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“Video Game Culture,” Contentious Masculinities, and Reproducing Racialized Social Class Divisions in Middle School

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Abstract

This short article examines how the mutual shaping of gender and technology can contribute to the reproduction of racialized class divisions. The article is based on an in-depth ethnographic study of the launch of a progressive New York City public middle school. The school aimed to integrate twenty-first century digital technologies and skills into the curriculum as it promoted student-centered learning and social equity. The article argues that educators and privileged parents constructed an educational context that facilitated and legitimized students who enacted masculinities rooted in “video game culture,” as it disciplined and purged students who enacted masculinities rooted in more canonical forms of boy culture. In doing so, the school paradoxically helped perpetuate the racialized class divisions that it hoped new media would help it overcome.

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Recent feminist theorizing on relations between gender and technology emphasizes the ways that gender and technology mutually shape one another, what Wajcman (2007, 293) referred to as, “technology as both a source and a consequence of gender relations.” In this short essay, I hope to extend this perspective by considering how relations between gender and technology can also play a powerful role in the re-making of racialized social class divisions. In particular, I will focus on the role of technology, and especially video games, in the production of gender and racialized class divisions amongst students at a middle school in New York City. I will draw on ethnographic documentation to argue that the school’s progressive educators and privileged parents mostly acquiesced in the construction of student masculinities organized around gendered video games while they condemned, and eventually purged, the construction of masculinities organized around virility and gendered sports. In doing so, they excluded many less-privileged boys from the school, in large part, I will argue, because these boys did gender in ways that violated educators’ and privileged parents’ class-shaped understandings about appropriate ways to do gender.

It is well documented that many popular video games are gendered technologies that play a role in producing gender divisions amongst contemporary children and young people. As Jenkins (1998) observed, many popular video games provide a context for western boys to accommodate traditional ideas about masculinity within contemporary conditions of spatial confinement. According to Jenkins, these conventional ideas about masculinity include: independence from fathers, mothers, and educators; daring, mastery, and self-control as central virtues; a social organization based on hierarchy and competition; the prominence of violence, aggression, and scatological humor; a tendency towards role-playing; and a context for male social bonding. For Jenkins, the main disjuncture between “traditional boy culture” and “contemporary video game culture” has to do with changes in the spatial organization of gendered play spaces. Many contemporary boys no longer have access to the backyards and woods that provided boys of the past with unsupervised play spaces.¹ Video games, Jenkins argued, offer contemporary city and suburban boys

¹ Girls, by contrast, were kept closer to the home, even when unsupervised play spaces were more readily available.

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with a way to accommodate their ideas about masculinity within conditions of domestic confinement.

Before getting to my argument I want to stress that I am in no way arguing for a natural, romanticized, or essential “boy culture” or “girl culture.” Instead, I hope to shed some light on how differences in appropriate ways of doing gender often play a role in the ways racialized social class divisions are lived, recognized, evaluated, and often re-made. To support my argument, I will draw on documentation I collected while conducting an in-depth ethnographic study of the first class to attend the Downtown School for Design, Media, and Technology (henceforth “the Downtown School”), a progressive public middle school that opened in New York City in the fall of 2009.² Documentation was generated through extensive participant observation at school, home visits, interviews with parents, students, and educators, artifact collection, and online participant observation on websites like Facebook and YouTube.

The case is relevant to my analysis for two reasons. First, the Downtown School attracted an atypically diverse cohort of 75 11- and 12-year-olds. Most of New York City’s public schools are highly segregated along racialized social class lines.³ At the Downtown School, by contrast, about 40% of the students were from “less-privileged” families that qualified for free and reduced-price lunch, whereas about half the students were from “privileged” families where one or both parents held graduate or professional degrees and worked as professionals in New York City.⁴ These sharp differences in social class correlated closely with institutionalized definitions of race and ethnicity, with nearly all of the privileged students identifying as white or Asian American, and nearly all of the less-privileged students identifying as black or Latino/a on Department of Education surveys.⁵

2 The names of all organizations and individuals have been changed.

3 See N.R. Kleinfield, “Why don’t we have any white kids?” *New York Times*, May 11, 2012.

4 What I am calling “privileged” parents primarily worked in culture industries, including academia, publishing, the arts, design, and media-technology production.

5 These institutional classifications of race and ethnicity severely reduced and distorted the history and experience of my participants, yet they remained integral to how parents, educators, and administrators understood differences amongst and within schools.

Second, the school was imagined as a twenty-first century model of progressive education, one that would fuse new digital technologies with the progressive virtues of student-centered learning and social equity. In the tradition of progressive education, the school's founders sought to make schooling more relevant to students' out-of-school lives. In doing so, the founders drew on popular ideas that suggested that today's children and young people were fundamentally different from children and young people of the past. According to the school's publicity materials, contemporary children and young people "had known no time" without digital technologies, and especially video games, and yet schools had not changed to reflect this new reality. As such, it was no wonder, the school's founders suggested, that so many students were not engaged with canonical schooling. To bridge schooling to students' out-of-school lives, the school's founders aimed to make the entire curriculum "game-like," to weave digital media tools and production activities throughout the curriculum, and to offer a suite of after-school programs focused on being a "maker" of media technology – from making animations, to computer programming, to "hacking" toys.

While the school hoped to tailor their offerings for the "digital generation," it quickly became apparent that their ideas about students' lives entailed familiar cultural biases. Most students were indeed enmeshed in digital technologies outside of school, but they used digital media in many different ways, and educators only considered some of these practices as appropriate for school. For example, while a clique of less-privileged girls was the most experienced and sophisticated users of social and communications media like Facebook, instant messenger, and mobile phones, these technological practices were either banned at school or made the subject of lessons about online safety and civility. By contrast, the school did not offer lessons about the safety and civility of playing video games, and, if anything, educators celebrated and defended the educational legitimacy of a "geeky" enthusiasm for video games.⁶ Moreover, while nearly all students used digital

⁶ The gendering of "appropriate" uses of new technologies has a long history. See, for example, Fischer (1992) for an account of the emergence of the telephone as well as Oldenziel (1999) and Connell (2005) for an account of how middle-class white engineers refashioned sedentary work practices as masculine by associating them with technical expertise, power, and competition.

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media frequently in their out-of-school lives, most students' out-of-school interests were not centered on digital media. Most students either went home after school or spent their after-school hours in classes and programs for dance, music, swimming, ice-skating, foreign languages, sports, and other activities that were not focused on digital media and which were not offered by the Downtown School. Only one girl routinely attended the Downtown School's after-school programs focused on being a "maker" of media technology; the rest of the attendees were members of a clique of mostly privileged "geeky" boys who also hung out with each other at lunch, recess, and via online games when at home.

Students' differing out-of-school interests and practices also shaped the social divisions they formed at school. Within a few months of the school's opening, the students had assembled a fairly stable configuration of gendered cliques that primarily congregated at lunchtime, recess, and before and after school. While there were some interactions between the cliques, the divisions between the groups were fairly rigid over the course of the year. Clique divisions, in turn, articulated sharp gender divisions, and each clique skewed significantly towards privileged and less-privileged students.⁷ Given the shortness of this article, I will only going into detail about the two main boy cliques, each of which formed in contradistinction to "the girls" and offered its participants a way to participate in a masculinized "boy culture." As shorthand, I will refer to the two dominant boy cliques as the "geeky boys" and the "cool boys" and the two dominant girl cliques as the "goody two shoes" and the "cool girls." These are labels that other students frequently used to name the cliques.⁸ In terms of social class, a few less-privileged boys regularly participated in the geeky boys clique, but most of the clique's participants were from privileged families. By contrast, no privileged boys routinely hung out with the cool

⁷ Ethnographers who have done research in schools often emphasize that it is through the informal peer groups that form at school that students learn to be classed, gendered, and racialized in different ways, e.g. Willis (1977), Eckert (1989; 1997), Lewis (2003) Thorne (2008), . Several students avoided participation in the main cliques, and some cross-gender friendships existed. By and large, however, the school's dominant peer cultures encouraged students to hang out with other students of the same sex, and these social formations shaped many students' approach to doing gender appropriately at school.

⁸ I am using the emic labels of outsiders since students were often unable or reluctant to ascribe a label to their own peer group. While I will not use scare quotes around these labels for the remainder of this article, readers should continue to interpret them as emic categories.

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boys, although two privileged girls, both of whom had spent most of their childhood outside the U.S., routinely hung out with the cool girls, the rest of whom were from less-privileged backgrounds. While other students, educators, and parents rarely described these cliques explicitly in social class terms, the cool boys and girls were frequently labeled with terms associated with racialized social class.⁹

The distinguishing practices of the geeky boys had much in common with Jenkins' account of contemporary video game culture. While both the cool boys and the geeky boys regularly played video games outside of school, only the geeky boys routinely foregrounded a "gamer" identity. At school and online, the geeky boys extensively discussed and debated the merits of various video games and gaming equipment, shared stories and tips based on their accomplishments, and established criteria for hierarchical peer status that centered on gaming prowess. They would boast to me and to each other about how quickly they had beaten a game, and they would readily share their opinions about what games were good and bad. In interviews, several proudly self-identified as "gamers" or even "hardcore gamers." On social network sites like Facebook, the geeky boys often posted images from their favorite games, or pictures of their favorite gaming equipment, and some used these images as their main profile picture. Many played online games with each other when they were at home, and they also played games with each other on mobile devices before and after school. The most popular game amongst the geeky boys, which they sometimes referred to simply as "The Game," was *Modern Warfare 2*, a war themed competitive first-person shooter game.¹⁰ The game was such a frequent topic of conversation amongst some of the geeky boys that one of the tables in the cafeteria came to be known as "The *Modern Warfare 2* table." Even though many students, including many girl students, also played video games, the geeky boys were the only group at school that routinely featured their affinity and prowess for games as a

9 The term "cool" has a long history in this regard. Geographical markers were also common – particularly "ghetto," and "the kids from Brooklyn and the Bronx" – and some privileged students and parents used racial categories such as "the black kids" or "the minority students."

10 "First-person shooters" are a genre of video games where players take on the "first person" perspective of a character that navigates a three-dimensional space, typically in an effort to kill enemies that are either played by the computer or another human player.

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marker of difference. Further, the games they played and celebrated were often organized around masculinized themes such as war, violence, gore, and hierarchical competition.

For the most part, both the goody two shoe girls and the cool girls ignored and sometimes stigmatized the geeky boys, although members of the goody two shoe girls and the geeky boys increasingly formed friendships and even romantic relationships in latter years. In sixth grade, however, many girls from both cliques routinely described the geeky boys as “annoying” and “gross,” and they chided them for various offenses such as a perceived inattention to hygiene. Within the geeky boys, however, these put downs were often inverted and worn honorably as a marker of group distinction. In addition to figuring the geeky boys as not-feminine, their displays of affinity for violent games signified autonomy from educators and parents who, for the most part, found the games’ hyper-violent and hyper-masculine themes distasteful.

The cool boys also played video games but they did not regularly foreground gaming knowledge and expertise as a distinguishing aspect of their identity at school or online. Nor did their peers label them as “gamers,” even though the cool boys played video games extensively outside of school. Instead, the cool boys tended to present themselves in the masculinized genre of the “jock.” Just as the geeky boys routinely discussed their unique interests, skills, and knowledge for certain video games and digital gadgets, the cool boys frequently discussed their interests, skills, and knowledge for masculinized sports such as basketball and football. Many played on football and basketball teams outside of school, as well as in pickup games during recess, in their neighborhoods, and at the local Boys Club. Several had parents, older brothers, and cousins that played basketball competitively in high school, college, or in private leagues. In addition to participating in masculinized sports, they also displayed and discussed their favorite professional teams and players at school and online. Just as the geeky boys used Facebook to post pictures of their favorite video games to Facebook, the cool boys used the site to post pictures of their favorite basketball and football players to their profiles. Some girls also played sports, and their peers sometimes congratulated them for their athletic skills, but these girls tended to play different sports than the cool boys, and the

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main cliques of girls did not organize their social practices around a shared affinity for sports. The goody two shoe girls mostly ignored the cool boys and described them as “low” and deviant, despite their “cool” status. By contrast, the cool girls frequently hung out near or with the cool boys at lunch and recess, and many considered each other friends. Interactions between the cool girls and the cool boys often centered on, but certainly could not be reduced to, “drama” related to the prospect of courtship between the highest-status members of the respective cliques. As will be discussed shortly, this comparatively early engagement in courtship rituals was a major thorn of contention for privileged parents, especially when the prospective courtship crossed racialized class lines.

While masculinized sports and video games provided similar resources for the construction of masculine identities within the school’s peer culture, there were also important differences in the ways each clique did gender. First, the cool boys were more precocious in their gender practices, in large part, I believe, because they had access to more age-heterogeneous friendship and kinship networks outside of school. As noted above, the cool boys and the cool girls were the first students to dabble in courtship rituals, and they touted their more “adult” knowledge in bids for status amongst peers at school. The geeky boys and goody two shoe girls, by contrast, did not start dabbling in courtship until seventh and eighth grade, and when they did they were more accepting of non-heteronormative orientations. The cool boys were also more willing to openly challenge educators’ authority. Often these challenges had the feeling of a dance, as the cool boys, and sometimes the cool girls, challenged school adults without fully rejecting schooling. Several of the cool boys scored at the top of their class on exams and assignments, and challenging educators likely helped them overcome the risk of being thought a teacher’s pet by their friends. Further, since standing up to teachers could elicit discipline, these counter practices were charged with the sense of risk and daring that Jenkins identified in both “traditional boy culture” and “video game culture.” As noted earlier, the geeky boys also constructed a sense of autonomy from adults, but they

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primarily did so through their affinity for media that adults found distasteful, not by directly challenging educators' authority.¹¹

While both the cool boys and the geeky boys played a part in reconstructing gender binaries within the school, educators and privileged parents who attempted to shape the school mostly accepted the geeky boys' "boy culture" as they increasingly figured the cool boys' "boy culture" as inappropriate and even dangerous. As noted earlier, many parents and educators found the geeky boys' affinity for hyper-violent and hyper-masculine video games distasteful, but they also normalized the geeky boys' practices as "boys being boys." By contrast, most educators and privileged parents did not frame the cool boys' gendered practices as "boys being boys." Instead, they increasingly defined the cool boys as threats that needed to be strictly disciplined and, if needed, purged from the school. These ascriptions of threat started to coalesce before the school had even opened. On the first day of school, one of the professional parents, a doctor, noted to me that, "the big unknown is the other students," before suggesting that the school had, "accepted all these students from Brooklyn and the Bronx." Throughout the fall, privileged parents routinely contacted the school with emotionally charged concerns about the threats the cool boys posed to their children's education, safety, and general well being. They demanded that the school institute strict "no tolerance" policies and even expel the boys who were acting out. Many of the privileged parents threatened to pull their children from the school if educators did not meet their demands. After an incident when one of the cool boys sent sexually themed text messages to one of the privileged and white cool girls – the two had been engaged in a courtship drama for months – the school gave into the privileged parents' demands and started regularly suspending members of the cool boys. These suspensions continued throughout the winter and spring and by the end of the year all of the most influential cool boys willingly transferred to larger, less-resourced schools that had a much lower proportion of privileged students and more diverse extra-curricular offerings, including sports teams.

¹¹ Interestingly, the geeky boys would often mimic many of the cool boys counter practices in the school's after school program or when they had a substitute teacher, cases where their grades and academic reputations were less on the line.

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It was not surprising to me that educators and privileged parents asserted their power in response to the cool boys' precocious practices and acts of resistance. However, the magnitude of their reaction and the threat they attached to the physical presence of the cool boys did surprise me. One can imagine another context, perhaps more prevalent in the past than the present, where educators and involved parents would have reprimanded the cool boys while still interpreting their behavior as normatively deviant, just as they had for the geeky boys' unbecoming affinity for hyper-masculine and hyper-violent video games. In my reading, the condemnation and eventual purging of the cool boys largely rested on educators' and privileged parents' class-structured assumptions about how students should do gender at school. Rather than overcoming the production of gender divisions, the school's embrace of digital media and gaming made room for, and even reinforced, the construction of masculinities rooted in identification with masculinized media-technologies, as it purged less-privileged boys who were attempting to fashion masculinities that were more virile, precocious, and oriented towards masculinized sports and heteronormative courtship. I suspect that one "boy culture" was permitted while the other was purged because class differences are much more socially and spatially segregated in contemporary U.S. society than gender differences, especially when these class divisions are also racialized. Despite class position and ethnic identification, most children share spaces and have opportunities for interaction with both boys and girls, and this everyday familiarity produces often taken-for-granted understandings about how boys and girls should do gender. Yet these doxic assumptions do not easily cross spatialized class divisions. Many of the privileged students who attended the Downtown School had attended neighborhood-based elementary schools that were overwhelmingly attended by students from similar class backgrounds, and they had spent much of their after-school hours in private programs that were similarly segregated by a family's ability to pay. Jenkins was thus right to draw attention to the changing spatialization of children's play spaces, but these changes have not just relocated boys from woods to living rooms; they have also placed children and families in classed enclaves that help make outside ways of doing gender appear dangerously threatening, even when the purported perpetrators are 11-years-old.

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