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"They see it as a guy's game": The politics of gender in digital games

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"They See It as a Guy's Game": The Politics of Gender in Digital Games

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Abstract. This paper examines "gamers'" gendered experiences of digital game play. Specifically, the paper explores female gamers' involvement as a gendered process with attention to their gendered experiences. It also focuses on players' resistance to gender based constraints, such as the social act of females "taking up" space in a traditionally male-dominated leisure activity. The findings indicate that gaming character representations, content, and the gaming environment influence the players' gendered experiences of game play. While commonality in the discourse of male and female players existed, there was also significant divergence; female players experienced significant gender-based discrimination. Female players' resistance to traditional notions of femininity and the sexist and misogynistic content and experiences of game play figured prominently in the findings. The study highlights how the politics of gender are enacted through the gendered content and practice of digital game play and how gaming holds particular relevance to the politics of place.

Keywords. popular culture, digital games, social construction, resistance, gender, hegemony

Résumé. Cet article examine les « gamers » et les jeux digitaux. Plus spécifiquement l'article explore la participation des femelles gamers dans ce contexte. L'article se concentre également sur la résistance des joueuses aux contraintes basées par sur le genre, tel que la socialisation des femelles dans une activité de loisirs traditionnellement dominée par des mâles. Les résultats indiquent que les représentations des caractères de jeu, le contenu, l'espace compétitif du ludiciel influences les expériences de jeu et accroitre, dans certains contextes le genre. Tandis que des similarités dans le discours du joueur masculin et féminin ont été trouvées, il existe également beaucoup de divergence significa-

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tive ; les joueurs féminins éprouvent de la discrimination significative centre sur le genre. La résistance des joueurs féminins aux notions traditionnelles de la féminité et le contenu sexiste et misogyne sont aussi figurés en évidence. L'étude accentue comment la politique du genre est décrétée par le contenu des ludiciels, et comment les jeux de vidéo on une pertinence particulière avec la politique de l'espace.

Mots-clés. culture populaire, jeu vidéo, jeu digital, ludiciel, construction sociale, résistance, genre, hégémonie

Introduction

In a technologically mediated society, digital computer games are a popular form of mass entertainment. The interactive, engaging, immersive, and socially mediated aspects of digital gaming enhance the "pleasures of play" and the player's attraction to games as a leisure pastime (Sherry, 2004; Taylor, 2003; Turkle, 1995). Globally, computer games have become a multibillion dollar industry (Plunkett Research, 2004). Nationally, Canada is currently one of the leading producers and consumers of computer games with sales of games and software reaching $590.2 million in 2004 (ESA, 2005b). The increased money spent on gaming is one social indicator but the discretionary time that people also spend playing also indicates the prominence of digital gaming within popular culture (Bryce & Rutter, 2006; Delamere & Shaw, 2006) and the significant cultural impact of this activity.

Wolf (2001) has argued that the astronomical growth of digital games and their ubiquitous presence and influence on culture can no longer be ignored as an area of academic study. Moreover, scholars across numerous disciplines have begun to acknowledge the cultural relevance of digital games (Bryce & Rutter, 2006). As a result, the field of game studies is currently becoming an independent and burgeoning area of academic research (Steinkuehler, 2006). Nonetheless, outside of a few studies, digital gaming has not been extensively explored as a popular leisure activity (Bruno, 1994; Delamere & Shaw, 2006; Ng & June, 1985), nor as political practice (Bryce & Rutter, 2003).

Digital game play as a recreation pastime is neither a disembodied nor a meaningless form of leisure entertainment. As Bennett (1986) highlighted in his writing about the political struggles of the development of popular leisure in the late 1800s, the exploration of popular leisure pastimes can articulate understandings of culture, including the values, ideologies, and hegemonies associated with such activities. Digital games are not vacuous activities that are somehow separate from the social

world. Rather, games are situated in culture and informed by the intersection between the social markers of race, class, and gender. The study of digital games must therefore be contextually situated for social meaning to be rendered.

Situating digital games under the cultural rubric of gender is one way to build our social understanding of the politics of digital game play. Cultural theorists have noted that popular media is a contested area where issues of power and hegemonic struggles impact gender (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Flanagan, 2000; Kennedy, 2002; Taylor, 2006; Wearing, 1998). As a gendered leisure activity, digital games are a masculine cultural space that female gamers enter (Kennedy, 2005; Kerr, 2003; Taylor, 2006). Many authors concur that digital games are created by, and for, male consumption (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Dietz, 1998; Funk & Buchman, 1996; Griffiths & Hunt, 1995). This is not surprising given that there are few female characters or female game designers (Flanagan, 2000; Ivory, 2006), and also given the sexist and misogynistic content presented in many of the games (Dietz, 1998; Provenzo, 1991). Misogynistic content is particularly widespread in action adventure, first-person-shooter, and other violent game genres. Nevertheless, despite the content issues and the masculine cultural space, female player participation in gaming is increasing (Bryce & Rutter, 2002; ESA, 2005a), especially in massive multiplayer on-line role-playing games (MMORG's). Outside of the content and recognition of male consumption of games, little has been explored about female players. The increased female presence elevates the importance of understanding the different gendered readings and gendered experiences of game play (Bryce & Rutter, 2002).

Within the substantive area of study exploring leisure as a gendered practice (Aitchison, 2001; Green, Hebron, & Woodward, 1990; Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1996; Wearing, 1998), scholars have found that women's access to and enjoyment of leisure is restricted because of gender (Deem, 1996; Henderson, 1996; Henderson & Shaw, 2006; Shaw, 1996; Wearing, 1994; Whyte & Shaw, 1994). This does not mean, however, that resistance to gender-based constraints is not possible (Carr, 1998; Delamere, 2004; Henderson et al., 1996; Shaw, 2001, 2006). Rather, leisure often acts as a contextual site where the contestations of traditional gender stereotypes take place. Games have also been shown to be a site for social activism and the creation of oppositional identities and subversion through resistance to traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity (Flanagan, 2003, 2005; Kennedy, 2002, 2005). As

Shaw (2006) stated, the concept of resistance during leisure is enacted when traditional notions of gender are consciously or unconsciously contested. Moreover, there is strong support for the idea that leisure is a cultural site where the construction of gender is formulated, resisted, and reproduced, indicating the importance of leisure as a socio-political practice (Shaw, 2001). This article explores female gamers' involvement as a gendered process with specific attention to their gendered experiences. It also focuses on players' resistance to gender-based constraints, such as the social act of females "taking up" space in a traditionally male-dominated leisure activity. In so doing, the study highlights how the politics of gender are enacted through the gendered content and practice of digital game play and suggests that games hold particular relevance to the social construction of gender and the related politics of place.

Theoretical Framework: Popular Culture, Gender, and Power

According to Rojek (1995) much can be gained from understanding leisure practices related to media and popular culture. This includes use of the media as entertainment, and media as social space in which the bi-directional interactions between social objects (e.g., computer games) and social agents (e.g., gamers) occur. Rojek (2000) further observed that leisure is an illustration of culture and has important implications for cultural change. As an inherently political sphere, culture does not simply include socially equitable "lived experiences," but rather is composed of "lived antagonistic relations" that are situated in hegemony and the complex socio-political institutions of society (Giroux, 1981). As Fiske (1989) stated, popular culture is a contradictory place where power is unequally distributed among categories based on social differences such as class, gender, and race. Popular culture therefore always "bears within it signs of power relations, traces of the force of domination and subordination that are central to our social system and therefore our social experience" (Fiske, p. 4).

Although leisure is implicated in this set of power relations, Rojek, Shaw, and Veal (2006) argued that leisure scholarship often overlooks questions of power, identity, and representation embodied in leisure practices. An analysis of the ways that power articulates popular leisure and specifically with digital gaming is one approach to develop a better understanding of the ways that gendered social relations are formulated.

This paper focuses specifically on gender relationships in the context of digital gaming. Gender has long been implicated as a social category

imbued with inequalities—as captured in what Connell (1987) referred to as the "gender order." Recently the term gender order has been reformulated as "gender hierarchy" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), that is, the aggressive, self-assured, hyper-competitive, and powerful form of masculinity that renders inferior any non-hegemonic forms (Bryson, 1990). Hierarchies often guide who "one is" and who "one wants to be," and can socially regulate expressions of gender during leisure as well as reproduce traditional ideologies of gender. The notion of the inevitable reproduction of hegemonic masculinity, though, may be too simplistic, and a more holistic understanding of gender hierarchy would be one that recognizes the agency of subordinated groups [e.g., gays, working-class males, and women] as much as the power of dominant groups, and thus the multiplicity of gender (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Accordingly, the reciprocal interplay between agency and power enables us to reformulate the gendered order therefore increasing the durability and survival of other forms of gender that are non-hegemonic. This also highlights that a resistance to the supremacy of hegemonic masculinity is possible for some, rather than fostering the common belief of gender oppression as the inevitable outcome. In a similar vein, Giroux (1981) suggested that the complex mixture of hegemonic power and human agency must be recognized to understand the dialectical interrelationship between power, ideology, and resistance. Giroux thus acknowledged that social sites enable and constrain human action in ways that can lead to domination, resistance, or different combinations of both processes.

There is theoretical support for digital game to be a social space where resistance takes place. Postmodern ideas can help inform how leisure practices conceal and reveal the operation of power relations in society (Rojek, 1995). Some scholars have used the idea of heterotopia and digital games to explore the social position of childhood and play (Dixon & Simon, 2005; McNamee, 2000). According to Foucault (1986), heterotopias are places that act like social mirrors, in that they operate as a reflection or site of counteraction to the social position a person occupies. Foucault originally used the term heterotopia in *Of Other Spaces* (1967). In this essay he discussed how all cultures have spaces where real sites within society "are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (1986, p. 23). Foucault called these spaces heterotopias, a Latin term meaning "place of otherness" (Hetherington, 1997). In the context of our research, digital games operate as a heterotopia where gender is explored in all of the above-stated ways. As Foucault (1986) noted, these heterotopias, or these "other" or "different" spaces, hold meaning for

society because of their "simultaneously mythic and real contestation of space in which we live" (p. 24). That is to say, we consider digital games as different spaces that allow people to explore, contest, and invert their social position and gender relations.

While resistance is theoretically possible in these spaces, often people do not use them in these ways because the spaces, as fields of play, have developed "habits" of acting and interacting that reproduce inequalities related to gender. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and its triangulated interaction with field and capital, also provide a useful analytical guideline for the feminist analysis of the politics of power and gender in media spaces (Shi, 2001). Habitus is a system of perceptions that is developed over time, internalized, and converted into a disposition that informs the way of thinking and acting of social agents (Bourdieu, 1984). As such, society is perceived through a social agent's performance in various fields (Shi, 2001). The influence of culture often results in conformity to the dominant notion and development of individual habitus of gender. From a social construction perspective however, dominant perceptions may also be contested. Thus players' developed dispositions and related political practices of gender within the field of digital game play can usefully be analyzed from a social construction conceptualization of habitus.

West and Zimmerman (1991) also take into account the capacity of the individual, acknowledging that the social construction of gender is best understood as performatively expressed through social actions and processes related to individual displays of gender. The personal display of gender is referred to as "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman). The individual social action of "doing of gender" is however, always enacted within the presented structural pressures to conform to traditional ideologies associated with biological sex (West & Zimmerman). For West and Zimmerman, then, the construction of gender as an achieved status is "that which is constructed through psycho-social, cultural, and social means" (p. 13), and a process that is socially monitored based on the expectation that individuals will conform to social expectations related to biological sex. Within this conceptualization, resistance to social expectations is performatively an option, with the known risk of being social assessed when choosing to be non-conforming.

Both heterotopia and habitus relate to and are consistent with a constructionist approach. Specifically, the concept of heterotopia indicates the way in which space is contested, and habitus alerts us to the connection between action, performance, and perception. These theoretical con-

cepts help to explore how players socially construct the games and their performances of gender as part of their experience of game play. The melding of these theoretical concepts is useful to inform and provide strong analytical foundations for this and future studies.

Methods

The findings in this paper come from a larger study on gamers' social construction of violence and gender representations in violent video game play (Delamere, 2004). The qualitative data presented here is focused specifically on players' game-related social constructions of gender, with emphasis on the female participants' gendered experiences of gaming. Recruitment posters were placed at community gaming arcades and businesses, as well as at a university arcade. Direct recruitment at a large gaming tournament was also used to locate participants. Using a non-probability purposeful snowball sampling strategy (Patton, 2002), a total of 12 self-described avid players of violent games were recruited, five female and seven male. The main purpose of this sampling strategy was to locate participants who had intimate knowledge of the particular phenomena of interest (Patton, 2002), that being violent video game play. There was little difficulty locating male participants for the study, the majority of whom were recruited via the posters. Finding avid female gamers who played this particular genre of games proved more difficult. There was, however, good fortune in finding an all-female team (clan), at the gaming tournament with the majority (four out five) interested in participating in the study.

Geographically, participants came from several large metropolitan cities in Southwestern Ontario and the states of New Jersey and New York. The age range of the participants was 20 to 30 years old with the majority of the 12 players in their mid-twenties. This age range was selected because it represents one of the primary cohort groups involved in digital game play and also because parental consent was not required. As observed, players in the study dedicated a significant proportion of their discretionary time and money on game play and equipment, supporting their self perceptions as avid game players. As a group, the average time participants spent playing per week was 21.5 hours, the males played an average of 12.5 hours with females in the sample playing significantly higher at 34 hours per week. The majority of female players had more time available to play due to demographic factors. More specifically, two were not working (one was on disability the other was unemployed) and one worked part-time.

Data collection consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews, field observations (at tournaments, players' homes, and a gaming establishment), research journal notes, and data from on-line gaming e-zines (magazines), and was managed using NVivo qualitative software. Triangulation of the data from these sources helped increase the trustworthiness of the study as did other verification methods such as member checks and peer debriefing. Confirmation of final analysis with the participants was not possible due to the young and transient nature of the sample.

Players' gender-related thoughts and experiences of gaming were analyzed using a social constructionist perspective and feminist theory. The foundation of feminist theory is focused on gender and issues of power as the primary framework for analysis. Reinharz (1992) acknowledged that "feminist social research utilizes feminist theory in part because other theoretical traditions ignore or downplay the interaction of gender and power" (p. 249). Feminist theory includes foundational beliefs about power imbalances, male domination, female subordination, and women's struggle to overcome the oppressive structures that create these conditions (Code, 2000; Tong, 1998). Inductive analysis and the constant comparison method were used to analyze the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As such, comparisons were made both within and between genders. Analysis proceeded with initial open codes in order to discover various descriptive themes and patterns centred on players' gendered perspective and experiences of game play, while also looking for any negative cases. The data spoke of the highly enjoyable nature of digital game play, but also illustrated multiple constructions of gender and differing gendered experiences of the female and male participants.

Findings

Gendered Character Representations

The participants' gendered character representations in the games were, for the most part, fairly uniform. They talked about the stereotypical characterizations of masculinity and sexualized femininity in the games, indicating a paucity of alternative representations. Clearly the characters in the games reflected primarily traditional embodiments of gender, a situation that is typical of media entertainment in general (McRobbie, 1991). There were, however, some differences in male and female players' responses to these character representations.

Gendered Representations of Male Characters: Hyper-Masculine Hero Archetypes

The players' descriptions of male characters paint a hegemonic portrait, replete with idealized hyper-masculine male characters. All participants viewed the male characters as stereotypically exaggerated hegemonic presentations of masculinity; that is as tough, strong, macho men.

> Um, they [male characters] are very big, covered in armor, covered in weapons. It's not something ... like Rambo doesn't come close. It's yeah! It's hyper-Rambo. It's all, it's a mountain of muscle and weapons. (D.Z., male age 23)

This macho type of character seemed to enhance gaming action for most participants in the study, which is perhaps not surprising given the violent and socially anomic content portrayed in the games they played. While the majority of players reported male characters as hyper-masculine macho men and hero archetypes, players recognized that this type of character was an unrealistic representation of most men. Nonetheless, they also understood that this type of male personification represented a social position of power that was fun, and sometimes exhilarating, to portray. Moreover, the enjoyment of adopting characters who had power over others was evident among female as well as male players. As seen in the following quote, female players often adopted hyper-masculine power roles, and did not shy away from using sexist language, thereby reproducing discourses that are commonly used in gaming cultures:

> You go in there and you're taking out their team, four at a time, and you know your score is like fifteen to two or something, right. You feel power. Yeh, like power, when you start raping people [killing opponents] yeah, you feel the power. (vixen, female age 28)

Gendered Representations of Female Characters: Sexualized Objectification and Misogyny

Players' observations of female gaming characters were stereotypical media representations including sexual objectification and misogyny. Examples of sexualized female character representations and treatment are presented in the following interview data and analysis of gaming magazine articles (E-zines).

> I think a lot of games are obviously geared more towards males. It's like, Dead or Alive with the scantily clad women. [A game centered on bikini clad female volleyball players where gamers have the option to voyeuristically

> film them as they go throughout their daily routines, such as sun bathing and showering at the beach.] (J.J., male age 22)
>
> Skinny, big boobs, you know. [Her description of a female character that was used as a trial in the game Counter-strike.] (vixen, female age 28)
>
> It [sexualized female representation] is used to attract more males in the sense that, you know, let's create the typical girl and design her just the way every typical guy wants her. Big breast, small thighs, you know. Stuff like that. (M.C., male age 20)
>
> It is unquestionably a graphical tour de force. The pristine tropical environments and bathing beauties are exquisitely designed. The graphics hold up to even the closest camera zoom with barely a hint of the jaggies [meaning the higher polygon count used in the graphics package allows players to voyeuristically view extremely realistic presentations of female anatomy]. (Kiel, 2004)

While sexualized female character representations were predominant, some games also included misogynistic play options whereby characters, such as the prostitute in the game Grand Theft Auto (GTA), could be raped and then beaten as part of play.

> Yah, GTA is fun! You know you pull your car up, get her [the prostitute character] into the car, find a dark alley and your suspension is squeaking and jumping around. It is sort of amusing, but definitely not something for kids, because then you beat the hell out of her and kill her, taking your money back. (mauauder, male age 30)

While female participants in the study knew of these characters, they were not frequent players of games that included sexist female character representations or games with misogynistic actions built into game design. In general, and not surprisingly, these female character representations were not unanimously appealing to all players.

Alternative Character Representations

Even though hyper-masculinity and sexualized femininity were the most prominent representations, alternative representations were also discussed by some gamers.

A male participant's description of a short, soft spoken and charismatic character, whom he interpreted as being a more "gay type" of male character, was one example of the diversity of male representation. Another example was one player's discussion about more realistically depicted male characters that were of average body weight/structure and more typical of most males in society. Alternative representations

of female characters, while less prevalent, were described as tougher, more "tomboy like" or as "tattooed emblazoned rebels." The presence of some alternative portrayals may indicate an increased openness by the gaming industry to include more diverse representations of gender while possibly having the dual purpose of expanding their market.

Players' Differing Responses to Character Representations

The male and female players had similar but also differing responses to the gendered representation of gaming characters. There was little player criticism about the male character presentation as hyper-masculine archetypes. There was a significant difference, however, related to how the male and female players viewed the hyper-sexualized representations of the female characters. The majority of male players accepted this type of depiction without apparent concern, while the female players in the study were strongly critical of such representations. The sexualized character representations were judged by all female participants to be unacceptable and demeaning.

> It is wrong that they put that aspect of female as being a prostitute in GTA. They DON'T HAVE ANYTHING GOOD FOR GIRLS OUT THERE!!!!! Like all the female characters do is like walk around in bikinis and stuff [sighing]. (cherie, female age 22)

> It's demeaning to girls, and it just makes me disappointed, how developers make the games, just doing things like that to girls. I'm like oh my goodness! But there's nothing you can do about it. (J.T., female age 20)

DZ was one of only two male players in the study who expressed similar concern about the problematic way in which female characters were presented and played.

> I mean one of my friends was endlessly amused by just watching Lara climb up and down the tree, where the point of view is below her giving him a good view of her butt [Lara Croft; scantily clad lead character of the game series Tomb Raider. It is also common knowledge amongst male gamers that you can, after purchase, go on-line and download a patch that transforms Lara's character such that she is nude throughout all levels of game play]. So that's, I would not say ... that is not a positive way to view females. (D.Z., male age 23)

The females' consistently negative responses to the hyper-sexualized representations of female characters was one indication of the very different way in which they experienced game play compared to the experiences of the majority of male players. The gendered nature of gaming experience is further explored in the following section.

"They See It as a Guy's Game:" Female Experiences of Game Play

Apart from the divergence of responses to character representations, particularly to the sexualized objectification of the female characters, there were other ways that the experience of game play was significantly affected by gender. Unlike the male players, female gamers were frequent targets of abusive behaviours and discriminatory actions during game play. Abusive verbal comments did sometimes occur between male competitors in the form of "trash talk." This male-to-male trash talk often centred on sexist, homophobic and derogatory remarks related to non-hegemonic traits such as "you pussy" or "you fucking faggot get out of my way." Female players, on the other hand, were much more likely to be the targets of both verbal and other forms of abuse. The talk and actions of some of the male players resulted in a stigmatized environment that female players had to negotiate in order to happily play.

First, the female participants recognized that the majority of the male competitors viewed female involvement as an infringement upon their own male space.

> They [male competitors] see it as, "it's a guy game." It's like, "girls shouldn't play CS" [Counter-Strike] you know! (vixen, female age 28)

Some male participants also acknowledged how the gaming culture was not very welcoming to female players due to the sexual objectification of the female characters.

> You don't want to have games for just boys and games for just girls; you want to make good games that appeal to everyone! If that's the image that we [meaning game designers] show of females, then females, obviously they are going to stay away from playing. (J.J., male age 22) [JJ was a computer science student interested in a career in game design.]

Female players' lived experience of being unwelcome extended to other discriminatory behaviours directed towards them. These actions created a hostile and sometimes infuriating experience for the female players. One example of this type of behaviour included blatant acts of sabotage against female gamers' computers. As previously mentioned, four of the five female participants in the study belonged to the same all-female team (clan). This female clan entered a tournament with 325 other competitors, all male. Gaming tournaments create local area networks (LAN's) that connect all the entrants' computers together onto one server, thereby increasing the ease of access to each computer by other technologically savvy competitors. In one observed incident, just minutes be-

fore the start of the female clan's first match, all of the females' computers shut down. Moreover, the sexist message, "it is beginning to smell like prawns in here" was scrolled across all four of the females' computer screens just prior to each hard drive "freezing up" and shutting down (Field journal notes, March 8, 2003). At the time of this incident, it was not clear whether the female players knew that their computers were the only ones that had been infiltrated and immobilized. During the interviews it was discovered that the female gamers were aware of being targeted and that this type of sabotage had also occurred at another tournament.

> We had the same problem in Nashville too. I don't know what it is. I swear to God that people sometimes sabotage us just because we're girls. They don't want us to win! Honestly, nobody else had a problem except for us! (vixen, female age 28)

The female players also provided other coercive examples of sexist discourses and misogynistic actions that they had experienced. For example,

> The guys in the game are just brutal. They're sooo mean, they have no mercy at all. They will call you, like a Bitch or a Whore. You know stuff like that. (chula, female age 23)

> They'll be like "shouldn't you be at home cooking for your husband?" Or they will call us bitches, whores, blah, blah, blah. We've heard it all, it's never ending. They'll be like "suck my dick bitch," and "go back to the doghouse," or I don't know there are so many things. (vixen, female age 28)

As noted before, games such as Grand Theft Auto have characters and actions as part of the design that are intended for players to enact misogynistic and brutal acts as part of game play (e.g, beating or raping a female prostitute). Even more disconcerting, though, were the actions of some male game players who found ways to use their game characters to inflict additional types of brutality against the characters of the female players.

> Well sometimes, like guys, like if you are a girl [even if a female plays a male character others know it is a female player because of audio communication capabilities] they would take out their knife and do some kind of a sexual thing to your character. When you are dead! When you are already dead and you are lying in a room. (cherie, female age 22)

It became evident from the interviews, in general, that the female players in this study had radically different experiences of gaming as

compared to male players' experiences. For female participants, the abusive actions of some male players were repulsive, frustrating, and at times intimidating. However, for the females in this study, the negative environment that they experienced on a daily basis did not lead them to abandon their chosen leisure activity. Rather, they seemed to see these problems as part of the challenge of game play, something they were determined to stand up against and overcome.

> Yeah, they'll be like, like hey you wanna' come over and give me head while I play, or they'll be like, can I give you head while you play. And it's just like, DUDE SHUT UP, this is CS [Counter-Strike] not a dating service you know! [sighs] (layde, female age 22)

Setting the Road and Building "A Room of One's Own"

Persistence and continued participation seemed to be the primary goal of all female players in this study. In spite of—and possibly because of—targeted discrimination against them, all the female participants were determined to persevere and continue their involvement with their leisure passion. Not only did they persist, but their negative experiences fed their determination to set up a gaming environment that was more conducive and comfortable for female participants. The female players viewed themselves as opening up a place for them to play, but also providing space for other female players to enter. This represented a unified goal for them and a collective sense of control and empowerment.

Virginia Woolf's (1929) essay "A room of one's own," spoke of gender inequalities and the need for economic and civil liberties for women writers. This, Woolf argued, was a crucial foundation for women to be creative and thus to be able to compete in the historically male dominated writing culture of her time. Like Woolf, the female participants in this study reported the pleasures and pitfalls of participating in a masculine and male-dominated space and strategies for overcoming them. As part of this, there was a concerted effort by female gamers to prove that they had a rightful place to participate in gaming. All of the female players spoke of their desire to beat the boys at their own game and prove that female players belonged. As J.T. stated, "Males, they think they're better game players. I'll just show them by beating them at the game." Or as chula put it, "It's like girrrl power, you want to prove that girls can own [win] the game." While pleasurable, challenging, and fun, there was a distinct sense that these players viewed their involvement as a social action related to equality and equal rights for women. This perspective is best represented in the following quote.

> I feel like we're setting the road for future females that want to be in the gaming community. I mean it's not, like I said, it's not just the gaming community. You can't just look at it as, oh that has to do with only this [gaming]. I mean women in general have come a long way you know from being the average housewife and I guess we, you'd say we're kind of doing our part in setting the road for other females to come and play after us. (layde, female age 22)

The women in this study discussed different strategies they used to help create a more comfortable and female friendly space for themselves, for other female gamers, and for like-minded males. The first strategy they used was to form a female only team (clan). As indicated in this quote, through forming a female only clan they gained a specific type of support that helped them strive towards common goals while forming deep bonds with each other.

> Guys, guys don't have that emotional aspect to it, like if, if one of us is down you know, we always have a good way of cheering each other up or you know, like, in, Especially with us girls, we have teamwork like no other!! (vixen, female age 28)

As the following exchange between vixen and ladye indicates, having a close knit female team was not only breaking new ground for more female gamer involvement, but also helped the current players to "laugh off" some of the negative behaviours encountered.

> I mean you know, many of the younger females [players] look up to us? They say you know, we really would like to be like your team and it's just. Hmmmm ... that's it, like we're, yeah, we're making a difference. (layde, female age 22)

> Yah, we put up with all the crap first [meaning sexist behaviours] (laughing). (vixen, female age 28)

The second strategy of the female players was to create a female developed, operated, and maintained on-line gaming server (e.g., a computer designated as a server for the purpose of processing and managing information being sent to a specific web-page). Most on-line gaming servers monitor infractions (e.g., the illegal use of cheats) and have the capability of banning player access. Depending on the infraction and the monitors' judgment of penalty for the infraction, players can be banned for a day, a month, or indefinitely. The servers do not monitor for sexist or abusive behaviours.

As ladye stated:

> You get it [sexist commentary and behaviours], you get it a lot more in pub [public] servers, it's just like there'll be the one shit talker on the other team and you'll just feel like, yeah, I'm sooooo going for you. (layde, female age 22)

The development of a female server was therefore, in their words, a place where they did not have to "put up with the crap," as the server gave them the power and control over gaming infractions, including any sexist or misogynistic behaviour. The creation of this server provided a female friendly place to play by assigning individuals (including pro-female supporters) to monitor gaming behaviours. This provided them (and perhaps some male players) with a more controlled and comfortable place to play. This strategy helped female players to play the games under their own terms, without the typical presence of sexist and misogynistic behaviours.

> Well, right now I don't really play on other servers, and we don't tolerate those things [simulated violence against women] on our server. Like we ban the person doing it and stuff like that. (cherie, female age 22)

> Everybody was like, oh he didn't have a chance [to remain on the server after acting inappropriately], I just banned him right away. (vixen, female age 28)

Discussion

As represented in the data, regardless of a player's sex, games are a pleasurable popular leisure pastime in contemporary society. The findings also show how games are a complex social space where gender and gender relations are enacted. Players' experiences of gaming provide insight into how the real world of digital games is informed by as well as informs gender relations, including gendered character representations, gendered environments, and players' reactions and responses to them.

The findings from this study support the notion that a gaming heterotopia acts as a counter site of society, a real yet enacted site where gender, as one aspect of society is "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault, 1967, ¶12). As an extension of this, the games are a real, albeit virtual, cultural space where the politics of popular leisure and the social ideologies of gender are both reproduced and resisted. The gendered habitus developed in this virtual field of play, while based in fantasy, is nonetheless 'real' in that it creates environments that are experienced as meaningful and that influence actions and reactions. Habitus, as a system of perceptions that are converted into a disposi-

tion, or way of thinking and acting (Bourdieu, 1984), is useful in terms of understanding how these environments are part of the process of social construction, negotiation, and reconstruction of gender. As such, habitus informed the social construction process in terms of both player's responses to the gendered character representations and their responses to discriminatory and offensive behaviours and situations experienced during game play.

The data show how the games represent and reflect 'real world' contexts of gender, including gendered violence. The hyper-masculine characters and violence enacted in the games are connected to beliefs about hegemonic masculinity. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) noted, hegemonic masculinity is dominant in the hierarchy of gender and associated with the acquisition of societal powers, status, and privileges. This may explain why, regardless of sex, all of the players in this study enjoyed playing characters that embodied hegemonic masculinity. It is possible that these players, regardless of their own gendered position, found a sense of power and privilege that was otherwise unattainable in their day-to-day lives.

While the reproduction of traditional ideologies about masculinity and femininity were present in the findings, resistance was also evident. One example was the embracing of non-traditional representations, such as the "gay-like" male and tomboy/rebel female characters described by some of the players. In addition, female players were also resisting traditional notions of gender (femininity) by playing characters and games that were violent, aggressive, and thought to be non-feminine or unladylike. This fits well with Bourdieu's concept of habitus. For example Butler's (1999) statement that "habitus is built on the presupposition that a field is the condition of its own possibilities" (p. 117), is consistent with the suggestion that there are multiple gender dispositions that can be constructed through game-play.

Resistance to traditional notions of gender was also evident in players' responses to the sexualized and objectified female characters in the games. The female players in this study actively and adamantly protested against the sexualized female portrayals and the narrow and restrictive representation of women in games. In this case they were protesting against the stereotyped norms of traditional ideologies of femininity, or what Connell (1987) called "emphasized femininity." Female players' reactions and the mechanisms used to fight against other sexist and misogynistic behaviours directed towards them are another significant finding that differentiated their experiences from the males in the study.

Their reactions, therefore, constituted a very different influence on the social construction of gender compared to that of the male players.

The female players were strong in their conviction to continue playing when many others, including a significant proportion of their male competitors, viewed their involvement as either unwelcome or as an inappropriate way of "doing gender." It was evident that the females in the study were not passive; they did not accept being pushed out of a space that they enjoyed. Their criticisms of traditional notions of femininity and their continuing involvement with play was a clear form of intentional resistance against the traditional ideologies of femininity. For some of the players, however, there was a paradoxical or contradictory aspect to this resistance in that their "doing" or "taking on" the masculine also included hegemonic reproduction of some of the same sexist and misogynistic discourses that they viewed as being problematic and unacceptable. The most concrete example of this paradox is found in some of the words of the female gamers, such as vixen's team rally cry, "let's get out there and rape them." There appeared to be little conscious awareness by the players of the contradictions inherent in this paradoxical use of language. It may be that some of the players took these actions because of their desire to fit in to the gaming culture and/or be viewed as a fierce competitor. This contradiction is consistent with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) conceptualization of the gender hierarchy and their recognition that agency and oppression can simultaneously exist. It is also consistent with the idea of resistance as inherently contradictory (Shaw, 2006). As Giroux (1981) indicated, the complex overlap between hegemony and human agency helps to explain the dialectical relationship between power, ideology, and resistance. From this perspective, the female participants' constructions of gender in this study were complex, multiple, and at times paradoxical.

Nonetheless, while this paradox existed, the dominant response of the female players was resistance against sexist and misogynistic representations and behaviours. The ultimate example of this was their development of a server, open to all players, but operated and maintained by themselves and other pro-female players. This was a conscious socio-political choice that these female gamers made. In doing so they created a space for resistance, where they could block gender oriented discrimination and sexist/misogynistic behaviours. In this, they were subsuming their own "rules of engagement" and order into the game. As such, they were also developing a different and more comfortable way of playing as well as doing gender. Thus they enjoyed the pleasure of taking on

strong, assertive, traditionally non-feminine game play characters and actions, and supported their own stylized power, while at the same time blocking transgression into gendered discrimination or sexualized violence. Their building of a room of their own acted as a means of breaking into a gendered cultural space on their own terms. They were aware that they were carving out a space for themselves to play, and there was also a sense of pride in knowing that they were opening up spaces that would empower other female gamers to follow. Like women in sport 35 to 40 years ago, these women had a sense that their socio-political stance towards gaming was going to break open doors not only for themselves, but also for future female gamers.

Conclusion

As evidenced in this study, gender politics proliferate in digital game play and warrants further investigation beyond the limits of one study. Digital games, as a form of popular leisure, provide a fertile ground for understanding the politics of leisure, particularly through attention to the social construction of gender. In many ways, the games, the actions, and the characters represent a reinforcement and reproduction of hegemonic and misogynistic notions of gender. However, various resistant forms of gender politics were also evident, especially with respect to female responses and actions. The interactive nature of game play makes the reproductive and resistive responses all the more significant as these are social enactments that have real social meaning. The findings are consistent with previous research on the social construction of gender through leisure practice (Green, 1998; Henderson et al., 1996; Shaw, 2001) and also supports the findings of Bryce and Rutter (2003) that digital games can be seen as a site where gender is both enacted and contested.

As some scholars have highlighted, resistance is a politically charged action associated with issues of power, be that personal or individual power (Foucault, 1978) or collective networks of power (Shaw, 2006). Leisure therefore acts as a cultural site where gender is formulated, resisted, and reproduced, either through deliberate or through unintended forms of socio-political practice (Green, 1998; Shaw, 2001). These contestations of gender in digital games have real world implications for gamers and for game producers, as well as for societal gender relations. For example, players' responses and expressed criticisms can be seen as part of the push towards the reconfiguration of game design and the production of a broader range of female representations (Kennedy, 2002).

In addition, females' acts of resistance may open up the opportunities for more women to play and to develop computer skills that may lead to expanded career choices as well as increased opportunities for game play (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). Thus the resistant actions of the female players are not "innocent" but indicative of how this type of leisure practice is part of a broader politics of gender (Wearing, 1998). In the case of digital games, this study reveals how the "personal is the political" and how the personal responses of female gamers can foster collective political action geared towards the creation of more gender-friendly leisure space for themselves and for others as well as action towards broader social change.

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