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Masters of the Realm:
Understanding Success and Achievement Among Women Playing Video Games

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In Sociology

By

Christine Tomlinson

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Francesca Polletta, Co-Chair
Associate Professor Catherine Bolzendahl, Co-Chair
Professor Tom Boellstorff

2017

DEDICATION

To

My mother, Melisa Gardner, for her unwavering support.

My friends, Cody Sarvis and Tim Straus, for being there.

My significant other, Jordan Istead, for keeping me sane.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Masters of the Realm:
Understanding Success and Achievement Among Women Playing Video Games

By

Christine Tomlinson

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Professor Francesca Polletta, Co-Chair

Associate Professor Catherine Bolzendahl, Co-Chair

In this study, I investigate the landscape of video game play in terms of gender's influence on experiences and preferences; relationship to a gaming identity and community; and understandings of success, skill, and leadership within gaming. I use qualitative methods, including interviews with 54 respondents, online observations of forum posts, and content analysis of older forum posts to assess player's experiences and perceptions. There were three major possibilities for gender's influence at the beginning of this project. First, due to an increasing number of female players, there may be equal opportunities, definitions, and understandings among players. Second, gaming spaces could reflect what is seen in other masculine areas, with women being pushed out and seen as not belonging. Finally, players may express support for equality, but continue to leave women at a disadvantage through cultural ideas within the space. Ultimately, it appears that these possibilities all exist in an uneven distribution across gaming culture. In terms of player experiences and preferences, there is a decreasing difference based on gender, with male and female players starting at similar times and enjoying the same aspects of similar games. When considering identity and community, players share a discomfort with a "gamer" label and have a desire not to associate with it. Finally, the

starkest differences and examples of the aforementioned possibilities come with player definitions of success, skill, and leadership. When considering success, players describe an open-ended, nongendered idea of what this means, allowing – for more casual and hobby-based play – the perception of an even playing field for men and women. On the other hand, when asked about or discussing skill, players defaulted to more masculine definitions and ideas, emphasizing men in their lives as examples of exemplary players and placing women at a disadvantage when it comes to more professional or competitive play. Beyond these aspects of gaming, players continued to create a complex idea about who is equipped for what by defining leadership in more feminine ways, but simultaneously considering this a low-prestige position and further presenting obstacles for women in gaming.

CHAPTER ONE:
Introduction and Methodology

Video games are an integral part of many Americans' lives and of the political,

economic, and cultural landscape. Given the huge consumer base and the amount of money and

influence at stake, it is not surprising that scholars, educators, public officials, and many others

have taken an interest in how video games matter for shaping and reflecting inequalities. Perhaps

one of the areas that has received the most attention in recent years is gender. It is estimated that

somewhere between 58% and 70% of American households have a gaming system of some kind

and nearly half of those who play video games are women (Entertainment Software Association

[ESA] 2016; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory 2009).[1] Additionally, several years of reports

show that women are the fastest growing demographic in terms of playing video games,

surpassing teenage boys (ESA 2016). In 2006, 38% of video game players were women, rising to

42% in 2011 (ESA 2006, 2011; Yee 2017). In 2008, over 60% of men and under 40% of women

described themselves as daily gamers (Lenhart, Kahne, Middaugh, Macgill, Evans, & Vitak

2008). The number of female players rose to approximately 48% by 2014 (ESA 2014). Marking

similar changes to the ESA, Pew also notes that by 2015, women were more likely than men to

own a console for gaming, at 42% versus 37% (Frank 2015). However, despite increasing

gender parity among video game players, there are still persistent issues in gaming culture

surrounding gender.

Much of the prior scholarly research on gaming has focused on the dearth of women in

major roles as video game developers or on depictions of women in video games. However,

given the large and growing group of women consumers, we need to know much more about

how and why this group is growing, what mechanisms of gendered interaction guide men's and

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[1] In this project, "gaming" is used to refer to video game playing specifically.

women's participation and play, and how gender shapes consumers' perceptions of game play and players' roles in it. This focus fits within the larger theoretical scope of gender scholarship. As many have noted, gender inequalities are persistent despite advances of women in society over the last few decades, with rigid beliefs about gender as it relates to status, competency, and skill remaining (Ridgeway 2011). Underpinning these beliefs is an understanding of gender as a necessary and natural distinction which defines one's preferences, personality, and abilities (Lorber 1995). Scholars have investigated cultural and social ideas about the competencies and interests of men and women, particularly as they affect what happens in the workforce (Charles & Grusky 2004). Commonly highlighted outcomes are a pay gap or prestige gap, as well as gaps in representation, such as those seen in science fields, which tend to be more culturally masculine and numerically male-dominated (England 2005; Etzkowitz, Kemelgor, & Uzzi 2000; Gorman 2005; Ridgeway 1997; Ridgeway 2011; Tang 1997). This is also common in tech-related fields. For example, women have been starkly underrepresented in the video game industry, at only 11% of developers in 2009, and increasing to only 21% in 2015 (International Game Developers Association 2016; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory 2009).

Understanding how gender is constituted and inequality is maintained in both social and work worlds is central to the study of gender. In this dissertation, I apply this focus to those who play video games. Online spaces, technology, and video games have long been regarded as related specifically to masculinity and, in particular, men and boys (Dickey 2006; Ivory 2006; Kendall 2002; Kimmel 2008; Kuzenkoff & Rose 2012; Salter & Blodgett 2012; Shaw 2014; Taylor 2006; Thornham 2011; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory 2009). As Kendall (2002:107) notes, the association in Western cultures of computers with masculinity ensures that there is often a "male-dominated atmosphere regardless of the number of women present." Salter

and Blodgett (2012) further suggest that women experience similar disadvantages and hostilities to those seen in tech-related spaces in the gaming community. This problem, is unlikely to subside easily because, "As long as the discourse of games and technology remains masculine-coded, the silencing of women and invisibility of women in these parallel publics is unsurprising" (Salter & Blodgett 2012:413).

Indeed, much of the research done on the experiences of video game players suggests that women are often not taken seriously as players or are treated in generally harassing and antagonistic ways (Ivory 2006; Kimmel 2008; Kuzenkoff & Rose 2012; Salter & Blodgett 2012; Thornham 2011; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory 2009). This is also true in professional e-sports and is compounded by a tendency to separate male and female players in tournaments, attributing varied, assumed to be innate, differences in skill to gender (Taylor 2012). As a reflection of how complicated gender can be in the gaming community, male players tend to push back against all-female leagues and tournaments because they feel that "women are getting unfair and undeserved attention and benefit" (Taylor 2012:126).

Within the gaming community, some have argued that women are largely only playing mobile games, but the statistics tell a different story. Of all players, regardless of gender, 54% do most of their playing socially and only 36% of the most frequent gamers play on their phone (ESA 2016). With the changes to the gaming landscape, it is difficult to continue to claim that video gaming is a male hobby. Despite these realities, however, the association of video games with men and boys endures. Socially, video games continue to be viewed as male-dominated.

Given the continually changing number of female video game players, this dissertation uses interviews with video game players and the analysis of online conversations between gamers to understand women's experience in video gaming in comparison to that of men. I

explore how men and women become video game players, what they play, and what their preferences are with video games. I also study how men and women conceptualize and experience various aspects of success in gaming.

In brief, I show that gamers recognize levels of achievement, but in terms that move away from conventional notions of competition, status, and leadership. This would seem to put women in a better position to achieve. However, gamers use gendered ideas about leadership and skill in ways that continue to put women in a disadvantaged position, especially when it comes to areas of gaming that are more monetarily lucrative or are associated with tangible, wide-scale status.

By noting that leadership and skill are *gendered*, this dissertation takes a distinctively sociological perspective on men and women's experiences. Broadly, in the sociological literature there are two major ways to think about gender – as a status and as a code or frame (Ridgeway 2011). In chapter two, treating gender as status which influences and shapes one's social experiences, I compare men and women's relationship to video game play as a hobby and activity. I show that men and women's experiences in terms of their paths to gaming, preferred games, reasons for playing, and what they consider important and appreciate in a game are all very similar.

Other aspects of gender operate differently, however, and gender is treated as a code in chapters three and four.[2] In this case, gender exerts influence based on cultural definitions and understandings and can operate differently from a social status and in ways that are less obvious to actors in a given space. People may not be as immediately aware in these cases that their gender is influencing their experiences and outcomes. In chapter three, I compare men and

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[2] "Codes" are often referred to in other work, discussed below, as "frames" – in this project the terms are interchangeable.

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women's experiences of identity and their relationships to the gaming community. Ultimately, there are some gendered differences in the ways that players relate to a gamer identity, though differences have become less pronounced. Further, while players perceive wider differences based on gender in experiences with hostility in the gaming community, men and women have surprisingly similar experiences and approaches to navigating multiplayer gaming.

Finally, in chapter four, I explore issues of success, skill, and leadership. While players do not consider success in gendered or even skill-related terms, other aspects of play are seen in more gendered ways. For instance, players associate good leadership with feminine traits, but also see leadership as mundane and unappealing and do not tend to want to hold these positions. On the other hand, skill is largely still associated with masculine traits and identified as relating to competition and more professional play.

LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Although much of the work done specifically on gaming and gender has focused on hostility, and primarily on the ways that women receive the brunt of hostile and aggressive treatment, there has so far been less focus on gender as a broader organizational and structural issue in gaming. Because video games continue to be viewed – and often experienced – as masculine spaces, this project draws on several areas of research that look at gender in other aspects of life. First is the influence of gender on preferences, which often guides people toward different choices and options. Second, hostility in gendered spaces is considered in the context of masculine and male-dominated spaces and the ways that women navigate them. Finally, I address research on gender's relationship to status in the form of prestige and leadership.

Before discussing these theories on gender and its various influences in society, it is important to keep in mind the ways that gender is socially constructed and its effects on people.

As will be discussed in more depth below, social norms that dictate beliefs about gender lead to inequalities, influence interactions, and alter people's perceptions of gameplay in relation to men and women. With video games specifically, more light can be shed on these aspects of gender and its social construction by investigating the qualities of gameplay, players' agency and choices, and the social structure within games and the gaming community. Video games offer a space that is still widely socially viewed as male-dominated – and often is, depending on the genre of game, as will be detailed below – yet men and women's participation is nearly even. Considering that many have called for more representation of women in numerically male-dominated or more culturally masculine spaces, the landscape of gaming can provide important insights into how men and women's participation in a variety of social spaces retains more gendered elements of spaces with a masculine culture, or not.

Defining Gender

First, it is important to understand key terms and concepts necessary for discussing these issues. The way that social science has viewed gender has changed considerably over the decades. Typically, there is a separation of a variety of categories that one can occupy, with sex being separate from sex category and both being separate from gender (West & Zimmerman 1987). In this case, sex is associated with biology, sex category is related to the way that people are sorted into particular categories based on cultural signals, and gender is related to the way that one identifies (Fausto-Sterling 2005; Schilt & Westbrook 2009; West & Zimmerman 1987). While these are separate pieces of social experience, these aspects are highly intertwined, but because they are each socially constructed, they may matter to different extents or be read in different ways depending on the social context. Gender, and the ideas related to it, tends to be defined based on difference, inequality, and comparison, causing women to be viewed as

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different from, and frequently less than, men. Gender being treated as a binary system comes from the dichotomous treatment of sex (male and female) and older notions from psychology about gender roles (Lorber 1995). Still, as a concept, gender helps in understanding how inequalities and difference vary over time and within and between people and communities.

Understanding gender's shifts in terms of influence on inequality is a key feature of sociology of gender. For this project, I build on recent gender theory from Ridgeway (2011) and Risman (2004). First, from Ridgeway, gender can be conceptualized as both a status that one occupies and a frame, allowing for gender to be viewed in different ways depending on how it influences people in given social situations. Second, based on work by Risman, I also consider that gender is constructed on multiple levels, and as such, it is important to understand how respondents view themselves or their gameplay as gendered, how interactions between players may be gendered, and how structural conditions (e.g., stories and game elements or animation in popular culture) shape perceptions and constructions of gender and gender inequality in and during gameplay.

Understanding the ways that gender influences people's experiences in a variety of spaces is important for having a complete picture of how gender affects people's lives, options, and outcomes. Keeping in mind the pervasive nature of gender's influence in society, the disjuncture between attempts to achieve gender equality and the ways that these attempts have fallen short have been highlighted in recent studies (England 2010; Ridgeway 2011). Despite gains made by women in many cultures and more women entering previously male-dominated fields, women continue to be broadly disadvantaged in society, particularly in Western contexts where there has been a push for gender equality. This disjuncture between a stated desire for more equality and a gap in outcomes is commonly noted as a "stalled" gender revolution

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(England 2010; Ridgeway 2011). Ridgeway (2011) suggests that the most plausible explanation for this is that inequalities based on gender are maintained via social beliefs and organizational aspects of society, which sort people, actions, interactions, and things into gendered categories. This reinforces issues of unequal status and unequal outcomes and experiences, despite social changes. Ultimately, it may not be realistic or possible to reduce gender inequality as long as an automatic tendency to categorize people exists (Ridgeway 2011; Ridgeway & Correll 2000). What is seen in many areas of life, such as the workforce, is more of a shifting of stereotypes as women increasingly enter more culturally masculine areas, but there is evidence that as more women enter male-dominated spaces, the association with a specific gender does decrease (Ridgeway 2011).

Preferences and Choice

Male-dominated spaces can often present difficulties, hostilities, and uncomfortable situations for women who try to integrate into them (Acker 1990; Kimmel 2008; Messner 1992). One might wonder if these types of hostile interaction and tendencies to push women out of male-dominated spaces are so pervasive and ingrained, why do women continue to enter these spaces? This is particularly of interest when considering male-dominated leisure. One major consideration is that most social institutions tend to be viewed as and interpreted as male-dominated (Acker 1990; Bielby & Baron 1986; Collins 1971; Hartman 1981; Lorber 1995; Messner 1992; Ridgeway 2011; Skocpol 1992). This instantly puts constraints on the options that women have to seek spaces that place less of an emphasis on masculine traits, behaviors, and interests. Adding to this, there is a social devaluation of feminine interests and an emphasis on more masculine androgyny for acceptable behavior. To understand these issues, it is important to understand gender socialization and liberal feminist ideology's privileging of a masculine

androgyny – with those who subscribe to this school of thought noting that people should strive

for androgyny to achieve more gender equality, but pushing people toward more masculine

pursuits and interests to achieve this (Tong 2009).

First, when considering gender socialization, the cultural devaluation of women and

femininity tends to be reinforced early on. Kane (2006) notes that most parents are typically

resistant when their sons have feminine interests and behaviors, while they are not concerned

when their daughters exhibit more masculine traits and interests. Often these behaviors are

encouraged in younger daughters, likely reflecting the social devaluation of the feminine and

privileging of masculinity in society (Bielby & Baron 1986; Cohen & Huffman 2003; England

2010; Kane 2006). This tendency to deemphasize the feminine is ubiquitous and so common that

it is even persistent in cultures that have a gender categorization system that branches beyond the

typical binary model (Lorber 1995).

Further, due to the tendency to define and identify masculinity in opposition to

femininity, this allows masculine ideas, behaviors, traits, and interests to have more respect and

hold a higher social status (Schilt & Westbrook 2009). This prevents men and women alike from

having more feminine expressions, often reinforcing this through the critical view and hostile

treatment of non-masculine qualities and preferences (Schilt & Westbrook 2009). These cultural

tendencies toward deeming masculinity more worthy and devaluing femininity are likely

responsible for filtering women toward more masculine spaces. Culturally, the message is that

masculinity is desirable, better, and more legitimate. Socialization helps to reinforce this,

allowing girls to develop interests in more masculine or male-dominated activities and hobbies,

but prevents boys from getting involved with more feminine pursuits.

Second, those who support a liberal feminist ideology tend to promote androgyny as a

way to reduce gender inequality, which can also influence women toward male-dominated spaces (Ferree, Marx, Gamson, & Hess 1994; Tong 2009). This works to reinforce the gap in terms of support for feminine versus masculine interests by creating incentives which push women further toward masculine spaces, instead of offering more possibilities for equal participation in a variety of fields and interests, thus continuing to emphasize male-coded activities, interests, and careers (Ridgeway 2011; Tong 2009). Between a social privileging of masculinity and the push toward a more masculine androgyny for gender equality, it is likely that women have been influenced toward male-dominated spaces, despite the cultures of hostility that can be bred within them (Ferree, Marx, Gamson, & Hess 1994; Tong 2009). While a more masculine androgyny has been criticized, Messner (1992) has pointed out that women have been entering male-dominated spaces much more frequently over time because these spaces are typically granted more social value and appear to offer the most obvious routes toward gender equality.

While there is a tendency for more women to enter masculine occupational fields than men to enter feminine ones, there is also a pattern of sex segregation across different university majors (Bradley 2000; Charles & Bradley 2009; Correll 2005). For example, Bradley (2000) notes that while higher education became more equally accessible for men and women by the 1990s, gender differences in choice of major remained. Some countries, including Sweden, introduced structural changes to make higher education less segregated by sex, but these efforts may reinforce the differences seen in areas like engineering and nursing. Industrial societies, which have more social gender parity, have more pronounced segregation in college major and occupation, with people self-selecting into gender-coded fields (Charles & Bradley 2009). Further, Correll (2005) notes that for occupational segregation, personal evaluations of skill and

competencies tend to be influenced by cultural beliefs about gender, contributing to this kind of segregation. The ideas that people have about the kinds of jobs they want are affected by cultural information about what people are good at, or not, based on gender. The ideas and associations that we have about gender – from what is appropriate to what one can accomplish – cause people to filter into certain options based on their gender and what appears to be culturally appropriate for them. Because of the ubiquitous nature of ideas about gender's influence on preferences, taste, and skill, it is likely that these issues will seep into video game participation, as well. Although women make up a large proportion of video game players, they may gravitate toward specific platforms for play or video game genres.

Hostility in Gendered Spaces

Along with these guided preferences, there is a tendency for hostile or unwelcoming environments to be created for women in male-dominated spaces. Because of the persistence in the association of video games with men, despite the near gender parity of the audience, harassment and hostility in video game culture is likely to follow similar patterns to other male-dominated spaces. Video games, in turn, may also provide further insights into the functioning of male-dominated spaces as gender exclusionary and segregated. First, it is important to note the presence of sex segregation in both work and leisure. Second, the cultures that support and are maintained within male-dominated or male-coded spaces need to be considered. Third, research that highlights the ways that women can be shut out of certain spaces and the emphasis on masculinity in these spaces must be taken into account.

First, sex segregation and male-dominance are general issues that contribute consistently to gender inequality. As noted above, in most areas – from education to work to leisure – there is a division between men and women (Acker 1990; Bielby & Baron 1986; Correll 2005; Lorber

1995; Messner 1992; Ridgeway 2011). Linked to these divisions is also a persistent social belief about competency and appropriateness. Because of the long-standing association of men with the workforce, men are typically seen as the ideal and the average worker, causing women to be seen as auxiliary, incompetent, or unfit for these spaces (Orloff 1993; Taylor 2012). This is not isolated to adult roles and activities, however, with gender divisions appearing early on in children's play, causing girls to separate themselves from boys to avoid unpleasant gendered interactions (Thorne 1993).

Along with these issues is a maintenance of a gender hierarchy, the status quo in which men are able to occupy a higher social status than women. As part of this system, this hierarchy tends to be maintained through hostile interactions toward women (Acker 1990; Kanter 1977; Kimmel 2008). It is likely that there is enough similarity that video games, from competitive play to a more casual investment, would be similar. This is an area of leisure and work that still maintains a cultural definition of being male-dominated, despite losing numerical dominance, and could have similar issues with maintaining subordinated positions for women. The rules in these spaces, because they are so heavily associated with men, tend to be made by men as a result (Kimmel 2008). This puts women in a position where they need to play by those rules, risking being pushed out if they do not and being kept in a subordinated role if they do (Kimmel 2008). Kimmel (2008: 127) also discusses sports as masculine spaces where men want to be able to avoid thinking about or interacting with women – essentially desiring to create a "female-free zone."

This creation and preservation of male-dominance in these spaces is common in work as well as leisure. As part of this, Davis and Duncan (2006) consider men, masculinity, and maleness among people in fantasy football leagues. Because these attributes are highlighted,

even the hobby of fantasy sports offers a space in which men can bond, similarly to sports talk (Kimmel 2008) or participation in playing sports (Messner 1992). Davis and Duncan (2006:261) note that this is also maintained through interactions that can make the environment hostile toward women, including frequently using gendered slurs (e.g., "pussies"), commenting that women are supposed to be in the kitchen, and consistent derision of feminine qualities – actions that can drive women away from participation. If women do choose to remain in these masculine spaces and participate, however, they are subject to the rules of the space that men have created. Similarly, women often find themselves in tokenistic positions. When women are in a stark minority, they are put in a position where they need to avoid questioning times that they, as a social group, are on the receiving end of put-downs and are often expected to support any disparaging comments and ideas (Kanter 1977; Kimmel 2008). The cultures built in these masculine spaces further create environments where the rules cannot be questioned without social sanctions and hostile reactions (Kimmel 2008).

Second, women can often be shut out in terms of influence and participation in male-dominated spaces. Research on occupations and work, typically codified as masculine, shows that women are subjected to a great deal of hostility (Acker 1990; Ridgeway 2011; Kimmel 2008). Indeed, Acker (1990:152) notes that women are often the recipients of hostility by having their bodies, "…ruled out of order, or sexualized and objectified, in work organizations…" because they violate the masculine norm. Women also tend to be cast as outsiders in terms of workplace interaction and are seen as not having as many skills to achieve or gain status, as these are viewed through a masculine lens as well (Acker 1990; Kanter 1977). Women may, then, enter these jobs and hope to acquire the necessary skills to advance, but are blocked from achievement because they are seen as potential threats. Because women are viewed as both

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outsiders and threats, men are pushed to enact more masculine displays and qualities, intensifying the pressure to keep women out (Acker 1990; Kanter 1977). As part of this, men often assert their masculinity through boasting, treating women differently, pushing women out, or putting women in positions where they feel they have to disparage their own group to support men (Kanter 1977; Kimmel 2008).

These behaviors are also experienced in masculine leisure, even though participation in these spaces is less necessary and the stakes are typically much lower. Sports, for example, are a useful starting point for understanding how these behaviors translate into other areas of social life. In sports, women tend to be ignored, not seen as serious players, or made to feel like they are not welcome in these spaces (Kimmel 2008; Messner 1992). This is mainly due to sports, like the workforce, being more heavily associated with men and maintained as spaces with men in mind (Messner 1992). Beyond this, men may actually see these hobbies as safe spaces to be men, a place to be able to act and engage with the activity without considering women and their position (Kimmel 2008). Because male spaces place a premium on masculinity (Acker 1990; Kimmel 2008; Messner 1992), there is likely to be a heightened performance of masculinity in male-dominated leisure as well. Messner (1992) notes that masculinity is a performance and as such, must be continually proven and reinforced by people in the space. This, in turn, leads to disparaging feminine traits and people, resulting in hostilities toward women and more feminine or homosexual men.

Further, as Rotundo (1993) points out, masculinity tends to encourage aggressiveness and this contributes to a dichotomous view of women. Women may be perceived as holding men back, but can also play into these spaces to be seen as more appealing. Like Kimmel's (2008) "bitch" and "babe" dichotomy, this structures women's options for existence within these spaces,

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and dictates their choices for participation. This dichotomy puts women in a position where they can be desired by men in these spaces or act out against the rules and expectations and get shut out. This is compounded by the oppositional nature of the way that we define men and women and masculinity and femininity (Lorber 1995; Lucal 1999). Further, simply being a woman is a "marked" status and leads to devaluation (Lucal 1999:783).

From occupations to leisure, women must navigate masculine spaces with the rules set in place with men in mind, limiting their options for how they can exist in these spaces. While these issues are seen in occupations and sports-related hobbies, it is likely that similar experiences and issues exist in gaming, due to its continuing perceived ties to masculinity and association with men and boys. Men are likely to try to maintain the space as a masculine one, with women being placed in a position where male participants' expectations constrain them. It should be expected that the culture is maintained through similar means noted by Kimmel (2008) and Acker (1990), with men and women being placed in positions where they are expected to maintain masculine rules that create hostile spaces for women.

Gaining Status, Moving Up, and Leadership

Women appear to be willing to enter male-dominated spaces, despite the possibility of hostile interactions, likely in part due to the higher status of these interests, but how does this decision affect women's options in terms of achievement in these spaces? It is possible that women, despite the tendency for men to shut them out, can gain personal status, but their options could still be limited to what is deemed acceptable within the confines of masculine rules. However, it is also possible that women can achieve the appearance of status, while continuing to not be fully accepted. Additionally, because of common conceptualizations of leadership, it is possible that women do not have access to the same kinds of leadership that men do or do not

receive the same level of respect in leadership positions.

The first possible outcome ties to Kimmel's (2008:249) discussion of the dichotomous options available to women – "bitch" or "babe" – and the constraints placed on women's behavior in male-dominated spaces. Bitches are women who do not play by men's rules in these spaces and have their own ambitions and goals. Babes, on the other hand, are those who support and work within the masculine rules, often accepting objectification from men and playing by men's terms, potentially allowing them to gain some level of subordinated acceptance.

Along similar lines, the possibility of tokenism presents other obstacles for women. Kanter (1977) notes that tokens in male-dominated occupations can have a great deal of difficulty achieving status. Because tokens are numerical, and typically social, minorities they tend to be closed out of participation and unable to achieve similar levels of status via the same paths or in the same ways as the more dominant members of the setting. For instance, women tend to be treated in ways that highlight their gender master status over their workplace title. Kanter (1977:981) notes that for people interacting with tokens, "It was easier…to make their perception of the token women fit their preexisting generalizations about women than to change the category; numerical rarity provided too few examples to contradict the generalization." Overall, women's chances of success and moving up in rank increase when they support men and are willing to agree with men at the cost of other women, to be a team player (Kanter 1977; Kimmel 2008).

Still, there is evidence to support the alternative – that women are not able to truly achieve status. If they do manage to have some success, it is likely that it is limited to specific positions and takes a different form from what men can expect for themselves. Acker (1990) notes that the workplace, for example, is highly gendered in structure and places importance on

hegemonic masculinity. This leads women to be pushed out while male dominance is maintained with this norm in mind. This makes it more difficult for women to participate directly or to earn respect. This can also be seen in political structure, where women tend to be defined against men and hold a lower status, allowing for male-dominance to be reinforced in the legal system (MacKinnon 1991). Additionally, sexual hierarchies placed in society tend to emphasize male dominance and a higher status for men, while women are viewed as less competent and less skilled (Hartman 1981; Ridgeway 2011).

These issues help to support gender inequality overall and contribute to cultural tendencies to value men and women differently. When looking at occupational segregation, expectations and beliefs about men and women introduce obstacles when it comes to achievement for women (Lorber 1995). Ridgeway (2011) also notes the powerful status beliefs that tie inequalities to gender categories. As women become more common in masculine spaces, cultural assumptions about men's capabilities and higher status become less starkly defined, but ideas about men's skillsets persist. This is reinforced and magnified in mixed-gender settings, leaving women in lower positions or with less status. These assumptions based on cultural expectations about women and their abilities, limiting their potential status in many aspects of social life, likely also influences women's presence and status in leisure activities.

The work done on some more masculine areas of leisure suggests that this is the case. Women are often shut out of a variety of male-dominated leisure activities, experience hostility and sexism, and feel that they need to use coping mechanisms to either deal with or avoid interactions with male participants (Kaiser & Miller 2004; Kimmel 2008; McGinnis, McQuillan, & Chapple 2005; Messner 1992). In golf, for example, women frequently experience sexism that creates barriers that stop them from making serious progress with the sport (McGinnis,

McQuillan, & Chapple 2005). As a result, women will often seek out other women to play with to avoid sexist interactions, reducing the gender salience of mixed-gender settings that increases inequalities and hostile treatment (McGinnis, McQuillan, & Chapple 2005; Ridgeway 2011).

Further, where leadership is concerned, Eagly (2007) notes that women are placed in a position where cultural expectations can be at odds with one another, with certain expectations existing for leadership that could contradict expectations based on gender. Overall, there are emphases on traits that are warm, communal, caring, and gentle for women and on characteristics like agency, independence, and confidence for men (Eagly 2007; Eagly & Carli 2003; Williams & Best 1990). Qualities associated with leadership tend to be tied to the traits associated with men, causing men to be taken more seriously as leaders (Due Billing & Alvesson 2000; Eagly 2007; Schein 2001; Sczesny, Bosak, Neff, & Schyns 2004). In terms of translating this into actual leadership style, there do appear to be differences between men and women, with women being more focused on support and cooperative approaches (Eagly 2007; Hyde 2005). While men and more masculine traits are stereotypically associated with ideas about leadership, however, the approaches that women use tend to be more effective (Eagly 2007; Judge & Piccolo 2004). Adding to this, women often feel pressure to lead more like men in male-dominated spaces (Gardiner & Tiggemann 1999). Although male-dominated spaces often create hostile environments for women, and women often feel more pressure in these spaces to lead like men, there does not appear to be additional mental health effects for women in these situations (Eagly & Johnson 1990; Gardiner & Tiggemann 1999).

These issues may also influence and affect women who play video games. From the ability to gain status to being taken seriously to achieving acceptance as leaders, because video games continue to be seen as a masculine space, it is likely that women will feel similar

pressures. Women may have few options for behavior or may become tokens in certain circumstances, limiting their ability to act freely and outside of the rules of the male-dominated space. Additionally, because gaming is more masculine, it is likely that leadership continues to be associated with masculine traits, much like what is seen in other male-dominated spaces. However, because representation of men and women is nearly equal in many types of games, expectations may be different and influenced away from the typical functions of male-dominated spaces.

With these frameworks in mind, how might video games add to our understandings of how gender operates? As is seen in many other areas, video games are still characterized by some gender segregation, including different rates of participation between men and women in different genres, sometimes coming down to the specific game having more or fewer female players. Because segregation is still present, and the hobby continues to be seen as male-dominated, these spaces should be maintained similarly to other male-dominated or masculine spaces, with gender salience placing players in positions where certain things are expected of them. We should see similar types of hostility, including using gendered slurs, general disapproving discussion of women, active attempts to push women out, and an expectation that men and women in the space will support and agree with these actions. Additionally, there should be similar experiences for women in terms of being blocked from or seen as inappropriate for higher status or leadership positions. Because of the male-coding of the space, expectations for success, leadership, and achievement should largely be seen as more masculine, putting women in a position where it is less possible to be seen in a positive light.

It is often argued in other spaces that having more representation of women should reduce these tendencies. Video games present a unique space in which to observe gender

differences, and potential hostilities or obstacles, because while they are still associated with men and often socially seen as a male space, the demographic reality challenges these beliefs. The near-equal representation of men and women should hypothetically create different dynamics where these masculine rules are no longer followed or are maintained differently.

Given previous work on gender, including Ridgeway's (2011) understanding of gender as rigidly defining expectations and possibilities for gaining status, what can be gleaned from video games in these areas? First, there is a possibility that because of the increasing participation of women, gaming has moved toward being a more egalitarian space and activity. It is probable that men and women gravitate toward different games and styles of play, but women's preferences in gaming may not be stigmatized. Additionally, this would mean that women are not singled out or met with hostility. In this case, men and women would have an equal opportunity and possibility of being seen as competent, skilled, successful, and able to lead. Player definitions of concepts like competence, success, and leadership will not be defined in overly gendered ways that put women in positions where they cannot easily achieve these.

Second, although women's numbers are increasing in terms of who plays video games, it is possible that this space remains highly exclusive and focused on men and masculine interests or traits. As we see in other male-dominated areas, this would leave women in a position where they are not taken seriously and their game preferences and style of play are viewed as inferior. Competence, skill, success, and leadership are defined and understood in ways that link them more clearly to men and create difficulties for women who hope to gain acceptance or status in gaming.

Finally, there is a possibility that partial gains are made for women, but they still experience inequality. In the case of spaces that strive for egalitarianism, often there are efforts

to establish a view of success and leadership that is less gendered, but gender inequality and hierarchies often still emerge and remain. In this case, aspects of gaming will not be openly defined in ways that declare women unfit or feminine qualities undesirable, but that still ultimately leave women in disadvantaged and lower-status positions.

DATA AND METHODS

To investigate the influences of gender on gaming preferences and experiences, I use qualitative data collection methods. The data for this project was collected from two primary sources: interviews, including one group interview, and online forum observations. For qualitative work featuring interviews, although there is a focus on saturation for the point at which a sample is complete, a meta-analysis revealed that the average sample size was 31, with the most common sample sizes being 20 and 30 (Mason 2010). These numbers appear to reflect a tendency for researchers to seek a set number, rather than keep saturation in mind (Mason 2010). For qualitative work, the number of participants required to understand a topic through interviews can vary greatly and is largely dependent on how much is learned through interviews and through time in fieldsites and how much information begins to be repeated during interviews, yielding less novel information (Charmaz 2006; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson 2006; Mason 2010; Morse 2000; Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam 2003).

With this in mind, interviews were conducted with 54 respondents in total, 31 of whom were women. Interviews ranged from 40 minutes to two-and-a-half hours and were conducted via Skype or over the phone, depending on respondent location and preference. Participants were recruited through two methods: snowball (or network) sampling and through volunteers from online gaming forums. Those collected through social network ties were much more responsive and made up the majority of the sample, with only five prospective interviewees declining or

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becoming nonresponsive. Online volunteers were less numerous and more likely to become

nonresponsive, leaving the sample with four online volunteers in total, three of whom then

supplied more participants via their social network ties.

The sample for this study is mostly comprised of those in Western cultural contexts, but it

is also important to note that there are often shared gaming and online cultures among those who

frequent these spaces (Salter & Blodgett 2012; Todd 2015). Of the sample, three respondents live

in Australia, one in Brazil, four in Canada, two in Japan, one in South Korea, and 39 in the

United States. Of the largest portion of the sample, respondents are distributed across the

western, mid-western, and southern United States. The age range of respondents is between 22

and 38, with both the oldest and youngest respondents being male. Players in the sample have

widely varied weekly average playing times, based on respondent reporting of gameplay, with

spans between zero predictable weekly hours of gameplay to 40 weekly hours. Time spent

playing is very similar for men and women, with women's time spent weekly ranging from two

hours per week to forty or more and men's ranging from zero to forty or more. The most

common amount of time spent weekly on video games for both men and women in the sample

was between ten and twenty hours, with most players reporting variation depending on how

much time they have for leisure.

The kinds of games played were varied with some similarities and differences between

men and women. Overall, role-playing games (RPGs) were the most popular in the sample for

both men and women. For women, the next most popular were simulation games and puzzle

games, followed by a tie between massively-multiplayer online games (MMO/MMORPG) and

action/adventure games. Nearly as popular were platformer games, followed by real time

strategy (RTS). Fewer female players were interested in other genres, including sandbox games,

first person shooters (FPS), survival games, tactical games, massive online battle arenas (MOBA), and rhythm games. For men in the sample, after RPGs, the most popular genres were action/adventure and strategy, followed by MMO/MMORPG, then FPS, with fewer players agreeing on a variety of other genres, including fighting games, puzzle games, sandbox games, arcade games, MOBAs, survival/horror, roguelikes, and management games.

The second strategy of data collection involved online forums, with data collected through observations of active conversation and content analysis of older forum posts. For online forum observations, data was collected via observation over a period of approximately two months, between May and July of 2016, from five different online forums dedicated to gaming. Of the five, three were specifically dedicated to and created for female gamers, while two were general gaming forums with larger populations of male contributors. The two general forums were the most active in terms of posting and replies, followed by the larger female-centered forum. The other two female-friendly forums were less active. As such, the larger three forums were observed three times per week, with a focus on the top 25 most discussed posts at the time of observation. The other two female-centric forums were observed initially three times per week, but were adjusted due to inactivity to once per week with the same emphasis on the top 25 posts.

Overall, this resulted in collecting data from 525 posts each, for active conversations in the general forums and the larger female-centered forum, and approximately 125 unique posts for the two less active female-centered forums. Within the posts, the top 100 most highly supported comments or full comment thread if it was less than 100 comments were the focus of analysis. For content analysis, targeted data gathering was also used to search for specific topics. Each forum was searched for terms including skill, gender, preference, favorite, guild, stress,

frustration, proud, GamerGate, hostility, toxicity, sexism, and community.[3] These were often

used with an asterisk to open the search up for variations of the words. In this case, the top most

popular forum conversations over the last year were reviewed in each forum for each term where

discussions were available.

Discussions between video game players online and interviews with players provide

insights into player experiences, perceptions, and understandings. Specifically, players' paths to

video games as a hobby are explored, focusing on their initial introductions, in terms of age,

games, and platforms. Player ideas about and discussions surrounding the label of "gamer" and

their feelings about the gaming community are also explored both directly and in terms of their

thoughts and discussions about players' relationship to and interest in multiplayer games.

Finally, in regard to issues related to success, skill, and leadership, players discuss their

definitions of success, what makes a player "good," and what is most desired from leaders in

multiplayer contexts.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

For this project, I use data collected directly from video game players to understand how

gender influences a variety of experiences in a changing demographic landscape. In chapter two,

I follow players' early experiences with video games, current preferences, and experiences with

stress in gaming. Here, I examine why people have particular preferences and to what extent

gender influences these likes and dislikes. With more women being represented among video

game players, men and women have very similar introductions to gaming and interests when it

comes to what they want in a game. Genre preference is a better predictor of what a player will

look for than gender. While early experiences and what players want in games has a great deal of

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[3] Guilds are one way to refer to gaming groups, typically those that regularly meet online to play together.

overlap, a major departure is that women are less interested in socializing during gameplay than men. Men and women both define gaming as a way to relax, but men are more likely to include other people in their idea of relaxation, while women seek to escape even social obligations in their daily lives. Additionally, stress becomes clearly gendered for players. Men and women have many common sources of stress and frustration, but stress stemming from the expectations of other players and concerns about one's own skill are unique to female players.

In chapter three, I focus on issues of identity and community for video game players. Players, regardless of gender, have a mixed relationship to a "gamer" identity, with men and women both shying away from using the term in anything but a purely clinical way. They can identify that they technically meet the requirements, but express that the term is either useless to describe what a person does with video games or too closely associated with misogyny and negative stereotypes related to isolation and lack of social skill. Additionally, men and women also both have similarly tense relationships to the gaming community, with players feeling that multiplayer settings are often too unpleasant and hostile to deal with. While players overall view women as having worse experiences with hostility from other players, men and women have both taken similar approaches to avoiding and reducing their odds of having to encounter toxic players.

Finally, in chapter four, gender shows the most influence. In asking players about their thoughts on success, skill, and leadership, clear differences emerge in perception and experience. While definitions of success follow comparable patterns to players' similar gaming trajectories, with players viewing this as non-gendered and open-ended, the other topics take on much more gendered meanings. When players consider skill, they associate this heavily with men and masculine qualities. This leaves women with fewer options to advance in gaming outside of

hobby-based play. On the other hand, when players define appropriate leadership, they associate this with more feminine terms. This initially seems like a positive outcome for women, but this feminization of leadership comes with an absence of prestige for holding this position. This additionally disadvantages women by putting them in a situation where they can be seen as successful, but this means very little; they have fewer options to be seen as *good* at gaming; and they have options to advance, but only insofar as the positions come without much positional status.

Overall, with changing demographics, women are left in an uneven position. They are gaining on men in terms of representation, increasingly have the same interests as male players, and are equally disengaged with the idea of a gamer identity. Men and women also share negative views of hostility in the gaming community, taking similar precautions to avoid unpleasant interactions. However, despite the many similar paths and experiences shared between male and female players, women have fewer options to be seen as legitimate when they try to move toward more competitive or professional play.

CHAPTER TWO:
Gaming Backgrounds, Preferences, and Experiences

It is typical in research on women's lack of representation in jobs, politics, and other spheres to focus on "the pipeline." Considering the dearth of women in top levels of design, operation, and prestigious gaming positions, we cannot understand these inequalities without better understanding how women get involved in game play and persist in the face of barriers. Much like encouraging women to run for political office or rise in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, the supply of motivated and interested participants early on is a key factor. With that in mind, I consider the common barriers game players face and how these become exacerbated or ameliorated for women. With the gaming landscape shifting, and with gender having a large influence on many preferences, what do paths into gaming as a hobby look like?

The idea of a "pipeline" is frequently thought of in masculine fields. In these instances, especially when considering STEM, women are typically seen as leaking out of the pipeline, explaining the lower numbers in terms of female representation in these areas (Blickenstaff 2005; Etzkowitz, Kemelgor, & Uzzi 2000). This pipeline starts as early as middle school, with students' interest initially forming here and performance in STEM subjects in high school influencing decisions in college (Correll 2001; Maltese & Tai 2011; Wise, Steel, & MacDonald 1979). However, while interest is fairly equal for boys and girls in STEM subjects early on, the male-dominated cultures of these fields and often present discrimination can push women out (Moss-Racusin et. al 2012; Valian 2007). Despite the component of hostile environments, much of the work investigating these "pipelines" focuses on how to get people to persist, pushing ideas of how to make STEM fields more attractive for women who tend to leave the pipeline at various points (Xie & Shauman 2003). How important is altering video games to attract women early

on? Also, if women are already present in the pipeline, why are they stuck at certain points?

A great deal of research on video games has focused on small sections of the gaming community, typically looking at MMO-style games and their players. According to scholarly work, it seems that for these games, social ties are important for establishing involvement, particularly for women. However, how do other types of players become involved with gaming? When do they start? And what draws them to a variety of games? These questions are particularly useful in understanding how preferences can be influenced – and potentially shifted – by demographic changes in a particular space. With more women entering video games as a hobby, how prevalent are gendered influences in terms of steering interest? Some work has touched on how players enter the hobby, how they relate to games, and how they think about themselves in the context of playing video games, noting that men and women in certain genres have experienced paths that are influenced by gender (Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, & Consalvo 2007; Taylor 2003; Taylor 2008; Yee 2008; William 2014). In this chapter, the paths taken to become a video game player and various gaming interests, preferences, and experiences are investigated.

As the demographics for who is playing continue to shift, I use this project to address previous assumptions about video game players and highlight emerging patterns. Though previous work suggests that men and women have different introductions to gaming, I show the very similar paths that men and women take – at similar times – to begin participating in this hobby. Based on interviews and online forum data, male and female players tend to start playing at the same ages, through the same introductory platforms and games, and gravitate toward very similar game titles. They also have very similar reasons for playing and preferences for what draws them to a game. There are, however, some important differences based on gender. One

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difference is that, counterintuitively and challenging previous work, women are less focused on social aspects of gaming, while men are more likely to prioritize this as part of their experience. Another difference is that women experience some unique forms and sources of stress, often due to pressure from other players and anxiety about their skill and potential performance in-game.

Getting into Gaming and Styles of Play

Gender influences a great deal in one's life, from the mundane to the more elaborate. As one example, preferences themselves can be shaped and guided by gender. As discussed in the previous chapter, socialization often guides people into choices that are heavily influenced by cultural beliefs about gender, from play to educational choices to career outcomes (Bradley 2000; Charles & Bradley 2009; Correll 2005; Kane 2006). Reflecting these trends in gender influencing choice, there is some evidence to suggest that video games have similarly gendered outcomes. In terms of entering the hobby, starting out as a video game player is often a social endeavor. Initially, people find their way to gaming through existing social ties (Taylor 2006, 2008). In MMOs in particular, women are likely to be brought into the game by people in their family, work, or friend networks (Taylor 2008; Yee 2008). Beyond this, it is much more common for women to be introduced to video games via a significant other (Yee 2006, 2008). However, while these social paths to gaming are common, women who play video games are more likely to lack a gaming social network (Taylor 2008; Yee 2008).

Because women tend to have a less well-established gaming friend group, websites and online forums can be an important path for women to find out more about video games (Taylor 2008). Access to online resources aside, because of the potential for women to be introduced later through a romantic partner, there may be obstacles to integrating themselves into the gaming community. For example, women can often experience unique constraints that can

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prevent them from getting into or getting better at gaming, both because they are seen as outsiders and because they frequently have more time constraints than male players (Hayes 2005; Taylor 2006; Winn & Heeter 2009). And although Lucas and Sherry (2004) note that women are less likely to play video games and spend less time on gameplay, Yee (2008) finds that female players of MMOs spend an equal amount of time on gaming and Williams et al. (2009) and William (2014) point out that women spend much more time and money on video games and mobile games.

In addition to having different paths into gaming and experiencing different levels of ease with entering the hobby, players may also see their gaming experiences differently. In terms of the reasons that people play, previous studies note that men and boys prefer violence and competition, while women and girls prefer to play socially (Brunner, Bennett, & Honey 1998; Glos & Goldin 1998). While these interests have been emphasized, some research has found that women are interested in competition, mastery, and skill (Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, & Consalvo 2007; Taylor 2003). However, Yee (2008) also notes that, for MMOs, men and women are not that different in terms of the reasons that they play. Interestingly, achievement and competition are more related to the age of players than to their gender. Additionally, in this context, men and women, "like to chat, gossip, and talk just as much in these games" (Yee 2008:91). Further, within gender and within genre, Taylor (2006) points out that there are different kinds of player, which influences their styles of play and motivations for doing so. Among these player types, there are those who focus on achievement (reaching game goals), exploration (finding out more about the game world), socialization (focus on interaction with other players), and imposition (typically distressing fellow players).

Beyond different motivations in gameplay, players also construct ideas about fun

differently, falling into different archetypes of players. Taylor (2006:70) also makes a distinction between "power gamers" and "casual gamers." A similar distinction is noted by Khanolkar and McLean (2012) between "devoted gamers" and "casual gamers." These conceptualizations are present among gamers and are often linked to stereotypes, with the casual gamer being someone who has "a life" outside of gaming and the power gamer being someone who does not (Taylor 2006:70). Further, the power gamer is more likely to engage in play activities that do not immediately appear to be fun, being seen by other types of players as excessive or obsessive. Often, the line between play and work is blurred for players, particularly in games that require "grinding," "farming," or "raiding" (Boellstorff 2008; Nardi 2010; Pearce 2006; Taylor 2006; Yee 2006). [4]

Finally, the industry has had a tendency to generalize and emphasize assumed differences between genders and similarities within them. Tied to this, there have been many arguments which have steered the earlier development of games that emphasize gendered differences in interest and seek to establish inaccurate biological roots for these differences (Hayes 2005; Taylor 2006, 2012; Yee 2008). This created issues with trying to get more girls and women involved in gaming, by emphasizing highly feminine or "pink" games (Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun 2008). By 2007, the gaming industry had gone through shifts from "pink" to "purple" to less stringently gendered approaches, following trends in research which emphasized the social construction of gender and the tendency for people to experiment with gender expression (Butler 1990; Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun 2008; Lorber 1995).

There does appear to be some support, however, for the "pink" approach to game design,

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[4] Grinding refers to efforts within the game to increase character level to gain more access to items or strength in the game. Farming or mining is collecting resources, often related to raising character level, skills, and abilities. Raiding involves working with a team – one's clan or guild – on multiplayer missions in the game.

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with surveys indicating that many teenage girls are looking for typically feminine gameplay and based on the success of *The Sims* franchise in attracting more purchasers and players who are girls and women (Jenkins & Cassell 2008). Like *The Sims*, other games that reflect the "pink" games approach seem to be effective in drawing women, who comprise approximately 70-80% of the casual gaming market (Dillon 2006; Jenkins & Cassell 2008). While recent numbers put matching games, farming games, and casual puzzles as the most frequently played genres by women, at 69%, 69%, and 42%, respectively, there are within genre differences (Yee 2017). For example, for MMO-style games, women are approximately 36% of players, but in *World of Warcraft*, only 23% of players are female (Yee 2017).

Based on literature, it does appear that women sort themselves into different game genres and different game titles. We would expect this based on gender research in other areas of life, from the educational system to occupations. Beyond this, though, previous work on these areas and video games implies that men and women should have different starting points. Specifically, women should be driven by more social aspects of gaming, while men are more interested in competition and achievement. While this would reflect the work done on various aspects of social life, when considering video games specifically, one potential issue with this conclusion is that most of this work has focused on players of games that are inherently more social. Additionally, the idea of competition's importance for male players suffers from the same general limitation of looking toward a particular genre of game that is more likely to attract a particular type of player. Although the reasons for playing video games, in terms of activities like playbor and what players consider the point of playing, help establish general archetypes for styles of play, we might expect that men and women have different ideas and definitions of these aspects of play.

However, while most studies on video games have highlighted clear differences between men and women – and boys and girls – when it comes to things that they look for in games, these studies were based on a different set of players before many demographic and cultural shifts in gaming took place. While there appears to be evidence of different pathways and different preferences, many of these studies focus on players of specific games or genres and are based on older data. With a consistently changing landscape for gaming – as the average age of video game players continues to rise and more women enter gaming as a hobby and, to a lesser degree, a profession – it is important to consider how things might be changing in terms of what we see happening with gender. While men no longer hold a numerical lead on women in gaming as a hobby, is gaming still a masculine space?

With women becoming increasingly interested in and represented among video game players, are shifts happening in terms of what we see with gaming preferences? Are preferences and interests beginning to be more equally split among men and women, or are women still inclined toward "pink" or more feminine games? Are these games seen in a negative light, in terms of the way that the gaming community discusses and regards them?

In addition to the broader questions of this project, this chapter also investigates questions based on these changing demographics. With previously documented differences in mind, it should be expected that men and women will filter into different game choices and playing styles based on perceptions of gender. Based on this, why do people have the preferences that they have? And to what extent does gender influence their gaming preferences and habits?

With a broader variety of players, it is possible that men and women have different ideas of fun based on either gender or the game genres that they are drawn to. Yee's (2017) findings about player preferences based on age difference do suggest that other factors influence

preferences, potentially more heavily than gender. It is also possible that men and women might be constrained in their options, with women feeling more free to explore more masculine games and gaming spaces than men feel free to explore more feminine-coded games, as suggested by research on socialization and gender performance. Additionally, men and women should place importance on different aspects of games. Previous work has highlighted the importance of competition for male players and social options for female players.

Stress and Frustration

Gender may also influence experiences and interpretations of stress and frustration during gaming. As a leisure activity, video games should work similarly to other ways that people tend to spend their free time. One important aspect of this time use is that leisure activities are frequently methods of reducing everyday stress, especially related to work (Brajša-Žganec, Merkaš, & Šverko 2011). However, while leisure is important for reducing stress, many Americans feel that they lack time for leisure activities (Bittman & Wajcman 2000). This concern and having to break up leisure time between work, self-care, and home obligations often increases stress, particularly for women who tend to have more disjointed and interrupted leisure time (Bittman & Wajcman 2000; Chebat & Zuccaro 1995). Still, although women have more difficulty scheduling leisure, they tend to value their leisure time more than men (Chebat & Zuccaro 1995).

Although many players use video games as leisure, it can also be a source of stress and frustration. For many players, however, these stressors are much more directly related to the actual participation in the activity than feeling like they do not have enough time. Interactions that involve griefing or cheating in a game can often create situations where players are annoyed

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or frustrated with other players (Taylor 2006). [5] These behaviors can reduce enjoyment and a sense of fairness in the game (Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006). Additionally, when dealing with other players, there is a sense of frustration when paired with players who are less experienced (Taylor 2006:49).

While griefing, trolling, and player hostility are often discussed in terms of making players feel that they are having a worse experience, one of the most studied sources of stress and frustration, at least in terms of MMOs, is when players begin to put additional effort into the game. Players may blur the lines between fun and work in a "playbor" kind of situation, where grinding becomes a focal point of their play in hopes of becoming better at the game (Taylor 2006).[6] Still, even in guilds, players may be seen as "too focused on achievement" if they become too engrossed in meeting game goals and grinding (Taylor 2006). There is often a great deal of responsibility involved in group play, with members of a guild being expected to be present for raids, regardless of what they might have going on in their lives, and often having scheduled raids every week (Taylor 2006). Related to these issues, which are typically more prevalent in group play, players may become frustrated when their work in the game does not pay off as expected (Nardi 2010).

Although leisure activities are meant to reduce stress, video games have many sources of stress and frustration for those who play. Because this is the case, there is a question of how players approach this problem. With common sources of stress in MMOs being tied to player hostility and group pressure, it is possible that men and women experience similar types of stress

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[5] Similarly to trolling, griefing includes hostile interactions between players and can include in-game theft, fraud, breaking rules, and attacking other players' characters outside of typical game behaviors, norms, and parameters (Boellstorff 2008; Consalvo 2007; Taylor 2006).
[6] Grinding refers to participating in repetitive and often tedious tasks in order to gather resources to move forward in the game.

from similar sources. Alternatively, however, keeping in mind that ideas about leadership and competence are likely defined differently for men and women, it is also possible that gendered expectations cause different amounts of stress from different sources. An additional question, then, is important to consider as well. While there are some limited ideas of why and how players experience stress, for the times when they *do* have these experiences, why do they continue to play?

FINDINGS

Most areas of life are guided by gender differences, from educational paths to occupational choices. In previous research, there is support for different paths into video games as a hobby, as well. Ultimately, I find that there are many similarities in what people are playing and that men and women begin playing video games around the same age, with similar platforms and games as starting points. Further, men and women have very similar interests when it comes to what they highlight as important to them as video game players. For male and female players alike, relaxation and the ability to use video games as entertainment rank at the top of their interest. There is one major point of divergence; contrary to common assumptions and previous work, women do not place most of their gaming interest in social aspects, with men having more of a tendency to highlight this as a major interest. Another gendered difference is in sources of stress. Men and women share many sources of and reactions to stress and frustration, but women are much more likely to experience stress as the result of pressure from multiplayer play.

What are People Playing?

There has been a long-standing approach to attempting to broaden the gaming audience with "pink" games aimed at what developers think female players want. This is supported by great deal of research showing that men and women are playing different games. As one

example, men are more drawn to MMOs than women, but men and women are equally drawn to RPGs. For gaming overall, there are broad trends in what people are playing. Data from 2016 shows that across all possible platforms, *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare* was the most popular game (Riesinger 2017). This was followed by *Battlefield 1* and *Tom Clancy's The Division*, all of which are from major developers (Riesinger 2017). These were followed by the year's NBA and NFL games, *Grand Theft Auto V* (*GTA V*), *Call of Duty: Black Ops III*, *FIFA 17*, and *Final Fantasy XV* (*FFXV*). The majority of these games are FPS or sports games, with the exception of *GTA V*, which is an action/adventure game, and *FFXV*, which is an open world RPG.

According to other recent data, women tend to favor mobile and social games, although within genres, some titles have more appeal, including *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, and *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (Campbell 2017; Yee 2017). The data also shows that women are unlikely to play sports games, at only 2% of players, as well as tactical shooters, at only 4%. In spite of this, specific titles can carry more weight for drawing in players of a certain gender than the genres themselves.

While much of the data documents clear and sometimes vast differences in game choices, it is interesting to note that there are similarities in the gaming preferences of men and women represented in the online forums. For example, for the three major gaming forums and one of the more female-oriented forums, FPS-style games are among the top ten most discussed games during active observation. The two general forums and one of the less frequently used female-oriented forums (FF2) also frequently discuss RPGs, while the major female-oriented forum (FF1) and the least active female-oriented forum (FF3) discuss them with much less frequency.

Also of note is the diversity of games that are discussed. Overall, the larger forums, regardless of the intended audience, are much more likely to focus on games from major

developers. And while the top ten most discussed games are still largely AAA titles in the smaller female-oriented forums, they are more likely to discuss indie games more frequently. Indeed, the female-oriented forums discuss a wider breadth of games, with more focus on multiplayer games and indie titles. The general forums, on the other hand, focus heavily on AAA titles.

Regardless of these differences in terms of how many types of games are discussed, there is a large amount of overlap in terms of which games are most frequently discussed across all forums. For example, *Overwatch* was the top most discussed game during observation across all but one forum, FF3. Even in this less populated forum, *Overwatch* was still in the top five most discussed games. For this forum, the most heavily discussed game was *Uncharted 4*, another AAA title that appeared in the top ten for all but one forum, FF2. *Overwatch* stands out among these most discussed games, as it is a title that has drawn self-professed unlikely players. Many discussions about the game – both in forums and interviews – highlight the fact that this is not a game the player would typically play. The game itself is a first-person shooter (FPS) and has a team-based multiplayer format. As one example of a player who has been surprised by her interest in the game, June discusses her experience with her favorite genres and games that she has tried to play:

> I find that even if [platformers are] really hard I find them relaxing…. Rhythm games are really good. We have been playing a lot of *Overwatch*, but that's very untypical. Like, usually FPSs stress me out…. I think the fact that [*Overwatch* is] so team based [and] took it to a more realized level of there's ways to play the game without just shooting things. Like, there are ways to help your team that aren't just being really aggressive…. [It] allows you to feel like you have some kind of control over the situation which is always not true.

Most of the players who had an interest in *Overwatch*, but tended to stay away from FPS or

multiplier games, have a difficult time explaining why *Overwatch* is an exception. Beyond

enjoying the game as a title, many point out the team-work aspect as being able to draw them in.

Others note that the game shows who had the "best play" in a particular match, replaying the

event, which feels supportive. The general sense, though, is a feeling of "I don't really know"

when considering why the game was an exception for them. As another example of a player who

tends to only play solo games and does not usually like FPS games, Lilly does not like the

feeling of being judged in multiplayer games, but frequently plays *Overwatch* with her sister

Jackie:

> I don't know why, but it's never honestly bothered me that much
> with *Overwatch*. Maybe just because the game is so freaking fun
> [laughs]. I think it might also be because of the way the game is
> designed… it's really a team effort and it's not so much you failing
> as the whole team is winning or losing, whether you're failing or
> not.

This game more than any other in discussion has captured a great deal of attention from those

who were previously uninterested in this style of game. It illustrates well the opportunities that

the gaming industry has to expand their player base and the likelihood of players switching

preferences for the right game.

Outside of gaming exceptions, the interview sample is also broader than what is

represented in the general gaming data and has gaming interests that span a wide variety of

genres and games. While most interviewees, regardless of gender, mention playing games on

their phones, none list mobile games among their favorite types of games. For both male and

female respondents, role-playing games (RPGs) are the most popular, with 24 of 31 women and

15 of 23 men noting this as among their top genres. While both the men's and women's groups

in the sample list 13 total styles of game, there are some differences in what is mentioned. For

women, simulation games and puzzle games are tied for second most popular with seven people mentioning each. For men, the second-place position is a tie between action/adventure games and strategy games, each with six individuals mentioning them. For women in the sample, third place is also a tie with six people mentioning massively-multiplayer online (MMO) games and action/adventure games. Third place for men is also MMO games. For the remaining games, with five or fewer mentions, women note enjoying platformer games, strategy, sandbox, first person shooters (FPS), survival, tactical, massive online battle arenas (MOBAs), and rhythm games. For men, their next most mentioned were FPS, fighting, puzzle, sandbox, arcade, MOBAs, survival, roguelikes, and management games.[7]

While several genres are regularly noted as favorites or typical choices, mobile games are not mentioned in the same way. While both male and female players note playing mobile games at specific times – like during breaks or before bed – these games are not a main focus in interviews or online forum discussions. Women are more likely to mention that mobile games were a part of their regular routine, particularly Gretchen who used to be one of the top players in *World of Warcraft* for her server, but since having a child, has not been able to dedicate as much time to the games she used to love. She and several other respondents, men and women alike, both note playing *Pokémon Go* and being excited about the opportunities for gaming that mobile games like it afford people. However, a couple of male respondents remain more closed off to the idea of mobile games. While the majority respondents are either neutral or positive about the topic, some of the male respondents are less accepting, including Todd who decried the statistics showing that women are nearly 50% of video game players, stating that the number is only that high because of the inclusion of mobile games.

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[7] Roguelikes are role-playing games where the death of the character is permanent and game environments consistently change with each playthrough.

Overall, however, it appears that men and women who are well integrated into what one might consider the gaming community – with clear ties to other people who play diverse types of video games – are more likely to be exposed to and pick up a variety of games. Although most of the respondents did not use video game forums, their experiences with games and current tastes reflect a similar pattern to the users of the internet forums.

Gaming Backgrounds

Most people playing video games as adults have a long-standing connection with gaming as a hobby. Although some previous work suggests that women are more likely to enter later in life, often after being introduced by significant others, women in the sample have very similar trajectories to men. On average, players typically recall entering gaming as a hobby in elementary school, between the ages of four and ten. Moreover, the social introduction to video gaming is true of players of non-MMO games as well, with their earliest introduction through shared video game systems in the home. Because of the age of introduction, this initial contact with video games through family makes sense. Most of the sample was introduced via their parents, with some who were introduced by cousins.

The two most common paths to getting into video games are via a parent's computer or through a gaming console purchased as a gift, either for the entire family or for the specific child. Many respondents note that video games were an early bonding activity with family and this often led to a new way to interact with and relate to friends. For example, Lilly mentions her early experiences, which were facilitated by her mother. While her mom bought a Super Nintendo for her and her twin sister, her mother would sometimes join in and play. Lilly recalls, "she would play Super Mario with us sometimes. She was astonishingly good at it and we were astonishingly terrible at it, so that was a good time [laughs]." While she and her sister had

different interests from their mother, this afforded an opportunity to spend some time together and share an activity.

Often, these early discoveries also paved a path for later gaming interests and habits. For Jack, for example:

> …I think between the pair of those games, the survival of *DOOM* and the strategy of *Red Alert*, doing essentially survival on a larger scale--that really spoke to the way in which I want to tackle the world.

Often the aspects of the game that captured the players' attention as children stayed with them throughout their interest in video games, setting the overall stage for the types of genres and styles of play that they are currently interested in. Other early interests were also influential. For players who enjoyed reading as children, story is often a primary concern in terms of which games they feel particularly drawn to, typically influencing them toward playing role-playing games (RPGs). Even Tanya, who more frequently discusses her interest in management aspects of a game, highlights reading as an important childhood hobby and often discusses story as a guiding factor in her decisions to play a game, as well as deciding to recommend a game to others. For instance, when highlighting one of her favorite games, she says, "...Star Ocean and it's one of my absolute favorite games, I love the storyline, the characters are great… it's a great game." It is common for players who had an interest in reading as an early hobby to discuss games in this way, placing the story as one of the more important aspects when it comes to what draws them in, what influences recommendations, and what keeps them coming back to a game.

The earliest experiences in terms of available console are also very similar. While some respondents note that PC games were their first introduction, the most common path into video games was though Nintendo systems, followed by SEGA gaming systems. Less common is a

varied experience with gaming systems, with access to multiple platforms. Access to a more varied experience was more commonly achieved outside of the home. As one example, Regina recalls:

> I think the earliest memory of a video game was probably… maybe Sonic? [M]y parents never bought me any of them, so when I lived in my grandma's house, [my cousin] had the Nintendo 64 and all of the PlayStations and all the SEGA stuff, so I would just play whatever he had. And then my dad also liked playing PC games, so he liked playing things like *DOOM*, he liked playing things like *Unreal Tournament*, so I really caught on to *Unreal Tournament*.[8]

Having friends or family members who had different systems in their homes often opened up additional gaming experience options. While this was a way for younger players to gain experience with varied consoles, having the opportunity to explore PC gaming was more likely on a parent's computer. Additionally, this this option is typically discussed as an early supplement to home consoles and other access facilitated through family. Although the vast majority of players discuss a console that was bought for them by both of their parents, several respondents recalled experiences where they would access a parent's computer – their father's in all but one case – and play games, even if they were told not to do that without guidance. While these less prevalent experiences were typically initiated because of access to a male parent's computer, it is also important to note that this was true for both male and female respondents who gained access this way.

      While many players had childhood experiences where they approached video gaming on their own out of curiosity or were given direct access to video games, there are some other paths into gaming for women. Online users' experiences differ somewhat from those interviewed. For many of these women, men are more prominently featured in their stories about their

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[8] Quotations from interview respondents have been minimally edited for clarity. Quotations from online forum users have also been edited and paraphrased to protect users' identities.

introduction to video games. For example, a common theme in the larger female-oriented forum (FF1) is an introduction through their brothers' gaming systems. Frequently, these users discuss having watched their brothers play, being able to play together on their brothers' systems, and being able to use the systems when their brothers were not home. For the most highly supported user in the largest thread, with 23 personal positive votes out of 74 for the overall thread, one user mentions:

> … I loved to watch my brother play video games with his friends. For me, this was a really one of the first ways I bonded with him as siblings….when I was about 12, I was alone at home and wanted to look at a new game that my brother just bought….It was *Final Fantasy 10*. I started playing the game and before I knew it, 8 hours had passed and I was still playing. Nothing else had ever sucked me in like that. It was to the point where my mom got home from work and I hadn't moved from my spot!
> That was when I figured out that games can have an emotional effect on me.

For these players, male family members figure much more prominently into their early stories of video game access. In these cases, consoles were purchased not for them or the family, but typically for their brother(s). Although their access was less direct than those in the interview sample, these early beginnings had similar effects. Although there are many stories about starting to play because of watching their brothers, many of the female forum users follow patterns similar to those interviewed. The second most common experience discussed on the forum is being introduced through a console purchased by their parents. Frequently, these early experiences are also discussed as a bonding experience – playing multiplayer games together or watching one another play single-player games was a way to spend time together.

While more female players in the online forum note that their experiences began with a male sibling's console, this was not represented in all forums or in the experiences of the interview respondents. This suggests that, in some cases, there may be some truth to being

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introduced to games via a male tie, but these experiences were still while these players were young and did not occur through romantic ties, as previous research suggests is common for female players. Overall, a late introduction to gaming through a significant other is not a common route for women.

Although most of the respondents had very similar beginnings, one aspect where male and female respondents differ is with access through friends. Contrary to previous studies, social ties appear to be much more prevalent and important for boys and men when it comes to video games. Male respondents are much more likely to have had early friend networks with overlapping interests in video games.[9] The largest impact that this had on female players was probably the lack of access to people to play multiplayer games with. This theme of friend networks was solved for the majority of women in the sample by high school or college, when they were able to meet more people with an interest in video games.

While an absence of friends during early childhood gaming is a common experience for female players, early connections to gaming as an activity were not impacted. Jane, who works in the video game industry and did not feel that she fully understood gaming as a true hobby until college, had a similar experience of becoming connected to video games early on, despite not having a social network based around video games:

> …so on the really old computers that we had, the first ones, they had the Microsoft pinball thing on it. And then in addition they had a few flight simulator things that my dad got 'cause he thought it was cool and from that I started to play with those a whole bunch and I was like, "This is awesome, this is so fun, I want more things like this," so I ended up getting *The Sims* and then also my parents bought us a Super Nintendo…and so that became uh, that broke the seal, I guess.

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[9] A major difference in the use of forums between general forums and female-oriented forums is that the latter is much more frequently used for networking with other players and trying to find people of similar backgrounds to play with.

This sense of "breaking the seal" is common for respondents. The majority feel that they had been gaming "forever" or for "as long as [they] could remember." Gaming in childhood made video games a large and often integral part of players' lives. For the majority of players, their experiences began early on and were often not the product of friend networks, but allowed many, more often boys, to have another point of commonality with others on which to forge friendships. Even without a reliance or importance placed on social ties related to gaming, though, games were able to become an important facet of players' lives.

Still, even for people who are introduced later, there is a deep affinity for their hobby. While these situations are less common, one case of a female respondent who was introduced to gaming later, and by a significant other, further highlights the importance of family for early experiences. For Paige, her parents were a major factor in her later start with gaming:

> I was a late comer [laughs]. I mean, I wanted to, it wasn't like my parents thought, 'Oh it's the devil,' or things like that, it was more, "We know how you focus on things and if it's here, you're not going to do your homework." I wouldn't do my homework anyway, I would watch "I Love Lucy" reruns, but … they were trying to protect me from myself [laughs]. And I wasn't smart enough to use my money to buy my own system, 'cause I could have done that, I just didn't think about it. Like, my brother, when he got his first job, he ended up buying himself an Xbox or a [PlayStation]… It was like, "Oh, I should have done that."

For Paige, video games did not become an option until she was in her mid-20s and dating her now husband. While these cases do exist, they are not the norm for those who consider themselves currently well-integrated into gaming as a hobby, or those with a current social network of many fellow players. It is also possible that for many cases of people who start playing video games later, they do not have an initial interest and are recruited by their significant others for MMO-style games.

In addition to common paths of introduction, players also tend to feel similarly about

their role in passing information within their friend networks. Interestingly, while many current players feel like they knew many video game players when they were growing up and note that their friends and family members were their primary source for gaming news and information, most players now consider themselves the source of gaming information for their friends. Many of the interviewees discuss being the one to introduce friends to games more frequently than they get recommendations. Most note that with the availability of information via Facebook pages, online forums, and official game company websites, it is unlikely that their friends have information before they do. As June mentions, recommendations overall have become much more infrequent:

> …because game news and information is so widespread, I don't feel like we need to recommend games to one another 'cause it's kind of assumed that everybody know what's going on, like what new games are popular and what's come out recently, that at that point, they can just be like, "Hey, are you playing? No? You should be."

While she establishes that new recommendations do not happen frequently, she does still echo the experiences of many other respondents and mentions a moment later that she recommends games extremely frequently, even to people that she does not know during her daily commute.

Friend networks have become much less prominent and important in terms of enjoying gaming and remaining aware of new releases or happenings in the industry and community. Because of the availability of information online through a variety of sources – from official company pages and newsletters to player-driven forums – players are frequently aware of news as it comes out. As a result, while most players feel that they recommend to others more often than they receive suggestions, seeking information on one's own is the most common way to find out about video games for current players. As Cam discusses:

> Most of my source for new upcoming games or games that might be interesting, I usually find online through different types of Facebook

pages…. I also like to go to their site to see what they have coming up. Or on YouTube some other compiled list…. I like to watch those and if I see something that might be interesting that I haven't heard of or I haven't picked up yet, then I'll look into it.

While previous work notes the importance of forums for women learning about video games, online resources are perhaps the most important source for men and women alike now, with friends serving as supplemental, but unnecessary, sources for discussion. Forums, for example, are often also used to discuss game plots and decisions or learn about mechanics, walkthroughs, and other game tricks or tips. The nature of gaming in terms of being more remote may support diversity among players. Allowing them to do their own research into different games and stay on top of gaming news on their own makes it easy to avoid social situations in many ways, which could allow for gender to be less salient. Additionally, this makes getting into and keeping up with gaming easier for all players, from those who begin early on or discover the hobby later. While all players note using online resources as their most frequent source of information on game releases, it is possible that for many women it is still a more important source, if they begin the hobby with and continue to have fewer ties to other people interested in gaming as a hobby.

One way that women do uniquely benefit from the use of forums, however, is not to gain initial access to gaming as a hobby, but to find other people to play multiplayer games with. In the female-oriented forums, there are frequently posts from women who enjoy playing multiplayer games, but do not have access to other players. Rather than play these games with strangers in randomly generated teams, they try to seek other female or like-minded players in forums to establish a trustworthy and comfortable gaming group. These types of posts are absent from general forums.

Outside of recruiting methods for women online, men and women both feel competent and capable when it comes to discussing and keeping up with games. Male and female players

both feel that they are much more likely to recommend games to people and also feel confident

that they are aware of gaming news. Players commonly follow forums, Facebook pages, or

subscribe to newsletters for particular companies or franchises that they enjoy to make sure that

they have the most up-to-date information on their preferred games.

Although it has become much easier to navigate gaming on one's own, some respondents

note that friends are able to provide them with information about games that they may miss

because they are not following every possible gaming outlet for news about upcoming games.

For these players, like Steven, getting recommendations about games is somewhat rare, but

friends are still an important bridge to learn about indie games or games in genres that they may

not have otherwise considered:

> I keep track of news and what's coming out, but there are so many
> games that it's hard to keep up with them all. So maybe once or
> twice a month, someone will mention a game to me that I didn't
> know. I don't always try them, I don't always have time to play, but
> people are always telling me about games I might find interesting.

While many of the respondents note that friends can provide them with information about new

games, most reveal that friend networks are less important for adult gamers because of the easily

accessible information provided online. Additionally, although most of the women in the sample

discuss talking to friends about video games, women are also more likely than men to feel like

they do not have a solid friend-base to game with currently. While most of the interviewees do

note that they know many people who play video games, female respondents were more likely to

mention that their core friends had stopped playing video games, they knew most of their gaming

friends through family or significant other connections, and that they lacked friends who shared

their interest.

This issue is more common for female gamers. For many, the bulk of their gaming

network is built via a significant other, but women also find that female friends that they used to enjoy video games with have lost much of their previously available free-time and can no longer play. Recall from above that this is more apparent when considering online forum discussions. General forums do not discuss finding people to play with and focus on discussing games, game news, and funny portions of games instead. While most of the discussion in female-oriented forums covers similar topics, and despite women being more drawn to single-player games, these forums are also used to seek other players for multiplayer games, from FPS games like *Call of Duty* and *Overwatch* to MMOs like *World of Warcraft*. This is where online forums become increasingly important for female players in ways that male players do not benefit. For men who have long-standing friend networks established, playing online games is often a way to stay in touch with friends, while for women who wish to play multiplayer games, they need to reach out to other players through forums more frequently.

Why do People Play?

Although previous work discusses playing video games as primarily a social pursuit, with the emphasis on players' interest in the social aspects of gaming, especially for women, this may only be true of people who prioritize MMO-style games. Most players do not focus most of their attention on multiplayer games and do not view video games primarily as a social outlet. Gaming tends to be seen as mainly a way to relax or escape. This is true for male and female respondents alike. As one example, Paul discusses his use of video games with attention to both aspects:

> Yeah, one of the things I like the most about gaming is that actually, I do it to relax. At work, it can be stressful. Real life is stressful. You know, you buy a house, you buy a car, you crash your car… you have to take this pet to a vet, you have financial issues, or some kind of family or personal drama or something. There's always something going on and for me video games are really more of a mental escape. You know, I get home, I don't want to think about work anymore. If I had some drama in my life, I get home and I

don't want to think about that. I want to focus on something else.

Although some respondents use the term "escape" to relate this idea, they often feel uncomfortable with it due to a perceived stigma in society toward escapism as it relates to video games. Regardless of what words players use, however, this is the overall theme for all types of players, from those who are concerned with being able to socialize to those who want to be left alone to enjoy their games. Regina, as a solo player, does bring up the issue of interaction in gaming, noting, "Oh yeah definitely. I mean, that's kind of the reason why people play video games, is to escape. And to have fun. And the way I have fun is by not interacting with other people [laughs]." This sense of wanting to be able to enjoy a game without worrying about others is frequently expressed. Darren, as another example, mentions that he tries to stay away from multiplayer games. For him:

> I suppose I have no real interest in multiplayer? I dunno. Games for me are… primarily a solo experience, a solo exercise. It's a matter of getting away from people, rather than meeting people.

For most of the respondents and for many forum users of the largest female-oriented forum (FF1), there is a pronounced desire to be left alone during video game play. One volunteer from this forum reflected many of the sentiments present in the players who prefer to keep to themselves when playing video games. Elaine has a difficult time understanding why someone would be interested in a multiplayer experience. She mentions:

> …it's funny, because my husband really enjoys MMOs and I'm like, "Uck! I don't wanna do that." Like, it's selfish in a way … I wanna be the one experiencing this and I don't want anyone else to get in my way…I don't mind a random interaction from an NPC, but I don't want an interaction with a real person.[10] I don't want to waste the time or the energy, 'cause half the time… people are just being trolls or they're just wasting your time or they're 30 levels over you

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[10] An NPC is a non-playable character; a character that you can interact with in a game, but that is part of the design.

and a 12-year-old and they just want to go on a killing spree of everybody that's a lower level than they are. And it's like… why am I investing time in this game when people are just gonna be jerks? I'd rather just play on my own console, by myself, and I'm the only jerk around.

Wanting to avoid other players is frequently cited by both men and women. Playing a video game with people unknown to the player is generally thought of as being unpleasant, tedious, and creating more opportunities for frustration. This is linked to one additional reason for preferring solo gaming that is less commonly cited overall, but more likely to be brought up by women. Within the context of playing a multiplayer game, it is more likely for players to be expected to have better skills, depending on the type of game being played and the likelihood of encountering strangers in-game. As Ashley notes, the concern of judgement makes her less inclined toward multiplayer games:

I think it's just… there's a certain privacy to it. Where no one's judging me on how I'm playing my game. [laughs] 'Cause I feel like when you're playing with other people and you're like, "Oh, I don't know if I should do that."

The concern of being judged is not present for all – or even a majority of – players, but is more often expressed by female players. Only a few respondents bring up, specifically, the worry about being judged for a lack of skill or for having to learn how to play the game. While this is mostly discussed by women, this is a major concern for Paul, as well, and he ties the issue to toxicity in the gaming community, which will be discussed in chapter three.

This is, however, a large justification for these players' decision to stay away from playing multiplayer games. This is due to concerns about hostility from other players, not wanting to feel judged, or wanting to avoid stress from the concern of letting the team down, which is discussed below. While these concerns are present for some players, it is important to

note that, overall, they are not a primary reason for a preference for solo games. For the majority of respondents, and particularly for women who view gaming as less social overall, the emphasis is on using gaming as a time to get away from obligations and everyday distractions.

Related to this view, playing video games is frequently likened to the experience to reading a book or watching a movie. Video games in the context of relaxation are often heavily linked to story. For Gretchen, a highly skilled MMO player, although she appreciates the social aspect of gaming, she enjoys solo games for, "…how immersive they are. Like a movie you're inside of. They can tell a story better than a lot of mediums." [11] Although story was not directly asked about, this is highlighted as an important aspect of games and for immersion for gaming experiences. Being able to interact with and affect the story is also important for many of these players. Paige notes:

> …you can build relationships, friendships with the other characters.…[S]o like in *Mass Effect*, you can get the job done kind of thing, you know, how they have the renegade side of it or the paragon, so you can do what you need done by being kind of a jerk about it or being really nice about it, either way… the result's gonna be the same, because that's how it's written, but how you get to that point is kind of what I like about it….those ethical choices that you can make sometimes….'cause not everybody makes those same decisions. [12]

Being able to take time to relax is important and, as part of that, being able to immerse oneself and have a unique experience with their game is also frequently cited as part of being able to enjoy playing more deeply. Players appreciate the ability to not only experience a story, but often also to influence it and lead their character toward different outcomes. This helps with immersion and investment in the character and overall game story, making players more

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[11] Gretchen held a leadership position in a nationally ranked guild.
[12] Renegade and paragon are interaction types in *Mass Effect*, with the former being harsher and more aggressive and the latter being more compassionate.

interested in the outcome of the game. For example, Brian discusses his interest in story-rich

games:

> As far as stories go, I think I just like stories. I like being told stories.
> I was raised with my mom reading to me a lot growing up, and I feel
> like RPGs and adventure games tend to tell the best stories….It's
> not even necessarily the characters. It's sort of the ideas behind it.
> Like a game could have interesting characters, but that's not enough
> to hold me. I need… I need the whole package. Like the world needs
> to make sense to me.

The idea of having more to hold one's attention is a sentiment that many players express. There

is a sense of wanting to know more about the world – how things work and how one's character

and decisions fit in overall.

However, while many place a premium on being left alone to enjoy their gaming

experience, in games that are heavily story-based, solo players also frequently like to discuss

their choices and the choices of others. With the interest in players' ability to influence a game,

whether it is via romance options or broader game decisions, forum users and respondents are

eager to find out how their gameplay compares. In general forums (GF1 and GF2), players are

more likely to discuss mechanical choices or how to improve the game. Often these discussions

are tied to which class participants played as, however, it is important to note that in game-

specific forums, these discussions do focus more on direct comparisons in terms of romance and

story choices.[13] In one top discussion about *Mass Effect* in one of the general gaming forums

(GF1), the discussion of class choice is largely mechanical, evaluating the benefits and

drawbacks of certain options. In the most highly voted exchange, the parent comment, with the

support of 193 users, mentions:

> For the whole series, I played as a soldier. The second game was
> the best overall, but the third game was the best for combat. The
> skills, combat, and interactions flowed pretty well, even though the

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[13] The "class" is the type of character; this relates to the skill set the played character has.

environments were small and could be disorganized.

The thread of over 300 participants focuses on these more mechanical decisions and how it influenced their gaming experience, making it either better or worse based on how well-crafted the game was as a whole. On the other hand, one of the top discussions about choice in FF1 is about overall favorite video game romance. The original poster first discusses her favorite:

> My heart will always belong to Cullen from *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Because of his backstory and all of his struggles, he seems so vulnerable and I want to just hug him.

Most of the comments discuss story elements of the romances – how the romances begin, how well the characters work together, the options one has in terms of interacting – and how much they enjoy the characters. These romance choices will be discussed more below.

While solo gamers do not talk about this sharing as an explicitly social way to enjoy games, those who prefer multiplayer games place more of a direct emphasis on this aspect of story-rich games. For these players, gaming is seen specifically as a means of interacting and maintaining bonds with friends. In these cases, the social aspect of games is so important that even solo games feel lacking because of the loneliness. For instance, Gareth notes what he considers to be a major drawback for solo games:

> I mean, it can get lonely after a while, to be honest with you. So, I mean, that's one of the reasons that the internet is so popular after all – to communicate. So, I would say that the lack of communication gets to me after a while, so I like to flip between them every once in a while.

Male participants are much more likely to express these feelings. Games without communication with others becomes a lonely endeavor. The socialization aspect for these players is a primary concern. MMO-focused players tend to have a clear goal of socializing and are more likely to

directly discuss the desire to talk with others about their games. Greg, for example, plays a large number of solo games, but also spends a great deal of time playing multiplayer games. When discussing his habits, he also places an emphasis on how he can use games within his friendships:

> I would say, there's two major things that make me want to recommend a game to somebody. Either it's a multiplayer game, it's something that I would think they would enjoy that we could play together and that would give us another reason to hang out and play games or if it's a solo game, it's something that I would like to discuss with other people. So if there's a really good story or a big twist, I feel like, "Okay, I need somebody else to play this so I can talk to someone about this."

Solo players are inclined to be enthusiastic about understanding and discussing other players' choices, but do not discuss it as openly or as often as the more socially-oriented players. Most of the solo players, and particularly women, in the sample are more focused on wanting to enjoy video games on their own, but often bring up talking about games with friends to compare their experiences or talk about major plot points. While it is something that interests these players, they do not highlight this as an important part of gaming like social players do. This commentary on their discussions is not as focused on socialization as part of the gaming process for them in the same way that is seen from MMO-style players. Additionally, the solo players are not inclined to mention any drawbacks to solo games, including the possibility of loneliness.

While there is this genre divide in terms of the way that games are seen in relation to social options, men are also more inclined to see gaming as a social endeavor. For those who play multiplayer games, they often discuss gaming as time to hang out with friends. For James in particular, gaming helps to facilitate his long-distance friendships. When continuing to play a game, even if he gets frustrated with it, he says, "…I know my friends are still gonna play, just

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'cause I stop playin' it, you know, when the majority of your friends live in another state and the

only interaction that you have with them anymore is through Xbox, you don't want to throw that

away because you get mad at a game." Although not all of these players have moved away from

home like James has, most of them feel that playing video games is the easiest way to hang out

with their friends. Ryan, for example, discussed organizing group playing times as a way to keep

in touch despite busy work and family lives. There is also one female respondent who expressed

similar sentiments and preferred multiplayer games. Jane explains:

> …I like to play multiplayer because it allows me to feel fulfilled
> from a social aspect and you know, it's… friends are the reason why
> people game for the most part. It's like our whole reason here, it's
> the whole reason for development, 'cause like… people want to play
> with their friends. It's like the biggest reason people come back and
> play *LOL.*[14]

While Jane is an exception in aligning with more of the male respondents, overall, women tend

to be less inclined toward gaming for social reasons specifically. Although forums are used to

find other players, the majority of posts – and users – focus on their experiences with single-

player games. Within the sample as well, women remain much less likely to focus on or mention

an appreciation for playing video games as a way to socialize, opting instead to focus on their

experience with games like other types of media.

As another consideration for reasons to play, because of the literature on competitive and

challenging play, it is interesting to note that many players do not express a large interest in these

aspects of gameplay. When it comes to the option between challenge or leisure, the majority of

players are not heavily focused on challenge and do not fall under the "power" gamer type.

Again, the type of game and genre that the player is drawn to has an influence on how they feel

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[14] *League of Legends.*

about competition and challenge. However, there may also be a gender component present. While most players are uninterested in competition as their main purpose for playing, or even as a secondary interest, some players note that competition is a driving factor in their play. Although not all of the men in the sample enjoy these aspects, men are only slightly more likely to be inclined toward more challenging aspects of games, and are more likely to highlight competition against other players than against the game environment. For James, who focuses more on FPS games and multiplayer games, competition is important. He discusses:

> I'm a very competitive person. Like, I've played sports my whole life. I can turn pretty much anything into a competition, doesn't matter what it is, so multiplayer games just let you compete with people at a game you like all over the world. You're really getting an idea, like… you think you're good at gaming and you go on Xbox Live, you're gonna find out pretty quick if you're good at that game or not. And then, it's fun to find out if you're better than your friends, you know?

This emphasis on competition, and also focusing on challenge, is not a common focus of forum discussions and is not highlighted as important for the majority of the sample. In fact, only six interviewees noted being particularly interested in competition – four men and two women. While competition is not a major deciding factor for playing or enjoying a game, players are more interested in being able to overcome difficult games or difficult game portions and levels.

Challenge as a general concept is more important to players than direct competition with other players. Still, while more players find a sense of accomplishment or satisfaction with being able to overcome challenging game aspects, it is still not a top reason for choosing particular games or playing styles. Having a challenging portion of a game is experienced as more of a bonus. While Darren does not like to play with or against other players, he does mention:

> …you see yourself improving, you can challenge yourself. I like the challenge aspect of it. With some of these games, basically you have

> to sit and read the manual before doing anything. To kind of understand all of the nuanced features, really, I guess getting the payoff later. Later on when you kind of know… you can take advantage of the features and play the game properly.

There is a sense of achievement tied to playing more challenging games or playing on challenging settings in games. Jackie expressed similar sentiments, focusing her play on achievement hunting and experiencing pride when overcoming difficult game obstacles. In one example of a particularly satisfying game experience, she says:

> Probably 100%ing [*Bayonetta*], 'cause it involves playing the game three times on increasingly hard difficulties and it was really hard, it was demanding. That was a cool gaming achievement that I like to remember. Pretty much if I get a really, really hard achievement, that tends to stand out.

Unlike competition, which more frequently becomes a stressful experience for players as discussed below, challenge can provide an opportunity for a sense of pride for male and female players across diverse game genres. These patterns of interest and preferences are present in online forums, as well. While competition is not a main focus, challenge comes up more frequently. Still, neither competition nor challenge are the main highlight for players. Much like the interviews, the majority of users discuss and focus most of their attention on other aspects of the game. Occasionally, however, players focus on having to overcome an exceedingly difficult game environment. As one example of a rare comment, with little support from other users, one person in GF1 says:

> I need to be constantly dying or I will lose interest in the game. Pretty quickly. I don't have any interest in the story or the characters or any of that "LOOK AT THAT PLOT TWIST!" I want to play to solve puzzles, have good gameplay and be challenged. I want to get my ass kicked trying to figure things out. If I don't need to solve something, I'm not going to enjoy the experience of the game. I don't want to deal with that. I want a rush, I want to have frustration and eventually get relief when I finally figure it out.

As an intermediary between desiring more challenge and wanting a fully relaxing experience,

few participants in forum discussion were between options. Another user in GF1 noted:

> I don't like when the final boss is way harder than the rest of the game. It makes me think less of the game overall. I want to finish the game, but I end up having to slam my head into a wall just getting frustrated. Most games just don't do difficulty well. A meatier enemy is just going to make the game longer. If the enemy is giving out a ton of damage, that comes off as cheap. I don't like to have to replay the same portion of a game over and over. I can't think of a lot of games that were good at making things difficult. *Dark Souls* was good, but didn't do it perfectly. Earlier than that… *Super Meat Boy?* Mostly it just becomes unnecessarily frustrating.

While this middle ground was rarer than the uncommon preference for more challenge, most

forum users reflected the same interests and desires for games to be less likely to produce

frustration. Challenge can more frequently become a deterrent if it is not balanced, causing

players to lose interest and find paths around these difficult portions. One highly supported

comment in GF1 represents the general sense that users of the forum had overall, saying:

> I don't feel satisfied when I play difficult games. If I'm playing something difficult, I'll use walkthroughs on the hard parts before even trying on my own. If a game is too hard, I won't finish it. I just feel frustrated when I have a difficult part of a game to get through. I don't feel like it's worth the time and effort to fight my way through it.

This sense of wanting to find the path of least resistance and to avoid frustration with

exceedingly difficult games or parts of games makes sense in the context of most players being

interested in using games as a method of relaxing. If the primary goal is to relax – either on one's

own or with friends – building frustration does not help individuals reach that goal. Similarly,

Cam does not want overly challenging content and mentions:

> I like doing really fun puzzles, because it's just like, I'm using my brain but in a different way and it's, it can be challenging, but it's still just as fun. So, until it gets to the kind of puzzle that I hate, then I'm like, "Uh… Game FAQs, tell me how to do this." [15]

When an overly challenging aspect of a game appears, it is easier to avoid reducing enjoyment by looking up methods of solving the problem or puzzle. While the majority of respondents did not enjoy too much challenge in their games, male respondents were more open to adjusting difficulty levels in subsequent playthroughs after learning the game and female respondents were more likely to want to avoid challenge and competition all together.

The aversion to competition, specifically, is less related to frustration and more related to concerns about interacting with other players and skill. These issues are mentioned several times by female respondents who feel potentially ill-equipped to play well. Ashley, for example, says:

> I don't really like competition. Unless I'm the best person. [laughs] Then I don't mind the competition. But yeah….I really do just prefer games where I'm playing by myself.… I do like the social aspects of a lot of mobile games, but mostly where you can trade things with other people. So, I like that part, but if I'm competing against other people, I'm not really drawn to that.

While women are slightly more focused on avoiding these aspects of play, players overall are more focused on wanting to consume video games similarly to other media. The main use of video games is typically to unwind at the end of a long or difficult day. Focusing on relaxation and escape for most players does not make challenge and competition immediately appealing, though players who are interested in fun that resembles work are more likely to be like the rare forum poster who cannot enjoy a game without extreme challenge. Looking to more diverse players shows that competition and social aspects are not necessarily the main reasons for play,

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[15] "Game FAQs" is an online resource with guides to help people through games.

particularly outside of those who are playing MMO-style games. While ranking can be important to players in particular circumstances, most video game play is to, in one way or another, relax and be entertained.

The Importance of Story

As touched on above, players are particularly interested in aspects of games that make them feel more invested or immersed. These qualities continue to call into question the importance of competition and social options as gendered preferences and primary motivators for video game play. Even for those who typically play MMO-style games, where story is frequently less obvious or less central to gameplay, the background and plot of the game is important or at least of interest. Story is a recurring theme for players, who often note how video games draw them in and can create an entertaining and emotional experience for them. Related to the enjoyment that comes from a good story, romance was also investigated to see how players feel about certain aspects of story and their ability as players to manipulate game content.

In terms of story, as mentioned above, players are largely interested in video games in the same way that they would be interested in any other kind of media. Many respondents liken their video gaming experience, particularly with RPGs, to watching a movie or reading a book. For these circumstances – where players are not playing to be social or to pass time – story is of particular importance. Players also tend to separate these game purposes when discussing their preferences and interests. For example, James discusses trying to explain his involvement with solo games:

> …the way I've explained it to my mom and, like, my grandparents who don't get my whole, my video gaming vibe, it's almost like an electronic book. I can lose my mind in a book; I can just read for days, be happy as can be. I can do the same thing in a video game. Going into this new world, this new story, where you can get enveloped in characters and their design and how deep they are and

what they're going through… it's no different to me than people who watch "Star Wars" and lose themselves in that universe or "Harry Potter."

The emphasis on story ties to both the players' view of games and a desire to relate it to other, seemingly different ways to entertain oneself. Video games, then, although they are interactive, are experienced largely as entertainment. This sense of video games as entertainment and a focus on story is highlighted in several ways by interviewees. Rather than placing an emphasis directly on social aspects of gaming or on the importance of ranking, players note that the story helps them get more invested in the game, can make or break their gaming experience, and is important for deciding what they do in-game.

Having a good story is a way for players to feel more invested in the events of a game. This provides extra motivation to complete game tasks and explore different areas of the game world. Rather than games existing purely for social purposes or for players to establish themselves in a ranking system based on skill, players are interested in being able to take in an interesting plot with fleshed out characters. In many cases, this is a way to bond with the characters in a game. As June says, "Story's important, I don't skip cut scenes. And in general, I like being able to foster some kind of personal connection to what's going on in the game." This sense of having a connection to the game and the characters in it is common. Having this connection to the story gives players a reason to continue playing and to come back to the game. As Zoe recalls:

> I think I just… stopped playing one day and just didn't come back to it. I don't really remember. I think I also started with the second one and it did the thing at the beginning, like, "Quick, do all of your choices from the first one." And I just… I was just like a little confused. Because I hadn't played the first one, I wasn't as invested in the story or the characters. Like… eh, maybe I'll play it later.

Not being aware of the overall story can make it difficult to feel like a game is worth playing.

Wanting to know what happens next in a story is also a major motivator for play and it can make

additional missions in the game seem less tedious. Although completing side quests – things that

a player can do aside from the main storyline – can earn you medals and achievements, this is

sometimes not enough motivation to be interested. For example, Todd mentions:

> The story is pretty great, it's not phenomenal, but it's pretty great.
> But even the side quests have really interesting characters. They feel
> like real, fully realized individuals and not just, you know, go collect
> ten rabbit pelts for me, kind of thing. It makes it fun to just keep
> exploring and it doesn't feel repetitive.

For some players, not having an interesting story or detailed side quests is not enough to

motivate them to do side quests at all. Instead, players may give up on the game or focus all of

their energy on the main storyline, with many considering finishing a story the real measurement

of completing a game, rather than achieving the most medals or earning the most achievements.

Related to this, the quality of the story is important enough to persuade someone to play,

influence them to recommend a game, or cause them to quit a game all together. Often, the story

can override other issues that frequently frustrate players, causing them to continue trying when

a game becomes difficult. Jamie, for instance, discusses an experience with a story that felt

particularly well done to her:

> …*Bioshock* has a really special place in my heart. It's just one of the
> most incredible stories that…just hits every mark. It had some
> fighting mechanic issues, where you have two weapons…. To
> switch between them was kind of clunky, like there would be a slight
> delay, but it's so overlookable because that story is so amazing…

The game's plot and characters, if done well, can outweigh other aspects of the game. It is

important to note that players emphasize genre as an important deciding factor for what they play

and why. If they are going to play a game to pass the time, without a great deal of time available

for immersion, then story becomes less important.

For these situations where players want to quickly pass the time, or for players who generally do not have time to dedicate to a longer game, story can be a negative attribute. They do not want to be drawn in and have to invest 40 or 50 hours into a game like an RPG, forgetting what has happened previously if they cannot get back quickly enough. Likewise, some players just want to feel like they are getting somewhere with the game quickly. This was more common among players without any interest in RPGs, which can be very time and story intensive. As Cam notes:

> I definitely think there are times when I miss something, sometimes the dialogue in RPGs, for instance, can get really, really in the way when it, you know… like Reddit or Imgur, there's the "too long; didn't read" statements, really that's all that's necessary in some of those situations, but I guess they want to just make the connections with other characters more personable and if that's, I mean… sometimes that's fun 'cause it's like playing a story, but in most cases, I'm playing a game to play a game, not watch a movie. [laughs] [16]

For players with little spare time or a desire to simply pass some time, story can be too much of an investment in their gameplay. While this is true for some players who tend to emphasize mobile or puzzle games as dominating their play time, story is still one of the most frequently cited reasons for playing a game, maintaining interest, and wanting to recommend a game to others. As Cam mentions, playing a game with a lot of story can often feel like watching a movie, an experience that most players are open to and interested in.

While genre matters in terms of what players select during specific times, story remains a large driving factor for many game preferences. Related to this interest in story, and particularly the drive to be more invested in a video game plot, players also overwhelmingly appreciate and

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[16] Imgur is an image sharing website.

enjoy the inclusion of romance options in gameplay. In some games, particularly RPG-style games, there is occasionally an inclusion of the option for players, as their character, to initiate a romantic bond with an NPC in the game. This gives players additional story options and another opportunity for investment in the game. There are a few common reasons for enjoying romance in video games. These range from enhancing the overall story to making the player more invested to creating more immersion or, for fewer players, offering different perks or achievements in-game.

The main reason that romance becomes interesting or compelling is that it adds to the story in the game. Being able to have an additional avenue for attachment or connection to the characters in a game gives the story more meaning for players. As part of this, players are able to feel like they are more immersed in the game and more invested in what happens. In-game choices and decisions can now weigh more heavily on their in-game relationship with an NPC, which will cause them to make decisions differently. As Paul puts it:

> [G]etting to sort of live with those characters for a long period of time, you get attached to them. And it's not just playing the characters, it's sort of becoming them. And you want them to be happy? I can't imagine myself spending that much time sort of inhabiting a character and then not wanting them to excel or not wanting them to live long and prosper.

Additionally, players often feel more immersed in the story with the addition of a romance option and romantic interactions. This is even true in situations where characters are not open to players' advances. June recalls:

> I find romance as a genre and concept really compelling, so for me, it's fun. I play games partially to get to know the characters and feel like I'm immersed in this world. I get really attached to characters, too, so being able to do it from a romantic standpoint is like even more fun. And like, I see that Mordin poster behind you and there's this part of the game where like you can hit on him and I was like,

"Oh my god, is this real, is this happening," and he shuts you down
and I was like, "This was even better than I could have hoped for."
[17]

Even in instances like this experience with Mordin, where a romance does not come to fruition,

players find the story element and possibility engaging. Overall, players are interested in

romance insofar as it provides more context, and content, to their stories. Few players note that

romance can sometimes feel poorly done or shoe-horned in, but in most instances, it is seen as

something that enhances the gaming experience by presenting more options for expanding the

direction of the game's story. In all, having an interesting and engaging plot, depending on the

player's interest and intent, can be more important than having the ability to play along with

friends or than having the ability to test their skills against others. Without specific genre desires

or a limit on time, story can override other aspects of a game, like competition or the ability to

connect with friends, as the primary reason to play.

Difficulties with Stress and Frustration

In addition to gaming preferences and interests come experiences of stress and

frustration. Although players view gaming as a hobby, a form of relaxation, and best when it is

easily enjoyed, there are a variety of stressors and frustrations that they typically encounter.

While men and women both feel stress or frustration during play, and often have similar sources

for these issues, women are much more likely to cite concerns about letting down a group in

multiplayer play. While there are sometimes different sources for these issues for men and

women, they tend to continue playing for similar reasons, including wanting to overcome the

problem, prove to themselves that they can do it, or to see what happens in the story.

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[17] Mordin is a character in *Mass Effect*.

Stress

Although most players discuss playing video games as a time to relax, the vast majority also feel stress when playing video games. Men and women both convey that there are many instances during which they have felt stress as a result of a variety of aspects of gameplay. Few mention that they have never experienced stress and tend to feel that way because they would quit playing a game if it was stressful. However, for the majority, various aspects of playing video games can become emotionally taxing.

The most frequently cited stressor, mentioned only by women in the sample, is having difficulty getting in-game achievements and finishing the game. When the game is too challenging to progress in, it can lead to enough stress that the game is no longer enjoyable and produces considerable unpleasant feelings. For Lilly, this experience is mostly related to difficulty with playing particular genres of game:

> [I]f I make the mistake of going on too high of a difficulty level or, when I was playing *Last of Us*, that was incredibly stressful and that was the only game that I never actually finished…. [most] of the tension comes from when I decide I'm going to play a survival type game. I think it's just not being able to punch out the target while having to actually stealth and be clever… I don't necessarily like not having the option… to beat the problem to death. I'm a very aggressive player.

Certain genres, due to experience or playstyle, are frequently mentioned as presenting more difficultly than others by these players. Because of this, players in these situations frequently experience enough stress to make them want to step away from the game. Often, this genre stress is related to scary games. While men do not mention this as a stressor, many women feel particularly strongly that scarier games, like those in the survival horror genre, are more stressful than most. As Ashley mentions:

> I mean, I don't like games that are scary. That stresses me out.

> [laughs] Like *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*, just like… nope. Can't.
> And I like scary stuff, it's just like… the interaction part of it, I think,
> is just really stressful for me. I can watch a scary movie and like,
> that's fine. I like that kind of scare. But me making the decision to
> open the door or walk down the hallway, I'm like, "Nuh uh."

Scary games are largely not enjoyable for many of the female respondents because of the stressful direct interactions in the game. Often, this is dealt with by either staying away from these games or handing off the controller to someone else, typically a male significant other, as discussed below.

The next most common stressor for female players is pressure from other players in multiplayer games. Frequently, respondents note that this is mainly perceived, rather than experienced. Issues like scheduling are cited as stressful because players are expected to be present at specific times, which can conflict with other aspects of their lives, like work, school, or social interests. Other worries are less tangible, but more deeply felt. Specifically, a fear of letting the other players down and not meeting other players' expectations is described as causing intense stress and anxiety, but many of these players note that their groups were typically very supportive overall and did not reprimand them for mistakes during raids. However, in some of these cases, especially in more competitive situations, other players would be direct in their disappointment. As Eva notes:

> Yeah, people are mean. People are so mean and they're so
> judgmental and I get so stressed out. Whether it's a more
> cooperative or more competitive game, I feel like people judge me
> or if it's a cooperative game, I'm gonna be letting my team down.
> Like when I was playing the MMO, that caused me a lot of stress.
> Like I cried real tears over really dumb stuff.

Related to this, several female respondents also bring up the threat of the "girl gamer" stereotype. The community itself can cause female players stress as well, leaving them to feel

that it is likely that they will be questioned about their interests and have pressure applied to

them that male players would not experience. This put many of them in a position to feel like

they need to either stay away from multiplayer situations or to play much better than other

players to earn respect. As June mentions:

> I don't want to embarrass myself. And there is a degree to which, because of the whole "girl gamer' like stereotype, I feel like this extra pressure. Where if I want to play a game and I'm not even good at that game, it'll reflect badly on girl gamers in general….it's been getting a lot better, but like [women] traditionally, have not been taken seriously and considered unskilled or basically not real gamers. And so, I don't want to reflect badly on the community of female gamers who are just individually sucking, when I know there are plenty of individual female gamers who don't.

This possibility of being questioned, challenged, and being seen as being bad at gaming because

of their gender causes stress in terms of pressure to perform well and be particularly skilled. It

also, however, causes stress related to being in gaming events or communities, including gaming

groups, conventions, and online discussion forums.

While men have less consensus about their sources of stress in gaming, they do report

some concerns. These issues are separate from the ones discussed by women, but men's stressors

also tend to be shared by women. Tied as the largest concerns for players more generally are

stressful interactions with other players and stress caused by needing to perform well in

competitive play. The issue of hostility from other players is covered in chapter three, but when

discussing stress, these problems are often intertwined. Hostile or harassing interactions with

other players are seen as pronounced and especially unpleasant in competitive scenarios. As Ben

points out:

> I really am not a huge fan of playing with strangers, usually, especially if I can hear them talking. The online communities for most games are just… absolutely awful. Especially first-person

shooters, competitive games… I really don't like playing those online. Also, gaming is kind of escapism for me. I like… that's like my me time. I don't necessarily want to share it.

More men mention having to deal with directly hostile players, the things other players say, and having to encounter people who are trolling, griefing, or flaming. This is not the extent of the stressful interactions that one might have with other players, however. Women, though they mention this specifically less frequently than men, are more likely to focus on other players stealing from them or ruining their playthrough. As Jessie recalls:

Oh, yeah, definitely. [laughs] … especially with the real time strategy games. It's been so much time… like with *Star Craft*, you can have a base and you spend so much time cultivating that base and then all the time constraints and then the other player can still be better than you and still crush you and it's just so frustrating and so stressful.

A few games are highlighted in these scenarios, including *Dark Souls* and *Day Z*, where players mention getting fairly far and collecting many items, only to have them taken by other players, leaving them to start over. While men and women alike mention that this creates an interesting uncertainty in-game, women often also note that having it happen is stressful and reduces their enjoyment of the game.

These sources of stress seem to contradict many of the players' points about using games as an escape or as a means of relaxation. However, players despite acknowledging stressors are still interested in playing and achieving in their games. Men and women also find different sources of stress, with women feeling more pressure socially than men. While men and women do agree on some causes of stress in gaming, women have additional stressors that often revolve around concerns of skill – whether they feel ill-equipped to deal with games where they cannot easily fight back, finish a game, or meet the expectations of other players.

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Continuing to Play

If players commonly feel stress as a result of playing video games, but see video games as a means of relaxation, why keep playing? Ultimately, players agree on a few reasons for continuing to play, regardless of their negative experiences. For the majority of respondents, playing despite stress is because they want to be able to overcome the problem. The unpleasant experience is worth it because there is a chance that they will be able to get passed the portions of the game that are causing them trouble. As one example, Jackie mentions that she continues to play:

> To prove that, you know, I won't let a game beat me. I don't always. If a game really stresses me out, I won't go back to it, but I haven't had a game that was so stressful that it just compelled me to stop playing it.

This feeling of needing to prove skill is commonly mentioned. In some cases, players note specifically that overcoming these challenges is evidence of somehow beating the game developer, but for most of the respondents it is more about proving their ability to themselves. These players are not likely to back down from a game and often put a great deal of time and effort into figuring out how to get passed a difficult game portion. Most of the players also want to solve these problems on their own, but many women and some men mention that they will seek advice from friends who have played the game or use online forums and guides to overcome the challenge.

While most players do want to prove that they can overcome obstacles, some cases are too difficult to continue with. The next most common response is actually that they will walk away from a game if it becomes too stressful. This is a more common response from women than from men. They note that if a game is stressful, then it is not going to be fun and thus is not in

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the spirit of why they play. For Lilly, for example:

> Yeah, pretty much. I'm not the kind of person who will just generally… like make herself hate her life for a video game. I'm pretty sure if I'm not… I just wanna have fun. And I thought I'd start having fun, but when I didn't, I was like, okay fine, I'll throw in the towel.

Many players have this sense and although many of them note experiencing stress, they convey that making themselves miserable to try to continue playing a game that they do not enjoy would not make sense to them. As they are there to enjoy themselves and have fun with a game, putting up with stress is not something that helps them achieve this goal of playing. This reflects feelings of success, discussed in chapter four. If the goal is to have fun and you can no longer have fun with a game, then you will not be able to be a successful player at that game.

While these are the major responses from players, there is one additional method of circumventing stress that several women brought up and that is also highlighted in female-oriented forums when discussing stressful gaming experiences. When recalling scary or difficult portions of a game, several women mentioned passing the controller to their male significant other to have them get passed this part of the game for them. As Mary notes:

> [W]ell typically I would just have Steven surpass those levels for me that gave me difficulties. So, if I could keep going beyond those points, I would. Just until I couldn't surpass it again and then I would have to hand over the controller. So just the moments that I was capable of doing, I would do.

In this way, stressful experiences with the game can be avoided and players can return specifically to portions of the game that are less of a problem for them. Additionally, this behavior is unique to female players and is not expressed by the majority. Most men and women are likely to return to figure out the specific aspects of the game that are becoming difficult or

walk away from a game altogether.

CONCLUSION

Often, men and women filter into different fields, activities, and interests based on gendered expectations and pressures (Bradley 2000; Charles & Bradley 2009; Correll 2005). Along with this tendency, there is also a social emphasis on and privileging of masculine fields and interests (Bielby & Baron 1986; Cohen & Huffman 2003; England 2010; Kane 2006). These tendencies have been documented in video game play, from gender differences in reason for playing to differences in what is being played (Brunner, Bennett, & Honey 1998; Glos & Goldin 1998; Taylor 2008; Yee 2008, 2017). While this has frequently been the case, different patterns are emerging for players, with gaming backgrounds and experiences showing a less segregated picture of paths to gaming, preferences in games, and experiences with gaming. Given that the interview respondents and online forum users largely entered gaming in the same ways and around the same ages, it is not surprising that their interests and preferences have also followed similar trajectories. With more women being noticed as part of the community, it is possible that as far as gaming preferences and habits are concerned, there has been a shift in what is seen as acceptable and appropriate for gamers to openly express an interest in and enjoy, reducing pressures to segregate in ways similar to other masculine-coded spaces.

First, concerning paths into gaming, it is likely that we will see an increase in the similarities between men and women's introductions to video games. While it is not a universally shared experience, many players note supplemental childhood access through their fathers' computers and games. With more women entering gaming and the average age of players consistently rising – with the average age of male players at 33 and the average age of female players at 37 – more parents of both genders will likely directly introduce their children,

rather than just purchasing a console as a gift or leaving an open computer (ESA 2016). Indeed, many parents already appear to be embracing watching their children play video games or playing together (ESA 2016). Similarly, the experience of women being introduced through a significant other is not widely shared by these current players.[18] While women are much more likely to discuss lacking a gaming social network than men, supporting findings from Taylor (2008) and Yee (2008), this also does not appear to be a barrier for women. Because men and women in the sample and on the forums were introduced in their childhoods and through their families, an interest in gaming formed early and greater access to information through the internet has made it easier to keep up the hobby.

Second, in terms of preferences, video games do not look like other culturally male-dominated areas of life. Interestingly, there seem to be fewer barriers for men to express interest in more feminine-coded aspects of gaming, to a certain point. Although specifically "pink" games are widely derided, they are avoided by both male and female players, and while mobile games are largely associated with female players, they have been gaining in popularity and have become more acceptable on a broad scale. Similarly, while FPS games have very few female players, certain titles are considered "not real games" by many players. Going against the tendency for more masculine interests and activities to be privileged, noted by much of the work on gender, players are much more likely to feel uncomfortable accepting games associated with more male players, that are seen as more masculine, and that sell very well. For example, *Call of Duty* is widely seen as less legitimate, though it is associated more with male players. With this in mind, and considering Yee's (2017) findings, player preference is likely guided by a variety of factors outside of gender or is less influenced by particular ideas about gender than what is seen

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[18] This introductory experience is noted by Yee (2006, 2008).

in other areas of life. There is also likely a tipping point with gender representation for acceptance or different constructions of identity among players of particular games and genres.

Because women who play video games regularly were introduced around the same time as men and because video games are more anonymous, this may lend to differences in gendered interests. If, with solo games in particular, there are fewer paths for women to be pushed out – or for men to be judged for having specific likes and dislikes in games – there are likely to be fewer instances for gendered differentiation. Although the remote nature of video games allows for less direct social interaction, there still seem to be some differences in preference, unless players are simply unwilling to mention what games they play. Though FPS and MMO games are cited as having few female players – between 10% and 34% – most online forum discussions show that women are frequently playing these games, discussing them, and seeking people to play with.[19]

For the majority of the users of the female-oriented forums, they also challenge many of the patterns established by previous research. They are broadly discussing the same major games that general forums discuss and are overall less drawn to more feminine or "pink" games than research and marketing lead us to believe. Interview respondents also support this, bringing up similar games and genres as their main interests. Players are also drawn to games for very similar reasons, particularly when looking at players who are drawn to specific genres. This creates a more complex picture of gender and its influence than what is seen in other masculine or male-dominated spaces. A major reason for this could be the option of anonymity, but is likely also linked to the typically early start to gaming that most players experience.

These findings overall appear to support the idea that it is possible that gaming has become a more equal space, with men and women being able to share interests and have similar

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[19] Differences in level of participation have been noted by Bryce and Rutter (2003), Campbell (2017), Nardi (2010), Nunneley (2014), Taylor (2006), and Yee (2005, 2008, 2017).

pathways into the hobby. There are few gender differences – far fewer than would be expected for other masculine areas – and individuals appear to emphasize very similar aspects of games. Regarding preferences and interests, it seems that more women being involved in gaming may have tipped the situation in favor of more open expression and less constrained options.

Third, while paths into gaming and preferences are similar, there is a major difference present in the reasons that people play. The majority of players view video games as an option for relaxation and getting away from everyday obligations, but men and women see this differently. This may be expected based on earlier research highlighting the importance of the social aspect of gaming for female players and the competitive aspect of gaming for male players (Brunner, Bennett, & Honey 1998; Glos & Goldin 1998). Contrary to previous work, however, women are more inclined toward solo games. This could, perhaps, be due to the lack of an early gaming friend network, but also appears to be due to defining time to relax differently from men. For women, the idea of relaxation often includes getting away from other people and being able to have time to themselves. While both men and women note a desire to be away from obligations and responsibilities, men consider these factors to be compatible with spending time with friends and more frequently prioritize gaming as a method of spending time together. Along similar lines, men are not inclined to emphasize competition as a main reason to play their games. While challenge can be important for feeling a sense of mastery for both male and female players, competition is rarely noted as a necessity.

Beyond these departures from expected gender patterns among players, there is also the unexpected emphasis on story by players. Continuing to undercut the expectation of competition and socialization as primary driving factors for play, video game players are inclined to mention story without being prompted. On forum discussions, as well as during interviews, players focus

on portions of a game's story that they found funny, interesting, compelling, or engrossing. This extended to romance for both male and female players who discuss their experiences with romance subplots in games in detail and express that it adds to the important story element of the gaming experience. This is a desire for investment that allows players to become more attached to the story and experience higher stakes, without focusing on potential stressors, like letting down teammates or encountering unfriendly behavior from other players.

Finally, although leisure activities are associated with reducing stress, video games can sometimes produce a great deal of stress for players. Nearly all players, despite viewing video games as an escape or tool for relaxation, have experienced stress and frustration that culminated in emotionally taxing experiences. Stress also presents another difference between male and female players. The sources of stress for women further reduce their likelihood of entering gaming spaces outside of hobby-based play.[20] This further complicates the picture of stress and frustration among players presented in previous work. It has been noted that players often find their experiences more stressful and less enjoyable when other players persistently break gaming rules by cheating or trolling (Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006). While other players frequently do cause stress – and male and female players both cite these problems as reasons to avoid multiplayer play – there is an emphasis on the pressures of team-based play, particularly for women. Because they are consistently worried about letting their team down and have frequent severe doubts about their skill, this likely discourages aspirations of achievement-based play. Related to this, women are unique in that they are more likely to rely on someone else to surpass difficult portions of a game. This could be linked to gendered ideas about "good" playing versus

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[20] For this project, hobby-based play is referring to gaming that is specifically used for leisure. Competitive play refers to play that is interested in ranking, but is not professional. Professional play refers to e-sports, tournaments, and sponsored play.

successful playing, discussed in chapter four.

Women's aversion to social aspects of gaming and their unique sources of stress also have potential implications for advancement that are missed by the "pipeline" conceptualization and the focus on hostile environments (Blickenstaff 2005; Etzkowitz, Kemelgor, & Uzzi 2000; Moss-Racusin et. al 2012; Valian 2007). Because women want to use video games to relax – and count social interactions as part something that they want to escape – this additionally limits options for competitive and professional involvement in video games. Having a gaming routine that avoids other players, even those who are friendly ties, leaves women less likely to be able to branch into competitive group play, play that focuses on ranking – including competitive play that can be achieved in single-player games, like speedrunning and tournaments – and likely less inclined to pursue game development.[21] Concerns about letting down teammates and lacking sufficient skill in games further compounds these issues and likely leaves women feeling too inadequate for play that is more competitive or professional or for involvement in gaming that they deem as requiring expertise, like what would be involved in development.

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[21] Speedrunning is a style of play that seeks to finish a game as quickly as possible, with a focus on achieving world records and placement in online ranking.

CHAPTER THREE:
Identity and Community Among Video Game Players

Research on video games and video game players has frequently focused on hostility, both between players and within the design of the games themselves (Ivory 2006; Kuzenkoff & Rose 2012; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory 2009). In particular, the harassment experienced by women has been highlighted as the most common experience for female players who play multiplayer online games. Kuzenkoff and Rose (2012) note that in their study, when female voices are present in online game chats, they are greeted with hostile and derogatory responses. If there are strong efforts aimed toward pushing women out of video games, how does identity get constructed for players, particularly if they feel that the community is exclusionary? With changes in who is playing – and is seen as playing – video games, there may also be changes in the experience of hostility in gaming spaces and a more accessible gaming identity for players. Rather than functioning as a masculine space that creates barriers for women to feel included, the gaming community may now be more equal in terms of full access to and participation in the hobby and broader community.

This chapter discusses gender in relation to both identity development and experiences with and perceptions of the gaming community. In terms of identity, players have a strained relationship with the term "gamer." While women tend to have an additional gendered experience with and perception of this identity, men and women are both uncertain about identifying as "gamers." While players in general take issue with the usefulness of the term and feel that there are negative connotations that come along with it, women frequently also feel like they are distanced from the term, despite their gaming habits. Beyond identity, the community also becomes complicated for players to relate to. Men and women both agree that women have more experiences with hostility and harassment in gaming, but when the topic of community

comes up, men and women both express a dislike of and desire to avoid these behaviors from fellow players. This dislike is enough that men and women frequently take similar approaches to avoid it, opting to stick to playing single-player games, play multiplayer only with people that they know, or mute voice chat options.

Identity and Community

Although scholarship published mainly in the 2000s suggested that male and female players have different pathways to video games, different motivations, and different styles of play, the previous chapter suggests that those differences may have narrowed and even disappeared. Bearing this in mind, how is identity – or access to a shared identity – influenced by gender? One might expect similar accessibility to a gamer identity for men and women because identity tends to be built on similarities that are considered salient among members of a particular group or category (Lamont & Molnar 2002; Owens, Robinson, & Smith-Lovin 2010).

Collective identity is built from agreed-upon definitions within a group based on these similarities to mark membership or non-membership (Jenkins 1996; Lamont & Molnar 2002). While self-definitions are necessary, it is also important for outsiders to understand and accept community boundaries – the things that either make you a part of the group or not (Cornell & Hartman 1997; Jenkins 1996; Lamont & Molnar 2002). Tied to the idea of community boundaries is a sense of collective existence. This collective mentality imparts a sense that individuals are compelled to act in the interest of the group (Tönnies [1887] 1988). The group identity, then, should supersede the individual's interests or differences. This is tied, somewhat, to the issue of masculine rules in masculine spaces, where women will be shut out if they do not support and follow the masculine rules that put them in a less desirable position than men (Kanter 1977; Kimmel 2008). Taken together, we should expect that a group identity – gamers –

is likely defined by masculine norms due to the association of gaming with men and could place pressure on women as a result. Are women, then, subject to a gamer identity constrained by masculine rules? Are they instead shut out from the identity completely? Or does a broader gamer identity allow for women and men to define and acquire it in similar ways?

However, while commonalities and shared meaning are integral to building a shared identity, there may be additional difficulties for establishing a true group identity for those who play video games. As part of the larger scope of player identity, one needs to keep in mind the pervasive, though inaccurate, and enduring stereotype of what a player is, typically focusing on social isolation (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell 2003; Khanolhar & McLean 2012; Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006). Largely, stereotypes of video game players also focus on teenage boys (Dickey 2006; Ivory 2006; Kimmel 2008; Shaw 2014; Taylor 2006; Thornham 2011). Despite these stereotypes not holding true for player demographics, there is an apparent influence on women in terms of how they relate to playing video games. In terms of gaming, women often hesitate to identify as gamers at all (Taylor 2006). It is also important to note, however, that the studies considering how women relate to gaming are frequently nearing, if not over, a decade old. Identity and other gaming-related experiences are a moving target, especially recalling that women are the fastest-growing demographic of video game players (ESA 2016; Yee 2017). While more women take part in video games as a hobby – and as chapter two highlights, have more overlap with men in terms of preferences and habits – is comfort with the gamer label also changing?

Further, Cassell and Jenkins (1998), Carr (2006), and Dillon (2006) note that women who play video games are inclined to feel obligated to express preferences or ideas as part of power dynamics that inherently favor men in gaming spaces. As a result, when discussing their gaming

habits, girls and women are inclined to hedge their personal preferences. For instance, Pelleiter (2008) finds that among students, the tendency to discuss their gaming habits in a gendered way is strong. Male and female students tend to establish gendered interests in games, until probed further, when differences in interest dissipate. For example, when asked about their favorite games, girls were more likely to mention *The Sims*, a franchise typically associated with female players and thus a safer choice to associate with, but later added *Grand Theft Auto* as a game they were familiar with and would consider a favorite (Dillon 2006; Pelleiter 2008).

Thornham (2011) points out that these behaviors appear to be an active negotiation for female gamers who consistently need to navigate the acceptable and unacceptable habits and social circumstances within gaming based on their gender. This negotiation is trying to establish a balance between what female players perceive as "acceptable" for them to do in terms of gaming habits and preferences. Often this results in discussing certain games over others, despite their actual interests and preferences, to keep with what is felt to be acceptable for their gender (Dillon 2006; Pelleiter 2008; Thornham 2011).

However, while there are some hesitations for female players, the topic of identity among gamers is complex and there is still a tendency toward a community identification regardless of gender in some circumstances. Pearce (2011) suggests that in multiplayer game spaces, individual identity is heavily tied to group identity. Players frequently use "we" to describe activities, interests, and preferences. Taylor (2006) has also observed physical world meetups for people who play *EverQuest* online where players affiliate themselves with and identify themselves based on their server and go by their character names. This type of identification is linked more closely with the game itself, rather than a broader gaming community identity.

Because gaming is still often seen as a masculine space, it is likely that aspects of identity

and community behavior operate in similar ways to other masculine spaces, from occupations to leisure activities. If this is the case, then a gaming identity should also be subject to masculine expectations. However, due to the diversity of games and their players, it is possible that accessibility of identity is different depending on the type of game and the community associated with it. While guilds tend to have a strong collective identity, this many not be the case for overall gamer identity due to its association with masculinity.

The first possibility when it comes to identity, then, is that there is a shared collective identity among gamers generally, or at least in terms of genre, where they can relate to one another and use common definitions to understand their place in their hobby. The second possibility is that women feel like they cannot relate to or attain a gamer identity because of stereotypes or existing masculine rules in the hobby. Finally, a third possibility is that women, despite being a large proportion of the audience for video games, feel pressure to negotiate their identity and hedge it by avoiding linking themselves to games or genres that seem inappropriate.

FINDINGS

Identity is something that video game players feel conflicted about. Because video games and their players are so diverse, the label "gamer" largely feels empty as a term. Likewise, hostility in gaming seems to be less straightforward than in other more numerically male-dominated spaces. Unlike what is observed in other spaces, with those present often reinforcing hostile behavior, male and female players often both take measures to avoid these types of interactions. Players are largely tired of the climate of harassment toward women playing video games, noting that things are beginning to get better despite any remaining hostile or aggressive interactions.

Who is a Gamer?

With most players beginning this hobby early in their lives, and with an overall awareness of a "gaming community," identity should be an important aspect of players' experiences. Sentiments about who can be or is a gamer have shifted for many players and while the gamer identity and label has always been somewhat contentious, in August 2014, it became especially difficult for video game players to reconcile their feelings about the term. During this time, GamerGate was ramping up – an online movement that was outwardly about dissatisfaction with video game journalism, but that was found to mostly be focused on harassing women with ties to video games, based on an analysis of Tweets using the hashtag.[22] During this time on the forums, opinions were divisive. Female-oriented forums were focused on harassment behaviors in the gaming community and that were ultimately being agitated by the movement. General forums were divided in terms of opinion, but changed over time.

Initially, the general forums were widely supportive of GamerGate and critical of women who were involved and wanted to be involved with video games in a variety of capacities, from playing to developing to critiquing. Over a span of about six months, however, general forum opinions began to shift, with more opinions reflecting the sentiment that including more women in gaming is a positive thing and that the gaming community should be more open. Much of the focus on this has dissipated in the general forums, but the topic of gendered harassment and participation still frequently appears in the female-oriented forum discussions.

Beyond GamerGate and the presence of resistance in the gaming community toward accepting women, there are also ideas present that introduce additional barriers to adopting the "gamer" identity. The idea of "casual" gaming is still somewhat divided among video game

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[22] Wofford (2014)

players. For example, this topic often comes up in online forums, with a sentiment that those who play less seriously or more casually are not "real" gamers. On these forums, playing more casually can be a disqualifying factor. In the general forums, people who do not spend a great deal of time playing games, play indie titles rather than AAA titles, or who only play mobile games are not easily considered true gamers in many cases.[23] This, much like the views on women in the gaming community after GamerGate, has been shifting as well, but not as substantially.

For the female-oriented forums, on the other hand, participants are much more open to diverse types of video game players and games. These sentiments reflect an idea that it is possible to be a legitimate video game player if you enjoy few games, do not have much time to play, or are partial to playing on mobile. This feeling is also prevalent among interviewees, as well. Regardless of gender, there has been a shift toward more accepting views on who is or can be a gamer. Most of the answers are very similar to Gareth, who has a broad view on this:

> I mean nowadays, it represents anyone who engages in video gaming, computer gaming…. But, yeah, like, myself? I'd absolutely call myself a gamer…. You know, I would just say gamers in the official sense, my view of them, is someone, yeah, who engages in activities that aren't athletic…. I mean, my mom could pick up her phone and download a single mobile game and that makes her a gamer. So, yeah, I'm very broad in that. If you're playing a game of any kind, that makes you a gamer…

There is a sense that the gaming community is still mostly closed off, with players who accept a broader definition of "gamer" noting that they have a fairly open view, implying a comparison to a less accepting general community. While these players frequently compare themselves to an imagined community stance, this is likely more of a stereotype than a descriptor of the broad

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[23] Indie games are produced by smaller companies or independent developers, while AAA games are produced by major video game companies and tend to be the most well-known and widely purchased.

opinion of video game players. While there are certainly those who continue to hold specific

views of who is or is not a "gamer," forum conversations since GamerGate have shown a shift in

broad opinion, with more people increasingly becoming interested in indie and mobile games

and supporting women becoming involved with gaming as a hobby and industry.

The majority of respondents feel that it is not necessary to shut particular people out

because they play certain games or stick to a specific platform for gaming, from console to

mobile. The main reason that their views are so broad is related to the fact that they see gaming

as so accessible now that it does not make sense to maintain a tight hold on the label. Indeed, the

perception is that "most people" are playing video games in some form now, from their

grandparents to young children in their families. Given this reality, the idea of what gaming is

and who is a gamer has had to shift. However, this has also led to a sense that an overall gamer

identity is not useful.

As one example, Joanne feels like the concept of using the term is not as helpful as it

used to be:

> …the majority of people game now. Just from including phone apps to *Farmville* on Facebook. I feel like a lot of people play games. So to say you're a gamer or to say someone's a gamer, it's like… well, what does that mean? Does that mean they own a PlayStation or does that mean they play *Pokémon Go*?[24] I feel like it isn't as much of a descriptor as people make it out to be.

The feeling that because so many people are now playing some form of video games and that

gaming is now so diverse as a hobby, it is not useful to continue thinking of it in terms of a stable

identity, is also frequently brought up in interviews. For many, as the gaming climate changes

and more people become involved, it is not as meaningful to identify as a gamer. Joanne further

echoes some of these feelings, saying that:

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[24] A mobile-only game.

Yeah, it doesn't give you any information. Like… if you say, "Oh yeah, I'm a gamer," it's like, "Okay, cool, what games?" Or like, "I'm a gamer, I play board games," or "I play *Pokémon Go* or *Plants vs. Zombies* on my phone," okay. I just don't feel like it says much.[25]

The increasing diversity in the gaming community has presented two outcomes: a shift toward more acceptance of people into the community and a movement away from strong identification. As the variety of games and gaming platforms proliferates, along with the audience consuming them, single games or genres can become more useful for understanding where players stand in relation to one another. The question is no longer "Are you a gamer?" but "What kind of gamer are you?"

Still, while these shifts have been present and felt by video game players, because many of these changes are recently gaining attention and traction, there continue to be those who have more specific conceptualizations of what a gamer is or should be when asked more directly. Even Joanne, who said that she does not think that "gamer" is useful as a term to understand someone's habits, has a complicated view of what would make someone a gamer:

I think my boyfriend is a gamer because, like, he's into it. He keeps up with it, he has a full-on gaming computer that he built and he buys the new consoles and he reads about what new games are coming out and he knows about stuff …. And he knows one guy who just plays MMOs. He's a gamer, too, because he plays games, but he doesn't keep up with anything, he just plays MMOs. I don't know… it's like people who read books…. It's like… yeah, a lot of people do that. What kinds of books?

While players express a sense that there are a variety of ways to enjoy games or "be a gamer," occasionally particular ideas do make their way into these definitions. The idea of monetary, time, or interest commitment come up when interviewees are asked directly if there are any

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[25] *Plants vs. Zombies* is a single-player defense video game available on mobile, as well as other platforms.

parameters or requirements that they feel are applicable, but this is only true in about one-third of the cases.

However, although legitimacy is seen as being easier to achieve at this point, the forum users and some respondents are hesitant to promote or adopt a specifically gamer identity. Although fewer individuals convey these feelings, there are some who hold on to a specific set of criteria. One thing that is mentioned frequently by these players is the type of game. For several interviewees, games like *Call of Duty* or sports games do not qualify someone. In part, this has more to do with a perceived disjuncture between identities. For many of the interviewees, "gamer" and "geek" identities are tightly intertwined and there is an association with these types of games with "jocks," who are seen as not belonging in or being unwelcome in "geek" spaces.

Beyond clashing identities, however, these players expect more commitment to video games, presenting some resistance against more "casual" gamers, even if they are playing well-known games. For those like James, there is an inability to necessarily immediately accept someone as a fellow gamer. He notes:

> If I meet somebody who says they like to play a lot of video games, and they just tell me that they play the run of the mill generic games, I'm kinda like, "You just buy whatever's popular. You don't actually look into games." And if you ask what their favorite game is and they say they like… *Call of Duty* is their favorite game. Like there's no story development in *Call of Duty*, there's no character development, it's just a game made specifically to shoot people….If you tell me your favorite game is *Mass Effect*, that's a game you gotta put some time into to actually play….If they tell me their favorite game is *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, you know, that game came out in 2002. They've probably been playing games for a while…

Players who identify more heavily with gaming and consider it a large part of their identity are more likely to feel like they need to include caveats in terms of who can claim the label of gamer. Likewise, on female-oriented forums, issues of who is or is not a gamer can sometimes

reflect similar sentiments. Although they tend to get less support than comments discussing

being on the receiving end of negative experiences where their legitimacy is questioned, users of

these forums sometimes admit that they have a difficult time not shaming other people's gaming

habits. As one example, a user mentions that:

> I have a hard time not expecting more of other gamers, but when I think that, I'm thinking "*doesn't game much*" is "*not a gamer like me.*" I usually dismiss people play sports games or just buy *Call of Duty* when it comes out or had *Skyrim* as their first RPG. It's mostly because I wouldn't have much to talk about with these people.
> It's probably the same thing for people who are really into film. If someone tells you they love movies and they only watch superhero movies or Tarantino, it's good that they have fun, but you probably can't really talk to them about movies.

For players like this, when people began playing, time spent playing, or games played continue

to have an important role in classifying players. There are clear things that do and do not fall into

being a gamer. Interestingly, these sentiments do not contain gendered requirements or attributes,

aside from disparaging games that are tied more closely to men who are seen as being more

traditionally masculine.

Defining certain behaviors as acceptable for gamers can extend into more extensive

boundary creation. The term "filthy casual" comes up more frequently in the forums, and

specifically the general forums, but one volunteer from the most active female-oriented gaming

forum expressed one of these more intense, but increasingly less common sentiments. While the

term is often used in a tongue-in-cheek way, it highlights behaviors that players do not consider

legitimate. For Elaine, the use of this term came from the urge to protect the gamer label during

an interaction with a coworker:

> You know, it's definitely a label that I have used for myself. I feel like it's not as socially unacceptable as it was, 5, maybe 10 years ago. But then, like, just today at work, I kind of got on someone's

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> case….She was telling me about something her son was doing on his Xbox and I was like, "Oh my gosh, that makes him a filthy casual." And then I was like… oh… did I just say that out loud? She had no idea how derogatory it was. But it's definitely a label that I assume, but a lot of ego can go into it, which I don't… I mean, obviously it happened to me today when I called this 12-year-old a filthy casual, you know, way to be a grown up, I guess….Like… I'm a gamer, I play games on my phone. That's not real gaming! Rah rah rah. So, yeah, I guess I'm a little conflicted about it.

It is rare for players to identify so strongly with the label, but in the instances that they do, they are much more likely to contend that there are clear behaviors that do or do not qualify people to be gamers. Mobile gaming, for instance, is one of the lingering boundaries for many gamers to protect their identity. Although the majority of players are more open and accepting, many on the gaming forums still express a sense that mobile games are not "true" games. When the general forums encounter discussions about the growing proportion of female gamers, many comments and critiques still quickly note that these women may just be playing mobile games and therefore do not count.

Further, while some players like Elaine are able to defend and embrace their gamer identity, it is more common for players to have a difficult time seeing the term as anything but negative. This is mentioned both in interviews, regardless of gender, and discussions on the female-oriented forums, with players expressing a more generally critical view of the term "gamer." For example, Eva quickly conveys her distaste for the label:

> I don't really like it, to be honest with you…. It just…really bad things have been tied to the word gamer. Like with the whole GamerGate thing, I feel like people just view the word gamer in a different light now. Like they're all misogynistic bastards.

There is an awareness in the community that the events of GamerGate may have tainted the identity, leaving gamers to be seen as more problematic than as a group of people who are

simply passionate about a hobby. Similarly, men are also uncomfortable with the idea of labeling themselves, mainly due to perceived ideas held by society related to video game players. Ben shares some of Eva's concerns and mentions:

> I mean… I am… I am clearly a gamer. I play constantly. But I don't like the label…. I think it's a lot about external perceptions. So many people have preconceived notions about what that label means and I don't feel like that accurately represents who I am as a person who plays video games.

There is a sense that the general public continues to hold stereotypical views of gamers, even without the influence of GamerGate. Several players still feel that many people believe that a gamer is an overweight, socially inept man, in addition to having concerns about gaming being associated with misogyny. Respondents who call up this image often feel that people would be surprised to learn about their gaming habits, but are also not enthusiastic about taking up the label of "gamer" for themselves. This has created, in some ways, more equality in terms of a gaming identity, with the playing field becoming more level through players wanting to distance themselves from the broad "gamer" title.

As events like GamerGate have shifted the discussion of the gaming community and its treatment of women front and center, player perceptions have started to change. Not only has the general community become increasingly supportive – at least outwardly – of women in gaming, players have also become much more hesitant about adopting a general gamer identity. This combined with a sense that "gamer" does not hold much explanatory or defining power has left the identity unstable and seen as anything from potentially tied to social stigma to descriptively useless.

Although many of the interviewees struggle with the idea of a gamer identity, forum users often feel left out of the ability to attain the identity of gamer. Many posts regarding the

term "gamer" on the female-oriented forums focus on women's difficult experiences in the

gaming community with regard to being seen as legitimate. For the most active forum, in the last

year, 18 out of 50 top posts mention problems experienced with trying to feel accepted as a true

gamer. Often, these examples highlight being told that they are not playing "real" games or are

not skilled enough at playing video games. While many forum users note having problems with

feeling welcomed in the community, most responses are critical of the boundaries built around

the gaming identity. Largely, it appears that this is due to being more open to diverse types of

players, acknowledging that the hobby is meant to be enjoyable for participants, and having

gaming habits that do not line up with the less open views of what gaming should be.

As one example, in response to a main post about a woman's gamer status being

questioned by a male friend, one user, with 184 positive votes, points out:

> I don't know why some guys feel like they have to push people out
> of playing video games because they aren't a "gamer" unless they
> stick to "hardcore" games for nine hours every day. I think it's good
> that more people are playing video games and more women being
> involved is only making gaming better. As long as you're happy,
> that's the most important thing to worry about since you're the
> person who you need to deal with 24/7.

While women have experienced – or worry about potentially experiencing – men questioning

their status as gamers, the tendency to question gaming habits is not uniquely expressed by men

toward women. As noted above, female players also have a tendency to express rigid ideas about

who can and cannot be a gamer, particularly in comparison to their own gaming habits. The

comment highlighted here is also in response to a main forum post where a woman is discussing

a male friend dismissing her as a gamer, but comparing her to a female gamer that he sees as

more skilled.

The idea of who is or is not a gamer has been changing and it appears that gender has less

influence now than it perhaps once had. Because many aspects of the gaming community are continuing to evolve, there is some division among video game players on the issue. Some feel dedicated to and protective of the identity, while many others feel that the label of "gamer" does not provide a good sense of how a person plays. For most players, they have begun to adjust to the changes in the gaming audience and availability of gaming options by moving away from these strict conceptualizations in favor of a more open and vague definition of who can or cannot be a gamer. As gaming demographics continue to shift and more people play games in more ways, the definitions and understandings will continue to move in this less structured direction.

It is interesting to note, however, that in the posts that highlight gatekeeping behaviors by male video game players, the women posting about the problem sometimes note that they are considered less of a gamer in comparison to other women who fit the accusing party's definition more accurately. There is clearly a gendered component, with women noting that they are often questioned more, believed less, and generally feel like they are not welcome, but the decreasing number of players who still place importance on identity also draw the line for attaining the gamer identity at games including *Call of Duty* and sports games, which are more often associated with male players, yet are broadly seen as not counting.

The gaming identity is complex and creates difficulties for players. In recent years, many players have begun to distance themselves from the term more, due to discomfort with aspects of the identity and perceptions that they believe people have about the term from lingering stereotypes or because of events like GamerGate. With the increasing number of people who play video games, and an increased tendency to play on a variety of devices, it is becoming more difficult for players to feel like a "gamer" identity is meaningful. While they mostly believe it is positive that more people can be included under the banner, it has left many feeling like they do

not know whether or not they can fully relate to someone who calls themselves a gamer. Because of these changes in the gaming community and culture, it has become easier for one to adopt the label of gamer, while also creating more confusion about what significance that identifier has.

Despite shifts toward a more open environment, there are more aspects to gatekeeping within the community for those who maintain a strong gamer identity than are often recognized. Women have been increasingly accepted, though there is still a stigma associated with mobile games, which many players still tie to female video game players. But outside of women's place in the community, more masculine games are also cause for players to suggest that perhaps these types of players do not count. For these cases, players are perceived as *too* masculine to fit in, with the common association being with "jocks" who bullied the average gamer and have now infiltrated their hobby.

Because of the increasing diversity among video game players, it has become more difficult for the majority of players to feel like they relate to and connect with one another on a broad identity level. It is likely that the identity has become more fractured and is re-settling as understandings of gaming adjust to the changing demographics and styles of gameplay. Because of this and the events of GamerGate, although video game players often refer to a gaming community at large, more people are hesitant to cite specific criteria or even identify as gamers themselves. Seemingly more salient now is an identity linked to particular genres, specific games, or specific platforms. There is an idea of a "PC Master Race," which is largely tongue-in-cheek, but holds that PC gaming is superior to console gaming. Alternatively, there are dedicated fans of PlayStation, Xbox, or Nintendo who privilege these consoles and their games above other options for gaming. There is some support for this more specific gaming identity in the literature and the data in this project indicates a loss of broader identity.

Toxicity, Harassment, and Unpleasant Behavior in the Community

As noted in the previous chapter, players have reservations about experiencing video games with other people. Much of the reason for this has to do with concerns over, or experiences with, hostility or unpleasant behaviors. Approximately one-third of respondents, regardless of gender, note "toxicity" in the gaming community, whether they refer to the word directly or mention generally harassing or hostile behaviors from other players. Most respondents with experience playing multiplayer format games dislike the environment that players outside of their own friend groups often create in the game. The sources of toxicity are often interpreted and discussed in similar ways by both men and women in interviews. As an example, Paul recalls playing *League of Legends* and mentions:

> Yeah, they're just… the smallest mistake, everybody will jump on you and go, "That's a noob mistake" or "You're a scrub loser." [T]here's never an assumption that there's a reason or a valid reason for someone not being good at a game. It's always just the jump to conclusion is, "Well you just suck and you're the worst person ever and you should probably just get off the internet and kill yourself." It's difficult to find people who are more moderate in terms of their temperament. 'Cause for a game that's social… it doesn't lend itself well to making players feel like they want to.

Several players of multiplayer games bring up hostility toward new, inexperienced, or unskilled players. Toxicity is often tied to this problem of new players not being allowed to learn, but is also linked to other behaviors of generally discouraging others from improving their skills. Other common concerns include general hostilities or unpleasantness with seemingly no cause. James, for example, mentions how much he dislikes many aspects of multiplayer games, even though they are his preference:

> I dislike that people seem to think that because they're on the internet, they can just say and do, mostly say, whatever they want to somebody. They just have this idea in their head that…they can say racist, sexist, homophobic comments to people because there are no

> repercussions to it….it takes away from a team-based game that I
> can't talk to my teammates because I had to mute them to shut them
> up. I definitely hate that aspect of it.

While many respondents are concerned with toxicity in games and the gaming community, few

mention the difficulties presented by trying to address or solve the problem. Many of them tie

hostile and harassing interactions to the anonymous nature of video game play and most players

– both in interviews and online forum discussions – seem to accept hostility as a part of gaming.

Because it is highly normalized, players often note that they have sequestered themselves to solo

gaming not only because they want to enjoy games alone, but also because even if they were to

play with others, they feel at risk of being harassed.

Despite a sense that this is part of the game experience and that reporting may not matter,

there is some movement on the side of development toward dealing with player hostility. Online

forum discussions about *Overwatch* bring up a feature to deal with common gloating harassment

from other players. Although this does not solve broader problems with harassment or hostility,

such as the use of slurs or private messaging threats, many players are happy with Blizzard's

decision to incorporate this feature. This topic came up among interviewees as well and June was

particularly pleased:

> I dislike when people are rude. Rude for no good reason. There's no
> need to do that. I'm going to talk about *Overwatch*. Blizzard
> implemented this fantastic feature where if someone types in "gg
> ez" [laughs] it automatically sends an additional message that like,
> is in a different font color, but it's sent by the same character, that
> says, "I'm having a really hard time in life right now, and I'm taking
> out my insecurity on other people." [Laughs] And like, when that
> feature got implemented, the internet blew up, obviously, and people
> were like, "Yeeesss." But yeah, when people are rude and they're
> like, "This character sucked," or "So and so didn't carry the team at
> all," like, there's just no need for that rudeness. [26]

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[26] "GG EZ" means "Good Game, Easy Win"

While developers are beginning to catch up in terms of addressing some of the antagonistic interactions that players experience, the sense that toxicity and hostility are engrained in online play is strong. Although games like *Overwatch* are attracting a wide variety of players and addressing some community concerns over toxicity, many players note that other games are particularly bad in terms of how players treat one another. Most players, in interviews and online forum posts, point to *League of Legends (LoL)* as especially toxic and unpleasant to deal with, for example. Specifically, the majority of players highlight competition as a major problem and the most likely cause of these interactions. While a few players note hostility in MMOs, Eva suggests that:

> [I]n MMOs, I feel like it's a more supportive environment, even though there are still going to be tensions and disagreements and arguments because we're people and that's just what we do…since we're all working toward a common goal in MMOs…everyone has to pull their weight, everyone really has to work together, I feel like that's a more positive environment. Versus like coming in for a first-person shooter or something, a competitive game, where it's just random people, so it's like, "Okay, I'm never gonna see these people again, let me call them some terrible name because they're doing badly or because I'm a douchebag." I dunno [laughs].

While many note that competition is a likely factor, respondents struggle to define what exactly creates these hostilities in particular games. Some suggest that it may be more common in free-to-play games because of broader access, some mention that MMOs may be rife with them because you have to communicate a great deal, but most consider competition to be the primary cause. However, hostilities can also happen in circumstances where players know one another. The only player to mention that she trolled fellow players also notes that it is likely due to frustrations with the game or one's own performance. Jane says:

> Yeah, I think that people, at least my friends, tend to get frustrated at themselves over other people. And a lot of us have a lot of

difficulty dealing with self-frustration, so it'll come out in anger to other people, which then just muddies up the atmosphere.

Stress caused by pressure to perform in a group may result in hostile interactions, specifically when players are working closely with one another. Similarly, Gareth, who has led groups in multiplayer games as well, reveals that he becomes frustrated with other players easily. Like Jane, Gareth notes that the primary thing he dislikes about multiplayer games is:

The fact that others can fail you or not live up to your expectations [laughs]. For me, personally, when you are playing a more competitive game, it is an investment of time and you do take it more seriously and so of course if someone else doesn't seem to be taking it as seriously as you are or simply is not as skilled or, you know, as knowledgeable about the game as you may be, it can feel like you're wasting your time or they're wasting your time.

Although these players also describe hostility in gaming as unpleasant and undesirable, they offer a look from the other side of the interaction in a particular instance. These cases of negative interactions are due to expectations placed on other players in the group and frustrations when the game is not running smoothly. If these frustrations occur among players familiar with each other, the perceived high stakes of competitive play could conceivably cause more hostility when anonymity or pseudonymity are added. Still, even these players note that specific games are much more likely to have high amounts of toxicity and hostility.

Even though respondents consider unpleasant interactions to be a universal experience in gaming, particularly with certain types of online multiplayer games, the majority of respondents also believe that women have unique experiences with hostility and harassment in gaming. In terms of interviews, gender relations are seen as strained, with women being subjected to different treatment and harassment for being female. One respondent, Greg, discussed his female friend's concerns with playing a multiplayer game together:

I know… a while back, I was playing *League* [*of Legends*] with a

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> friend for the first time and after the game, she had said, "Thank you for not using 'she' as my pronoun to let them know that I was a woman," because she thought that it would make them treat her differently. Whether that be positively or… I wouldn't say any of it's positive… like giving stuff to a girl in a game just because she's a girl isn't positive either.

Female players often experience – or at least expect to experience – different treatment, whether it is in the form of aggression or seeming support. Many players discuss this dichotomy of treatment. Hostilities typically range from threats and aggression to sexual comments to male players explaining how to play the game and giving away items. Regina had an experience tied to the last category while playing *Day Z*, a game in which players can randomly encounter each other and work together or against one another:

> That guy or whatever that was like, "Are you a girl?" he's like, "Here, let me show you how to do this," or "Here, let me show you how to play the game." It's like, well, I've been playing the game longer than you have, just because, one, you're way young….Just the way he would talk about how to play the game, he made it seem like I didn't know what I was doing. Or I didn't know what I was talking about. So, he was like, "Here, this is what you have to do to put things in your inventory." It's like… that is the most basic thing that you can do in a game ever. Like if you play any type of game, you know how to use your freakin' inventory. In fact, it's the first thing you do.

This kind of experience is more commonly discussed in forum posts, but several female respondents say that these concerns about being interrogated about their knowledge or otherwise harassed have made them dislike the gaming community and has discouraged them from taking part in many multiplayer games or physical world events for their hobby. There is a sense of being considered outsiders – women often feel like they are seen as possibly not knowing enough to get by in game worlds or faking their way through an interest in video games, with the thought that they are doing this to try to impress men.

Aside from these interactions, sexualization of female players is also a concern. Lauren mentions her own experiences and what she has seen happen to popular internet gaming personalities:

> [T]he way that I'm treated as a girl who plays games is different. 'Cause like if you tell a guy you play games they'd be like "Oh that's hot." And, I think her name's Dodger, she does like YouTube videos where she plays games, most comments are going to be about her attractiveness not about her ability to play video games…

Several respondents and many online forum users note that many of these experiences are not unique to gaming, but exist in wider geek culture. Women may be questioned extensively about their experiences and knowledge or are often accused of being "fake" geek or gamer girls to try to get boyfriends who are interested in these hobbies. These comments can extend into gatekeeping even in groups of players who know one another. In an instance of playing *Final Fantasy XIV*, Eva encountered many hostile gendered comments from someone in her own guild. She recalls:

> Yeah. [M]e being a female and then watching guys play video games… there's more guys playing video games than girls from what I've seen. And the way that Ben gets treated over voice chat and then the way I get treated, especially because I'm a girl, is different. Sometimes better, like I'll get special treatment, people will give me stuff for no apparent reason. Sometimes it'll be worse, like the guy that said I shouldn't be playing video games, I should just be like giving Ben blow jobs. All the time.

In this case, Eva and Ben both discuss this member of their guild and his comments, but note that the guild leader did not do anything to address Eva's discomfort. The group needed a skilled player and the person in question was very good at his role in the game. The sense, according to Ben, was that he and his wife could be replaced, but the skilled player could not. Though this is the only such instance discussed by respondents, it is possible that masculine norms can be

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maintained in this way in gaming spaces. When a player is perceived as skilled, guild leaders for more competitive groups may allow them to continue playing while making other players uncomfortable. However, Ben and Eva did leave that guild because they found the behavior unacceptable.

While players often discuss common gendered hostility and have a sense that existing in the gaming community is more difficult for female players, most interviewees and many forum users have not directly seen or experienced this kind of behavior. This is also somewhat reflected in online forum discussions, with regular posts in the female-centric forums being about online harassment due to gender, but with many commenters noting that they had never experienced interactions like these themselves.

In part, this disjuncture may be due to the spread of information about hostile treatment. With more knowledge of the experiences of others, female players are able to make the decision to either avoid multiplayer format games all together or to play only with friends, as indicated by most of the female interviewees who play multiplayer games. Having an understanding of the gaming community as openly hostile toward women provides female players an opportunity to shield themselves against these behaviors and take precautions to protect themselves. As one example of this, Moira, a transgender volunteer from the internet forums mentions her own experiences with multiplayer games and the steps it has caused her to take:

> I've had people be nicer to me because I'm a girl than before.…But generally, I think it's a bit more negative. But I tried to avoid the sort of games where that comes up. Like I don't play *Counter Strike*. I don't play *League of Legends*. Because they're very competitive and I really don't enjoy them and because, you know, it's kind of toxic. And at the same time, you can kind of get hit with things with benign sexism. Like, I've had more people try to be nicer to me since… you get bigger highs and you get bigger lows. I think the lows tend to be higher than the highs being higher. But, still, you kinda get both.

Many interviewees and online forum users discuss avoiding specific games, not using voice chat, using gender-neutral usernames, and only playing with friends as measures to avoid gendered harassment from other players. Similarly to female golf players, it is not uncommon to see users of the largest female-oriented forum making posts to find people to play video games with. While this is, in part, due to lacking established gaming social networks, mentioned in the previous chapter, many posts also highlight wanting to be able to play with women or like-minded individuals to reduce their chances of being harassed and to increase the social support that they can expect in these cases.

Although men and women both agree that women receive the most hostility in gaming, male respondents are also inclined to take the same precautions against more combative and volatile players and toxicity. Male players note avoiding particular games, playing more solo games, muting voice chat, or playing only with people that they know to avoid unpleasant interactions or dealing with hostilities. Ryan, for instance, has created groups for several games in which all of the players know one another, through friendships or relationships, to reduce the chances of having to deal with hostility. As another example, Paul has decided to stay away from multiplayer games, mentioning that he has a history of playing these games, but could not stand the toxicity and was driven to a preference for solo games.

CONCLUSION

Players' relationship to a gaming identity and the gaming community is largely strained. While there is an acknowledged and widely accepted idea of gaming culture, a gaming identity is more difficult to feel comfortable with than one might expect. One possible cause of this issue for female players was the space being seen and experienced as more masculine (Kanter 1977; Kimmel 2008). Lining up with this, previous work has noted that women are unlikely to identify

as gamers (Taylor 2006). I have shown, however, that there is a hesitation among male and female players alike when it comes to accepting and using a "gamer" label for themselves.

The literature indicated three probable possibilities for the ways that players relate to gaming in terms of identity and community. First, it was possible that a shared collective identity was able to lead players to easily relate to each other under common definitions (Jenkins 1996; Lamont & Molnar 2002; Tönnies [1887] 1988). Second, players could potentially find themselves in a position where men could easily access a gamer identity, but women would not be able to relate due to stereotypes or masculine norms and rules (Kanter 1977; Kimmel 2008). Finally, women may have been pressured by masculine norms to negotiate a gamer identity, using hedges to make their interests seem appropriate (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Carr 2006; Dillon 2006; Thornham 2011).

All of these possibilities, however, miss the mark of what is happening with gaming in terms of identity and community. For the majority of players, their relationship to a gaming identity is currently in flux. Most players have noticed the changes in player demographics and habits, leaving them feeling like being a "gamer" is too inclusive to be meaningful. With more women entering video games as a hobby – and becoming more visible, particularly in discourse about video gaming – the outcome leaves players somewhere between tangible equality and the appearance of equality, with disadvantages for women. Because these changes are currently taking place, the remaining sense that gaming is particularly bad for women and the uniquely gendered hostilities experienced by women linger. With fewer women reporting direct experiences, however, it is possible that these types of gender differences are beginning to diminish. This grants some support for the idea of a tipping point. As more women become involved – and as their experiences are talked about more frequently – this alters the types of

influence that gender has on experience.

Beyond these broad changes, the idea of identity is currently complex. Rather than experiencing a common identity that women have different degrees of access to, or that they feel a need to negotiate, a "gamer" identity is fractured and viewed as not useful given the current landscape of the hobby. As more people start playing video games and as people are increasingly made aware of player diversity, fewer players in general are adopting the "gamer" label. For many, the label changed from a stereotype to be ashamed of outside of gaming circles to a term that is too broad to possibly have real meaning. As players consider their place in what they still refer to as the gaming community, being a "gamer" could mean almost anything. It is more useful and meaningful to know what *type* of gamer someone is – whether they play mobile games or shooters, casually or competitively. These are now the criteria by which players can compare themselves to others and determine shared interests, values, and definitions.

Similarly, the community is also increasingly changing. Though most masculine spaces show that participants support or at least accept hostile behaviors that reinforce masculinity, it appears that there is fatigue with these actions in the gaming community. Behaviors such as using slurs or open harassment, which would be seen in other culturally masculine spaces, are less accepted and often drive both male and female players away. Men are less inclined to feel that this is an acceptable way to behave, leaving many players feeling like they need to take measures to avoid or escape these interactions. While women continue to feel especially likely to be harassed or experience hostility, it appears that an attitude of "this is the way it is" is becoming less common and more women are experiencing gaming without directly experiencing hostilities. At the same time, more men are becoming tired of general toxic behaviors from other players. This could be tied to the overall loss of identity. With fewer players invested in strong

boundaries, there is less incentive or motivation to engage in gatekeeping behaviors to keep out the wrong kind of players.

If we build on research on masculinity in the workplace and in leisure, this may give a clue as to why these hostile behaviors and exclusion are happening, but unlike what has been documented in the workplace and in male-dominated leisure, there has begun to be a breakdown of a collective identity and of men condoning the reinforcing of masculine rules in gaming. This could be due to the approaching gender parity in video games as a hobby. This could also be a result of shifts in perception since the events of GamerGate. To better understand the similarities and differences between players, as well as the shifts occurring in terms of identification and experiences with hostility, research on video game players should expand beyond its typical approaches. More genres should be compared and studied, for example. The experiences of male players should also be considered more deeply. Until we can map the full experiences of diverse kinds players, it will be difficult to understand the complexities of their experiences, their identities, and the gaming landscape.

CHAPTER FOUR:
Success, Skill, and Leadership in Gaming

While many players see gaming as an escape from their workday responsibilities, gaming also has social structures that present opportunities for players to understand success, recognize skill, and engage in leadership. For example, in MMOs, there is often an incentive to play in an established group with a set hierarchy (Taylor 2006). Many times, these groups – typically called guilds or clans – have players serving in different roles, from those who help to heal other players, to those who deal more damage, to those who lead the group as a whole (Nardi 2010). As such, these groups tend to have some kind of hierarchical structure for players. These game dynamics open up opportunities for other types of player interactions and ideas about competency. However, even solo games present players with the opportunity to decide who is, or is not, successful and skilled at this hobby. Scholarship on gender shows that women tend to have poor outcomes in situations where achievement depends on others' perceptions of their skills and competency. In this chapter, I explore video game players' ideas about success, definitions of skill, and expectations for leadership and ask how these notions affect women's experiences in gaming.

I consider three possibilities. With increasing representation numerically, women may be in a position where they are able to achieve and be seen as successful in ways that are similar to men. However, it is also possible that men may resist women's advancement and may not take them seriously as leaders. A third possibility is that players may describe men and women as equally equipped to be leaders, but women may still be disadvantaged. In this third possibility, leadership may open more opportunities for women, and women can be seen as suitable for these positions, but leadership is left without status or prestige.

Ultimately, these concepts are unevenly influenced by and related to ideas about gender.

Using players' definitions and understandings, success is devoid of gendered definition and seen as open and easily accessible for anyone playing. On the other hand, skill is very much still viewed in masculine terms, potentially limiting women's options for competitive and professional play.[27] Players take another divergent turn when defining leadership. When considering leaders in multiplayer games, players use largely feminine conceptualizations. One outcome of this is that it opens the possibility for more women to lead. However, along with this, leadership is not an attractive option for men or women who play multiplayer games. Generally, this position is seen as socially-oriented and often unpleasant as a result.

Defining Success and Achieving Status

In other spheres of social life, success and status can be difficult to navigate through gendered stereotypes. Specifically, it is important to consider the type of access that people have to status, success, and acceptance. Recalling that gendered spaces often lead to sex segregation and hostile environments, these situations can also cause people to call into question women's skills, abilities, and dedication and can cause women to encounter obstacles or barriers when trying to participate (Acker 1990; Bielby & Baron 1986; Bryce & Rutter 2003; Heilman 2002; Heilman et al. 2004; Kanter 1977; Kimmel 2008; Lorber 1995; Messner 1992; Ridgeway 2011; Yee 2008). Women are put in a position where they need to use specific approaches to achieve success or gain status. Recall that Kimmel (2008) notes that women can achieve some level of success by navigating masculine norms that sort women into "bitch" or "babe" categories (249). A woman in the former category tends to work outside of the masculine norms, while a woman in the latter tends to allow herself to exist as a sexual object to be accepted.

Outside of behaving in ways that have been sanctioned by men in these spaces, another

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[27] Recall that in this project, hobby-based play is purely leisure-focused; competitive play is that which is interested in ranking; and professional play is related to e-sports, tournaments, and sponsorship.

possibility is that women exist as tokens. As noted previously, Kanter (1977) shows that as tokens, women can find a great deal of trouble with achieving success. People exist as tokens when they are in a social minority group and inhabit a space where a social majority or socially dominant group outnumbers them. As tokens, women are more likely to gain status by working as support for men and often by disparaging other women to maintain the appearance of being a team player. Related to Kimmel (2008), Kanter (1977) also notes that these situations often lead to women being sexualized or objectified, making accepting these behaviors an easy way to be seen as non-threatening. Although there are noted paths for women to gain some acceptance, it is also possible that women are never truly accepted and cannot achieve real status in these spaces. Because of emphases on hegemonic masculinity and male-dominance, Acker (1990) notes that women tend to be excluded in direct ways in the workplace. In the same way that obstacles develop for women in leisure, this limits women's options for participation and status.

Mixed gender settings can also highlight differences and make gender stereotypes come to mind more easily. Ridgeway (2011) points out that in these settings, an emphasis on skill related to gender often leaves men being perceived as more competent, putting women in lower-status positions. Indeed, regardless of whether or not a space is coded to be masculine, mixed settings make gender more salient and relevant in people's interactions and assessments of themselves and others. Additionally, further addressing Kanter's (1977) work on tokens, Yoder (1991) suggests that this may not take enough factors into consideration. Tokenism is only considered insofar as women are in a masculine-coded space or in a space considered inappropriate for their gender. Yoder (1991) suggests that, according to Blalock, having more low-status individuals in a space can become threatening to those in the majority, which can increase discriminatory or hostile behavior. These limitations may also translate to women's

options for success and status in video games. This issue may go beyond numbers – creating

circumstances where tokenism is the primary cause of tension – and could mean that RPGs, with

a higher proportion of women playing, or the increasing representation of women in gaming

generally, can actually increase negativity.

Beyond status, success, and acceptance in a space, women may also be working with

different definitions of success. For example, according to Dyke and Murphy (2006), Johnson et

al. (2008), and Williams et al. (2009), men and women across a variety of different ages and

backgrounds tend to have different ideas of what constitutes success in their lives. As one

example, men are more likely to view success through a material lens, while women are more

likely to focus on relationships and a "personal notion of balance" (Dyke & Murphy 2006:361-

362; Williams et al. 2009). Other work has found similar differences, with women being less

likely to view success as financially related (Sturges 2002). While these different personal

definitions of success are often present, men and women may also be judged differently in terms

of success. For instance, women who are skilled in activities associated with men tend to be

more negatively evaluated by others (Heilman & Okimoto 2007; Heilman et al. 2004; Ridgeway

2011).

These issues may extend to video games as well. Although there is work that has

established that women are concerned with social aspects of gaming (Dickey 2006; Hartmann &

Klimmt 2006; Yee 2006), other studies have shown that women are interested in more tangible

success when playing.[28] Boys and girls, for example, equally emphasize feeling competent when

they play, but girls are less likely to view success as related to time spent playing (Hamlen

2010). Additionally, for adults playing video games, Taylor (2003, 2006) finds that women do

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[28] Women's apparent tendency to gravitate toward social play, however, may not always be the case. For example, Lucas and Sherry (2004) find that women sought social interaction through gaming less frequently than men.

place importance on mastery and status when playing, often aiming to obtain better in-game gear. They are particularly focused on this as a positive when they have earned the upgrades through playing the game well. This is a means of displaying status and skill as a player and may lend evidence to players using masculine definitions related to success in gaming. Further, in terms of success for gamers, there is evidence to suggest that women do encounter obstacles.

While men and women may define success and achievement similarly overall, and typically based on masculine standards, Taylor (2012) mentions that in the e-sports community, women's presence and status are often challenged by men. Women, including those playing professionally, may have fewer opportunities to become more skilled as players because men avoid playing with them and often think that women are biologically less capable of playing video games well. These difficulties can also occur in non-professional play, placing women in positions where they cannot use typical channels to increase their skill or gain status. With these differences in mind, how do players, particularly those outside of the professional gaming community, view status, success, and achievement as players? How influenced are players by the overall perception of gaming as a masculine space toward using more material definitions of success and skill? Although prior work shows that women are likely to be judged by masculine standards when it comes to success, because many things are currently changing in gaming culture and for players within it, it is likely that understandings of these issues are also currently dynamic.

Leadership

Like success and achieving positional status, leadership as a concept typically has a great deal of gendered expectations tied to it. Often, women are stereotyped in the workplace in ways that paint them as not appropriately skilled or focused (Bobbit-Zeher 2011). Additionally,

employers are more likely to accept stereotype-confirming information and ignore actions or traits that work against these stereotypes (Gorman 2005). Related to this, both inside and outside of workplaces, there is a tendency for in-groups and out-groups to be formed, which cause people to gravitate toward people who are like them in terms of a variety of factors, including gender (Brewer & Brown 1998; Gorman 2005; Ibarra 1992; Reskin 1988, 2001). In mixed settings, these stereotypes are more likely to be imposed on people (Bobbit-Zeher 2011; Reskin 2000; Ridgeway 2011). While this is pronounced in male-dominated settings, even female-dominated settings can have negative stereotypes placed on women, with circumstantially positive traits, like being nurturing, still reflecting poorly on women as workers (Bobbit-Zeher 2011; Williams 1992; Ridgeway 2011).

In addition to general stereotyping, there are also differences in the ways that people see leadership (Applebaum, Audet, & Miller 2003; Rosener 1990). Leadership is often associated with positions higher up in the hierarchy, while "stereotypically feminine characteristics such as friendliness and cooperativeness," are expected in and associated with lower ranks (Gorman 2005:722; Jackall 1988). These different perceptions and understandings mean that leadership is often defined differently. Indeed, leadership has largely typically been defined in terms of masculine traits (Eagly 2007; Kawakami, White, & Langer 2000; Kolb 2006). Because of the social expectations associated with masculinity, behaviors viewed as being driven by individual agency tend to be seen as masculine, while behaviors that value the collective are viewed as more feminine (Cann & Siegfried 1990; Spence & Helmreich 1978; Williams & Best 1982). Further, women tend to approach leadership in people-oriented ways that often do not follow typical methods of leading (Rosener 1990). Women tend to use this people-oriented focus to lead in more democratic ways than men, which can cause certain leadership styles to clash and people

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to view their effectiveness differently (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt 2001).

Regardless of the tendency to emphasize masculine qualities in leadership, Eagly (2007:2) notes that, "…given that leaders' effectiveness depends on context, it is reasonable to think that stereotypically feminine qualities of cooperation, mentoring, and collaboration are important to leadership." In female-dominated settings, this can give women some room for success, though it often leaves them at a disadvantage in male-dominated settings (Eagly 2007; Ridgeway 2001). Although these ideas and perceptions have often resulted in taking women less seriously as leaders, there has recently been a shift toward valuing these traits for certain positions. These perceptions of women and the tendency for women to lead in people-centered ways have created trends toward including more women in management positions (Loughlin, Arnold, & Crawford 2012; Peterson 2014). While this is the case, this inclusion has often come at a cost. In cases where women begin to make strides as leaders, there is often an experience of higher workloads, with less status or prestige attached to these positions (Peterson 2014).

These issues are experienced in leisure as well, causing women to encounter similar obstacles. In outdoor leisure, expectations and biases focused on men's status and skill tend to cause people to prefer male leaders. Women are similarly absent in leadership positions, as coaches or managers, in sports organizations. Sartore and Cunningham (2007) find that because of the definitions that people hold for leadership, it is much more difficult for women to achieve these positions because men are seen as more competent or stereotypically right for the job. Because video games are similarly associated with men in the minds of most people, one might imagine that women would experience similar expectations, stereotypes, and obstacles.

Video games do not always have positions for leaders like occupations or other hobbies and forms of leisure, but MMOs do tend to have hierarchies and leadership positions within

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groups that play together, typically in the form of guilds, which help players work together to meet in-game goals (Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006).[29] Whether these are "family guilds" focused on building social connections or "raiding guilds" focused on meeting game goals, these are highly social situations (Taylor 2006). Membership is often voted on and traits of the player, including putting the needs of the group first, are considered (Taylor 2006).

Because of the focus on masculine traits and behaviors when it comes to leadership, women may avoid pursuing a masculine position or may try to negotiate between the masculine expectations of leadership and the expectations placed on them because of their gender. Adjudicating between the two can help women avoid negative assessments in leadership positions. Softeners – behaviors, speech patterns, or displays that are more socially linked to femininity – can help women avoid being seen as violating gender norms (Kawakami et al. 2000; Koch, Mueller, Kruse, & Zumbach 2005; Ridgeway 2001; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin 1999). These issues of social norms and expectations could be present in video gaming as well. Largely, video game players are under similar expectations, in terms of masculine and feminine gender norms which govern their behavior (Lucas & Sherry 2004; Taylor 2003). Taylor (2006) discusses specific instances that mirror those of female leaders in work and other types of leisure. Focusing on *EverQuest*, an MMO game, she found that players used softeners on message boards for the game. Women would use more feminine usernames in conjunction with statements of power and mastery and images that included highly desired weapons in the game.

Beyond the use of softeners, Taylor (2006) also finds that leadership in *EverQuest* looks

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[29] These hierarchies often involve different types of leader – including raid leaders, guild leaders, and officers – and varying levels of decision-making and authority (Gareth, personal communication, August 25, 2016; Gretchen, personal communication, August 31, 2016; Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006). Additionally, these are used and mediated – or not – by players in addition to often being built into the design of many multiplayer games (Greg, personal communication, August 16, 2016; Taylor 2006).

very similar to what is seen in the workplace – women have options to lead, but note that they need to put in more work and give more attention to relationships between players than male leaders do. Further, in *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), leadership is much more socially focused for women, who are largely responsible for finding new players to recruit, typically by using their own social networks, including significant others (Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Zhang, Yee, & Nickell 2006).

Many differences in perceptions of leadership are shaped by cultural beliefs about what a leader should be like, causing women to have to take different approaches to leading and to be expected to bring different traits to their leadership style. Because gaming is still more associated with men, women may be seen as unfit to lead and feminine traits may be disparaged. While this is a possibility, changing demographics among video game players may cause shifts in expectations and definitions when it comes to leadership.

Ideas of success, skill, and leadership tend to be defined similarly and also typically place women in disadvantaged and limited positions. However, with more women entering gaming, it is possible that these understandings have begun to shift. Changing demographics could present more opportunities – or more obstacles – for women as their representation continues to increase among video game players. As a result of these changes, men and women may find that they are now equally able to achieve in each of these areas. However, it is also possible that these ideas continue to be seen in masculine terms, placing women at a disadvantage and possibly subjecting them to increased attempts to push them out. Finally, there is still a possibility that these topics are seen in more feminine terms, but continue to leave women at a disadvantage due to a loss of prestige that often comes along with feminization.

FINDINGS

The relationship that players have to success, skill, and leadership in gaming is complex. Players tend not to focus on masculine traits, including instances where general ideas of success and leadership are involved. When players consider success, they define it in ways that make it easily accessible for both men and women. They see success as highly individual, with an emphasis on players getting what they want out of a game to be successful. In considering what makes a successful video game player, the issue of skill is not considered.

While success is viewed in open terms, the question of what it means to be "good" at games elicits a different response. Players see skill in much more masculine ways, offering examples of male players that they know when thinking about players who are "good" at games. Because skill is defined in more masculine terms, this leaves women with fewer options in gaming outside of more hobby-based and casual play.

Likewise, gendered definitions are applied to leadership, but in this case, players use more feminine terms. Communication skills and a friendly demeanor, with an ability to motivate a group are considered especially desirable in a video game group leader. Social skills, for most players, are of the utmost importance in being able to lead effectively. While defining leadership in more feminine terms may seem positive for women, leading is also not seen as desirable. For those who have led groups, both male and female players were approached and specifically asked to fill these roles, rather than seeking them out. While women have access to leadership positions in guilds and are seen as good for these positions, leadership is also low prestige and comes with few incentives.

Success and Skill

Although success and skill may seem to go together, video game players define them

using different sets of expectations and criteria. For a more masculine space, one would

anticipate people placing a premium on masculine traits and qualities, and while this is true for

when players consider what makes someone *good* at video games, success is viewed differently.

Success is much more open-ended and reflects similar patterns to player ideas about identity,

discussed in chapter three. This presents potential difficulties for women – although they can be

"successful" there are cultural obstacles that can prevent them from being seen as "good" or

skilled.

Who is Successful?

The concept of being a successful video game player, within the context of hobby-based

play, caught most of the respondents off guard. Largely, these players do not think of their style

of playing video games in terms of success. As gaming is largely considered a hobby, some liken

the concept to searching for a successful viewer or consumer of other media. However, when

players consider success, there is a great deal of consensus overall. Success depends on the

player, the game, and the goals that the person playing has. It is seen as an individual decision,

based on what people want for their own gaming experience. For example, Paul notes:

> I feel like that's got to be personal. That's up to the individual player.
> Because what I define as success for myself is not going to be the
> same for someone else. Like, for me, it might be 100-percenting a
> game or beating it on the hardest difficulty or getting an achievement
> or something, but for somebody else, it might be winning a *Super
> Smash Bros.* tournament or just beating a game on any difficulty,
> you know, there are different skill levels. And my accomplishments
> aren't necessarily going to be the same as someone else's.

For the majority, this is a personal and individual consideration, rather than something that can

easily be quantified across all people playing video games. So many players play for different

reasons, enjoy different aspects of games, and play different genres that it is difficult to pin-point

exact guidelines or requirements for success.

While players agree on an open-ended definition of success overall, there are some topics that stand out after some consideration. First, the vast majority of players suggest that enjoying the game and having fun are the most important factors in determining who is successful. The second most commonly noted factor, and often related to the top most mentioned factor, is that the player gets what they want out of the game. One recurring thought related to this is that gaming is not "supposed" to be something that is taxing. As Jackie puts it, "Gaming is supposed to be a hobby. It's not supposed to be a lifestyle, it's just supposed to be something that you do in your spare time." Many players share this sentiment and sometimes struggle to think about what, outside of enjoying yourself, could possibly make you successful at playing video games. Although this is the most common sentiment, several players do use this confusion as a starting point to consider professional play as the route for success. This is only occasionally mentioned, but is considered by both male and female players. While this is an initial response for some players, however, they ultimately fall back on the idea that enjoying what you do is the most important aspect for success as a player.

For many of these players, they do extend this to their own ideas of what is fun or enjoyable about games, noting that if a player is not enjoying themselves and seems to be consistently frustrated, that is not successful. This is mentioned by players of a wide variety of games, but most of these players are female and many recall specific instances where they have witnessed another player grinding and seeming like they are exhausting themselves with the game. For example, Eva mentions the way that her husband, Ben, frequently gets caught up in minute tasks in a game:

> I dunno, I don't think you're successful if you look at playing video games like having a job. Like the way Ben plays video games kind of drives me nuts because he'll do things that he hates, like he's not having fun. He says he is, but he's not, I can tell. He'll be just

grinding an area for hours and hours and I'm like, "Are you having fun?" and he's like, "No." "Well why are you doing it?" and he's like, "I have to." To me, I dunno, that's not successful.

For these players, enjoyment should be obvious and "playbor" does not seem readily and obviously enjoyable for the person engaging in it. Women are more likely to bring this aspect of enjoyment up and convey that they are confused when players suffer through these game tasks. This relates to the overall view of video games as entertainment and an opportunity to relax discussed in chapter two. If a player is becoming overly stressed by tiring activities that they feel they "have to" do in-game, this appears to go against the primary perceived purpose of gaming, in addition to violating the pervasive idea that in order to be successful, you should be having fun. While players can define fun in their own ways, even players who are in the middle of grinding typically do not see their playbor as fun, but as a necessity to move forward in the game.

Few players deviate from this dominant conceptualization, but some do have alternative or additional ideas about what success looks like. While these players are fewer in number, they do tend toward more tangible definitions of success. This is true for those who prefer solo or multiplayer games and is not confined to a particular genre. The next most common indicators of success, evenly divided between men and women, are finishing the game and competing. Following these ideas, a few players do have more instrumental definitions of success. The fourth most common mentioned factor, with very few players and slightly more women mentioning it, is the idea of making money playing games. The fifth most mentioned, by very few respondents, is the idea of being remembered for something as a player. One of these more instrumentally-minded players, Ashley, mentions:

I guess… if we're defining success as it becomes their career path? I've seen that happen where people are playing these games for

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money or for competition or…if they're famous for it. Yeah, that's
how I would define someone being successful at gaming.

For these players, they do not think of success as related to the way that they personally play video games – as a hobby – but in terms of something more directly measurable, be it ranking, monetary gain, or attention. Professional play and recognition become more important than enjoyment, but it should be noted that several of these respondents are undecided on how important these tangible measures are, considering that different players have different goals, interests, and intentions.

Broadly, and although many individual or less commonly mentioned qualities are occasionally suggested, successful gaming is not necessarily conceptualized in the same ways that people may think about success in other culturally masculine spaces. Largely, when players are not entrenched in professional circles, viewing games primarily as a hobby, there is less consideration for what is, or should be, successful. The majority of players, when it comes to their own experiences with gaming and the way that they see others, think that success is simply in playing and enjoying the game, though there are varied ideas of what constitutes enjoyable.

Good Players and Gaming Skill

While success is viewed in open terms and most players do not rely on gendered definitions to understand it, the idea of being *good* at video games is approached very differently. In this case, masculine traits are considered much more important, though male players have less consensus than female players around what qualities make someone "good" at gaming. Additionally, unlike success, players feel that they have a solid grasp of what makes someone "good" at video games and this subject is easily identified and comfortably quantified.

Among the traits mentioned, the most commonly cited quality of a good player is practice and time investment. While a large portion of the respondents mention this, the majority are

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women. Still, those identifying this quality note that it is important for building skill and a better

understanding of the game. Having the time to practice is what gives people the ability to

become better at a game. As one example, Gareth suggests:

> …commitment of time would be another big one. Professional
> gamers spend an extraordinary amount of time playing the games
> that they want to be good at and they're very disciplined enough to
> practice the skill and all of the necessary skills to be the best of what
> they want to be at.

Echoing this, Zoe mentions:

> 'Cause like the people who do like, say like competitive gaming,
> who do it as their main profession? I know they spend a whole lot
> of time 'cause they like… learning everything and getting really
> good to do combos or whatever. So, to get really good, you'd have
> to spend a lot of time practicing.

In some cases, respondents mention the idea that good players "don't have a life," in part due to

lacking the time to do anything aside from gaming, but also in reference to the old stereotypical

image of a gamer. Several respondents bring up this stereotype when considering who is a "good

player." While most acknowledge this stereotype as outdated, they suggest that part of the reason

that people assume gamers are lonely and cloistered in a basement doing nothing but playing

video games is because of how much time dedication is necessary for getting better. Broadly,

however, players recognize that to get better at any skill or hobby, practice is necessary.

Not all of the traits suggested are necessarily based on ways to learn or to improve. The

second most frequently mentioned trait is good reflexes and hand/eye coordination. Again,

because there is more consensus in women's definitions, women outnumber men in agreeing on

the importance of this factor. Unlike taking the time to practice, this is considered to be more

innate – this is a quality that, perhaps, could improve with practice, but is considered integral to

becoming "good." Being able to keep up with gameplay and manage controls in-game is

essential. For instance, Jackie says, "Well, you know, I think my husband is actually really, really good at video games. He's got the mind for it, he's got the reflexes for it, he's really good." There is some sense that there is a natural talent or inclination for video games and when discussing reflexes, respondents do not mention them as things to be improved upon, but rather something that players start with before they become good players.[30] Relatedly, several respondents also mention an additional innate factor. Though it is brought up infrequently, men and women both mention intelligence and knowing one's own skills and limitations equally.

Additionally, the fourth most mentioned factor has to do with competition and material measures of success. Players tend to agree on measurable indicators for someone to show that they are good at playing video games. In this category, and with women outnumbering men, is having a high score, high kill ratio, or overall positive competitive outcome. Also within this category, however, are men who more frequently mention that these players need to have a sense of or personality for competition to achieve these higher ranks. In these cases, more masculine and material aspects of gameplay are considered essential.

Outside of these trends in qualities, one additional interesting note is that women are more likely to mention specific people in their lives who they believe are good players. When discussing what makes someone good, they frame their definition around these particular examples, who tend to be men and are frequently their significant others. While this is mentioned in combination with the other qualities above, they also tend to diminish their own skills in conjunction with these examples. When considering the qualities that make someone good, Elaine mentions:

> [laughs] This is gonna sound silly. I would say… I'm thinking of

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[30] Often, these innate skills include things like hand-eye coordination, appropriate reflexes for using controls, and spatial recognition, which are socially associated with men, causing women to feel discouraged or ill-equipped for playing video games (Cherney 2008; Jenson & de Castell 2004).

> my husband right now, 'cause he gets really good at video games…
> I would say he spends a lot of time on them, he figures out how to
> play the game in quotes, let's say. He knows what game engines are
> looking for or he figures out the combos. He's very aware of how
> he plays, he invests a lot of time in playing and… yeah, I'm trying
> to think. Those would probably be the main things I can think of
> right now. This magic person.

Similarly, Lauren recalls her ex-boyfriend and his habits while they were dating:

> He's just obsessive about it. And like he's studying making video
> games. Like he's just into them in general. Yeah. I would just say
> the sheer amount of time he's put into it and the sheer amount of
> video games he's played is like ridiculous.

While women are likely to note male examples of good players from their lives, and a few men also mention male friends who are especially good players, no one mentions specific examples of female players that they consider very good or offers up themselves as examples. Men are also more likely to keep answers vague and more like "ideal types." Overall, however, this is where more masculine qualities stand out, in terms of perceptions of skill. It also suggests an additional potential road block for women attempting to be "good" at gaming, as women have often been cited as having less time to dedicate to video games, but are also not seen as possessing more masculine qualities when it comes to skill. This could cause women to be taken less seriously or be seen more critically in terms of serious, competitive, or professional play.

Leadership

Like the idea of success, leadership is another area where players readily agree on many traits that are necessary for a good leader to possess. Players have a variety of ideas about what makes a good leader in gaming, which tend to undercut the expectations of masculine traits in leadership. These qualities are more associated with women and femininity, focusing on social intelligence and abilities. However, while feminine traits are upheld as the most important

qualities for a leader, men and women alike do not have a desire to lead and often find the

process – or the prospect of it – tiring and unappealing. For most players, leadership is not

necessarily something that they strive for or are interested in. For those who have had experience

with multiplayer games, leadership is often a stressful prospect. This suggests that guild

leadership has undergone a similar process to what has been seen with increasingly feminized

managerial work – more pressure, more work, but less value in the position.

Qualities

Players have several ideas about what is necessary to become – or what is most desirable

in – a good guild leader. Largely, most of the qualities or traits that are considered the most

important in this position are typically seen as more feminine. By far, the most cited quality that

is considered important for leadership in multiplayer games is communication. This quality has

the most agreement between male and female respondents, though women do slightly outnumber

men in this group. The idea of communication ranges from being able to represent your ideas

clearly to the group to being able to calmly discuss where people should be. As Jamie notes:

> You know, maybe one person you can be like, "Stop messin'
> around, get over here," and other people, you need to be like… you
> know just the way you talk to your friends, knowing how they're
> going to react well, and just knowing how to talk to your group so
> you stay, you know, a group. And if you have two people that just
> start throwing down with each other and never speak to each other
> again, that's not gonna go well. And unfortunately, that's how I feel
> like a lot of team leaders do it, it's not that their friendship isn't
> important, I'm sure it is, but they're also like, "Oh my god there will
> never be a team again." You need to be able to keep them together.

Communication is the main way to hold the group together, maintain consensus, and encourage

players to meet group goals. The idea that communication will hold the group together is

common. Many players feel that related qualities are also important. These are more scattered in

terms of agreement, but relate well to the idea of communication. For women, qualities like

empathy or compassion, friendliness, the ability to motivate, and charisma are also important for

good leadership. As June notes:

> …being friendly, so like someone that people want to play with and like dedicate their time to… and being able to praise people for what they do well and kind of gently suggest, "Hey, I think so and so might need help if someone can get over there." So, attentiveness, organization, and interpersonal skills, more generally. Be a nice person.

Most players convey that they do not want to interact with their group leader in ways that

resemble a relationship that one would have with a superior at work. Indeed, many players

mention that leaders should not "be like a boss" or "boss people around," and indicate that

communication among gaming groups should be more positive and supportive, otherwise it

would be impossible to get people to work together and do what you need them to do.

Often the idea of communication is tied to listening, the third most mentioned quality by

both men and women, and the ability to understand what players want, are interested in, and how

players are feeling. Players had experienced instances of having leaders who were not interested

in understanding the broader desires and interests of the groups, preferring instead to carry on

with their own interests. Ben recalls his experience with a leader who was not inclined to listen:

> [I]t really strongly comes down to listening to what the other people in the group has to say….Like when we were playing *Final Fantasy*, our guild leader was more concerned with crafting than anything else in the game. The rest of the group wanted to do raid-based progression….It was his guild, like the guild master title was in his name and he refused to pass that to someone else. Even though someone else probably would have been a better fit. It didn't make a lot of sense, I didn't think.

This goes along with the overall themes of being able to communicate and understand group

dynamics, using these approaches to ensure that the group is kept happy. In these ways,

leadership in guilds highlights a feminization of leadership qualities. Rather than focusing on more masculine traits, or even skill at the game, players are much more concerned with being able to establish bonds with and cater to the group as a whole. Players want leaders who will not only communicate what they expect in a friendly and supportive way, but who will also listen to and take into account player interests and goals.

The second major quality that players consider particularly important, with more women mentioning it than men, is also much more cooperative and community based. This has to do with knowing your guild well, allowing a leader to know their strengths and assign them tasks to achieve gaming goals. While several players who had not led groups before note that this is important, Gretchen also highlights this as the most important thing in her experience as a raid leader:

> …ability to delegate…. picking the right people for the right job. You know, as a raid leader, a lot of it was coming up with strategies for bosses and also, you know, knowing when to listen to other people about what strategies they had.

Being able to communicate – and listen – are given a great deal of attention when considering what is important for a leader in a guild. This position is defined largely as people-focused, causing more feminine ideals of leadership to stand out. Two additional traits related to delegation are experience and organization. Equal numbers of men and women note that experience with the game, though not skill, is important for leaders. Organization, however, is mostly noted by women as being important for ensuring that people are where they need to be when they need to be there. Like delegation, these qualities are seen as important in the sense that one can understand what is required in the game and where certain players can and should be to increase the odds of achieving the group's goal.

Even with less frequently cited useful traits, there is a focus on more feminine qualities. Both men and women occasionally suggest that additional important factors for leadership are cooperation, patience, planning, and encouragement. A few respondents, with more women mentioning them than men, do bring up more masculine-associated traits, mentioning analytical thinking or logic, as important factors for leading and only a couple of male respondents note confidence and the ability to maintain even emotion as important. Overall, however, feminine traits are the most desirable for leaders in video games, with traits more associated with masculinity being less valued by players.

A few female respondents also clarify what a good leader does not necessarily need. In these cases, it is related to the way that they see their own playing. Jane, who considers herself an excellent guild leader, mentions:

> Not skill. It's not skill. It does not take skill. I'm not good at video games. Like, I say to people all the time, I'm not good at video games. I surround myself with people who are good at video games. I just care about having fun and I let them do all of the hard work.

While knowing the game and the players in your team well enough to place people in the right roles are important, some women feel that they are good leaders, but not necessarily good players. For these women, skill is not an integral part of their role in leadership and they wanted to clarify this in their discussion of their leadership experiences and what is important for this position in multiplayer gaming.

The qualities that players highlight are interesting when considering an apparent lack of interest that players have in becoming leaders in multiplayer games. It appears that leadership is highly feminized and, as a result, likely comes with a great deal of demand, but little reward. While some leaders take pride in their experiences with leading their group to victory, this is the only way that leadership is discussed as being rewarding. Much more common is a lack of desire

to start or to go back to this role and a sense that leadership is often more about wrangling unruly players than forging strong bonds with a group.

Interest in Leading

In terms of player interest in leading, responses are divided. This division is based on personal experience with leadership, self-perception of one's own leadership skills, and openness to multiplayer games. Although many players' opinions are scattered and many of the respondents do not enjoy, seek, or feel like they would enjoy leading multiplayer gaming groups or campaigns, there are some players who have led and recall a positive experience. While this is the case, these players often also mention that they would not want to go back, despite claiming that they enjoyed their role as a leader. For players' opinions which have a lot of agreement, players are nearly evenly divided in terms of their feelings about being a leader in video game play. The largest group, mostly comprised of women, is not interested in organized or multiplayer play and therefore does not hold an interest in leading groups. For these players, their focus is on solo games, preferring not to have to deal with scheduling play, having to encounter drama, or needing to experience the game with others. This is true for many players who do not want to feel the obligations of being committed to regular team play. This extends to having issues with lining up play styles and having everyone get what they want out of the game. Tanya expands on this:

> I don't like to be held to someone else's timetable. So, if I'm playing
> *World of Warcraft*, I don't want to get in a group where they're like,
> "Run, run, run, kill everything!" and I'm setting up the perfect sniper
> shot from three screens away and am completely useless.

While this sentiment is common, a slightly smaller proportion of players are inclined toward playing with others, but are more interested in casual play. Nearly evenly divided between men

and women, this group notes that they do not like highly organized multiplayer play. For these

players, gaming is loosely arranged with friends whenever everyone has some time, rather than

as a regimented raiding schedule that one might find with more competitive players. For many of

players, like Greg, this boils down to difficulty with scheduling. He states:

> Well, I would say, probably more often than not other people are organizing them. Mostly because more often than not in my experiences, it's been my friend saying, "Hey, do you wanna come over and play this game with me?" or something like that. And then if it's an online multiplayer game, that's usually they're playing and at the time it's probably later in the evening, so it's like, "If you have time, we're playing, you can come play with us right now." Often when I'm playing multiplayer games, I'm playing them early in the day when a lot of people are at school or work, so when I play with friends, it's usually them inviting me.

Having to work around specific scheduling has become increasingly difficult for players as they

have had to add new obligations and responsibilities in their lives. Many players note that it just

is not realistic to try to have a set schedule every week, due to the time that is taken up by other

aspects of their lives. Many players recall having an easier time in high school and college, with

more time to work with.

The next most common reason for not wanting to lead is enjoying multiplayer games, and

being invested in them, but simply having no interest in leading. Of this group, the majority is

also comprised of women. For this group, and particularly for women, the responsibility

associated with organizing and leading is enough to dissuade them. Many players, including

Jackie, mention that they have so many responsibilities at work that they do not want to have to

carry these issues into their leisure activity. As a result, they prefer to have others organize

playing sessions for them.

Beyond this, the remaining players are all female and cite stress and concerns about their

skill level as reasons that they would not want to lead in multiplayer games. For those who

mention stress, this is caused by the feeling that they would need to add too much to their

gaming routine, causing the game to be less enjoyable. Players do not want to feel like they are

micromanaging every detail of their gameplay, but would rather have other players be

responsible for the overall decisions made during the game. As one example, Eva says:

> Heck no. That would stress me out so bad. No. I definitely sat back
> and let other people do that. And if they wanted me there at a certain
> time and I had a test, I'd tell them, but that's as far as I'd go.

Often, these players do not even want to consider having to add leadership to the list of other

obligations that they have to tend to in their daily lives. Male and female players alike feel like

having to plan gaming activities would be too much additional work.

While stress from having to manage schedules, activities, and gathering people together

is common, some women are also particularly concerned about two other stressors associated

with leadership. One additional concern for women is the stress related to feeling like they would

be forcing people to do something. This caused discomfort with the idea. Cam notes:

> [O]nce I get to too much of a leadership position, I feel like I'm
> trying to force something on someone, so I actually don't like to be
> like president, necessarily. I like to be like a step or two down
> because that way I get to do a little bit of the leadership, but I also
> get a lot more of the voice toward me, so I can hear feedback that
> they're giving and relay it to someone who's a little higher up, so…
> being able to be in a state where everyone's a leader within the
> community is kind of a nice thing.

Several women have concerns about feeling like they are forcing other players to partake in

aspects of or activities in the game that they are not interested in or do not want to have to put up

with. This perceived aspect of leadership makes the position unappealing. Female players do not

want to have to feel like they are making their teammates feel obligated to play in particular

ways or for particular goals.

Cam's sentiments also reflect the other stressor that is specific to women discussing leadership. For some women, concerns about their skill is also a large influencing factor for their not wanting to lead. Although players who had led feel that skill or in-game ability is not an important factor for leadership (discussed above), these players who do not have an interest in leading feel that it would be a hurdle for them. June mentions:

> I was shy and I think there was a sense that, yeah I liked *Guild Wars* when I played it, but I didn't have very high DPS and I wasn't like good at that game, so I'd let someone who was good at it organize a party. [31]

For these women, a feeling that not being able to perform their tasks especially well would make them feel uncomfortable dictating what other people should be doing. The sense of not being skilled or good at a game is enough to cause these players to second guess their ability to organize, be listened to, and make appropriate calls in-game. Much like the worry about feeling like they are forcing other players to do something, the concern about not being skilled enough at the game is also unique to women.

Finally, some players had led in multiplayer games previously. Most of these players are female and, regardless of gender, most have enjoyed their leadership experiences overall. While this is the case, most of these players also express little desire to lead again, even if they had a positive experience. For these players, most note that their personalities just feel like they mesh well with the leadership role. While many did not seek out the position, and rather were called upon to lead at some point, they feel like being pulled into leadership positions is a common occurrence for them. For Jane, she got a great deal of satisfaction from being able to contribute

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[31] DPS is damage per second.

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as a leader in gaming:

> Jane: For multiplayer games… I am usually the one organizing.
> Interviewer: How did you get to that point?
> Jane: I don't know… I'm bossy. Because they're all lazy boys that won't do anything unless you tell them what to do.
> Interviewer: You just kind of fall into these positions?
> Jane: Yeah… yeah, it's definitely in my personality type to organize and just lead things. Which, I guess is sort of reflected in my role here. I'm bossing around a bunch of boys here, so nothing ever changes, right?
> Interviewer: Do you enjoy it?
> Jane: Oh, yeah, I love it. Or… I mean, it's not something that I purposefully think about, it just sort of happens.

These stories are common for both men and women who have led games. They tend to be selected for leadership, even if they do not seek it out, got a great deal of enjoyment out of the process, and feel like it lines up well with their personalities and tendencies.

Beyond feeling like leadership comes naturally, women who enjoyed this position also mentioned that much of their satisfaction with the experience was derived from leading a group to victory and successfully managing them. For Jessie, for instance:

> …it's definitely satisfying when you are… basically leading the team to victory, like it is solely your gameplay that's doing it. You're carrying the team essentially and everyone's complimenting what you're doing. That's a really good feeling, just knowing that you're this one character and you're able to win the game basically. It's fun.

It was not only instances in which their character was paving the way to win, but also in cases where their teammates did well. Being able to be proud of their teammates for a job well done and knowing that they played a large role, even if it was mainly supportive, in the victory is cited as a major portion of what is enjoyable about leading in multiplayer games.

However, it is more common for players to look back on their leadership experiences less positively. Both men and women, note that they would not want to ever deal with leading again

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or would be hesitant to do so. Largely, this is due to previous experiences as guild leaders or

because of the lack of time that they have now due to starting families or having more

demanding jobs. For instance, Gareth notes that since he has become a father, the time that he

has to dedicate to leading in a game is substantially reduced and the extra stress from having to

manage players would not be worth going back:

> It was more the things pertaining to it, like making sure I get home
> from work on time, right? Like, the actual playing of the games
> itself, I'm a pretty laid-back person, so even when it was stressful,
> it was still fun for me, I still enjoyed it. But it was more… because
> I was in a leadership position and planning things, it was more just
> making sure that everything was done at the right time, in the right
> way. So maybe the administrative aspects of it, 'cause I was a guild
> leader for example, so a lot of things to worry about.

This goes back to some of the stressors noted previously. These players are often concerned with

the stress that they experienced when arranging play schedules and dealing with players. Many

note that there were often disagreements within the group that they would have to settle or recall

having to come home after a long day of work to continue holding an administrative position in

what was meant to be their leisure activity. After time, these aspects of multiplayer games

became more stressful and stopped being appealing. There are not enough rewards to match the

demands of the leadership position. While game leaders can take a sense of pride in their group

achieving in-game goals, it is difficult for players to feel like much of the work is worth it.

Having to arrange schedules, pull players together, work behind the scenes, and act as an

administrator after they are off work places players in a situation where they feel like they get

little out of their role.

While interest in leadership is not gendered in and of itself, there are certain aspects that

women are more concerned with than men. While stress comes up frequently in terms of

thinking about needing to manage other players, women have unique concerns that reflect more gendered understandings of the leadership position and experience. Men are not concerned about lacking appropriate skills or having to influence people to do things that they may not want to, while women find these possibilities to be worrisome enough to make leadership wholly unappealing. While this is the case, it is also important to note that most players are not interested in leading for a variety of reasons, which may be due to the feminization of and traits associated with leadership. Leadership itself is not discussed in a way that brings attention to status, prestige, or even a consistent sense of satisfaction. While players feel that more feminine traits are most useful and necessary for smoothly leading a group, leadership is not something that players strive for or even actively seek out. Rather, the most common path to becoming a leader is through agreeing when the group suggests that they should.

CONCLUSION

It appears that issues of success, skill, and leadership are not as tightly intertwined for video game players as they are when applied to other areas of leisure or work. Each of these aspects of the gaming experience is defined differently and with gender influencing understandings to varying degrees. The literature presented three possibilities for defining these concepts. One was that they would be defined in a way that allows men and women equal access because of the increasing number of women playing. The second was that women may not have true access at all, due to masculine definitions. And finally, the third was that women would be seen as equally capable, but still disadvantaged due to a lack of prestige associated with these concepts.

Highlighting the first possibility, when players consider success, this is less openly and less strictly defined. Typically, men and women define success in different ways, with women

focusing on well-being and social ties and men seeking more material definitions (Dyke & Murphy 2006: 361-362; Sturges 2002; Williams et al. 2009). Broadly, however, success and competency tend to be seen in masculine ways in many social spaces and women who exhibit masculine skills are assessed poorly (Heilman & Okimoto 2007; Heilman et al. 2004; Ridgeway 2011). Previous work on video games specifically has highlighted shared definitions of success among video game players, but these shared definitions often lean on masculine understandings (Taylor 2003, 2006, 2012). The players in this project have moved in a different direction. Rather than associating success with masculine or material factors, the majority of players see it as highly individual and more related to player satisfaction. If you are able to play and able to meet your own goals, even if you do not finish a game, you can be a successful player. This opens options for women to feel successful in video game play. In fact, the majority of players do indicate that they feel like they are successful.

Although skill and success are often considered as going hand in hand, players do not see these aspects of gaming as necessarily related. Turning to the second possibility, when they consider "good" players, they present different ideas about what is required and how this can be defined. Here, there is more of a tendency to reflect many masculine understandings of competency and ability seen in other public and male-coded spaces that disadvantage women (Acker 1990; Bielby & Baron 1986; Bryce & Rutter 2003; Heilman 2002; Heilman et al. 2004; Kanter 1977; Kimmel 2008; Ridgeway 2011). Skill and being "good" at video games are defined in material and masculine terms. Players tend to associate these aspects of play with more competitive and professional play. These are the players who rank, who break records, or who are able to excel in competition with other players. Often, players also highlight innate qualities that make someone good. Taken together, this presents obvious obstacles for women and

clarifies the instances in which women doubt their skill. Defining "good" players via masculine terms likely dissuades female players from seeing themselves as capable or considering branching into other types of play or even game development. It likely also feeds into inequalities from male players, who may judge female players more critically if they attempt to move away from hobby-based play.

Finally, in line with the third possibility, leadership is defined and understood in more feminine terms. While leadership is typically seen in masculine terms, there is some leeway for more feminine approaches to leading that focus on cooperation and community (Eagly 2007; Gorman 2005:722; Jackall 1988; Kawakami, White, & Langer 2000; Kolb 2006; Rosener 1990). And although feminine leadership styles can sometimes be seen as less effective, this is typically mostly true in male-dominated settings (Eagly 2007; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt 2001; Ridgeway 2001). While this has often been the case, when it comes to leadership in multiplayer games, including MMOs, players do not think that masculine leadership styles are most effective.

Players want a leader – and conduct themselves as leaders – with emphases on communication and support. The position is seen as highly social and thus requiring leaders to be able to interact with their groups in ways that are not only knowledgeable, but also friendly and supportive. Although the emphasis on feminine qualities may seem like a potential boon for women, players are often not interested in or seeking out these positions. On the surface, it may seem that this emphasis on feminine traits could give women more of an advantage, but when it comes to leadership, it appears that there is a veneer of equality that ultimately disadvantages women. Reflecting findings on the feminization of managerial positions, leadership in multiplayer games appears to come with a great deal of work, but little perceived prestige or

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incentive (Loughlin, Arnold, & Crawford 2012; Peterson 2014). Most players are not interested in leadership as it requires too much effort in trying to get and keep other players on the same page, through whatever friendly means are necessary. Male and female players both cite fewer apparent benefits than sources of exasperation.

Overall, video games appear to operate somewhat differently than other male-dominated or masculine areas. Women still face the possibility of being taken less seriously – and are often acutely aware that this could happen – but have more avenues for non-professional success. This could be due to the changes happening with gaming, as a hobby and as a space with an increasing number of women. However, other masculine leisure activities still tend to have a variety of obstacles that prevent women from being able to climb up in rank. Women have more potential pathways into leadership in video games and have more opportunity to feel successful, but are still left out when it comes to prestigious positions in gaming and ideas of skill.

CONCLUSION:
Gender, Gaming, and Uneven Change

Women tend to encounter a variety of obstacles and difficulties when navigating numerically or culturally masculine areas of society. Traditionally, women have had very similar experiences in gaming spaces, from hostilities to their presence being questioned to feeling inadequate based on expectations. Recently, however, gaming has been going through many changes as demographics and available options have been shifting. As a hobby, there has been a proliferation of gaming platforms and possibilities, while the audience for video games continues to grow and include more women and older players. With these changes in the gaming landscape, there have also been cultural shifts recently, in part due to these developments, but also due to shifts in the conversation within and about the community. Women's experiences in gaming spaces have been increasingly highlighted in public ways, giving the issue ample attention from those inside and outside of the gaming community.

While women still experience obstacles in terms the construction of skill and leadership in gaming, many barriers are being broken down. Players are increasingly open to diverse ways of playing, genres, and platforms. When discussing identity and the community, many players highlight how much things seem to have changed and how with so many people playing in so many ways now, it does not make sense to hold a tight grip on a particular gamer identity. On online forums, conversations have moved from saying that women should make their own games if they want to play so badly to expressing a desire for more open inclusion. In this way, it appears that numbers – with more women entering gaming in general – and cultural discourse work together to bolster a movement toward equality. However, in areas where stark differences in proportion remain, like what is seen in more professional and ranking competitive play, women are – whether the community is aware of it or not – in a disadvantaged position. This is

even true in the case of leadership, where women are welcomed, but the position is largely

absent of broad appeal or reward.

Generally, these changes allow us to examine a masculine space as it becomes

increasingly less numerically, and perhaps culturally, male-dominated. Regardless of numerical

male-dominance in a variety of spaces, there is a great deal of documented evidence showing

that masculine interests are privileged and women are often pushed toward them (Ferree, Marx,

Gamson, & Hess 1994; Ridgeway 2011; Tong 2009). There also continues to be gender

segregation in many areas of life, often due to ideas imparted by society about propriety and

ability (Bradley 2000; Charles & Bradley 2009; Correll 2005). Couple these with issues of

hostility in male-dominated or male-coded spaces – including online, tech-related, and gaming

spaces – and it should be expected that men and women follow similar rules of protection and

support for masculine norms and for women to be seen as ancillary and not belonging (Acker

1990; Kanter 1977; Kimmel 2008; Orloff 1993; Salter & Blodgett 2012; Taylor 2012; Williams,

Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory 2009).

Many have suggested that including more women in male-dominated spaces should allow

for a movement toward gender equality, but how does this look in action? To understand

gaming's place in a broader framework of gender construction and influence in society, I have

considered gaming histories, interests, and experiences; identity and community; and

understandings of leadership, success, and skill to identify when and where gender parity may

matter. In the case of video games, even as the space nears gender parity, changes can be uneven

and variable in terms of their effects on women. While it may seem like an obvious answer that

more women will lead to more equality, video games show a similar pattern to research

investigating the stalled gender revolution in many regards. While this is the case, gender

equality is quite close in some specific instances in gaming.

The major concerns of this project focus on where women find themselves in the broader scope of gaming and what the implications may be for gender in other spaces. On one hand, there was a possibility, as has been discussed with other numerically or culturally male-dominated spaces, that more women will likely lead to more equality. Another possibility was that women's preferences and styles would not be taken seriously and the space would be governed by masculine interests and rules. Finally, there was the possibility of the appearance of acceptance and equality, with players expressing support for these ideas, but ultimately leaving women disadvantaged due to beliefs and definitions present in gaming culture. Ultimately, different aspects of gaming present two of these three possibilities, with women and feminine interests appearing to gain real traction in many cases, but women remaining disadvantaged in others.

First, gaming interests and preferences appear to be moving in a direction that allows women to experience more equality in terms of what they play. While previous work has shown that younger players may express hesitation with acknowledging their gaming habits in ways that violate gender expectations or norms, there is an increasing overlap between player interest in a variety of genres and aspects of games. As more women begin to play, and as players become more aware of female players' experiences, pressure to express certain preferences appears to diminish. In this way, there is a path toward more equality between men and women.

Second, the outlook regarding identity and community is currently unclear. A shared way of identifying on a large scale as gamers appears to be equally unappealing for most male and female video game players. Men and women are both concerned about presumed perceptions of the connotations that people may associate with the term "gamer" and have a sense that the label

is no longer useful. There are fewer gendered complications with a broad gaming identity for players and there is some level of comfort for players to simply identify with the *type* of player that they are. However, while identity is more open and ultimately less meaningful for most players, issues with community remain. There is a push toward inclusivity in the community, with most players eschewing aggressive or combative interactions and finding hostility – gendered and otherwise – to be annoying, frustrating, and unacceptable. This appears to be opening more hobby-oriented, less professional gameplay up for more gender equality, with players no longer interested in upholding or quietly accepting hostilities.

Finally, while these aspects of gaming do appear to move toward an environment that is more accepting of women, gendered definitions remain when it comes to skill and leadership. For hobby-based players, equality is within reach. Success is defined openly, with little connection to skill in players' minds. Gendered obstacles continue to appear in other, more competitive or professional gaming, however. When players consider who is "good" at games, they often conjure examples of men that they know. They also tend to associate these players with having skill specifically and define this in more masculine ways. On the other hand, leadership in multiplayer games is defined in more feminine ways. While this opens the possibility for women to become leaders, players' perception of leadership is also less desirable. Players do not like the idea of leading, feel that it is too focused on having to placate needy or difficult players, and regard the position as having little prestige. These gendered definitions for play that becomes more competitive and begins to exit hobby-based play leaves women at a clear disadvantage.

Overall, video games as a hobby reinforce, but also challenge, many issues that introduce and support gender inequalities. One major takeaway from the case of video games

may be the potential influence of increasing gender equality in previously male-dominated spaces. Because video games are nearing gender parity, and thanks to increased discussions about gender in gaming culture because of events like GamerGate, it is likely that this has influenced and shifted the ways that women are able to navigate these spaces. Rather than reinforce many of the rules – including harassment – players are increasingly displeased with the behavior of a minority of players. Between player interests and preferences, experiences with identity and community, and everything from success to leadership, there is a complicated picture of gender's influence and outcomes.

Backgrounds, Preferences, and Experiences

Thinking of video games in terms of the idea of a "pipeline," there is little apparent reason that women should not have many of the same outcomes as men in gaming based purely on early experiences. While the pipeline model for STEM happens largely in the educational sphere, with students entering and exiting between middle school and college, the path to video gaming tends to begin at home – in the private sphere – and during childhood for most players.[32] While most players will only explore video games as a hobby, one cannot deny the gender disparities in more professional positions related to gaming. The majority of those working in video game development, getting spots in speedrunning conventions, or competing in tournaments are mostly men. Still, despite differences in some of these outcomes, men and women's paths into gaming and preferences have become increasingly similar. While this is the case, there are cultural obstacles that make it difficult for women to make headway. Some of these cultural blocks can be seen in different sources of stress for men and women. While both

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[32] Regarding the entrance to the STEM pipeline, see Correll (2001); Maltese and Tai (2011); and Wise, Steel, and MacDonald (1979). Also, it is useful to note that private spaces are likely to afford women more comfort in which to explore their interests, without being subject to masculine norms and expectations frequently present in public spaces (Bryce & Rutter 2003; McRobbie 1991).

male and female players become stressed or frustrated during gameplay, female players are much more prone to gendered sources of stress based on lingering ideas about skill and teamwork. Women's tendency to have more concern about their skill level and ability to contribute to a team's goals can make them feel less inclined toward multiplayer games and less confident in their abilities when it comes to group and more competitive play.

Currently, perhaps the area in which the least amount of gender difference remains is in players' paths to gaming and what they like in a video game. Although the typical understanding of girls' and women's involvement with video games is related to their interest in being directly social, I have highlighted a major departure from the literature.[33] It has been noted that women have less of a gaming friend network when they are younger (Taylor 2008; Yee 2008) – and often also later in their gaming experience – but in this study, I have shown that men and women typically begin their hobby around the same age and in very similar ways. The lack of a social network is likely a large contributing factor to women tending to prefer to play solo games, while men more frequently consider gaming time an opportunity for socializing.

Although men and women both share a general definition of video games as a way to relax or be entertained, women are largely more interested in gaming as an escape from people. While some men also share this interest, men are much more likely to view video games as an opportunity to spend time with friends. Specifically, men are more likely to see gaming as a primarily social endeavor. Further, the ability to share the experience with friends is more important than the possible aspects of challenge and competition for men.

Seemingly, the ways that people play has largely been misunderstood. This could be because players of different genres – or players who play more than one genre regularly – have

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[33] For examples, see Dickey (2006), Hartmann and Klimmt (2006), Taylor (2006, 2008), and Yee (2006, 2008).

different interests and preferences from those who play one game or genre exclusively. While this one large departure exists for players, for the most part, players are drawn to very similar aspects of games, regardless of gender. Gendered differences in preference, or its expression, could, again, be a result of sampling. With younger players or players with more rigid interests, there may be more gender difference.

While paths to gaming and preferences are mostly very similar, there is another difference in men and women's experiences with video games. Women experience different sources of stress and frustration, though these differences are not related to having more dispersed free-time (Bittman & Wajcman 2000; Chebat & Zuccaro 1995) and go beyond issues of playbor and dealing with unruly or antagonistic players (Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006). There is a great deal overlap between the sources cited by players, but women tend to experience unique stressors in response to perceived team pressure and expectations of skill. Skill is still largely defined as in masculine terms. This leads female players to be highly critical of their own play, place high expectations on themselves for performance in multiplayer games, and to avoid challenges in games that they perceive to be too difficult based on their self-assessments. Although many aspects of players' experiences and preferences point to a decrease in a gender gap, this difference in perception and experience is another probable obstacle for women in terms of exiting hobby-based gaming for more competitive or professional play. While men and women share many of the same early experiences and later preferences, culturally women are prevented from feeling as equipped to play *well*.

Identity and Community

While preferences are relatively stable, identity and community are two areas of gaming that are currently in flux. It is difficult to know where these will settle, but identity has taken a

surprising turn. Based on previous work on identity, there were three possibilities for women's construction of a gamer identity. First, women may have shared a collective gamer identity with men, with players relating to one another based on common definitions for their hobby (Cornell & Hartman 1997; Jenkins 1996; Lamont & Molnar 2002; Owens, Robinson, & Smith-Lovin 2010). Second, women may have felt like they could not relate to or attain a gamer identity due to obstacles from masculine rules and norms (Dickey 2006; Ivory 2006; Kanter 1977; Kimmel 2008; Shaw 2014; Taylor 2006; Thornham 2011). Finally, although women comprise nearly 50% of players, they may have felt a need to negotiate their identity, using hedges to avoid expressing interests in genres or games that appear inappropriate for women (Cassell & Jenkins 1998; Carr 2006; Dillon 2006; Pelleiter 2008).

When looking at players' relationship to the "gamer" label, however, these possibilities were all inadequate. Rather than a shared identity, women specifically feeling distanced from the label, or women negotiating and hedging their identity, a gaming identity is losing importance. There is a shift happening while the demographics of gamers continue to change and more types of games become acceptable. The distinction between "casual" and "hardcore" gamers may need to change to adjust to the fact that mobile games are becoming seen as more legitimate, with more people playing these games on commutes or during breaks. Even for those who do identify with the label "gamer," there are frequently caveats and is some level of distancing from the term. This is true for both male and female players – a gaming identity is not very appealing.

While a broad gaming identity is increasingly seen as unnecessary and unattractive, there are some lingering sentiments about what gaming culture does or does not allow for someone to claim membership. While this is the case, fewer critiques are leveled at games traditionally associated with women. Instead, overly masculine games are policed more harshly than overly

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feminine games, with potentially more stigma being attached to players who are perceived as "jocks." Overall, there may be a fracturing of identity associated with gaming, with changes happening unevenly and perhaps creating a space where association with particular genres or platforms is likely stronger than with playing games in general. This lends more support for the findings on identification with particular servers or guilds (Pearce 2011; Taylor 2006). Because gaming is becoming more broad and diverse, it makes sense that smaller-scale identification would come more easily, such as considering oneself a speedrunner, part of the "PC Master Race," or a fan of PlayStation.[34]

When it comes to community factors, players are largely on the same page with identity, in part due to hostilities that are often present and intensified in certain genres or titles. Hostility, and particularly gendered hostility, is more variable than previous studies suggest.[35] While many players perceive women as being disproportionately on the receiving end of hostility, men and women both use similar tactics to avoid unpleasant interactions and both cite toxicity in the gaming community as something that influences their behavior and decisions when it comes to their hobby. This is more aligned with the research indicating that players react negatively to interactions that involve trolling, griefing, or cheating (Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006). Although men's concern about hostilities has not been studied in great detail, male players tend to share many of the same techniques for avoiding these experiences in multiplayer games.

The difference, though, lies in much of the perception of these interactions. In online discussion, hostilities are seen as part of the game and something that players need to accept, though many have opted to play with friends, mute their mics, or avoid multiplayer games all

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[34] Based on observations of online discussions and personal communications via interviews.
[35] For examples, see Ivory (2006); Kuzenkoff and Rose (2012); Taylor (2012); and Williams, Martins, Consalvo, and Ivory (2009).

together to address their concerns. In contrast to previous work, men are also more likely to have experienced direct hostilities from other players. The reason for this is likely because the general understanding of hostilities is that women are much more frequently on the receiving end. This, in addition to often seeing video games as a less social endeavor, gives women a head start on ensuring that they can avoid these hostilities, while male players may initially enter the hobby without similar reservations. As communities begin and continue to change and discourse about women in gaming receives more attention, this will continue to change the response to hostility. Also, with the growing concern about women in gaming and the inclusion of more methods of communication that happen outside of the game – like Discord chat – it is likely that methods of avoiding hostility and acceptance of women in gaming will continue to evolve.

Success, Skill, and Leadership

While many aspects of gaming are trending toward more inclusion and equality, topics surrounding success, skill, and leadership are where gender differences and influences appear more starkly. There were three possible ways for these topics in gaming to be defined. One possibility was that players would use definitions that allowed men and women to have equal opportunity. A second possibility was that definitions would be based on masculine understandings, leaving women in a disadvantaged position (Dyke & Murphy 2006; Eagly 2007; Kawakami, White, & Langer 2000; Kolb 2006; Taylor 2012; Williams et al. 2009). Finally, a third possibility was that feminine definitions would be used, leading to lower prestige (Eagly 2007; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt 2001; Gorman 2005; Jackall 1988; Peterson 2014; Ridgeway 2001).

In keeping with the uneven changes seen in gaming spaces, each topic is seen and defined in different ways. Following the first possibility, success is overwhelmingly defined in highly

accessible ways. When considering more hobby-based play, players view success as individualized and based on what each player wants to get out of the game. It is not linked to tangible or measurable outcomes, leaving men and women with more equal footing in terms of playing as a hobby. Coupled with the trend toward a less stringent idea about identity as it relates to games and similarities in background and preference, this fits with more casual or hobby-based play becoming more equal in terms of opportunities. While players are still aware of the obstacles that girls and women have faced in the hobby, player accounts in interviews and online discussions show a shift toward more openness and acceptance. As with the changes in preferences, identity, and the relationship to the gaming community, this is likely due to growing diversity in gaming and more visibility of both female players themselves and the obstacles that they have encountered. Where gender begins to show clear influence, however, is with the topics of skill and leadership.

Unlike success, skill is defined in very masculine ways for players. While anyone can be a successful video game player, being *good* at video games is more exclusive and more associated with men and masculine skills. In this way, successful playing is not necessarily good and success is not necessarily skill. This presents more obstacles for women who are likely to be subjected to masculine rules and seen as less competent when it comes to professional or competitive play. Tied to women's concerns about being skilled enough or their frequent stress over letting their teams down, discussed in chapter two, this masculine definition of skill limits the paths that women have to becoming seen as "good." There have frequently been instances where female players who stream their games online, for example, have been accused of having their boyfriends play for them.[36]

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[36] Based on observations of online discussions.

Much like the probable reasons for the reduction in boundaries for hobby-based play, the masculine emphasis placed on skill is likely due to a lack of discourse and low numbers. Because women are seen in lower numbers in more public play, and because much of the recent changes in culture and an examination of gender issues have been focused in hobby-based gaming, there has been less of an opportunity for women to make gains. To move away from these constricting ideas about who is "good," the barriers in competitive and more professional play for women will need to enter a more public discussion, in addition to women becoming generally more visible in these spaces.

Finally, leadership diverges from both of these other aspects of gaming. Reflecting the changes seen in management, players tend to see leadership in more feminine terms. Despite MMOs being numerically male-dominated and the tendency for women to be seen as less competent, especially in male-dominated spaces, feminine leadership is highlighted by players as the most useful and appropriate approach (Eagly 2007; Ridgeway 2001; Rosener 1990; Sartore & Cunningham 2007; Yee 2017). While this may seem positive, it creates a circumstance where leadership is not seen as desirable and is more work than reward for those who take part in these positions. Tied to this, leadership is not associated with skill and instead is seen as a people-oriented and community-centered position. The association of leadership with women opens up the option for skill to be seen as unimportant or unnecessary for leading a group. Because skill and being "good" at video games are seen and defined in mostly masculine terms, this creates a space where women are able to lead, without status, and are likely to be judged more harshly for their performance and any potential missteps. As a result, as seen in chapter two, stress often comes from different sources for men and women. Women are much more concerned with skill-related worries, due to being shut out from cultural understandings of skill within gaming, and

potentially letting down their gaming team or being seen as less legitimate in gaming spaces. These factors work together to disadvantage women if they move toward more skill-based and competitive or professional play. While they have opportunities to feel and be seen as successful or accepted in non-competitive and more casual play, when it comes to skill-based play, definitions and understandings create circumstances where women can be seen as unfit, less competent, and feel like they cannot live up to expectations.

Looking Forward

While various aspects of non-professional gameplay are changing, outcomes for gender are uneven and currently restructuring. With platforms, games, and who is playing consistently shifting, the ways that players relate to their hobby will likely continue to change in response. Considering the uneven distribution of these changes, however, suggests that there is an argument to be made for including more women in masculine spaces when aiming for cultural change. While numbers may not matter on their own, visibility of women in these spaces and discourse regarding gender issues likely contributes to the development of more equal outcomes.

There is a connection between numbers, visibility, and discourse within a space and shifting perceptions. This was most obvious on the forums, as they provided an opportunity to look at what is happening over time. Prior to GamerGate, discussions were largely dismissive of women involved with games. During the height of GamerGate, players became more inclined to argue about women's place in gaming. As the event went on, there was a shift toward more people discussing acceptance and opening up gaming to more players, reducing gatekeeping behaviors based on what is deemed acceptable or not. This discourse provided more visibility for the issues that women face in gaming, in addition to more women becoming involved as players, indie developers, and commentators. To continue driving change toward more equality, then, it is

important to increase discourse and visibility, while also promoting more representation.

It does appear that in many cases, players are not simply paying lip service to the idea of women in gaming, but this is largely related to specific pockets of the hobby. In non-professional play, where women make up nearly 50% of the audience, and in non-competitive play, women are increasingly seen as legitimate and players are largely tired of aspects of game development and the gaming community that have tended to ignore or actively push out women. However, in competitive and professional play, masculine ideas continue to be held as the standard. When considering professional play, particularly in e-sports, with far fewer women represented, this difference begins to make sense.

As women gain representation in gaming spaces and the dialogue about gender in gaming continues, their presence will increasingly become normalized. This will continue the trends toward equal treatment where it is present and may begin to break down gender inequalities in other areas, but a great deal of work needs to be done to highlight gender issues in areas of play that are more skill-based, competitive, or professional. Beyond this, as emphasized by this study and the recent work by Yee (2017), more factors need to be considered in studies on gamers to fully understand the various differences – and similarities – between men and women in these spaces. Age, genre, and style of play are all likely to influence what players find interesting and important, how they relate to other players, and how they define and understand a variety of aspects of gaming.

Further, this project, while building on much of the previous work on gender and video games, is limited in some ways. It is unfortunate, for example, that an ethnographic component on different games was not able to be included. This would have been helpful for understanding more about what happens during actual gameplay of different genres of game and how this

relates to player understandings and constructions. Additionally, one avenue that was intriguing, but ultimately could not be fully explored due to the sample, is sexuality in relation to gaming. Several players noted their experiences and choices with romance in games, including male players who identify as straight opting to romance male characters as female characters. An interesting follow-up for this project in terms of identity construction will be to investigate the ways that players construct a sexual identity in relation to games with romantic story options.

For future directions of research on this area, it will also be important to follow the answers of these players toward the aspects of gaming that continue to be defined in explicitly masculine terms. While hobby-based and more casual play appear to be moving toward a more gender-neutral conceptualization, play perceived as highly skilled is associated with more demands and more masculine qualities, likely leading to a broad disadvantaging of women and a climate that continues to push female players out.[37] These more competitive, public, and professional kinds of play may reflect other male-dominated spaces more clearly – or may also be undergoing shifts due to changes in wider gaming culture. While this study could not expand to these types of players, it will be important to talk to more of those involved in things like Twitch streaming, tournaments, and sponsored play to understand the ways that these players construct and create particular identities, patterns of behavior, and understandings of what it means to be successful and skilled.[38] This will further highlight and clarify the ways and avenues through which women may have obstacles and options for participation and advancement.

Overall, video games are a rich area for understanding topics of identity, gender, community, sociality, design, and interaction with media, among many others. One important

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[37] As highlighted by Taylor (2012).
[38] Twitch is a website where people can stream a variety of content, but is mostly focused on streaming video game play, often for monetary gain and competitive ranking.

thing to keep in mind – and something that more recent work appears to be showing – is that a variety of factors can influence one's relationship to and experience with video games. Beyond gender, age appears to be a mediating factor for players in terms of their preferences, behaviors, and interests (Yee 2017). In this project, I have also begun to highlight some of the influence of genre preference and time constraints on what players appreciate, avoid, and are motivated by. It will be important for the continuing study of video games in society to investigate these other factors and their influence in the context of gaming experiences to fully understand the sources of similarity and difference among players and the elements influencing cultural change.

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