Liminoid phenomena on the other hand are much more individualised and commodified, they –"develop apart from the central economic and political processes, along the margins, in the interfaces and interstices of central and servicing institutions – they are plural, fragmentary and experimental in their character." (Turner, 1982 :58) Liminal and liminoid are both for Turner the "seedbeds of cultural creativity" but it is the liminoid which has the power to transform through radical 'manifestoes' and critique.

Turner's notion of the liminoid thus gives us the notion of play as not just a source of creativity but also the possibility to consider play as a site of political meanings and interventions – play has both a hegemonic function and a critical one. This understanding of these liminoid "situations as settings in which new models, symbols, paradigms arise" (Turner, 1982: 28) provides us with a means of acknowledging the role that play can have in allowing individuals and groups to subvert dominant meanings, and is an appropriate framework through which to understand the heterogeneous practices of individual female players and the communities that have formed around these practices. Turner also offers us a further useful analytical tool – the notion of *communitas* – this is relevant to the ways in which the female games community enunciate their identity in relation to the dominant masculine games community, but also how 'communities of players' in general position themselves as 'other' to ideas of work based communities. For Turner *communitas*:

> does not represent the erasure of structural norms from the consciousness of those participating in it; rather its own style, in a given community, might be said to depend upon the ways in which it symbolises the abrogation, negation or inversion of the normative structures in which its participants are quotidianly involved. (1982:58)

These feisty, fearless and transgressing female gamers taking up space and answering back, are performing a kind of gender insubordination which may not be feminist in its intentions but may be feminist in its effect upon themselves as subjects and within the wider community. These online personas or avatars provide us with representations of performed subjectivities where the boundaries of what is

acceptable are potentially different to those experienced in the offline setting. The webpages, websites, and online personas can be viewed as enunciations of identity that are directed at particular discourses which are important to them. These performative spaces enable the living out (however temporarily) of imaginative heterotopian identities or playful representations of self which may be limited and constrained, but in very different ways to the offline context they regularly inhabit. (See Taylor 2003 for a discussion of this in relation to Everquest players. Certainly, the successful repetition of these performances appear to have direct consequences on the offline subjectivity in that in the examples given here they also achieve a different status within the culture as they access a producerly mode of engagement with technology.

Feminism 'In' and 'At' Play: Female Quake Players and the Politics of Subversion

The female Quake playing community makes no specific claims to a feminist agenda or a feminist politics, yet it is clear from the practices of the community that their activities are at least implicitly informed by issues which have been central to feminist critiques of technology and of popular culture. They have often deployed of sometimes contradictory feminist discourse in the articulation of their relationship to the game culture in general, on the one hand they have produced websites, webpages and formed clans through which to enunciate their outsider status through the naming of these clans and the imagery which inspires their skins. Their activities are analogous to other kinds of feminist practice where separate space is deemed important for the critical work of developing a network and supporting other women. The make use of language derived from feminist debates through which to describe their experiences and to critique the representation and treatment of women in computer games and computer games culture. More recently Stephanie Brail (a prominent player and spokesperson in the female games community) has made more explicit reference to feminism in an interview that celebrated the success of female websites in helping to foster a more inclusive community for female players online but also bemoaned the continued sexism and sexist imagery in games content and in the games industry in general:

> A lot of women want to hide their heads in the sand these days. Out of some sort of bizarre denial, they want to believe that anything slightly related to feminism is just a bunch of radical, bitter, (heaven forbid) lesbian hoo-ha that doesn't really apply to them. […] How does this relate to computer and video gaming? If you think women have equality in this arena, then all you need to do is pick up a game magazine or read the credits at the end of a video game. How many women play vital roles in reporting on video and computer games? How many women programmers or designers do you see?

Brail makes the connection between the role of women in the industry and the representation of women in computer games:

> It's obvious, when playing most video games, who's in charge here: men. Many titles are the video game equivalent of beer commercials. I mean, c'mon, let's take a recent game release, Dead or Alive Beach Volleyball, in which there is a bunch of women in bikinis with big fake boobs bouncing up and down in virtual sand.
>
> Some women look at skimpily clad, big breasted women in games and yawn, saying that men in video games are often similarly attired in next to nothing and also have good bodies. Sure, but there's a huge difference between a man with no shirt on and a man showing off his huge throbbing manhood through tight underwear. Have you ever seen *that* in a video game? Or how about a guy in a thong? I sure haven't. Men in games are not portrayed sexually: women are. (Brail 2005)

In Mary Flanagan's analysis of women artists creating games she emphasises the critical aspect that women are using the medium of games as a means of 'self-discovery.' (2003: 371) Flanagan stresses that her interest is in "women making games for themselves using the tools of this system, countering them, and making new meaning with them." (2003: 380) Flanagan argues :

> "[w]omen game artists are in some ways the embodiment of the cyborg "weaver" imaged by cyberfemininsts such as Haraway and Plant, t'hough in an unpredictable and unromantic way… these game makers are technically proficient women who have chosen to incorporate cyberfeminist and political ideas into their work while remaining conscious of the limitations imposed by their male-constructed and –dominated artistic platform. With their clear evaluation of social experiences such as discrimination, violence, the representation of women… as well as their unique notions about the body, homeland, landscapes, and social constructions as they relate to the body and to identity, women's games celebrate the act of playing as a means of self-discovery." (381)

Despite the lack of specific feminist intentions the female Quake players, skinners and their community make precisely this kind of intervention. Many of the websites which function to service and maintain the female gaming community offer critiques of the representation of women in games, share experiences of sexist behaviour,

debate the efficacy of a creating games specifically for girls and women, and provide a valuable highly participatory space for other female gamers to contribute to these debates. Simultaneously, they offer positive images, experiences and role models for other female players as well as frequently offering technical support and instruction in how to create their own web pages, web sites or how to use particular software.

Flanagan distinguishes the female artists from the 'women in games' community or grrlgamer community – "they are not seeking to create new gaming paradigms. Rather, they work to get women "accepted" by the male gaming communities playing male games and offer camp like readings of popular existing games." (2003: 380) It is not necessary to dismiss the everyday practices of those who lack the critical or technical knowledge required to make the kind of explicitly feminist and theoretically informed work which Flanagan privileges. These works would potentially be opaque to those without the necessary skills to decode and decipher their meanings and their politics. Whilst these female game artists are making a valuable and potent contribution to the meaning and understanding of computer games (as is Flanagan in her valuable celebration of their work) we need not dismiss the pleasures and practices of those who do actively engage with and take pleasure in popular games culture. As Yvonne Tasker has pointed out in relation to a similar trend within feminist film criticism "this critical trajectory reveals the operation within feminist criticism of a class-based, high cultural, attitude towards the popular […] an attitude familiar from other forms of criticism." (1993:136) Flanagan's use of quotation marks around the word 'accepted' also suggests that this is somehow both easier and less meaningful.

I would argue that these women who take pleasure in and contribute to popular games culture contribute significantly to the democratisation of technology and technological competence in a way which elitist/artist interventions can rarely hope to achieve. Popular games culture is made up of a range of heterogeneous players, practices and pleasures and it is *the* crucial site where dominant notions of technology, gender and technological competence are both constructed, negotiated and contested. Sustained feminist engagement with computer games as a site of pleasure and as a form of active engagement with technoculture is long overdue.

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