

On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming: Invading, Creating, and Reclaiming the Cultural

Clubhouse

by

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## **Examining Committee Membership**

The following served on the Examining Committee for this thesis. The decision of the Examining Committee is by majority vote.

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### Authors Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## **Abstract**

This dissertation uses intersectional feminist theory and Autoethnography to develop the concept of “cultural inaccessibility”. Cultural inaccessibility is a concept I’ve created to describe the ways that women are made to feel unwelcome in spaces of game play and games culture, both offline and online. Although there are few formal barriers preventing women from purchasing games, playing games, or acquiring jobs in the games industry, this dissertation explores the formidable cultural barriers which define women as “space invaders” and outsiders in games culture. Women are routinely subjected to gendered harassment while playing games, and in physical spaces of games culture, such as conventions, stores, and tournaments. This harassment and abuse is intensified toward female journalists, developers and academics who choose to speak publicly about sexism within the culture, particularly since the 2014 rise of Gamergate. This dissertation illustrates the parallel development of games culture and women’s continued exclusion from it, from the exclusionary sexism of J. R. R. Tolkien’s writing to the development of the “Gamer” as a fixed (and stereotypically cis-male) identity in the pages of video game magazines of the 1980s and ‘90s, to the online “Gamer activism” of today. At the same time, I also explore my own experiences as a female gamer and academic in the 2010s, using projects I have been a part of as a means of reflecting on developments in the broader culture. I first discuss a short machinima (a film made within a video game) that Elise Vist and I created within the 2007 Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game *Lord of the Rings Online* entitled *Lady Hobbits*. *Lady Hobbits* becomes an entry point to consider the historical cultural inaccessibility of women’s representations in seminal male-dominated media such as *The Lord of the Rings*. I then discuss the gender and games advocacy group that I co-founded at the University of Waterloo, The Games Institute Janes (GI Janes), and the many gaming events that

we ran, comparing the experience of our gender-integrated and women-only game nights. The challenges I experienced organizing GI Janes fuels my analysis of the cultural inaccessibility of game play for girls and women, as demonstrated by the tangled gender dynamics at play in the eSports community and *Super Smash Brothers* fandom. Lastly, I discuss my experiences as a staff member, and eventual first female editor-in-chief, of game studies publication *First Person Scholar* (FPS). This chapter interrogates the cultural inaccessibility of writing and publishing about games for women in the academic field of game studies, and the ways in which game studies' links to gamer identity replicate games culture's troubling sexism. The dissertation concludes with a discussion of the more recent connections between games culture, Gamergate, and conservative political groups such as the Alt-right. The conclusion asks how women can study games culture and the politically-motivated violence with which it is has recently been linked if doing so puts us at risk of becoming a target of harassment and abuse. It underscores the importance of future social justice-oriented work in academia and at large. In summary this dissertation moves from examining the historical inaccessibility of representation and participation (chapter 2), to the inaccessibility of game play (chapter 3), to the inaccessibility of participation in the discourse of games culture (chapter 4), before finally moving to a conclusion about Gamergate and politics in 2018 and how cultural inaccessibility has become a problem that is much larger than just games culture (chapter 5).

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## Dedication

To every little girl who had to beg her brother, cousin, neighbor, or friend to share because no one was going to buy her her own games.

To every girlfriend who has thrown a match against their boyfriend to avoid his ire.

To the feminists fighting to “make D.Va possible.”

To everyone who has ever turned off their voice chat in disgust or fear.

To every woman who is accused of cheating because she is too skilled.

To all who have been dogged by Gamergate and all who have felt silenced by them.

To everyone who has ever wanted to call themselves a Gamer but felt like they couldn't.

I see you.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### (G)amers versus (g)amers: Gatekeeping and Cultural Inaccessibility

*“The gamer identity is under assault, and so it should be. [...] The gamer community has been told the consumer is always right—and that the consumer is mostly male. The “consumer king” gamer, as developer and writer Matthew Burns puts it, will continue to be targeted and exploited while their profitability as a demographic outweighs their toxicity, but the traditional gamer identity is now culturally irrelevant. [...] Gamergate represented the moment that gamers realized their own irrelevance.”*

— **Dan Golding, *The End of Gamers***

*I often say I'm a video game culture writer, but lately I don't know exactly what that means. 'Game culture' as we know it is kind of embarrassing—it's not even culture. It's buying things, spackling over memes and in-jokes repeatedly, and it's getting mad on the internet. [...] 'Game culture' is a petri dish of people who know so little about how human social interaction and professional life works that they can concoct online 'wars' about social justice or 'game journalism ethics,' straight-faced, and cause genuine human consequences. Because of video games.*

— **Leigh Alexander, 'Gamers' Don't Have to be Your Audience. 'Gamers' are Over**

### Overview

The sexism of games culture affects women's comfort and safety in both online and physical play spaces as well as spaces of online discourse about games; thus, this research necessarily highlights the gendered barriers to full participation in games culture. In this dissertation, I coin the term, “cultural inaccessibility” to describe the cultural barriers that hold women back from full participation in games culture. While games may be physically available for girls and women to purchase and play, the culture surrounding game play privileges boys and men as players and makes it unquestionably less welcoming and accessible to girls and women. Women are prevented from accessing the three crucial aspects of games culture: representation within the games themselves (chapter 2), safe and comfortable spaces to play those games (chapter 3), and safe and equal participation in the discourse surrounding games (chapter 4). I will demonstrate these three obstacles to access via three of my own personal projects, which serve as case studies

in representation (*Lady Hobbits*), play (GI Janes), and discourse (*First Person Scholar*). I demonstrate this inaccessibility by showcasing my own experiences (through autoethnographic reflections), the experiences of my colleagues (through interviews I conducted), and the experiences of other women in games culture (through their published stories and testimonies), while also drawing upon existing academic work on gender and games (Burrill; Chess and Shaw; Consalvo; Fron et al.; Gray; Jenson and De Castel; Kafai et al.; Kirkpatrick; Sarkeesian and Cross; Shaw; Taylor N.; Taylor T. etc.) to better understand how and why women are forced out of games culture. This introduction will give an overview of key terms and concepts (games culture, gamer, Gamer, Gamer Identity, cultural inaccessibility, gatekeeping, gaming capital, Gamergate, games criticism, and games discourse) as well as the methodology and frameworks (autoethnography, intersectional feminism) used within the dissertation. It will also provide an outline of the subsequent chapters.

## **What is Games Culture?**

Before I dive into women's experiences of games culture, I would like to first define what I mean when I say both "culture" and "games culture." My definition of culture is based firmly in Heewon Chang's definition, which is that culture is "the product of interactions between self and other" within a community in which participants "develop varied levels of affinity and identity with different groups of people" (22-23). In this case, games culture is the community of practice, and the identity people have varied levels of affinity with is "Gamer." Gamer identity is obviously not a born identity; it is instead a chosen or found identity one has as a member of a cultural group—games culture. Despite being a chosen identity, Gamer identity is affected by one's identities of race, class, sex, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. Each of these affect how accessible Gamer identity is to aspirants. As Kishonna Gray has explained in her article

“Intersecting Oppressions and Online Communities:” “Video game culture has privileged the default gamer, the white male, leading to the maintenance of whiteness and masculinity in this virtual setting” (262). Beyond maleness and whiteness, one would also be expected to be heterosexual, in the financial position to have owned and played a great many games, to know a great deal about those games, and to be a skilled player. When a player does not meet all these requirements, it will make it more difficult for them to “choose” to be a Gamer. Many game players do not, as Adrienne Shaw has explored, feel hailed by the Gamer label for a variety of reasons that will be explored later in this introduction (“On Not”). Alternately, players may want to possess the identity of “Gamer” but feel that they aren’t “enough,” i.e. that they don’t fit in with the expectations aligned with the “default” Gamer identity (“On Not”).

It is important to note that, “a formal and official” process is often not required to join a cultural group and therefore “a degree of actual and imaginary connection with other members would be needed” to claim the identity of the cultural group and become part of that group’s culture (Chang 21). In other words, becoming part of games culture is based entirely on your own personal sense of belonging and your “actual and imaginary connection with other members” (Chang 21). Conversely, members will also develop a sense of who they feel does not belong. This is in part because there is no official way to “become” a Gamer, or to claim the Gamer identity, unlike say the identity of “professor” or “police officer” or “wife” or “mother.” Therefore, membership of a group such as games culture is determined through shared knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, values, habits, and most importantly by opposition with those defined as “not Gamers”. While I may feel that a shared love of games is enough to connect with another member of games culture, many would insist I am not a Gamer because I don’t share many “typical” Gamer values, chiefly my interest in feminism and social justice. This lack of

official identity also means that “membership” within this affinity group can be policed or contested by other members. While participation in games culture would initially appear to be limited to “someone who plays games,” acceptance hinges on much more than participation in play, as I will describe at length and with examples in the following pages.

It is worth mentioning that a singular “games culture” is hard to define and pin down because those of us who play games are an evolving and diverse group of people with different norms and interests who likely all see games culture in their own way. This is especially true in recent years post “Gamergate” when games culture has split into warring factions over disagreements about the presence of “social justice” in games and games culture (Goldberg and Larsson 12). While games culture has been attacked by outsiders who believe games cause violence, addiction, and delinquency before, this time was different, as Daniel Goldberg and Linus Larsson have explained in their book *The State of Play*: “Gamergate is notable because it is, perhaps for the first time, an attack by one group within video game culture on another. At its core, it represents a civil war for control over the future discourse on games” (12). While those of us who believe in social justice are critiquing games and games culture in order to increase openness and diversity, Gamergate uses harassment and exclusion in order to attempt to silence these critiques. As you can imagine, the groups participating in this “civil war” see what “games culture” is and what games culture should be *very differently*, as I will explain at length below.

The ineffability of “games culture” is complicated further by the fact that it is made up of countless very different smaller subcultures united by their interest in games. To give just two examples, “game studies,” the community of academics examining games (discussed in chapter 4), and the “fighting game community,” encompassing multiplayer fighting game enthusiasts (discussed in chapter 3) are both small subcultures of players within the larger games culture.

Each of these communities has their own specific norms and expectations and can be divided into even smaller subsets, such as the Canadian game studies community, or the community of players of a specific fighting franchises like *Super Smash Brothers* (1999–2018) and so on. These subcultures and countless other smaller communities of gamers make up the larger singular “games culture” that I refer to throughout this dissertation. When I discuss my own experiences, I will often refer to very small subcultures of gamers (for example, as small as the English PhD students at the University of Waterloo who were involved with *First Person Scholar*) as well as the larger singular “games culture” and Gamer identity.

Importantly, throughout this dissertation I will differentiate between a “gamer” (anyone who plays games of any type) and a capital-G “Gamer” (someone who performs the hegemonic masculine tropes necessary to be accepted by other Gamers) to differentiate between the ways I see this term being used in games culture. While all players are gamers, not all players are Gamers. For example, I have been playing games my entire life, and write about and teach games for a living; I am surely a gamer, but I may never be a Gamer, because I am not accepted by large portions of those who comprise games culture. I used to believe that if I just insisted I was a Gamer, despite being a woman and a feminist, eventually acceptance and belonging would follow, but now I believe that an interrogation and dissection of the Gamer identity is necessary to create a games culture where all players are equal. While anyone who plays games *should* be considered a capital-G Gamer, more often they are not considered “enough” to be a Gamer by dominant gamer culture—and it is the difference between these two states, as well as the inaccessibility of this identity and larger culture that is of interest to this dissertation as many women, because of their gender will find themselves perpetually being seen as “gamers,” no matter how much they identify with the larger “Gamer” identity.

## **What is a Gamer?**

Developing a sense of belonging in games culture is difficult because of active policing of the symbolic borders of the “Gamer” identity. A 2015 study showed that while 57% of women between the ages of 18 and 29 play video games, only 9% of them identify as “Gamers”; by contrast 77% of men in the same age group play games and 33% identified as gamers (Duggan, “Who plays”). Many women are uncomfortable calling themselves Gamers, even though they regularly play games, because they either feel they are not playing “enough,” that they don’t spend “enough” (time or money) or because they don’t know “enough” (Shaw, “On Not”; Khan). Shaw interviewed many gamers about their identity, and found that the reasons for this disidentification go beyond just the games themselves. Some of Shaw’s participants explained that a “real” Gamer would know certain information: they would know developer’s names, they would make and get certain inside jokes, and they would play a wide variety of games, especially difficult ones (“On Not”). Complicating things further, what qualifies one to take up the identity of Gamer will change depending on which member of the culture you are talking to, making it even more difficult for those who are not traditionally aligned with the identity (like women, and especially women of color) to occupy it.

Problematically, the title Gamer is used to determine who is and who is not a full participant in games culture, who gets to walk into gaming spaces unquestioned, who gets to play online unharassed, and who gets to express their opinion without facing abuse. Many male Gamers get to experience a type of intense belonging, while female gamers are ostracized and harassed (Fox and Tang 315). As a female gamer it is easy to feel as though, despite playing games, you are missing out on the full experience of the community. You want the sense of belonging and may even try to convince yourself you have it, but something is always missing.

You can spend a lifetime feeling like you are peeking into the windows of a cultural clubhouse where you can see what is happening inside. You long to take part. You can talk to the members when they leave, you can know all the secret knocks and passwords, but for some reason your key just doesn't seem to fit the lock.

The cultural barriers to women's adoption of the Gamer identity are caused by the systemic sexism within games culture that Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Morie Frond, and Celia Pearce describe. They termed this phenomenon "the hegemony of play" in order to:

critique the way in which complex layering of technological, commercial and cultural power structures have dominated the development of the digital game industry over the past 35 years, creating an entrenched status quo which ignores the needs and desires of "minority" players such as women and "non-gamers," who in fact represent the majority of the population (Fron et al. 1).

Essentially, the hegemony of play is the system that has allowed games culture to *become* as inaccessible to girls and women as it currently is by both *creating and maintaining* barriers to entry and to full participation. It is present in every facet of games culture including, but not limited to: the games industry, professional gaming, games journalism, academia, and the manner in which games are marketed and sold. The hegemony of play allows men to pass through games culture, to participate fully, without being questioned, no matter what type of games they play, while women in games culture will be viewed as outsiders, even after a lifetime of participation.

Participating in any gameplay that does not have particularly traditionally "masculine" themes (war, sci-fi, fantasy, horror) or mechanics (complex, violent, difficult) is one of the qualities that makes one "not a Gamer" by hegemonic standards. For example, someone who

spends a lot of time playing so called “casual games” like puzzle game *Candy Crush* (2012), or life simulation *Animal Crossing* (2001–2017) is seen as not being a “real Gamer,” even if they have invested *more time and money* into the games than a “hardcore” gamer has invested into their own hobby. As Jesper Juul explains in his 2010 book-length examination of casual games and casual gamers, “casual games are positioned as a rejection of traditional hardcore game design, within its gory themes and focus on technological capabilities” (25). Gamers have used the terms “casual gamer” and “hardcore gamer” to differentiate between those they feel are “real” gamers (hardcore) or not (Juul 25). But, more often than not, “hardcore” and “casual” are code words for “men” and “women,” and “good” and “bad.” In fact, “casual” is a term often used by Gamers to insult other Gamers, the modern equivalent of saying “you play like a girl.” This is part of the reason I am choosing to use the vocabulary of gamer/Gamer in this dissertation, rather than terms like hardcore/casual, to discuss this divide.

Juul explains that he thinks a hardcore player values “emotionally negative fictions like science fiction, vampires, fantasy and war,” as well as “difficult games,” whereas a casual player values “positive and pleasant fictions ... and dislikes difficult games” (29). This oversimplified division is a product of the time Juul was writing, the divide has had since been complicated; not only do many people not fit this divide, but the standards of what makes one a Gamer (as opposed to a “casual”) are becoming stricter and more cultural as more people start playing games and the lines around what is a “casual” and “hardcore” game become less and less clear than they once were. When massive multiplayer shooters like the currently popular *Fortnite* (2017) can be played on phones, we can’t simply label all “phone games” as casual any longer. In contrast, for some Gamers, simply playing games on anything other than a PC is enough to revoke someone's “Gamer” status even if the games themselves are the same (Johnson, “Hiding”

12). Someone like myself, who likes to play emotionally positive and negative, simple and hard, sci-fi, fantasy, horror, *and* casual puzzle and life sim games in equal measures (as well as games that mix these types of play), complicates the system for “who is in” and “who is out.” Most players enjoy games of both sides of this spectrum and don’t easily fit into the hardcore/casual divide because gamer identity is much more complicated than just the games one chooses to play. While the title and identity “Gamer” was originally simply a term for those who played 1940s and ‘50s war games (Peterson), over the years it came to mean those who played video games specifically and now the term represents a largely white and male demographic (Kirkpatrick, *Computer* 85).

In the 1980s the term gamer was not yet used within the popular discourse of gaming magazines (Kirkpatrick, *Computer* 85). Briefly, in 1985, the term ‘gamesters’ was used, but at the time gaming magazines were mostly aimed at parents looking to buy games for their “gamester” children and therefore a gamer “identity” was not yet necessary to sell games to the players themselves (Kirkpatrick, *Computer* 85). This dynamic shifted in the 1990s, as gamers aged and game magazines were now targeting a specific demographic of older males. Around this time, game magazines and marketing teams started addressing their audience “more assuredly as teenage, male gamers” and demonstrating some of the characteristics that we now associate with contemporary Gamer identity (Kirkpatrick, *Computer* 87). In his article “How Gaming Became Sexist” Graeme Kirkpatrick argues that this shift happened over just a few years:

From early 1985, games were consistently singled out as a discrete class of objects with their own specialized terminology of evaluation and appraisal. At the same time, a new reader position was formed around the term ‘gamer’, indicating the presence of a new

subject defined by its embrace of the game-focused discourse (Kirkpatrick, 2014). From the end of 1986, this discourse became overtly gendered as male and over the course of 1987–1989 presented symbolic boundaries to female participation (457).

In other words, the term gamer wasn't originally intended for only a male audience; it was intended to describe those who were interested in games and their related discourse, but in just a few years the discourse around this identity became aligned as male. Kirkpatrick argues that 1985 saw the birth of gaming culture through the discourse produced in video game magazines; this journalism centered on an ideal gamer who “was the arbiter of great ‘gameplay’ and gaming discourse was structured around this figure and his, or (at this stage) her, preferences” (“How” 459–460). Kirkpatrick argued that, until 1986, a gamer was still presented as anyone with an interest in games and that “intelligence rather than gender was what distinguished gamers from inferior players or out groups” (“How” 462). This all changed in the following two years.

Between 1987–1988, games journalists writing for gaming magazines “began to oppose the figure of the young male gamer, now possessed with an intuitive appreciation of the real value in games, to the feminized, weak player” (“How” 462). On top of this, heterosexual sex, and women's bodies started being used heavily to sell games to this presumed male demographic, and women started to come up frequently in gaming magazines as the butt of various jokes (Kirkpatrick, “How” 462–463). By the time I was born in 1988, games culture and gaming were already deeply culturally linked to masculinity. As Kirkpatrick explains, games culture was a community built around linking one's skill and understanding of video games “with the attainment of masculine virtue” (“How” 465). I was locked out of the clubhouse before I ever even booted up my first video game.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Which was, for the record, *Pitfall* (1982) on the Commodore 64.

Furthermore, after the US games industry crash from 1983–84 that destroyed Atari as well as countless other companies, the games industry became quite risk averse and American companies who had been burdened with Atari games they could not sell would only stock the Nintendo Entertainment System in the gender-divided toy aisle (Kline et al. 110). Research showed that the “principal players” of games were boys from age eight to seventeen, and therefore games were placed in the boy’s aisle, marketed aggressively to boys, and focused on adapting the arcade games that were most popular with young boys: primarily, “action–adventure, sports, racing, fighting, and shooting genres” (Kline et al. 249). This surely only helped to solidify what was already happening in the discourse of gaming magazines. Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer–Witford, and Greg De Peuter delve deep into the construction of the Gamer identity in their book *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* in which they coin the term “military masculinity” to explain the ways in which gaming, games and Gamers are historically strongly aligned with “gender coded scenarios of war, conquest, and combat” (247). While some female gamers may also enjoy games with these scenarios or themes (Kline et al. 262), it is important to highlight that these games were not designed with women in mind; instead, at the time the industry was establishing that “what teenage boys want, teenage boys get” (Kline et al. 256–257). More than the subject matter, it is the marketing of these games, be it in magazines or on television, that gives away the intended male audience. Even games that had wide appeal amongst a variety of genders and ages were promoted through highly gendered advertisements; for example, Nintendo’s classic *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998), was advertised on TV with the slogan: “willst thou get the girl? Or play like one?” (Hochschartner). ‘90s video game marketing often focused on things we now think of as associated with stereotyped ideas of a Gamer, such as, not “having a life” not being able to “get

the girl," violence, and even masturbation as shown in the commercial for *Street Fighter II* (1994) (Kline et al. 131).

While it may seem like a stretch to link masturbation to Gamer identity<sup>2</sup>, examine this statement from the year 2000 in print magazine *DieHard GameFan* in which the editor-in-chief brings up masturbation when he remarks the following:

It's been said before, but today's gamer isn't cut from the same cloth as those of yesteryear—then again, I suppose it would have helped if you'd started playing games prior to PlayStation, right? Yep, back when a gamer was a gamer and the only thing he had to look forward to on a Friday night was a date with Mario, a bag of Doritos and a six-pack of Mountain Dew—oh, and some of that Skinemax stuff. Nope, today's 'gamers' are watered down, shrinky-dink versions of the old school player (qtd. in Holmes).

Within this comment, we can see some of the cultural and commercial signifiers that people still use today to indicate “Gamer” status: masculinity, outsider status, retro gaming, Doritos, Energy Drinks, Mountain Dew, and masturbation/pornography. Many of these signifiers mentioned in *DieHard GameFan* are still being currently linked to Gamer identity today. The character D.va from the popular multiplayer first person shooter *Overwatch* (2016) (fig. 1.2) can perform an in game animation in which she plays a retro game similar to *Space Invaders* (1978) while eating Doritos and drinking Mountain Dew.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sex and masturbation were actually used in 90's games advertising often including advertisements for the SEGA Game Gear which featured a cartoon male with his back to the viewer who appeared to be masturbating and then a cartoon of the same male playing the Game Gear naked side by side. An advertisement for the Game Boy featured a man who was distracted from a woman in her underwear chained to a bed by the game he was playing. One Game Gear advertisement read “the more you play with it, the harder it gets” and another Game Boy advertisement read “Game Boy. More fun than a ferret down your trousers”. This is not even including the countless advertisements that featured scantily clad women.

<sup>3</sup> But obviously not masturbating. One hopes this indicates that pornography/masturbation has been since dropped from the list of things used to signify gamer identity. I would also be remiss not to mention here the South Korean feminist organization “For D.Va” (aka “National D.va Association”) whose aim is to fight to make D.Va, (who exists in *Overwatch* as a Korean professional gamer in the year 2060) possible. The idea behind the organization is



(Fig. 1.1) D.Va from *Overwatch* playing games, eating Doritos, and drinking Mountain Dew (McWhertor).

The references to pornography or masturbation in the quotation represent less that gamers must always be doing something with their hands, and more that video games are the most important thing in a gamer's life, more important than maintaining relationships or having sex. A classic example of this dynamic playing out can be seen in the 1998 television advertisement for the original PlayStation, in which Crash, the star of the *Crash Bandicoot* (1996–2017) series, interrupts a male Gamer who is on a date (with a woman) at the movies. Crash tells him “you are so totally whipped” and asks him if he would rather be “at home shooting a bazooka, or watching a chick flick” (Golding 134). The Gamer is then transported home where he is playing video games with an animated version of *Tomb Raider* (1996–2015) protagonist and popular sex object of the time, Lara Croft, while his date is locked outside crying his name and begging to be let in.

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that currently, someone like D.Va, a young women who unapologetically games and represents gamer identity, could not exist in real life because women are not treated equally. The organization wants to make Korea, and the world, a better place for future female gamers (like D.Va) to be born into by attacking injustice both within the gaming communities and the larger political sphere.

When Lara Croft asks him who is outside he laughs and says “I don’t know!” before returning to playing his game. It’s hard not to read this commercial as a metaphor for the ways women were pushed out of games; in this case, literally locked outside and begging to be let in.



(fig 1.2) A man playing games with Lara Croft in a 1998 PlayStation advertisement (DefaultEclipse).

Lastly, when the EIC of *DieHard GameFan* says “today's 'gamers' are watered down, shrinky-dink versions of the old school player,” you sense the palpable resentment and opposition to people who *think* they are Gamers but are “not really” Gamers which has never left games culture. Kirkpatrick’s research demonstrates how these long and heated discussions of “true” Gamer identity have been part of the discourse of games culture since at least 1987 (“How” 462).

When you are a female gamer the hegemony of play dominates your life as a player. In my 25-ish years playing countless video games and spending time with a large variety of Gamers, I am constantly reminded that because of my gender I will never ever really be a full participant in games culture. All of this time spent around Gamers has led to countless experiences where I’ve felt excluded, marginalized, harassed, violated, and even abused because of my gender. It was always difficult for me to put into words *how and why* I felt excluded from playing games when no one was physically holding me back from participation. Games were technically accessible to me, yet the culture and the labels that went along with it were not. All of

this led me to develop a term that encompassed the exclusion I felt within games culture: cultural inaccessibility.

### **What is Cultural Inaccessibility?**

Throughout this dissertation, I use the term “cultural inaccessibility” to frame my discussion of games culture. Cultural inaccessibility refers to the various cultural barriers that either deliberately or unconsciously exclude people from certain subcultures, or that make them feel unsafe in these subcultures because of their identities. Someone may have the economic capital or able-bodied privilege to perform a task (i.e. physically play a game that you purchased) but still face considerable resistance due to their race, gender, and/or sexuality. Consider the following examples of how games can be rendered culturally inaccessible.

Jenny Haniver has an Xbox 360, an online game, an internet connection, a membership to Xbox Live, and the headset needed to communicate with other players. But, as soon as Haniver speaks on the headset she is immediately met with insults and hostility. Men make sexual advances on her, her own team tries to kill her, she is told to stop playing, and frequently she is told to “get back in the kitchen.” Haniver records the sexist comments she receives and posts them to her website *Not in the Kitchen Anymore* to document her experiences as a female gamer. Haniver is a skilled gamer who has substantial experience in various first-person shooters, but because she is a woman and must use voice chat to play effectively, she is often denied the same experience of male players of the same game. While her experience and skill at the game *should* have led to her being accepted by the other gamers playing her online FPS, being a woman exempts her from receiving recognition as “just another Gamer” and therefore the game is not fully accessible to her.

While men also hear various forms of trash-talk and insults while they play, the insults that men use on each other are both less frequent and not *about* their gender (or directed at them *because of* their gender). Nonetheless, men may face harassment and inaccessibility due to their race, or even their sexual orientation, via profiling of their speech patterns (Nakamura 1). Lisa Nakamura explains that Gamers use “aural stereotyping based on the speech patterns and inflections of players” resulting in “powerful new forms of voice activated racism” (2). For example, UFC fighter Quinton “Rampage” Jackson spoke out about this harassment, saying that he stopped playing online games because “my own team would kill me because they’d hear my voice and start calling me ‘nigger.’ ‘nigger this nigger that!’ If you was right next to me at the arcade, you wouldn’t say nothing. I don’t ever tell them who I am” (qtd. in Nakamura 2). While offline Jackson is a celebrity athlete, this does not make harassment-free online gaming accessible to him.

When women of colour play online games these two situations are compounded to create gendered racist harassment. Gray outlines one of her personal experiences along these lines in her book *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live*. One night while playing online in voice chat with a team of strangers, she heard the remark, “that’s why you suck. You’re a fucking girl!” This comment was followed up by a forceful and racist realization: “wait wait wait. You’re not just any girl. You’re black. Get this black bitch off my team. Did you spend all your welfare check buying this game? Why aren’t you doing what you love? Get back to your crack pipe with your crack babies” (qtd. in Gray *Race* xvii). Gray goes on to explain that games, for her, are a journey: “the journey, although mostly fun and enjoyable, frequently becomes a place full of hatred and intolerance” (*Race* xvii). What Gray is describing in these passages is the way in

which the space of Xbox Live, and therefore games culture, are inaccessible to her. What is being denied to her, and Haniver, and Johnson, is what Mia Consalvo calls “gaming capital” (3).

### **What is Gaming Capital?**

The main method of keeping games culture inaccessible to women is by policing what games, knowledge, actions, and skills are considered valid and culturally important. In other words, Gamers keep their culture sealed off by sharing and deploying and circulating what Pierre Bourdieu famously called “cultural capital.” Bourdieu felt we could not understand society unless we acknowledge the presence and accumulation of capital in “all its forms” and not simply economic capital (15). Bourdieu argues both that capital can be immaterial, and it can circulate despite its immateriality (16). Mia Consalvo outlines how cultural capital functions in games culture through her concept of “gaming capital.” Gaming capital is useful for discussing the ways that gamers “interact with games, information about games, the game industry, and other game players,” and how these interactions are used as a currency that is present (albeit different) in all varieties of games cultures (Consalvo 4). Consalvo notes that “players can accumulate various forms of gaming capital not only from playing games but also from the paratextual industries that support them” (184). Gaming capital isn’t simply how many games you’ve played or how skilled you are (although that is part of it); it is also developed through reading game reviews, watching certain streamers and YouTubers<sup>4</sup>, and attending certain events. Gamers (who already have the economic capital necessary to buy games) demonstrate three of the varieties of cultural capital that Bourdieu describes in “The Forms of Capital”: objectified cultural capital, embodied cultural capital, and linguistic cultural capital (17).

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<sup>4</sup> i.e. people who stream their gameplay live on websites like Twitch, or people who make videos about games or of their gameplay on Youtube.

Objectified cultural capital is obtained by physically owning objects (Bourdieu, “Forms” 17) and is gained by having large collections of both physical and digital games, gaming hardware and games related merchandise. This type of capital could be demonstrated by having items that are worth a lot of money (such as shelves full of vintage games) or things worth no money at all (such as obtaining in-game items or trophies). The key is that they are culturally impressive and can be shown off. The owner can gain cultural capital not just from having these things, but from playing or displaying them (trophies), and is therefore able to participate in conversations about their meaning or content.

Just having these objects won’t demonstrate your cultural capital—you have to communicate or show to people that you have these objects in order to obtain the capital. I have witnessed many demonstrations of objectified cultural capital by gamers who like to discuss how powerful their computers are, or how many games they own for the current generation of consoles. To my knowledge, people don’t actually go around *inspecting* other gamers’ computers or collections—it is the *claim* that is of importance. On the other hand, statistics about your hours of playtime or level in a game are often viewable to all other players through the social networking aspects of certain games and consoles and therefore that information can be checked, and often is.

Next, embodied cultural capital is key to Gamer culture. This is the capital that is acquired or slowly inherited through socialization and participation in a culture. As Bourdieu explained, “accumulation of cultural capital in the embodied state” requires “a labor of inculcation and assimilation” which “costs time, time which must be invested personally by the investor. Like the acquisition of a muscular physique or a suntan, it cannot be done at second hand” (“Forms” 18). Embodied cultural capital in games culture may be as simple as a

demonstrable in-game skill that has been worked on for years, or as complex as possessing an encyclopedic knowledge of the history and story of a series of games. This type of cultural capital is accessible to women but only if they have access to the time and technology needed or are exposed to someone who already possesses capital in order to teach them (likely a father, a brother, a significant other).

When women are shut out of games culture because they don't have embodied capital they are denied the ability to develop in the first place and a vicious cycle is created. Therefore, cultural inaccessibility could also be understood as an inability to develop embodied cultural capital due to one's born identity. Embodied cultural capital is also the reason why women like myself have to so frequently assert that they are lifelong gamers in both our play and our writing. Displaying gaming capital in this instance is not for the purpose of bragging but is instead a survival technique to assert or display a narrative of embodied capital to those who would not otherwise believe us to be Gamers (or even gamers). Referring back to the quotation from *DieHard GameFan* magazine wherein the editor insisted that real gamers are playing games with Doritos and Mountain Dew and consuming pornography on a Friday night—underneath this statement is an assertion that true devotion to games is devotion to *the exclusion of all else*, including romantic interactions and traditional socializing. This clichéd depiction creates a very problematic idea of who can be a Gamer and why.

Lastly, linguistic capital is a form of embodied capital that is especially difficult to attain. Someone with linguistic gaming capital knows how to communicate like a Gamer. The vocabulary of gaming is vast and complicated. Furthermore, there are cultural in-jokes and ways of speaking (trash talk, or references to memes for example) that demonstrate linguistic capital to

other gamers. Terms like agro, HP, DPS, and OP<sup>5</sup> are examples of gaming language that is thrown around in play or as part of casual discourse. Linguistic capital also helps demonstrate what type of Gamer you are, as using culturally specific terms like “Social Justice Warriors” or “Vidja Games” demonstrates to others that you are either a member of, or sympathetic towards, Gamergate. New gamers don’t have access to this language: it has to be learned via exposure, experience or even research. Because linguistic capital is passed on slowly through time within a specific culture, you have to be present in gaming’s cultural spaces to learn the language. I personally am unsure where or how I learned all the gaming terms and language I know, beyond being steeped in games culture from a young age thanks to having multiple male relatives who played games. While this allowed a certain amount of access to embodied and linguistic capital, I was still last in line to play. The games, the systems, the language, none of it was mine, it was borrowed. Learning this language as an adult would be difficult, not only because it takes a great deal of time to acquire, but also because you are expected by other Gamers to already be able to communicate as one of their own.

In her article “Three Ways Women Unlearn their Love of Video Games,” Juliette Khan explains that simply getting girls to play games at a young age is not enough to get them to “keep loving” games into their adult years. Khan uses a combination of her own experience and her much younger sister’s experiences to demonstrate the variety of ways in which girls are first

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<sup>5</sup> “Agro” is the act of accidentally or purposefully drawing the attention (and likely attack) of an NPC or enemy in a video game, “HP” is an abbreviation of either “hit points” or “health points” and is used as a numeric description of how many “health” a playable character or enemy has, or how close they are to death, “DPS” is an abbreviation of “damage per second”, as in, how many damage a player is doing to an enemy in an attack that produces damage over a length on time instead of just instantly (usually through spells), “OP” is an abbreviation of “overpowered” usually referring to the amount of damage done by a certain character or weapon in relation to other characters or weapons.

denied gaming capital from their gaming experiences, and then forced to leave games behind as they grow up. Khan explains:

Like me, [my sister] knows from personal experience that girls play video games, and would hotly defend it if challenged. But a second tenet holds sway, as contrary as it is simultaneous: video games are for boys. The video games we've played don't count.

They're concessions, scraps, snatches at the lucrative attention of little girls. It's not that my sister and I don't like real games; it's that the games we like aren't real.

This is the double-edged sword women and girls in gaming encounter on a daily basis. At a young age, girls learn that not only are so-called "girl" games or "casual" games or mobile games not considered "real" games by many, but that playing these games doesn't count towards developing embodied gaming capital. In other words, young girls are denied the opportunity to develop gaming capital unless they play the "right" games and develop the "right" knowledge, both of which are coded as masculine. In my lifetime, the goalposts of what is a "real" game have continued moving further out to such an extent that it's near impossible to determine what "real" games are, or if you play any of them. In some groups, a childhood knowledge of *Pokémon* (1996-2017) may count as embodied capital. In others, knowledge of or devotion to games played on Nintendo systems may actual detract from your capital. But who are the people moving these goal posts and why? I would like to turn my attention momentarily from female gamers to those who are deciding what is and is not cultural capital, those deciding who is and is not a "Gamer." These are the "gatekeepers."

### **What is Gatekeeping?**

To explain the phenomenon of cultural inaccessibility more clearly, I need to first define and discuss the practice of gatekeeping. Gatekeeping is the practice of deciding who has access to a

community or subculture or who can participate in that space. A person who takes this job upon themselves is referred to as a “gatekeeper.” While a gatekeeper historically was someone who controlled access to a physical space (i.e. opening and closing a literal city gate), the term now refers more generally to one who controls access to resources and opportunities (Cambridge). In popular discourse, the term expresses the ways that certain individuals control access to information, culture, or identities; common examples include the punk (“Green Day isn’t punk music”), geek (“liking Harry Potter doesn’t make you a real geek”), or queer identity (“you may be attracted to women but you married a man so you’re not really queer”) (Sarahalyse). In game studies the term gatekeeper has been used to discuss not only how Gamers police who they feel is allowed to identify as a gamer (“you only play Nintendo games so you aren’t a gamer”), but also the way that men have traditionally policed women’s access to gaming technology and space (intentionally or otherwise). As T. L. Taylor and Emma Witkowski have explained, pursuing an interest in playing games as a woman “would often mean going through male friends, boyfriends, or male family members to access the technology and games” (6–7). I myself would not be writing this if not for the fact that as a child my younger brother, whom games were purchased for, decided he would share his toys with me. But, he could have just as easily said no; in other words, despite his choice to open that gate he was still in a position of control over my access. More often than not I’ve encountered closed gates: such as my male friends and relatives who would forbid girls (and later girlfriends) from playing *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974 –2014) with them. Gatekeeping can come from a place of attempting to “protect” an identity or culture from outsiders, but in practice it usually feels like a large “no girls allowed” sign.

The article “Challenging The Gatekeepers: Exposing Fallacies of the ‘Fake Geek Girl’ Argument” by Natalie Zina Walschots illustrates the gatekeeping practices that make gaming so inaccessible to women. The comments on Walschots’ article address why many feel like there is nothing stopping women from becoming more involved in games culture beyond a woman’s desire to play games. Walschots’ article directly confronts the gatekeeping behaviors of gaming culture by critiquing the following viral image and all of its rhetorical implications:



(fig. 1.3) A meme about female gamers (Walschots).

This meme imagines a world where all women rejected and mocked men because of their interest in video games until, in 2006 (in console generation 7—the year the PS3 and Wii came out), these same fictional women began to desire attention from men and therefore decided to turn their attention to games such as *Portal* (2007) (which is referenced in the meme: “the cake is a lie”) to obtain the interest of Gamer men. These women then try to change games (that they previously did not care about) because they “are sexist” and demand that games should “cater to

their needs.” It would be easy to brush this image off as ridiculous but this heavily shared image made it to the front page of Reddit because it is part of a dominant cultural narrative that Gamers have bought into. As Walschots puts it:

The image struck a chord with a lot of people and gained a lot of traction online. For me, it revealed something very important about the resentment that a lot of male gamers have for women who share their interest. It additionally reveals a lot more about the author's (and all the subsequent sharers' and upvoters') insecurities and animosity towards girl gamers.

While Walschots explains the issues with gatekeeping in the rest of the article very clearly, the comments the article received demonstrate perfectly the gaps in understanding for the gatekeepers reading her article. By and large, there are two types of comments on Walschots article which I will summarize here: 1) “well there are a lot of good reasons we are protective of our culture, it’s because of bullies!” and 2) “no one is physically stopping you from participating but yourselves.” Both of these types of comments demonstrate a lack of understanding of how gatekeeping works as a cultural practice. One commenter explains perspective #1 as follows:

Imagine the gaming community like a gated community, it used to be a normal community but due to so many misunderstandings and emotional torment its members decided to put up a gate and withdraw inside. This community was under attack for a very long time and quite intensely to point where gamers in the 70s, 80s and 90s where [sic] scared to go to school, scare [sic] to meet new people and pretty much hated life.

From this perspective gatekeeping of gamer culture is a justified method of protecting oneself from the harsh realities of the outside world. The commenter understands the “emotional torment” of his own childhood “outsider” status but is neither sympathetic to women

experiencing exclusion from “his” culture, nor aware of any women who shared this outsider status in their youth.

Another two commenters explain perspective #2: “No one wants to ‘keep the gates closed’. No one stands at their EB Games or GameStop, restricting women from entering the store. You weren't stopped from playing video-games.” Similarly: “last time I checked, there wasn't a giant man yelling curse words at women whenever they tried to buy video games. There's no 'gatekeeper' to the hobby, just the communities surrounding it.” These last two comments demonstrate a lot about the divide between physical and cultural accessibility. One commenter actually acknowledges that the “communities,” i.e. games culture *are* inaccessible to women, but doesn't feel that this is a problem. For this commenter, if something is physically available to women then it is fully accessible to them; the cultural accessibility is either seen as unimportant or the commenter cannot imagine what it would be like to lack the privilege to participate in these spaces.

Furthermore, all negative commenters on this article (unsurprisingly) seem to be unable to grasp how the meme itself and the narrative it perpetuates is a form of gatekeeping—how memes like this affect people like me and our desire to enter game-centric spaces, including the stores where video games are sold. There are countless cultural factors that come into play before a woman even walks into a game store. Does she have access to the knowledge to know what she wants to buy? Will she be condescended to if she asks a question? Will she be condescended to even if she doesn't ask any questions? Is she intimidated about entering that space? Or does she buy the game online as to avoid game stores which feel unwelcoming to non-Gamers, or those perceived as non-Gamers? These Gamers commenting do not understand that they don't have to physically “restric[t] women from entering the store” or “yel[l] curse words at women whenever

they tr[y] to buy video games” in order to stop them from entering.

My partner once joked that when I walk into a games store one of two things happen: I will either be totally ignored or repeatedly hit on. Most memorably, when preparing for my “New Media” PhD comprehensive exam, I went into an EB Games to buy a game that I had been assigned to play before the final exam. I walked into the store, picked up the game, (*Beyond Two Souls*, 2013) and took it to the counter. I was in a scenario where I was buying a game for both my job as a games researcher and for myself as a lifelong gamer, but I was instead treated as if I was a mother or girlfriend shopping for a “real” Gamer. The employee behind the cash stared at the game instead of scanning it and then shouted at my partner (who was standing at least 10 feet away across the large store with his back to us looking at plastic figures) asking if he has played the developer’s other game. I replied, “No I haven’t played *Heavy Rain*” (demonstrating that I knew what he what “other” game he was talking about) and elaborated that I knew this game was supposed to be the “spiritual successor” to *Heavy Rain* (2010). The employee looked at me blankly for a moment and then turned to my partner *again* to ask if he was *sure* he wanted it, because it was the same style as *Heavy Rain* with quick-time events and long cut-scenes and therefore it wasn’t very good. I asserted that I knew what the game was like and I wanted to buy it anyway and the employee silently rang it through looking back at my partner (who was still oblivious) clearly upset he didn’t get to have the conversation with my partner that he wanted. Not once did he speak to me.

This incident demonstrates gatekeeping and cultural inaccessibility at play; I was attempting to buy a game for myself and yet there was an assumption that I was buying it *for* my partner who would never have entered the store without me. This is simply because my partner is white, has glasses and a beard, and was dressed in jeans and a hoodie and despite not being a

Gamer he *looks* like what people *think* a Gamer should look like. I, on the other hand, was wearing a dress and makeup, and therefore I was *not* read as a Gamer despite being the one at the counter ready to buy the game. Furthermore, this interaction wasn't about money because the employee was attempting to talk my partner *out of buying that game*. When I left the store I was very angry and upset: while there was no one in the store stopping me from buying the game, I felt like I was still not welcome in the store outside of my role as mother, sister, or girlfriend. This was not my first experience like that at a games store and it was not my last. Games culture makes games inaccessible to me even when I'm standing in the store surrounded by them with a lifetime of knowledge and my wallet open. As frustrating as this was, I didn't have to go into a game store to know that I wasn't the expected or intended audience, because I was an avid consumer of the criticism and discourse of games culture through games journalism, games academia, and social media. I was very accustomed to the spread of toxic<sup>6</sup> tweets, articles, and memes that insisted that women either weren't gamers, or were only interested in games to ruin them.

## **What is Games Criticism?**

The criticism and discourse surrounding games (i.e. games reviews, blogging, academic scholarship, forums, memes, social media posts and so on) also have cultural limitations. Most women gamers unfortunately understand that there are many risks to writing about games on the

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<sup>6</sup> Toxic masculinity refers to masculine gender norms that are harmful to people of all genders and society. The classic example is the way in which boys and men are punished for expressing any emotions other than anger causing anger to then in turn become the dominant emotion through which men feel they are allowed to express themselves. Psychologist Terry A. Kupers defines the term as men's "need to aggressively compete and dominate others" (713). The term was originally academic before it became popular online due to the viral hashtag #masculinitysofragile (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 171). Ironically men reacted very angrily to this hashtag as they "conflated this attack on the construct of *masculinity* with an attack on *maleness*" (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 171). I use the term "toxic" throughout this dissertation to talk about different spaces and cultures and when I do I am referring to this cocktail of dominance, competition, aggression and anger, often against women, that is at the root of toxic masculinity.

internet: even simply tweeting or sharing a video can open you up to harassment, doxxing, (the process of searching for and compiling private and public information about an individual and sharing it publicly with negative intentions), or even threats. Because of my role as an academic studying gender and games, I personally experienced at least some exposure to all of these forms of backlash and more. I have been harassed for things as prominent as appearing in videos made by NBC News (discussed in chapter 5), or as small as being present at an academic conference (discussed in chapter 4). Many women choose to not talk about games, and especially gender and games, in any public manner because they fear the backlash they have witnessed other women endure.

Carolyn Petit is a games critic who used to work for the video game review website *GameSpot*. Petit wrote a review of *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) upon its release and gave the game a score of 9/10. While she loved the game, in her review she noted that the game has misogynistic overtones that some might find offensive. Gamers who were offended by her review, believing both that the game should have received a 10/10 and that she should not have mentioned the sexist content, started a petition to have her fired (Parfitt). While many comments on the review contained sexist and transphobic harassment, a variety of other comments noted that Petit was biased both as a woman, and as a feminist, and this affected her ability to review the game to their standards. One commenter claimed “its [sic] a 10. This reviewer's prejudice has clouded her opinion of what otherwise is a masterpiece,” while another argued, “keep your personal vendettas out of your reviews” (qtd. in Parfitt).

The reaction to the review is made worse by the fact that a cis male reviewer for another publication wrote a much harsher review of the game that gave *GTA V* a 3.5 stars out of 5 for bad writing and unlikeable characters and had received nowhere near the hate or harassment that

Petit had faced, thereby proving that the reaction was not about the score, but the woman writing the review and her feminist perspective (Smith). While Petit had the physical means (employment as a journalist, a platform to display her writing as a journalist, a review copy of the game) to write this review, the act of writing about games is not culturally accessible to her as she received thousands of negative comments and tweets including threats against her life because of this almost entirely positive review. This is just one of countless examples of women who have experienced life-changing harassment for simply doing their jobs. This example also demonstrates the ways in which the discourse of games culture became inaccessible to women long before the rise of Gamergate.

### **What is Gamergate?**

More recently, the Gamer identity has become associated with hateful and aggressive speech and harassment, making it difficult for many to fully identify with the term even if they have the privilege to do so. As Dan Golding explains, “to be a gamer now is to be, at least in part, marked by the color of Gamergate” (128). Some are so attached to the identity of Gamer and its fixed meaning that they are willing to threaten to rape and kill those who question the legitimacy or importance of Gamer identity. In August 2014, a group of gamers began a large organized harassment campaign against women in gaming and their allies using the twitter hashtag #gamergate. While the same group of people had been harassing women for years, they lacked a cause to rally around. They found their banner after the abusive ex-boyfriend of game developer Zoe Quinn posted a 10,000 word “manifesto” about Quinn’s supposed wrongdoings with the intention of it going viral amongst angry Gamers. The central accusation was that Quinn had exchanged sexual favors for a favorable review of her critical success *Depression Quest* (2013), even though the journalist in question *did not even review her game* (Quinn 3). Despite being

filled with lies and slander the “manifesto” went viral amongst Gamers who clung on to the idea that there was corruption in games journalism that went beyond this one incident, and that a variety of feminist women like Quinn were at the heart of it.

Under the pretext of battling for “ethics in game journalism,” a group of irate Gamers dubbed themselves Gamergate (ironically, a reference to Watergate<sup>7</sup>, rather than gatekeeping) and set to work on rectifying the situation. The focus of their campaign was on harassing women who write about, make, study, or play games in an effort to “protect” video games from, as they put it, a feminist “conspiracy”—harassment which continues to this day (Chess and Shaw 208). Despite the initial events transpiring almost four years ago, I have received harassment from people associated with Gamergate as recently as January of 2018. To Gamergate, feminists in games became a villainous force that was ruining video games, and they as Gamers, became the “heroes” destined to educate and eradicate feminists from the games culture. As Quinn put it, “thousands of people who had never heard of me before rallied around [t]his banner and took up the crusade, latching on to me as a stand in for any number of things they hated” (2).

This harassment started long before August 2014; for example, Shafiqah Hudson reached out to Quinn when she noticed that a lot of the Twitter users harassing Quinn had harassed her in June of 2014 during the #endfathersday hoax. In this case, a group of men made fake accounts using photos of black women and claimed to be black feminists who wanted Father’s Day banned to stir up public outrage against both feminism and black women (Quinn 206). The hashtag quickly went viral based on misinformation and those who spoke out against the hoax, like Hudson, were heavily harassed online. Hudson also claimed that the same Twitter users that were harassing her had been attacking trans women for years, claiming that the abusers leading

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<sup>7</sup> The Watergate scandal took place in America in the 1970’s under the Nixon administration. Now in North America it is common to add “-gate” to words to signify an event involving scandal and corruption.

Gamergate “practiced—cut their teeth, if you will—on trans and Black women” (qtd. in Quinn 206). This of course indicates that this type of online harassment did not start in games culture, and wasn’t always part of games culture but did take root in games culture quite comfortably. Also worth noting that when white people face harassment, we are much more likely to receive sympathetic media coverage than people of colour and trans women. You have probably heard of Gamergate, but you probably haven’t heard of #endfathersday.

Another example of pre-Gamergate harassment is the abuse of *Feminist Frequency* founder Anita Sarkeesian, who was first targeted by the nascent group in 2013, after publishing a Kickstarter campaign to fund a series of video essays examining the representation of women in video games on YouTube. Sarkeesian has spoken out against the harassment she faced in a TED Talk, as a guest on *The Colbert Report*, and at the UN, but the harassment has not stopped (Valenti). Here are just two tweets that were directed at Sarkeesian that she then shared on her website (“One Week”)

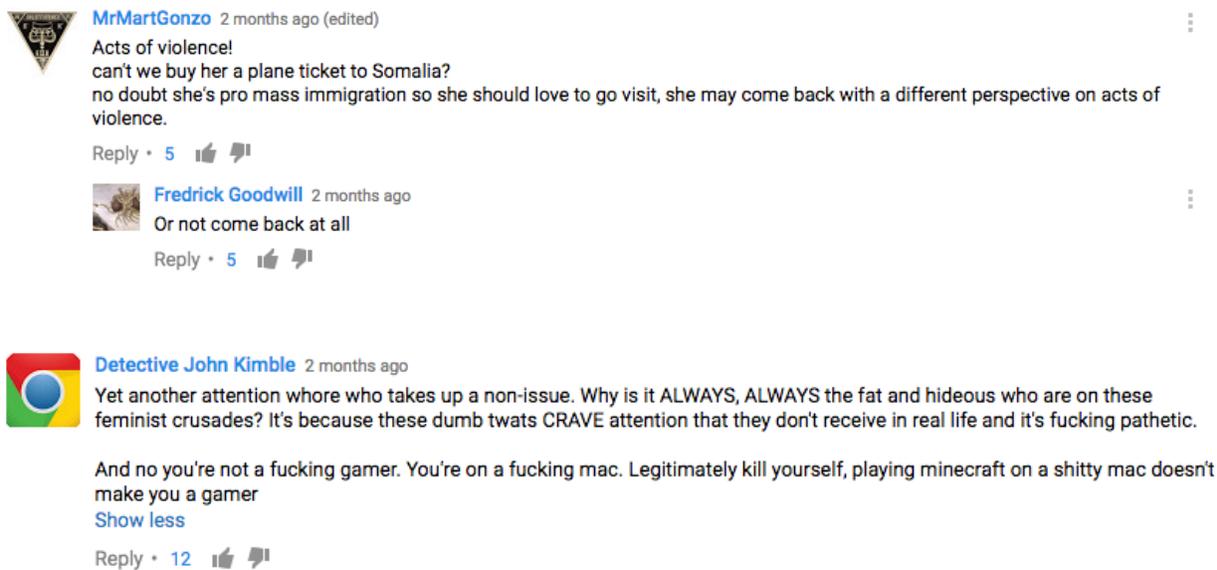


(fig. 1.4 and 1.5) Two tweets directed at Anita Sarkeesian (“One Week”).

These tweets represent the type of aggression Gamergate perpetrates, targeting journalists, critics, game makers, players, and academics who examine games through a feminist lens (Braithwaite; Burgess and Matamoros-Fernandez; Hathaway; Quinn; Chess and Shaw). The attention I have drawn from Gamergate was the result of their campaign to “investigate” feminist academics who study games in order to “demonstrate that the research on gaming is actually

ideologically compromised activism that aims to impose censorial content control on games” (Antonsen et al. 4).

While I’ve luckily never received a death threat, I’ve received just enough attention for people to discuss in great detail how they would like me to die. Here is a small sampling of negative attention I have received online because of Gamergate. All of the following screenshots were taken from the comments of a single YouTube video that was created by a group who describe themselves as sharing news about “issues concerning European survival” (i.e. white supremacy) and has been viewed over 16,000 times, drawing hundreds of repulsive comments entirely about me.<sup>8</sup> This is just one recent example of the many times in the past six years that I have attracted unwanted attention from Gamergate and other anti-feminist groups online for simply sharing my research on the internet.



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<sup>8</sup> Other videos on this channel have titles such as “the war on whites is real,” “intersectional feminism rages war on white women,” “‘diversity’ is a weapon against white people,” and “forced multiculturalism makes Nazis.”



**piscator57** 2 months ago

Waterloo and Trent universities are the worst places in Ontario for SJWs.....and cultural marxism.....

Reply •



**brianwesley28** 2 months ago

The University of Water Buffalo

Reply • 1



**Barry ShitCunt** 2 months ago

I would say shove her in the oven but I don't think she would fit

Reply • 1



**lemonlimelukey** 2 months ago (edited)

is there a connection between feminism and a lack of self control and obesity?

Reply • 13



**WarhammerXLK** 2 months ago

Yah they got this mental disorder called "feminism" that they think they have right to be fat and call themselves beautiful..lmao they are so lost..

Reply • 4



**slantyrack** 2 months ago

Ew, I bet her cunt smells like raw sausage.

Reply •



**CookPassBabtridge** 1 month ago

Every time one of these women willingly inserts herself into what is overwhelmingly a male domain they cry for special treatment, whilst at the same time campaigning for gender neutrality on the basis that women are just as capable and strong willed as men. Get over it you fat ugly dyke, man the fuck up or get the fuck off the game.

Reply • 1



**twosunshof** 2 months ago

She looks like a overweight Brianna Wu.

Reply •



**TSR** 2 months ago

What's funny is guys say the exact same shit to other guys.

Drink bleach, fatty.

Reply • 21

(fig. 1.6-1.14) A comment about me on a YouTube video

These comments are mild compared to what Gamergate is capable of, and represent a mere handful of the thousands of hateful comments, tweets, direct messages, forum posts, and YouTube videos I have read (or watched) about myself online. This type of harassment *can* cause women to stop speaking publicly about games and games culture—which is exactly its intention. Many feel, as one commenter above explained, that instead of trying to make games culture better people like me should “man the fuck up or get the fuck off the game.” I would be lying to you if I said there weren’t periods where I thought about never talking or writing about games again. Games criticism and discourse feels the least accessible to me of all aspects of games culture; instead of feeling merely unwelcoming, it feels downright dangerous. At this moment I haven’t used my Twitter or YouTube accounts in over three months because I was so overwhelmed by the abuse I was receiving there: everything from standard insults, to faux-neo-Nazi propaganda (discussed at length in chapter 5), to insinuations that I’m Jewish and therefore up to something nefarious. Gamergate’s actions vary from hacking into personal accounts and posting personal information online, to sending rape and death threats, to, in the case of Sarkeesian, calling in shooting or bomb threats at venues where she is scheduled to speak (Totilo; Hern).

For some, this online harassment has had very real personal and professional consequences: Nintendo employee Alison Rapp was fired from her job after being harassed for months by Gamergate (Klepek); influential games journalist Jenn Frank quit writing about games for a living for her own safety (Cox); and game developer (and now politician) Brianna Wu was forced to move after she received multiple death and rape threats that included her address (Reiley). Quinn and her partner were forced to live with friends for almost a year as the same men who were threatening her with rape and death were sending her photos standing outside her

home, and bragging about putting dead animals in her mailbox (102). Quinn and her partner had every reason to believe that it wasn't safe to go home and moving in with family wasn't an option as the abusers had those address and phone numbers as well. Furthermore, Quinn's partner, also working in the games industry, lost his job because of Gamergate's harassment, and was told by other studios that he was "too controversial to hire" demonstrating the ways that Gamergate's actions also effect people close to those targeted (108). After pursuing legal action against the abusive ex who was controlling the mob of abusers, Quinn was told by the magistrate deciding on the case that the solution was to "just get offline." When Quinn explained that independent game designers distribute the games they make over the internet, and that leaving the internet was not an option, the magistrate replied, "find a different career" (108).

These few examples are just the publicized ones. There are countless other stories we will never know about women who were forced out of games, and silenced. Quinn has worked with hundreds of victims of this kind of online abuse as the founder of the Crash Override Network, a crisis hotline and advocacy group. Problematically, Quinn explains that when victims discuss their abuse publicly they are harassed further, which can re-victimize them and make the abuse much worse (166). Therefore, many feel that they only way to stop the abuse is to stay quiet. Jessica Megarry examines the phenomenon of how Twitter users use rape and death threats to perform a type of "online sexual harassment" which is "excluding women's voices from the digital public sphere" (46). Megarry performed a content analysis of a month of tweets in the discussion about online abuse in the viral hashtag #mencallmethings and discovered that the abuse women face online primarily takes the form of threats. After women receive these threats they "modify their own behaviours in response," in order to avoid men's violent behavior, something that women are already used to doing offline by avoiding darkened streets or going

places alone (Megarry 53). The result is that women speak out and express their opinions less in order to avoid encountering violent threats much like they would avoid places they have experienced street harassment (Megarry 53).

Much like the comments about myself that I posted above, the threats in Megarry's study were often creatively framed (i.e. rarely simply "I'm going to kill/rape you") and "displayed a preoccupation with physical appearance" (50). Comments I receive rarely simply call me fat; they instead say that I need "a salad and a jog." They don't call me ugly; they say "I would not let my dog have sex with that 'woman'." And they don't say directly they are going to kill me; they say something along the lines of, "I'm going to lock you in Guantanamo" or encourage suicide. Megarry argues that this hyper-specific language is used strategically to more effectively chase women offline by making the threat of violence feel more real, more credible, and more visceral by invoking objects, metaphors, and locations (50). Megarry concludes simply that "online sexual harassment restricts women's ability to participate equally online with men" (53). Other research demonstrates that online abuse and harassment is motivated by the desire to have specific women, or women in general, stop speaking out about certain topics (Poland 49). Sometimes this message is even stated explicitly, such as when I mentioned recently (in the form of a tweet) that I was taking a break from Twitter because of online abuse. One person replied saying: "lol you have to go into hiding after getting your hand slapped. There's a lesson to be learned here." This demonstrated that their plan to silence me from speaking publicly about games culture had, in at least this user's mind, worked: I had learned my lesson. This type of harassment and online marginalization of women negatively affects not just the women currently working in games, but also future generations of young women who may be deterred from joining this popular industry because of the abuse they see hurled at their role models. If

anything proves how inaccessible games culture is to women, it is the continued existence of Gamergate.

I should point out that I use the word “Gamergate” in a variety of contexts in this dissertation with shifting meanings. As you can probably tell from my explanation above, Gamergate is seen as an event, but also a movement, but also a group of people. I might say “before Gamergate” to discuss the event, I might say someone is “affiliated with Gamergate,” to discuss the movement, or I might say “Gamergate harassed X” to discuss a group of people and their actions. There are terms and mentalities or beliefs that I have come to see as aligned with Gamergate after years of studying them, but these beliefs are also shared with many other anti-feminist groups and cultures. Furthermore, as a group of people, there is no membership list for Gamergate. They don’t always declare their affiliations when they are harassing people, or when they are posting online, or making YouTube videos. Therefore, it’s difficult to parse when Gamergate is reacting negatively to say, a Feminist Frequency video, or if the reaction is coming from Gamers who are in no way affiliated with Gamergate but still committing misogynistic harassment. Also, I wonder, does it matter? The misogyny of games culture is harmful if it comes from someone who identifies with Gamergate as a movement, or if it comes from someone who hates the movement. I don’t know personally how many of the people harassing me see themselves as “members” of Gamergate, but I can only assume that *almost all of them* are Gamers, because otherwise, what motivation would they have to be angry about my research examining video games and video games culture? In other words, this dissertation is concerned about Gamergate, but it is more concerned with the general toxicity of games culture, affiliated with Gamergate or not. Sexism was a problem in games culture long before Gamergate and it will likely remain a problem long after the term is forgotten.

But none the less, despite the preexisting problems with sexism Gamergate did change games culture permanently. It made explicit the sexism that was always there, and it made it explicit to the world by becoming worldwide news. Furthermore, I don't use the internet the way I did before Gamergate started, and the same is true for almost everyone I interviewed for this dissertation (see chapters 3 and 4). I second guess what I once said with great confidence, I screen whom I allow to interact with me where I once acted publicly, and take long breaks for my own mental health from what was once the space I used to unwind. This is the new status quo for women in games online. I want to use the opportunity this dissertation presents to examine how my own experiences in the culture reflect the current climate, and the ramifications of broader struggles over feminism and social justice manifest themselves in the day-to-day work of a female games scholar. In the next section, I will outline the autoethnographic approach I've chosen to employ to reflect on these matters within a theoretical context.

### **What is Autoethnography?**

Autoethnography is a "small genre" of ethnography in which the ethnographer is not an observer but a "member of the community or a participant in an activity," as I was in the examples of *Lady Hobbits*, the Games Institute Janes, and *First Person Scholar* (Boellstorff et al. 44).

Autoethnography employs personal narrative as a tool for cultural analysis and has been used by anthropologists as a method since 1979 (Hayano 99). It can be defined as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)" (Ellis et al. 1). Robin M. Boylorn, co-author of *Critical Autoethnography*, describes her autoethnographic work as "marrying [her] love and obsession with storytelling with cultural and social phenomena" (Boylorn et al. 13). In this dissertation, autoethnography merges my obsession with storytelling

with my analysis of my time spent moving through games culture as well as academic cultures. I analyze my personal experiences within small games-oriented subcultures to better understand the larger “cultural experience” of women within games culture. There are a few requirements for conducting ethical autoethnography that have been outlined in *Autoethnography as Method* by Heewan Chang. The autoethnographer must “be a complete member in the social world under study,” who “engages reflexivity to analyze data of the self”; “is visibly and actively present in the text”; and lastly, “includes other informants in a similar situation in data collection” (Chang 49). I engage all four of these important requirements between my analysis of and reflection on my experiences and the interviews I conducted with others who were part of these projects and therefore in “similar situations.”

Autoethnography is also an extremely subjective method and I feel that more subjectivity in game studies and games criticism is both necessary and positive as our identities change the way we interact with game texts and games culture as well as the way we are treated within the culture. While traditional ethnography in game studies (especially within MMORPGs) is well established (Boellstorff; Chen; Nardi; Schaap; Thornham) more “self focused” studies by academic gamers that examine their position within games culture have yet to follow. Stephanie Jennings writes about her desire to change this by responding “to a longstanding wariness of the subjectivity of the critic—both within game studies and humanities disciplines more broadly” by proposing “an approach to games criticism in which the subjectivity of the critic is accepted as central, unavoidable, and necessary” (1). Jennings argues that a “self as lens” method that employs “critical subjectivity” would “provides routes for political intervention in games criticism” as “the subjectivity of the critic would [...] serve to further open and amplify marginalized voices in studies of video games” (4). In other words, while my position in games

culture as a queer feminist woman is heavily marginalized by dominant Gamer culture, autoethnography allows me to use my experiences to discover points of crucial political intervention in games culture and games studies that may not be immediately clear to other scholars with different experiences or identities. Autoethnography was built as a method of “challeng[ing] canonical ways of doing research and representing others” in order to perform research that would have been difficult or unethical as a straight ethnography (Ellis et al.). Traditional ethnography has a patchy ethical history of “colonialist, sterile research impulses of authoritatively entering a culture, exploiting cultural members, and then recklessly leaving to write about the culture for monetary and/or professional gain” (Ellis et al.), whereas autoethnography assumes that the best cultural research comes not from an “objective” outsider but from someone subjective who is currently embedded in that culture.

Furthermore, autoethnography involves assuming that *no research is objective* and all research has implicit biases due to the researcher’s individual experience. Autoethnography simply puts those biases up front, and starts from there. In my case, those biases would be things I have signaled to my reader: I am a female gamer, who identifies as a feminist, who supports social justice, who has felt excluded and harassed by men in gamer culture. All these things impact and inform my dissertation where I discuss, not just what I have seen or heard, but how I reacted and felt in those scenarios as well. Luckily, “autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist” (Ellis et al.). Researchers hoped that autoethnography “would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics” and “experiences shrouded in silence,” both of which are aims of this dissertation (Ellis et al.).

## **Is this Dissertation a Formal Ethnography?**

Although this dissertation contains elements of ethnography (such as semi-structured interviews) it is *not* a formal ethnography with bounded periods of observation and fieldwork. As an autoethnographer I “retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity” (Ellis et al.). In other words, everything is being discussed in retrospect and it is important to establish that I did not join FPS, found GI Janes, or create *Lady Hobbits* with the intention of writing about them. In fact, I had not even considered writing a dissertation about games when I began all those things, as I didn’t think of myself as a games scholar. The observations in this dissertation are derived from my own memory or the memory of my interview subjects, and therefore there was no period where the method of active participant observation was employed. These three projects were not in and of themselves experiments or acts of data collection: they were my life. It is only upon reflection that I see these experiences as case studies of games culture. Therefore, I did not ever conduct any of my relationships with those I interviewed thinking that I would be interviewing them for this dissertation.

Some have questioned the legitimacy of autoethnography as a method (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 210; Chang 54-56). Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson and John Hockey explain that some see autoethnography as “self indulgent” and “more akin to ‘navel gazing’ autobiography than to rigorous social scientific research” (210). Therefore, a researcher, especially a grad student researcher, is undertaking a risk when performing this research. The risk being that some reviewers may not see it as a valid method or even a valid perspective. It is of course, also a risk to choose to perform autoethnography when you are studying video games, something else that many don’t take seriously. I know that some reading this might think my research is illegitimate

both because I study games, and because I use autoethnography as my method. But, this perceived illegitimacy does not bother me because I am confident that my life experiences can help illuminate certain aspects of my research topic in a way that is not only useful, but also, hopefully interesting and accessible as well. Performing autoethnography opens you up to not only academic critique, but personal critique as well. When someone questions your data, they are questioning your lived experiences and I understand that by choosing this method and writing about my personal experiences that critique is inevitable (Boylorn and Orbe 17-18).

Autoethnography is usually misunderstood for two reasons that are outlined in Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T. L. Taylor's *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Firstly, people often confuse autoethnography with autobiography. The confusion is understandable, as autoethnographers often frame their data as stories, but it is still data they have collected and analyzed at length (Boellstorff et al. 44). Secondly, as Boellstorff et al. have pointed out, autoethnography is sometimes used to cover for lack of method in "brief forays into a virtual world, or examination or related materials such as pictures and avatars" (44). This is a larger challenge with ethnography in general: due to the nature of personal observation it is easy to doubt the authenticity of such work. As Boellstorff et al. argue, "personal experience is part of ethnographic research. However, the converse is not true: ethnographic research is not just personal experience" (43). Ethnography is about more than simply collecting data, recording observation, or spending time in a digital space. It is about developing "analytical expertise in understanding the data," which in my case happens to be the three projects I worked on and their affiliated communities, as well as the larger community of games culture (Boellstorff et al. 44).

Over the course of this study I was not just an observer but an integral member of the projects that I examine. I spent hundreds of hours in each of my examined spaces, as well as

years reflecting on these experiences and collecting interview data from others involved in these projects before presenting this data in its current form. This dissertation covers almost six years spent in and around these projects and communities and almost 25 years spent with games and gamers as well as different incarnations of games culture. I believe this dissertation is breaking new methodological ground in game studies. It is, to my knowledge, the first piece of writing that identifies itself as an academic autoethnography of games culture or of game studies as opposed to an autoethnography of game *play*. It is, by virtue of my subjective position, an examination of what it means to be a queer feminist academic gamer in both a pre- and post-Gamergate world. It is subjective research that puts aside the games themselves and tries to examine the subcultural monsters these texts have created.

### **Conclusion: What is this Dissertation About?**

The following dissertation highlights what obstacles are holding back girls and women from becoming Gamers and gaining full acceptance within games culture. Cultural accessibility is a staged process that begins small (do you have games you can play? do you feel safe playing them?) but has large implications (do you feel comfortable taking classes involving technology at school? Are you seen as enough of a Gamer to get a job at a games studio?). Girls and women need to feel comfortable playing and loving games before they will assert themselves as gamers, game makers, or games critics. Therefore, their ability to be treated as equals during play, to see themselves represented in the games they play, and to feel included in the discourse surrounding games is of utmost importance. It is extremely difficult to become a consumer or a professional in the games industry if you are shut out of games culture from a young age. 74% of young girls express an interest in STEM careers, but women only hold only 18% of computer science

degrees and 25% of jobs in computing (Mylavarapu), leading many to wonder at what stage they are being deterred from these career paths (Ashcraft et al. 2).

Studies have demonstrated that playing games as a child leads directly to an education in STEM and a career in the tech industry via a “pipeline” effect (Metcalf 2). But because girls are actively discouraged from playing games they lose their desire to pursue tech-based careers, creating a “leaky pipeline.” This all starts in childhood as there is a: “dominant and accepted starting point for a career in game development: a love of games, passion for gaming, and a devoted history of playing games” (Weststar and Legault 2). This is made strikingly clear through studio job advertisements that literally state as specific requirements, “must love games” or “be an avid gamer” (Weststar and Legault 2). Essentially, to land a job in the games industry you must demonstrate not only your skills at the job but also your wealth of gaming capital, the same capital it is so difficult to develop as a young woman. Gatekeeping girls and women from participating in games culture isn’t just about their ability to be gamers in their free time, it’s about their ability to access other cultures and industries in their career.

My chapters are united by this concept of cultural inaccessibility, identifying the sexist patterns that make making, playing, and writing about games so difficult and unwelcoming for girls and women. This dissertation focuses on gender specifically to keep my project in scope, but I will be examining this issue through the lens of intersectional feminism. Therefore, I will not ignore those identities which intersect with gender (race, sexuality, language, class, culture) and create deeper levels of inaccessibility within games for women of color, queer women, trans women etc. While intersectional feminism is considered a key characteristic of contemporary fourth wave feminism, the term was first developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 text “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of

Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” during what is considered second wave feminism (Rivers 22). Crenshaw advanced the idea that most feminist and anti-racist work was focusing on the most privileged members of those two groups, black men and white women respectively. Crenshaw put forward that we need to consider how “dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis” of race or gender that “erases Black women” and other women of color (140). 30 years later, intersectionality is still a concept countless people fail to grasp when discussing the fight against “one type” of prejudice.

While Crenshaw’s original work discusses how these biases affect legal battles over discrimination in 1989, the games industry still suffers from this problem of imagining racial diversity in terms of men, and gender diversity in terms of white women. Many people feel that making games culture diverse simply means adding more white women, when in reality 76% of game developers are already white and only 3% of game developers are African-American, demonstrating that “the industry has an even bigger problem with race than it does with gender” (Ong). This is despite the fact that a study from 2015 demonstrated that Black and Hispanic video game players in their sample were actually *more likely* than white players to identify as Gamers (Duggan 7). While most studies of game demographics have racial and gendered data, they rarely have data about women of color specifically proving the need for intersectionality when studying games. So while we do know that men are twice as likely as women to identify as gamers (15% vs 6%), and we know that black and Hispanic players are more likely to identify as gamers over white players, we don’t know out of the 6% of gamers who identified as women how many identified as women of color (Duggan, “Who plays” 7). From here forward I want to make clear that when I discuss making games culture accessible to girls and women, I do not

simply mean cis white women but *all women*. While I do not feel that games culture is accessible to myself, I do believe that it is substantially more accessible to me than to many other women because of my white and able-bodied privileges as well as the sheer luck of having a male sibling and parents who, despite their low socio-economic status, found a way to purchase some games and consoles (often from garage sales and never when they first came out) as Christmas presents.

At this point I would also like to add that while I discuss cultural inaccessibility in this dissertation, it is beyond the scope of this study to also discuss the physical inaccessibility of games and games culture. Countless games and spaces of games culture are also not physically accessible because of the lack of accessibility for those who experience limitations with mobility, vision, hearing, or countless other factors. One study estimated that 11% of the US population “have their ability to play games affected by a disability,” 9% “are able to play games but with a reduced gaming experience,” and 2% were unable to play at all (Yuan et al. 86). Furthermore, the demand to make games more physically-accessible will only increase as more people who have played games all their lives age and develop additional impairments (Yuan et al. 87). In other words, it is important to state that games and games culture will *never* be fully culturally accessible to all women until games are *physically* accessible to all women who want to play them.

A techno-feminist framework, like the one I use in this dissertation, “emphasizes that the gender–technology relationship is fluid and flexible and that feminist politics and not technology per se is the key to gender equality” (Wajcman 287). In this vein I believe the solution to the problems laid out in this dissertation are not technical, but social. While better blocking or banning mechanisms on Twitter or in online games might be a Band-Aid solution, games and games culture need to address their own prejudices in order to become truly diverse and safe for

girls and women. Representation and diversity within the games themselves is important (as I will discuss in Chapter 3) but we must be careful to imagine representation and diversity in the broadest manner possible, thinking of the diversity of development teams, artists and players, as well as characters. We must also think of the term accessibility in the broadest terms possible. While the term might immediately conjure up ideas of creating games that are more physically accessible to play, when we think about it more deeply we see the ways in which the accessibility of games to girls and women is about so much more than physical access.

Accessibility is determined by their ability to get their hands on these games, to walk into a game store, to have the money to purchase them and to have the knowledge to know what to look for. Accessibility is about their ability to play these games, to be accepted into the culture, and to walk in the virtual worlds of their games and the real worlds of gaming tournaments *without fear*. Accessibility is about their ability to write about these games and publish that writing, to tweet about games, to speak about them professionally and socially without facing harassment.

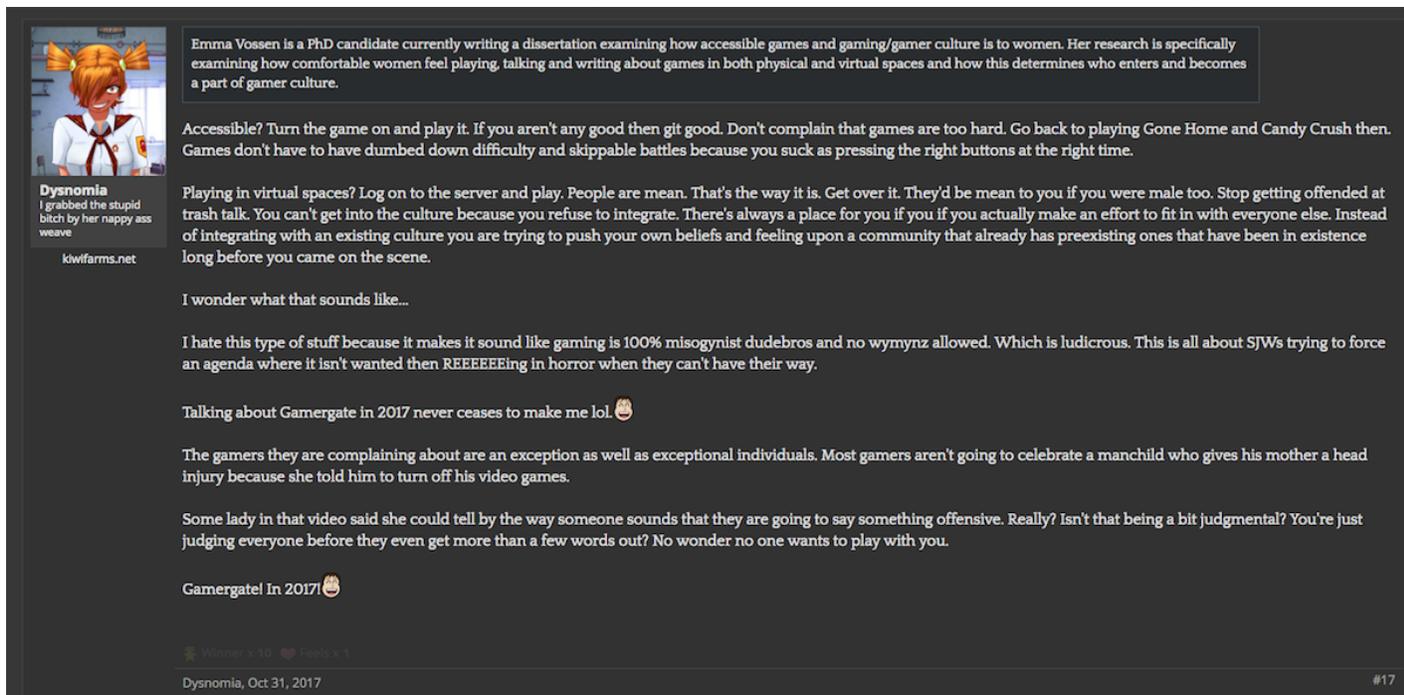
Furthermore, accessibility is not about just being able to enter these spaces, it's about being able to live and thrive in them. One of the most complex problems games culture has yet to address is: why are we trying to get marginalized people to enter the games industry if we know they will be treated badly once they get there? Are we exposing them to violence through initiatives to diversify the industry? Secondly, what happens once we have diversified the industry? How do we retain minorities? How do we ensure they want to stay? Games culture has been working with the flawed "add marginalized people and stir" approach for so long, attempting to blend them into this existing culture for so long, that we have yet to switch perspectives and think about, as Gray remarks:

What are they getting blended in to? They are getting blended into these hegemonic ideologies where we are still perpetuating and privileging whiteness and masculinity.

And as long as you get in and go along with that you are okay but as soon as you deviate from that script then you are out. You're fired. You are blackballed ("Ideas").

We need to make games culture a space that retains diverse people, instead of scaring them away or expecting them to act out a specific script that gives preference to straight cis white male comfort over all else.

This dissertation research is motivated not just by the experiences of exclusion, isolation and abuse that so many women in games culture feel but also by the backlash we have received for discussing those experiences online in recent years. Games culture will never be accessible until gatekeepers, Gamergaters, and Gamers themselves recognize that cultural barriers to access are not simply physical. By way of example, consider the image below taken from Kiwi Farms, a forum intended to discuss individual people online, often feminists or others who its users deem to be worth mocking. Users often utilize these forums to both make fun of people and also to collect and share online information about people they are attempting to doxx. A thread about me was started this October and is full of rants about my research and "jokes" about which one of the users will "drive the race war van". One user was searching for information about me this October and came across a description of the research in this dissertation on a university of Waterloo website, and responded thusly:



(fig. 1.15) A post in a forum thread about me and my research on Kiwi Farms.

I highlight this comment because it felt like an amalgam of countless comments I had read over the years about women and activism in games—but, this time, it was addressed specifically at me. In their conception I am someone who “refuse[s] to integrate,” someone who just “came on the scene” only recently (although it’s likely that I have been playing games for more years than this commenter has been alive). They see me as an invader to their community, not a longstanding member. Why? Because I’m a feminist and therefore I am, as a student infamously once told me, “the opposite of a Gamer.”

Furthermore, I think it’s important to acknowledge that despite their anti-feminist views this commenter doesn’t see themselves as one of the Gamers who is a problem. They likely don’t see themselves as part of Gamergate. They feel those Gamers who hate women are “exceptional individuals” yet he has come to this forum to talk about how much he hates me and other “SJWs.” This is part of why the issue at hand is so complex, this Gamer is simultaneously angry about women like me who he sees as the opposite of a Gamer because of my interest in making

games more inclusive—while at the same time insisting that games are already an inclusive place. This commenter doesn't think he hates women; he thinks he hates SJWs. While most of us labeled SJWs are women, he doesn't conceive of his animus as misogyny because, as Quinn outlines, on some level we are not even considered human:

People participating in online abuse treat it like a game, too, seeing who can do the most damage to a target they see as a dehumanized mass of pixels on a screen, more like a monster in a game to be taken down than an actual human being with thoughts and hopes and weaknesses and moments of brilliance (7).

When I read comments like the one above I can't help but think of my students, who see me as a flesh and blood person, but will often make comments about "SJWs" or Quinn and Sarkeesian that make it clear that they don't see "them" as Gamers, as people, or as members of games culture. I often think about how, if that student encountered the idea of me online before encountering the real me face to face, they would despise me. It is during this face-to-face time with my students that I attempt to humanize these women, including myself, to these Gamers. I attempt to demonstrate that these barriers to access for minorities are real and not imagined and that harassment is actually worse than it seems, not overblown. If we are going to make games culture accessible to everyone we need to demonstrate the existence of these cultural barriers to those who are actively maintaining them, even if they are unconscious of their status as gatekeepers.

The following chapters aim to demonstrate how complex issues of access to games culture are, and offers some solutions to how the existing hegemony of players, creators and writers can be challenged. Teaching women to program, and creating female protagonists for them to identify with, are steps towards equality in games but focusing on these solutions places

the onus of creating change on the victims of sexism instead of the perpetrators. Even if women enjoy the content in the games and know how to program, they will still have to work within the toxic gendered conditions of games culture. In these pages I explore the specifics of *how* video games are culturally inaccessible and *why* this culture became so inaccessible through historical analysis, examination of influential texts, discourse analysis, personal reflection, and interview data. The following chapter examines the roots of Gamer culture within science fiction, fantasy, and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954). This chapter builds off of this work to discuss the problematic representations of women in works of fantasy and video games more specifically. Lastly, this chapter will discuss a short film, *Lady Hobbits*, created by Elise Vist and I using a LOTR video game to create female representation within Tolkien's fictional universe.

The third chapter examines the inaccessibility of play itself. It considers "real life" play spaces, from childhood play to competitive play, as well as play within online spaces. I consider complications to play, such as trash talk, harassment, and stereotype threat. Finally, I discuss the process of organizing and executing a variety of feminist gaming nights as one of the founders of the GI Janes. I discuss my experiences as both an organizer and a participant at these events, and draw from the interviews I conducted with some of the organizers and participants of these events. This chapter functions as an introduction to the culture of both the Games Institute and *First Person Scholar*, as these organizations had a heavy impact on the birth, life, and death of the GI Janes.

The fourth chapter examines the inaccessibility of the discourse surrounding games, including games journalism and game studies. I recount my own experience of getting involved with the Waterloo-based middle-state publication *First Person Scholar*, and the experiences of the other editors whom I have interviewed. I also examine the roots of the male domination of

the field, and subsequent attempts by some male scholars to dictate the nature of games studies using the supposed ludology versus narratology “debate”.

Lastly, the conclusion of this dissertation looks to the future directions of this research. Since I began this research in 2012, games culture has changed many times over. Currently discussions around toxic masculinity and the inaccessibility of games culture often extend past Gamergate to encompass the Alt-right, current President Donald Trump, various online “culture wars,” and the rise of neo-Nazism. This final conclusion gestures towards how my future work has moved beyond examining just gamer culture to examining how white men are radicalized online in anti-feminist and often white supremacist digital cultures.

## Chapter Two

### *Lady Hobbits* and The Historical Inaccessibility of Female Representation

*Men grow up expecting to be the hero of their own story. Women grow up expecting to be the supporting actress in somebody else's. [...] Lady hobbits didn't bring the ring to Mordor. They stayed at home in the Shire.*

—Laurie Penny, *I was a Manic Pixie Dream Girl*

*Wizards tend to exist in Orders, or hierarchies, and certainly the Island of Gont reminds me of nothing so much as a medieval European university, or maybe a monastery. There don't seem to be many women around the University, although I suppose someone cleans the lavatories. [...] Can you imagine a girl trying to get a place at the University of Gont? Or I can put it another way—can you imagine a female Gandalf?*

—Terry Pratchett, *Why Gandalf Never Married*

## Introduction

This chapter traces the early exclusion of women from fantasy texts, and the cultures surrounding those texts, that pre-date digital games, in order to situate and explain the historical roots of games culture and the exclusion of women from it. This chapter looks to J. R. R. Tolkien and Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) franchise, the fantasy genre, and the culture of creators surrounding it (specifically The Inklings), to find the precursors to so-called “nerd culture” (Kelly). Alongside this investigation I will discuss *Lady Hobbits* (2013)<sup>9</sup>, a short film adapting LOTR that Vist and I created inside the video game *Lord of the Rings Online* (2007) (LOTRO) in order to critique the male dominated world of both Tolkien and Jackson's LOTR.

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<sup>9</sup> *Lady Hobbits* is 10 minutes long and covers the first half of the plot of Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring*, up until the hobbits meet Aragorn. This includes Bilbo's birthday and subsequent disappearance, Gandalf arriving in the Shire to tell Frodo about the ring 17 years later, Frodo and Sam's preparations to leave the Shire, Merry and Pippin discovering the plan and insisting they come along, the Hobbits being pursued by the Black Rider (although in our version they are oblivious to the threat), the trip through the old forest (although in our version the hobbits get through without the help of Tom Bombadil), Frodo using the ring at the Prancing Pony (although in our version she uses it to avoid getting hit on), acquiring Gandalf's letter from the innkeeper, and the hobbits meeting Aragorn for the first time. We had initially planned the second episode to pick up where we left off and cover the second half of *Fellowship of the Ring* but it was never made as the first episode was so time consuming to create.

We made *Lady Hobbits* both to create points of identification for ourselves within LOTR and also to demonstrate, through adaptation, that there is no compelling narrative reason that some, *if not all*, of the story's protagonists couldn't have been women. This chapter will outline the creation of *Lady Hobbits*, demonstrating why women need to find creative ways to find space for themselves within narratives and fantasy worlds like LOTR due to their continued exclusion from them.

Tolkien is the grandfather of “nerd culture,” an umbrella term spanning the fan cultures surrounding science fiction, fantasy, and gaming. Since its initial publication in 1954, LOTR's cultural ubiquity has shaped our contemporary assumptions about what fantasy as a genre looks like, and these assumptions have in turn determined to a great extent what video games look like both historically and today (Young 109). Therefore, it seems fitting that this chapter examine how gender was represented in Tolkien's texts, as well as how Tolkien and his contemporaries diminished and excluded women from the formative subcultures surrounding the science fiction and fantasy genres (Zaleski and Zaleski 352; Fredrick and McBride 1). Not only are the politics embodied within these “timeless” texts passed down via their continuous influence, adaptation and consumption, but so too are the politics inherent in the conditions in which they were created. The underrepresentation of women in our fantasy media today is no surprise when it is a genre built on a text with a deficit of women, a text created, shared and edited in a “male culture” where women were purposely excluded by Tolkien and his contemporaries (Fredrick and McBride 1-6).

It is because of the exclusion of women from Tolkien's LOTR, as well as adaptations such as Jackson's films, that Vist and I decided to create a short film depicting the Fellowship from LOTR as women. Despite *Lady Hobbits* being a YouTube video that only about 500 people

have ever watched, I needed to create *Lady Hobbits* to make the world of LOTR feel accessible to me as a woman. This experience highlights just how difficult it is for women to consume narratives in which they are excluded both from points of identification and the cultures surrounding those narratives. The issues that LOTR and Tolkien have with depicting and excluding women are still a problem affecting women in 2018, (80 years after the release of *The Hobbit*) through adaptations of Tolkien's work and through the countless video games that use the tropes, characters, norms, and settings that Tolkien created in his genre-defining work.

In games culture, despite half of women playing games (Entertainment Software Association) we have an underrepresentation of women at almost every level: as characters in the games themselves (Deitz; Glaubke et al.; Dill-Shackleford et al.; Williams et al.); as professional players (Taylor T., *Raising* 125-128; Harper 120,125)<sup>10</sup>; in the games industry (IGDA)<sup>11</sup>; and in game studies<sup>12</sup> (Batti and Karabinus, “Coalition”; Batti and Karabinus “Dream”; Karabinus *Histories*). This chapter focuses specifically on the lack of representation of women in our media and in “nerd culture,” using LOTR as my touchstone. From Tolkien and Lewis’ “boys only” clubhouse the Inklings (Zaleski and Zaleski 352), to LOTR fans attempting to insult Liv Tyler’s portrayal of Arwen by calling her “Xena Warrior Princess” (Leitch 136), to the lack of female Dwarves in LOTRO, to the contemporary backlash against people of color in neomedieval games (Young 109)—there is an undeniable common link of patriarchal white supremacist hegemony that we can follow through the development of the cultures surrounding fantasy media. This hegemony is especially visible in the culture surrounding video games, which is the dominant contemporary medium in which we now consume fantasy narratives. As I established

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<sup>10</sup> Addressed in chapter 3

<sup>11</sup> Addressed in chapter 1

<sup>12</sup> Addressed in chapter 4

in my introduction, women are excluded from games culture at every level by men who determine what that culture looks like via the Hegemony of Play (Fron et al). This chapter unwraps this hegemony by connecting the birth and continued influence of LOTR to the sexism, racism, and exclusion we see in games culture today. This chapter will retrace that exclusion in order to gain insight into the subcultures that grew from these roots and that exist in present day games culture. I demonstrate that fantasy narratives and the cultures surrounding them *have always* excluded women, and that this exclusion carries through to today via adaptation, tropes, and assumptions. These issues of representation and consumption of early texts are intrinsically linked to our contemporary texts, and the lack of representation of women in these early texts that became the basis of “nerd culture” has completely determined and dictated women’s relationship to that culture in present day.

### **Contemporary Backlash to Representation in the Fantasy Genre**

Talking about the roots of the lack of representation of women in fantasy works and cultures is especially important in present day as the representation of minorities in media is increasing, yet we are seeing a vocal backlash to this diversity and representation online (Young 74). While representation of minorities in the media is seen as a positive for many it has also been negatively characterized by some vocal groups online as a forced agenda of “political correctness” (Young 74). More diverse media is sometimes even met with boycotts and backlashes, as we saw with the 2016 all women adaptation of *Ghostbusters*, or the female protagonists of the 2015 and 2016 *Star Wars* films (Sims; Thomas). There is a twofold issue of representation at play here: backlashes against representation are on the surface about the increase in diversity in media, but when people insist that it’s not important to have women Jedi, Ghostbusters, or Fellowships, they are in turn (whether they know it or not) arguing that female

fans of those franchises are less important and therefore deserve less points of identification within that media. This contemporary backlash to inclusion and representation is especially clear in the fantasy genre, which was built on a text that depicted the “racial diversity” of fantasy worlds as made up of hobbits, men, elves, and dwarves that were all both white and male (Young 109).

Fantasy (alongside science fiction) has long been a male-centric genre, from its roots in a canon dominated by white male writers and fans (Young 79), to the present day controversies surrounding the Hugo Awards (Bechtel 120). The Hugos are the longest-running prize for writing in science fiction and fantasy, dating back to 1955. Recently, some writers and fans became unhappy with the way the awards were being distributed to texts with more diverse authors and characters, and therefore started two campaigns called “Sad Puppies” and “Rabid Puppies” (Bechtel 120). The campaigns have been described as “the latest online battleground between progressive fans and conservatives fed up with what they view as a move towards elitism and affirmative action” (Biggs) and as a project that looked to “make science fiction great again” after the fashion of Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again” campaign slogan (Bechtel 120). The two groups decided that they would take advantage of the Hugo’s democratic online voting system in order to fight “a perceived bias towards liberal and left wing science-fiction and fantasy authors” (Barnett) by nominating and block voting for those who they feel are more deserving. For example, one book that made the short list and was voted on in 2016 was Rabid Puppies leader Vox Day’s “SJWs Always Lie: Taking Down the Thought Police” a book length essay about how so called social justice warriors have “plagued mankind for more than 150 years” and are “invaded one institution of the cultural high ground after another” until “their ideology [became] dominant in the West” (Day). The nomination of books such as this led

previous Hugo-winning authors like John Scalzi and George R. R. Martin to encourage members to vote “no award” in a category in which there were no deserving nominees (Flood).

Like contemporary games culture, science fiction and fantasy culture is being pulled apart by a culture war between the supposed “Alt-right” and those of us fighting for social justice. It is no wonder then that so many described the Hugos controversy as some variation of “the Gamergate of Science Fiction and Fantasy” (Waldmen; *Boston Globe*; Biggs; Bechtel 126). Game designer, politician, and Gamergate target, Brianna Wu went as far as to suggest that Gamergate themselves were behind the campaign, tweeting “Gamergate hijacked this year’s Hugo Awards, and loaded them with extremist homophobic authors” (*Boston Globe*). It’s not hard to imagine, as Wu has here, that there is an overlap between the two groups when the fan cultures of science fiction, fantasy, and gaming overlap so heavily. Sci-fi author and Rabid Puppies leader Vox Day himself even claimed that he created Rabid Puppies to fight against “the left-wing control freaks who have subjected science fiction to ideological control for two decades and are now attempting to do the same thing in the game industry” (The Telegraph).

I focus on the Hugos for so long as I feel that the controversies surrounding the awards, more than anything else, demonstrates the ways in which all nerd cultures are connected, and all nerd cultures are struggling with misogyny and anger because of its white male dominated roots (Massanari 332). So much of nerd culture still sees itself as perpetually oppressed and marginalized and therefore struggles deeply to see the ways in which their much loved texts, and they themselves, actually perpetuate oppression against the marginalized. As Adrienne Massanari has explained:

suggesting that geek culture can also be oppressive and marginalize certain populations may create a sense of cognitive dissonance for these individuals, who likely view

themselves as perpetual outsiders and thus are unable or unwilling to recognize their own immense privilege (332).

The Hugos demonstrate the ways in which those with privilege see themselves as being oppressed by the marginalized (in this case women writers and writers of colour). For better or worse, video games are part of the culture war surrounding sci-fi and fantasy and sci-fi and fantasy are a part of the culture war surrounding video games—and *The Lord of the Rings* influenced them both.

### **Tolkien's Influence on Video games**

*Lord of the Ring*, in many ways, created the video game genre as we know it. Simply put: "Middle-earth has had more influence on Fantasy games, both digital and nondigital, than any other Fantasy world" (Young 109). Contemporary video games evolved from war and military strategy games and role playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974–2017), which themselves evolved out of works in the science fiction and fantasy genre (Perry, "Influence"; Jenkins 279; Young 109). In fact, *Dungeons and Dragons* itself was so heavily based on LOTR that the creators faced a threatened lawsuit from the Tolkien estate, forcing them to change the names of multiple types of characters including changing "hobbits" to "halflings" (Young 109). There is a shared lineage and culture of masculinity that has trickled down through these texts and their surrounding cultures. While role playing games, video games, sci-fi, horror, fantasy, and comics all have their own distinct subcultures with their own cultural practices, there is also large overlap between these groups. It is fair to say that most group members are part of more than one of these subcultures, which is why we often use umbrella terms like "nerd culture" or "geek culture" cover all "nerdy" interests (McCain et al.). Gamer culture, being the newest of these cultures, will forever be rooted in the sci-fi and fantasy genre and its politics and therefore

it cannot be ignored when examining the sexist culture surrounding video games. In his article “Myths, Monsters and Markets: Ethos, Identification, and the Video Game Adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings*,” Mark Rowell-Wallin explains that video games as a form needed to replicate older media in order to gain legitimacy:

Marshall McLuhan noted in *Understanding Media* that there comes a point in the development of a new aesthetic form where the new media attempts to gain legitimation by means of association with previous forms. Ancient epic poetry adopted the structure and narratives of oral storytelling; opera and ballet began by adapting significant dramatic works, as did film; the early novel appropriated the form and structure of the historical treatise; and video games are no different.

Fantasy narratives like LOTR were the perfect place for video games to attempt to gain this legitimacy because they offered what Henry Jenkins calls “special stories”:

When game designers draw story elements from existing film or literary genres, they are most apt to tap those genres - fantasy, adventure, science fiction, horror, war - which are most invested in world-making and spatial storytelling. Games, in turn, may more fully realize the spatiality of these stories, giving a much more immersive and compelling representation of their narrative worlds (“Game Design” 676).

For these reasons fantasy was a natural fit for video games and Tolkien’s oeuvre was an obvious place for designers to look for inspiration. Without LOTR, the conventional aesthetics, narratives, tone, and themes of video games may have been quite different. As games critic Douglas C. Perry explains:

H. P. Lovecraft, J. R. R. Tolkien, Robert Bloch, Robert E. Howard, Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, Larry Niven, Orson Scott Card, E.E. Smith. This small sampling of

influential authors' work in the genres of science fiction, horror, and fantasy has laid the bedrock for some of the best videogames in the business. Rarely, however, will you find them mentioned or credited. That is hardly needed. Their work is so ingrained in Western pop culture, so influential, that saying something is "Tolkien-esque" or "Lovecraftian" is too obvious. [...] Developers such as BioWare, Black Isle, Blizzard, Obsidian, and other teams have created entirely original games grown from the culture put forth from Tolkien's works. *Baldur's Gate*, *Everquest*, *The Elder Scrolls*, *Neverwinter Nights*, *World of Warcraft*—they're all ground in Tolkien's fantasy ("Influence").

Once graphics were capable of rendering rudimentary settings and environments, many early video games stepped away from the "reality" that games were representing in the '50s and '60s (i.e. digital versions of analog games such as tic tac toe-simulator *Bertie the Brain* [1950], and table tennis games like *Tennis For Two* [1958]). Instead, they looked to science fiction (*Spacewar!* [1962], *Space Invaders* [1978], *Galaga* [1981]) or neomedieval fantasy worlds (*Adventure* [1979], *King's Quest* [1980]). This trend only increased over the years and while the genre has diversified, many of today's most popular games—from *Clash of Clans* (2012) to *Skyrim* (2011) to *Dragon Age* (2009–2014) to *Zelda* (1987–2017)—still take place in these Tolkien-esque settings. If so many of these titles borrow from Tolkien's worlds, and are inhabited by monsters and heroes indebted to Tolkien's imagination, then it is a logical conclusion that contemporary games would also be influenced by the absence of women in these texts.

### ***Adapting Lord of the Rings: Why make Lady Hobbits?***

Growing up I didn't care much for *The Lord of the Rings*. My mother had a LOTR poster hanging on the wall in the living room and I tried not to look at it because the depiction of

Gollum sitting in a boat with his skinny arms and greasy hair gave me nightmares. We watched all the animated adaptations of *The Hobbit* and LOTR but I never quite saw the appeal.

Throughout my childhood, I devoured hundreds of books from my mother's shelves, but despite reading many difficult books at a young age I must have picked up *The Hobbit* and *The Fellowship of the Ring* dozens of times only to abandon them 20 pages in. As a young adult, my friends (mostly nerdy guys) and I watched every LOTR movie in theaters and at home on DVD, and, while I didn't hate it, I never really seemed to "get it" in the way they did.

I realize now that my indifference to Middle-earth was caught up in the history of women's representation within both the fantasy genres and children's literature (Segel 171; Jenkins, "Freedom" 277). While children's literature for girls written by women (focusing heavily on domestic and moral themes) was present in the early 19th century, it wasn't until the mid 19th century that children's literature for boys became more common in an effort to make young boys care about reading (Segel 171). These books for boys had a much different focus on adventures, action and fantasy, a focus that Elizabeth Segel notes represents an "escape from domesticity and from the female domination of the domestic world" (171). Children's literature served to ensure that young girls and boys were performing gender appropriate cultural practices in a way that still affects how young boys and girls play games today (Jenkins, "Freedom" 277).<sup>13</sup> Many "girl games" still focus on domestic themes, childcare and cooking included. In his article about how pre-digital gender-segregated play practices have affected video game play, Henry Jenkins argues that gender segregation itself has been an integral but "disturbing" aspect of "boy culture" that "kept women restricted to the domestic sphere while denying them the

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Flanagan has written at length about how girls often undermine and push against these "appropriate cultural practices" by "unplaying" these norms and acting out forbidden scenes with their dolls, such as funerals (32). Flanagan's theories about unplaying are explored at length later in this chapter.

spatial exploration and mastery associated with boy culture” (“Freedom” 178). Furthermore, Jenkins insists that these notions of segregated play have followed us into today's videogame culture (“Freedom” 176). He concludes that “the conventions of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century boys’ adventure story provided the basis for the current video game genres” (“Freedom” 176). These adventure and fantasy stories, Jenkins argues, offer boys “complete freedom of movement,” the ability to imagine themselves going off on exciting adventures, whereas the lack of women in the stories demonstrates to girls that they have restrictions, that their movement is constrained (“Freedom” 291). LOTR reflects these values, as do many contemporary video games, and this was something we wanted to challenge in the creation of *Lady Hobbits*.<sup>14</sup>

Through the books and their countless adaptations many people have been influenced by LOTR and, as Jenkins explains in *Convergence Culture*, “each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lived experience” (3). When women are constantly represented poorly in the media we consume, eventually we come to expect women to be represented in certain ways: as love interests or sidekicks, as secretaries, as distractions, as mothers. In LOTR specifically, we see women depicted as healers, as assistants, as invaders, as love interests, or as monsters. I have come to expect to see women in video games depicted in a limited number of roles, often sidelined, or sexualized, or both. Adrienne Shaw's research explores the tension surrounding our desire to be represented within games at length, arguing that marginalized people “like representation but they do not want to be

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<sup>14</sup> Creating *Lady Hobbits*, I argue, is an act of “research creation” as outlined by Chapman and Sawchuck in their article “Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and ‘Family Resemblances.’” Research creation is a practice in which the researcher integrates “a creative process, experimental aesthetic component, or an artistic work as an integral part of a study” (5) that “operates in contrast to the dominant academic paradigm.” (24).

treated as target markets.” (Shaw “Interview”). Shaw’s book *Gaming on the Edge* concludes, after interviewing many gamers with marginalized identities, that marginalized people *just don’t expect* to be represented: as one gamer she interviews explains, “any character in a game being like me isn’t really a possibility. So I don’t really come to expect it” (210). Shaw’s many interviews indicate that there is, after years and years of not being represented or expecting representation, a sort of apathy that accompanies the idea of “representation” or “diversity” and this is something women, queer people, and people of colour internalize throughout their lives. I feel this apathy deeply even as I attempt to fight it; as a lifelong gamer I’m used to having to find unique ways to enjoy media dominated by straight white men. As a young girl I didn’t feel entitled to representation because I was unaccustomed to it. I believe many young women, like myself, do not realize that we have internalized the misogyny of our world, and therefore we don’t know to expect or want any better. It wasn’t until I started looking back at the texts I consumed as a child (like LOTR) that I started to notice how few women were in them and how poorly those women were treated. I believe that the core problem with the representation of girls and women is not just that women aren’t represented but that they have these lowered expectations surrounding representation—in other words, you have to know what you’re missing in order to fight for it. We don’t know what it would be like to be the focus of most narratives.

As author Laurie Penny explains:

Men grow up expecting to be the hero of their own story. Women grow up expecting to be the supporting actress in somebody else's. As a kid growing up with books and films and stories instead of friends, that was always the narrative injustice that upset me more than anything else. I felt it sometimes like a sharp pain under the ribcage, the kind of chest pain that lasts for minutes and hours and might be nothing at all or might mean

you're slowly dying of something mundane and awful. It's a feeling that hit when I understood how few girls got to go on adventures. I started reading science fiction and fantasy long before *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*, before mainstream female leads very occasionally got more at the end of the story than together with the protagonist. Sure, there were tomboys and bad girls, but they were freaks and were usually killed off or married off quickly. Lady hobbits didn't bring the ring to Mordor. They stayed at home in the Shire.

This quotation really summed up the tension I felt not just reading LOTR as an adult, but also attending the LOTR movies with my large group of male friends in high school. I felt like I wasn't watching the same movies as them, or at the very least I felt that I wasn't experiencing it in the same way that they were. It bothered me though I couldn't articulate why. While we shared many other interests, I couldn't understand their intense love of these books, films and characters that I frankly found quite boring. Later on in life this gap in understanding only increased my desire to engage with it, to close read it, to critique it, to write about it. As Jenkins explains:

Fandom, after all, is born of a balance between fascination and frustration: if media content didn't fascinate us, there would be no desire to engage with it; but if it didn't frustrate us on some level, there would be no drive to rewrite or remake it. Today, I hear a great deal of frustration about the state of our media culture, yet surprisingly few people talk about how we might rewrite it (*Convergence* 247).

It was after a summer of engaging in research about adaptations of LOTR that Vist and I decided to attempt to “rewrite” LOTR with our non-existent budget and limited resources. We wanted to use *Lady Hobbits* to stand these assumptions on their heads: what if LOTR was woman

dominated? What if there were no male characters at all? What if there were no straight characters at all? How would this change the narrative? Or would it change nothing? We decided to learn how to make a machinima and find out.

## **Machinima, Gender, and Embodiment**

A machinima is an animated film made inside a videogame, i.e. an animation in which computer game graphics are manipulated and used to create stories. A traditional machinima is made by filming in game using the techniques of “digital puppetry,” in which you manipulate the characters within the game through gameplay without using any additional coding or mods to adjust what can be done within that game (Nitsche et al. 64). In other words, we created eight characters within LOTRO and loaded them each into the game on their own computer, controlling the characters’ actions simultaneously using in-game emotes and actions. We filmed the characters’ actions on one of the computers by turning off all interfaces (such as the health bar, and the contents of our inventory) and using screen capturing software; we often filmed five or ten “takes” before getting the movements correctly synced. We then took this footage, picked the best clips, edited the clips together, recorded voice-overs and added special effects and music. Making a machinima is simply filming a movie inside a videogame with in-game sets, props, actors, and lighting.

In their article, “At Play in the Digital Dollhouse: Machinima (Re)Productions of Girls’ Gendered Identities,” Cassandra Jones and Rosalind Sibielski argue that girls making machinima “find themselves producing films within two masculine-gendered activities—gaming and filmmaking,” in which they must develop the technological literacy needed to create, capture, edit, utilize, and share film content (7). While we were grown women creating machinima, I believe that we were facing the same constraints. Jones and Sibielski argue that games that are

popular for making machinima like *The Sims* (2009) function as a digital dollhouse where girls can engage in play that explores their gender identities, much like we did in LOTRO. While the girls creating these machinimas tend to focus on hegemonically feminine topics and themes when creating their machinimas (relationships and families for example), the authors conclude that the girls in their sample are still “playing *at* gender through their forays into cultural production” while not yet “playing *with* gender” (Jones and Sibielski 6). In this case, the resistance these girls are performing is through their participation in the male-dominated roles of both video game player and filmmaker but not necessarily through the progressive representation of women (Jones and Sibielski 6). As Robert Jones explains, we need to be careful not to herald machinima as emancipatory and democratizing as we must consider “the material conditions that implicate machinima as the medium of a select group” in a “contested space where points of access are far from equal” (277). In other words, machinima is doubly inaccessible to girls and women as it carries the inaccessibility of the film worlds and the world of gaming.

When making our machinima we wanted to embark on this dual resistance of playing at and with gender—of proving that we could make the film all by ourselves on the one hand, and by representing women in a complex manner on the other. This took mastering technologies of two highly gendered worlds of production. Linda Hutcheon notes that when playing a game the player is “at once protagonist and director” because “instead of just interpreting, the player intervenes” (Hutcheon 135). This couldn’t be more true than during the making of a machinima. Within the game world that *Lady Hobbits* was filmed, Elise and I were simultaneously protagonist, supporting characters, director, camera operators, voice actors and editors. In the image below you can see our setup. We had two rolling chairs that we could use to move between the seven computers quickly to make the characters move and emote.



(fig. 2.1) Me sitting in front of the seven computers we had to use to create *Lady Hobbits*.

The upside of using machinima as the form of our adaptation is that it allowed us to physically “inhabit” the world of LOTR, an act of invading the male-dominated clubhouse that is both the fantasy world of LOTR and the gaming world of LOTRO with our female hobbits. While the game itself did allow us to create female hobbits, an inclusive act, I never encountered any other players who were female hobbits while playing, I got the impression this was an uncommon choice amongst players. Each character needed to be leveled (played to gain experience) for about two hours to get to a high enough level and gain enough health to survive the trip from the Shire to Bree (i.e. the trip the hobbits take in *The Fellowship of the Ring*). On our journey through Middle-earth we really were vulnerable hobbits having to eliminate and hide from real threats in real environments. We had created a world inside of LOTRO and inside Middle-earth that we could become immersed in by building our Frodo from the ground up, imagining her, designing her, clothing her, leveling her, filming her and eventually voicing her. But even though these characters became very real and normal for us, they were not normal or normative within the world of LOTR or LOTRO—they were rebellious, invaders. LOTRO has an existing version of the fellowship, but we chose not to encounter them; we chose to supplant and replace the male fellowship of the game with the characters we created. We were all too aware that there was a

“real” Fellowship that we could accidentally encounter within the game world despite its size. Most importantly, we knew from playing video games set in fantasy worlds inspired by LOTR that groups of women going on adventures was not a normal occurrence. We knew this thanks to the perpetuation of “neomedieval” tropes that are present in contemporary video games and fantasy media that we consumed.

### **Neomedievalism, Race, Gender and “Historical Accuracy”**

When Vist and I were looking to adapt LOTR into a machinima using LOTRO we came across two sets of norms—the norms of neomedieval texts (both LOTR and LOTRO) as well as the norms of gaming culture, which are both dominantly white and masculine. What I didn’t realize at the time was how connected these norms were. In the introduction to “Digital Gaming Reimagines the Middle Ages,” Daniel T. Kline explains that contemporary video game adaptations of medieval and neomedieval texts “complicate the notions of ‘medieval’ and ‘medievalism’” as they associate the middle ages so strongly with the genre of fantasy (4). There is a tension between fidelity to the Middle Ages as an actual time period and fidelity to what we now “know” as medieval due to source texts such as LOTR and *Dungeons and Dragons*. We have been exposed to more environments that resemble the faux-medieval Middle-earth, than media that evokes the real Middle Ages. Richard Utz sums up this tension by arguing that

neomedieval texts no longer strive for the authenticity of original manuscripts, castles, or cathedrals, but create pseudo-medieval worlds that playfully obliterate history and historical accuracy and replace history based narratives with simulacra of the medieval, employing images that are neither an original nor the copy of an original, but altogether Neo (Utz 2).

If what most of us know as medieval is developed through intermediate sources like LOTR with,

as Kline explains, “little regard for medieval realities,” (4) then why are fans so attached to the “realities” and fidelity of adaptations of these core texts? Although they do not accurately portray the medieval, many people would be upset by the idea of a more racially diverse cast of actors playing the fellowship in Jackson’s LOTR as it would not be “historically accurate” to medieval times. For example, in a recent case, someone asked the Tumblr historian “MedievalPOC” if they thought an upcoming neomedieval video game should include non-white characters and many people wrote in to the page insisting that this was a ridiculous question (Plunkett). The historian who runs the page posts depictions of POC from pre-enlightenment art and fiction in order to correct “assumptions that works of fantasy based in ‘re-imagined’ worlds of Medieval or Renaissance Europe that omit the contributions and presence of People of Color are made with ‘historical accuracy’ in mind” (medievalpoc). The harassment this historian faced<sup>15</sup> is typical of the backlash many have experienced when stating online that neomedieval texts should be more diverse (Young 74).

This backlash has been a challenge for medievalist academics, who are struggling with the ways in which neomedieval texts and “history” have been fetishized and hijacked by the Alt-right because of their whiteness (Ho). As medievalist David M. Perry explains, “White supremacists explicitly celebrate Europe in the Middle Ages because they imagine that it was a pure, white, Christian place organized wholesomely around military resistance to outside, non-white, non-Christian, forces” (“Obsessed”). In other words, the “historical accuracy” that some cry out for in LOTR, *Game of Thrones* (2011 —2019), and the world of neomedieval video

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<sup>15</sup> MedievalPOC is described as having both “a reputation for excellent work” and “an inbox full of hate-mail from white supremacists who want to claim the Middle Ages for their own” in a December 2017 interview with the Pacific Standard (Perry “Yes”). They described their typical hate mail as being from white supremacists and either containing death threats or unfolding as such: “I love Tolkien, stay away from my elves. You’re not allowed to be in my white fantasy history, you disgusting, you know, expletive racial slur” (Perry “Yes”).

games is not a cry for accuracy, but a cry for white male dominance. Usually the reality that these detractors are so attached to is not our lived reality, or our historic reality, but a simulacra of a reality writers like Tolkien created for themselves, realities that included dragons and other mythical creatures but excluded women and people of colour. Or included people of color, but through racial coding, as Sue Kim explains: “In the [LOTR] films, goodness correlates to whiteness, both racially and as color scheme, and is associated with Europe, particularly England and the Scandinavian countries, the West, and the North. Evil is invariably black, savage, Southern (or "Southron"), and Eastern” (875). Tolkien’s writing reflected the white supremacy of the world he lived in, and that has been carried forward into our time through the evolution of the fantasy genre. Kim goes on to argue that while the LOTR isn’t real, it is:

created, read, and viewed by people in the world, and they reflect the languages and signs, desires, actions, and values of our world. In other words, the fantasy is that we must understand *The Lord of the Rings* or any text or film merely as fantasy, particularly when what we understand as the "fantasy" of film has undergone significant changes in recent years. The films are not merely recordings or simple mimetic representations of a modernist or premodernist text (although they certainly have such elements too); the film's production, distribution, and discourses (both within and about the film) epitomize postmodernity in a number of significant aesthetic, technical, economic, epistemological, ethical, and political ways (875).

Therefore, the representation of the characters has real importance, even if the world itself is not “real” it contains more of our world than we might initially think.

None of this would be that interesting if it weren’t for how often people lean on this phony “historical accuracy” claim when defending the white maleness of the LOTR franchise

and other neomedieval text and games (Young 73-76). In her book *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*, Helen Young investigates the internet debates surrounding the diversity, or lack thereof, of neomedieval texts such as *Game of Thrones* and *Dragon Age* at length. She notes how in these debates, those who are against diversity in neomedieval texts will often use real historical trade routes to argue that two races would not have encountered each other as evidence as to why the text should contain only white characters—despite magic and dragons being real (73). Neomedieval texts “engage not only with history but also with genre convention and are thus under an added layer of pressure to conform to audience expectations” to favor whiteness and maleness (Young 74). Young concludes that “in the light of these approaches the desire to construct medieval Europe as exclusively White is easily read as nostalgic longing for a never-extant time when the world was not just Eurocentric, but simply was White Europe” (75). In these debates there is an attachment to a false idea of fidelity that boils down in practice to a desire to see all fantasy settings as a place where people of color and women are still in their place (Young 75).

These debates about “historical accuracy” versus “political correctness” bleed into other genres as well. In May 2017, there was a controversy on Twitter when a fan of the *Call of Duty* (2003-2017) (COD) games asked the developers if the, at the time, upcoming *Call of Duty: WWII* (2017) would contain playable female soldiers for his wife to play. Gamers responded with outrage when the developers confirmed playable female characters, arguing that the game would no longer be historically accurate to WWII. This outrage was ironic because the same outrage did not exist about the Nazi zombies also present in the game. Many gamers claimed that the inclusion of women would affect their enjoyment of the game. As one journalist put it: “imagine, while playing an otherwise serious and historically accurate World War II game,

storming the beaches of Normandy on D-Day with a platoon of women. It would be jarring and laughable—an example of the exact type of tokenism and pandering developers should avoid” (MaGee). This example demonstrates how the attachment to supposed historical accuracy moves beyond just fantasy games, and the medieval, and is used as a way to keep diversity out of many types of games. The attachment is not to history, or even to the fantasy genre, but to an established white male world without women or people of color—much like the world Tolkien created.

In adapting LOTR, Vist and I were looking for ways to make a world that was immersive and pleasurable for ourselves. The story itself wasn’t really the problem. The adventure to destroy the Ring excited us! We just wanted characters we could identify with. In the end, we didn’t change much about their personalities, aside from making them queer women. Kline explains that “the pleasure of immersion and remediation is only intensified by the player’s familiarity with the sources of the neomedieval games themselves” (6). This pleasure is, again, intensified when making machinima within neomedieval games when you are familiar with the source material. As much as our machinima may seem like a departure from LOTR, in other ways it’s a love letter to the series laden with references either to LOTR itself or the quirks of *LOTR Online*. Examples include our accurate use of the timeline from the books to show the inaccuracy of the timeline of Jackson’s films, the heckler replying “one gross what?” in response to Bilbo announcing that she is “one gross” in her birthday speech, or Frodo saying “oops wrong room” when first walking into the room of the game’s (male) Aragorn instead of the room in the same Inn containing our film’s (female) Aragorn. As fun as these moments were, they did create tension between the narrative we were attempting to create in *Lady Hobbits* versus what we knew was happening in Tolkien’s world, causing us to get creative with our explanations, even if

they were only to each other. In other words, why would lady hobbits be leaving the Shire?

### **Alterbiographies: Our Hobbits, Our Selves**

Playing LOTRO with our own version of the fellowship quickly led us to create what Gordon Calleja calls “alterbiographies.” An alterbiography stands in opposition to the “scripted narrative” written into the game by its creators and is instead “the story generated by the individual player as she takes action in the game” (Calleja, *In Game* 115). Examining alterbiography “argues for a shift in emphasis from story-telling, the dominant mode of narrative in literature and cinema, to story generation” (Calleja, “Experimental” 1). Vist and I found ourselves instantly in this mode of story generation upon making our hobbits. This was partly because in a neomedieval setting although female avatars were treated the same as male avatars by the game, we knew this was still Middle-earth, and we knew that, with few exceptions, in Middle-earth women didn’t go on adventures. I found myself thinking, “Why is it that Eowyn had to disguise herself as a man to go into battle but I can just waltz right in there?” While I think it’s good design on behalf of Turbine to allow anyone to play a female avatar, the tensions with the way women were treated in the game versus the way they were treated in the source text caused us to start generating alterbiography right from the get go. You had to ask yourself, why am I, a lady hobbit, leaving the Shire? What are my motivations? What do I want to accomplish? Why was I allowed to go?

For example, when we started playing LOTRO Vist discovered that, while you could pick from male or female elves, hobbits, or “men”, you could not make a female dwarf. LOTR lore indicates that dwarven women would not go on adventures, or really be seen above ground at all (Ruane and James 387). But really would women of any of the other races be going on adventures either? It seemed like a strange exception to make, and therefore we decided that the

best way to deal with this limitation was to take our knowledge that both male and female dwarves could grow beards and decide that you could just self identify your dwarf as a woman. In our alterbiography, Vist's dwarf was a woman, who just happened to be referred to by male pronouns all the time because no one was used to seeing female dwarfs out and about. It was almost like a disguise. Suddenly, because of this alterbiography all the dwarfs in the game became almost genderless to me unless they specified, it had changed the whole game for me—for the better. We didn't want to create a world in which gender was unnoticed, or a world without sexism, and we attempted to demonstrate that in the film, for example by having Frodo put on the ring to disappear when a stranger came up to her at the Prancing Pony and started hitting on her.

Soon the alterbiography that we had formed around the game because of its gendered expectations began to lead us in another direction, away from the “scripted narrative” of the game all together. The established LOTRO narrative makes you a sort of unmentioned but important figure in the narrative of LOTR. This is supposed to be the story about how you, just some random man, hobbit, dwarf, or elf, assisted in the destruction of the Ring in some way. You are someone who is very important to the destruction of the Ring and the preservation of Middle-earth but you are just sort of “offstage” during the books. You are supposed to play the game by creating a character that has random core narrative adventures as part of the main storyline where you do something with the “real” members of the Fellowship who you encounter throughout the game, while also going about other business in Middle-earth. When we first started playing LOTRO we discussed how it wouldn't be hard to just avoid the parts of the game where you interact with the “real” Fellowship entirely. We joked that you could just make your own Fellowship, walk through Middle-earth together following the path taken in the books and create

an alterbiography so strong it would just be a personally tailored version of the original narrative— and that was *Lady Hobbits*.

When creating the characters, we knew it was crucial to our adaptation that the characters not only look the way we thought female versions of the characters would look, but also to have a distinct appearance and style that displayed varying types of femininity. We wanted the characters to be the same characters from the book, but not exactly the same. We wanted them to all be unique in some way. Our Gandalf is very much Tolkien's Gandalf but she is also an expansion of that character. We make it explicit that she is a bit of an unreliable, flakey windbag who is also filled with wisdom and knowledge. Our Aragorn is still the hero that protects the hobbits throughout their journey, but she is also uptight and straightforward to a fault, unable to take or make a joke. Our Sam is every bit as much of a sweet devoted lover as Tolkien's Sam, but we have just demonstrated this in different (and much more literal) ways. We've since realized that our *Lady Hobbits* have become, for us, the characters in LOTR. Little did I know at the time we were creating the machinima that the imaginative play that Vist and I had taken up in both the world of LOTR and in *LOTRO* was a practice that has been theorized heavily within game studies called “critical play.”

### **Critical Play: Unplaying LOTR and LOTRO**

Mary Flanagan defines critical play as play that is “characterized by a careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes that function as alternatives to popular play spaces” (6). Although we didn't go into making *Lady Hobbits* knowing that we were exemplifying Flanagan's concept of critical play, we were consciously *playing critically* and the above quotations from Flanagan describe the exact type of play we were interested in when we started playing LOTRO. Vist and I used critical play in order to find a place for ourselves

within LOTRO and to create a retelling of the LOTR narrative that was more culturally accessible to ourselves as women. Critical play functions as a mode of resistance to the dominant play styles and hierarchies of games culture that demonstrate the cultural inaccessibility of certain games spaces for women. Flanagan discusses many varieties of critical play but *Lady Hobbits*, and machinima in general, falls very clearly into three of Flanagan's categories of critical play: unplaying, reskinning, and rewriting.

Unplaying is defined as “specifically enacting forbidden scenarios or secret scenes” or “other unanticipated conclusions often in opposition to any acceptable or expected adult play script” (33). In *Critical Play*, Flanagan most often uses “unplaying” to discuss girls killing their dolls as opposed to nurturing them or *Sims* players setting their characters on fire or leaving them alone in a locked room to starve. Although we never abused any of our avatars, we did unplay them in many ways that worked against the game and the established LOTR narrative. We took them into areas of the game where they weren't a high enough level to enter alone. We filmed some scenes that appeared to have our low-level hobbits killing monsters when really we were spamming them with spells from higher-level characters off-screen, having switched off the visual and audio effects from the spells so that you couldn't see or hear them “on camera.” We also acted out many scenarios that were not “appropriate” for the neomedieval setting of the LOTR universe. These varied from the simple act of women hobbits leaving the Shire and becoming adventurers, to a “canonical” acceptance of Frodo and Sam's more-than-platonic relationship, with the couple living together happily at Bag End. For us, the idea of Frodo and Sam *not* being in love in LOTR is as ridiculous as the idea of them being in love might be to LOTR purists. We were really making the all-male Fellowship within LOTR, the all-male clubhouse behind the authorship of LOTR, and the male-dominated world of LOTRO our own.

We were unplaying the scripted narrative of LOTRO but we were also unplaying the conventions of the MMORPG as well. We didn't do anything to gain achievements, unlock story or reach a level cap. Everything we did was simply either to tell the story we wanted to tell or, alternatively, to explore Middle-earth with our Fellowship just as the original had. For example, it was very important for us to quest out to Tom Bombadil's house to see what it was like despite not being high enough level to get there easily. Even though it was important that we walked past the house on our trip to Bree we decided to depart from the narrative and have Tom not help the Hobbits as a way of mocking the ridiculousness of his position in LOTRO, in which he is programmed to simply skip around in circles continuously in front of his house.

Real-life players in LOTRO were frequently confused or even annoyed by the way we were “unplaying” the game. For example, while filming a scene where we have the hobbits kill a barrow-wight alone without the help of Tom Bombadil (i.e. unlike in the books) a stranger saw that our low-level hobbits were taking all the damage while our high-level character casted spells from off-camera and they came over and killed the monster for us. When we moved to another part of the field and tried to film the scene again the stranger interfered a second time and ruined our shot once again. Eventually we had to actually send a private message the player and explain that we were making a machinima so that they would leave us alone. Instead they took a seat and decided to watch us work, which was annoying as we had to try not to get them in the background of our shot. The irony was not lost on us that we were attempting to film a scene where the female hobbits killed a high-level monster “all by themselves” and without the help of Bombadil, only to have another male character (and more than likely a male player) interfere and “save” us from the monster. Even if well-intentioned, other players who were playing the game “properly” would often burst the bubble of fun that we were having unplaying the game.

The reskinning in *Lady Hobbits* is slightly more obvious: reskinning is defined as “altering characters or objects” (Flanagan 60). We made our characters from the ground up to look exactly like what we imagined them. Made in LOTRO, they were still hobbits, still had big feet, similar ages and many of the traits of the original Fellowship, but we wanted them to be each unique in their own way. Sam is still Sam in most regards: she is robust in build, blond, and concerned with being faithful and loyal and useful above all else. She wants to assist Frodo in her journey but is also quite interested and concerned with making sure that she and Frodo get engaged so they can be together forever! We were at once reskinning the characters and LOTR for ourselves.

Rewriting is a form of critical play which involves engaging in “unconventional play” as opposed to what Flanagan calls “straight” play or “conventional intended play.” She explains, for example, that in Victorian doll culture girls “could constantly revise and rewrite the narratives surrounding dolls” (36), and that in *The Sims* players could rewrite by “redefining play from within the writings of fan culture” (60). We obviously rewrote LOTR, but we also wanted to be able to revise and rewrite not only the original narrative but also our script as we went according to how we saw the characters and the world as fans. Because of this, many things that happen in the film were a surprise to us. For example, when we got to the Brandywine Crossing the boat that the Fellowship was supposed to take to get to Bree was gone as part of an in-game quest. We couldn’t film the scene on the boat without doing a quest that was beyond our level, and getting to the right level would have taken days. Therefore, because we needed not only to get to Bree in the story, but also physically in the game, we decided to swim. This emergent aspect of the story led to one of my favorite moments in the film in which Sam jumps into the water without hesitation and Frodo freaks out because she thinks that Sam cannot swim. Sam then reveals that

this was a lie she told Frodo in the past so that she would hold her hand while they swam.

Rewriting became not just part of the critical play of making *Lady Hobbits*, but also part of the fun of what was otherwise an assignment for class. What I didn't realize at the time was that Vist and I were not just rewriting the genders of the hobbits, we were also rewriting the gendered context of the text itself. We were doing this by creating a culture around our adaptation that was made up of just us and therefore that culture was inherently feminine, queer, nerdy and feminist. Making *Lady Hobbits* was only time that I found myself "nerding out" over aspects of LOTR and I know it is in part because we had created our own small nerd culture in which we, queer feminist women, were the normative bodies in the text and the intended audience of the text we were creating. This act of rewriting the culture was radical in part because the culture around the writing of the LOTR itself was anything but feminist. In the following section I explore how the culture surrounding the creation of LOTR is still effecting the way that nerd culture is perceived and enacted today.

### **LOTR IRL: Tolkien's Life and Nerd Culture**

LOTR is a text that is incredibly focused on connections between men and the male experience. In a review of *The Return of the King* in *The Observer* in 1955, Edwin Muir described the gendered dynamic of *The Lord of the Rings* books as one of boyhood, explaining that "hardly one of them knows anything about women, except by hearsay. Even the elves and dwarves and the Ents are boys irretrievably, and will never come to puberty" (qtd. in Partridge 182). Tolkien himself lived a life in which he mostly associated with men (Partridge 179). Between his all-boys school education, deceased parents, time served in the military, and time at Oxford, it's no wonder that his texts are so focused on the bonds between men. Tolkien had many male friendships that he considered of extreme importance, including most famously a

group of writers and academics he met with regularly named “The Inklings.” The Inklings were a group of approximately thirteen white Christian men working at Oxford, who met to talk and share/read their writing, which was often of a fantastical nature. This included C.S. Lewis’s works of science fiction about space travel and Tolkien’s works about time travel (Fredrick and McBride 3-6). These men were, in fact, the first audience to consume *The Lord of the Rings*, and have even been referred to as “The Fellowship” by their biographers (Zaleski and Zaleski).



(fig. 2.2) A few of the members of the Inklings (Dirida). (fig. 2.3) The fellowship in Peter Jackson’s adaptation of *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

The men would meet in C.S. Lewis’s room on Thursdays nights and at a pub, the Eagle and Child, on Tuesday mornings (Zaleski and Zaleski 4). The group was made up of male members, although at least one woman wanted to join, detective novelist Dorothy L. Sayers. When reading about the Inklings it is hard for me not to identify strongly with Sayers, who “had much in common with Lewis and Tolkien’s circle, including a love of orthodox Christianity, traditional verse, popular fiction, and debate,” but was “excluded in principle from membership in the group by virtue of her sex” (Zaleski and Zaleski 352). In high school I was “part of” a large group of friends who hung out weekly and talked about games, science fiction, fantasy and politics, but because of my gender I was never really a “member”—I was more of a tagalong that some members liked and others loathed, allowed to stay only because I was dating one of the “members”. When I imagine Sayers, I find myself projecting my experiences and empathy onto her, in part because of her exclusion and in part because I know how much Tolkien disliked her writing, most specifically her characters (Zaleski and Zaleski 352). Some have speculated that

this is because of her male characters' "dandyism," and Sayers's "affinity for strong female characters" (Zaleski and Zaleski 352). Others have rightfully pointed out that Sayers could have "introduced a different perspective on gender" if she was allowed to be part of the Inklings' discussions, "not because she was female" but because she frequently "argued that women and men are both equally human" (Fredrick and McBride 23). In other words, not only was Sayers a woman excluded from The Inklings, but she also wrote essays about feminism<sup>16</sup> including the essay "Are Women Human?" which was published in the 1947 anthology *Unpopular Opinions* (Fredrick and McBride 23).

While Sayers is the first example I could find of a woman being excluded from the cultures surrounding the science fiction and fantasy genres, she was far from the last.<sup>17</sup> In fact, in 2014 the magazine *LIGHTSPEED* published a special issue of women's writing (fiction and nonfiction) as a reaction to the continued exclusion of women from the Fantasy subculture called "Women Destroy Fantasy!" (Rambo et al.). Not only do women discuss their exclusion from the culture in the 2014 special issue, but they explicitly link that exclusion back to Tolkien himself. Fantasy author Kameron Hurley remembers epic fantasy being defined by reference to Tolkien: "Tolkien and his medieval castles and orcs and wizards . . . well. That was epic fantasy, defined," and anything else "either needed to be put outside that frame or somehow be mangled to fit within it." In other words, Tolkien became the yardstick that all other fantastic literature was measured against. Hurley goes on to explain that fantasy has been defined in the narrowest way possible to the exclusion of almost all women. She elaborates: "I've seen a lot of women

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<sup>16</sup> Despite writing what I would argue are feminist essays Sayers struggled to identify with the feminist label and even claimed in a 1938 essay that she felt "the time for 'feminism' in the old-fashioned sense of the word, had gone past" (Loades 23).

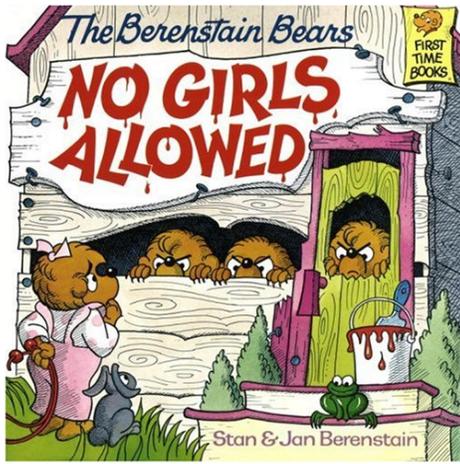
<sup>17</sup> This exclusion happened in such an explicit way that women often wrote in these genres under male pseudonyms to hide their gender, a practice that is *still encouraged in science fiction and fantasy today* (Anders).

writers struggle in the epic fantasy field, facing reader and publisher expectations that assume their work must be something else, anything else, besides epic fantasy. Epic fantasy is Tolkien. Epic fantasy is *men*.” This type of male-culture did not end with fantasy and we have seen how these assumptions about one genre have bled over into others, and into gaming most of all.

But nerd culture isn't defined simply by the gender of its members; the behavior of its members is important as well. The Inklings were, as Candice Frederick and Sam McBride have pointed out, their own “male culture” which, with their focus on science fiction and fantasy, tendency to have debates for sport that would sometimes delve into “ruthlessness,” and function as an “intellectual circle” for “male companionship” for those who felt “alienated [from] ... the culture of [their] times” (1-6). The Inklings, I argue, were an early manifestation of one the most prevalent icons of contemporary nerd culture: the all-male “clubhouse.”<sup>18</sup> This clubhouse is something we see depicted in media constantly, from *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984), to *Freaks and Geeks* (1999-2000), to *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2018), to *Stranger Things* (2016-2018). The all-male group of “nerdy” friends that meets to play *Dungeons and Dragons*, watch films, or talk about science fiction and fantasy is something we are all familiar with, not only from the depictions of “no girls allowed” signs on literal clubhouses in our media (as we see in the images below) but also from our own childhood experiences of segregated play (Jenkins, “Freedom” 276). In our media, there was always a woman, like Sayers, like myself, at the fringe of the group—not quite in but not quite out, feeling resentment, feeling excluded but nonetheless wishing to be part of a group with minds like her own.

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<sup>18</sup> The idea of the all-male clubhouse has been well developed in Jane Margolis and Allan Fisher's book *Unlocking the Clubhouse: Women in Computing* that outlines the ways that girls and then women are locked out of the computing clubhouse through socialization in the home, computer science education, and women's alienation from “geek culture” (5).



(fig. 2.4) *The Berenstain Bears No Girls Allowed* (1986). (fig. 2.5) *The Little Rascals* (1994).

The all-male nature of *The Inklings* was something that member C.S. Lewis was very passionate about, claiming that “the decay of friendship, owing to the endless presence of women everywhere, is a thing I’m rather afraid of” (qtd. in Fredrick and McBride 1). Tolkien scholar Brenda Partridge explains that Lewis adamantly believed that “full intimacy with another man was impossible unless women were totally excluded,” as “women’s minds were not meant for logic or for great art” (180). While this statement may seem dated to most, it is actually quite similar to sentiments and comments I’ve encountered from Gamergaters, or men’s rights advocates in the present day. For example, the “Men Going Their Own Way” subgroup of (heterosexual) men’s rights advocates who believe in living life totally segregated from women, without wives, girlfriends or children. We see in these groups not just cultural inaccessibility but a very literal inaccessibility of spaces and groups as a woman. Tolkien himself believed women could be educated, but only in a receptive sense, in which they took in knowledge created by men which they would soon forget (Partridge 181). He explains that he was impressed by how quickly women could grasp a point taught to them by a man they were interested in, but

disappointed by how they could “go no further, when they leave his hand, or when they cease to take personal interest in him” (qtd. in Partridge 181). This statement seems reminiscent of the views expressed in the meme (fig. 1.3) that I analyzed in the introduction of this dissertation, in which the creator and subsequent sharers believed that women took interest in video games for male attention. While these are two different perspectives, both assume an interest in men as being the main motivation to maintain other interests. These views might not have been shocking in Tolkien and Lewis’ day but the assumption that women have less of a natural attraction to science fiction, fantasy, comics, computers and videogames is a stereotype that is still dominant today (Margolis and Fisher 61-75) as is the stereotype that their interest in nerd culture is fake and for male attention, hence the “fake geek girl” meme (Reagle 2862; Leon 11). I bring up the comparison between the words and actions of *The Inklings* and the words and actions of modern day men because it is how little these groups of “nerds” have changed that is of primary interest to this dissertation. The other interest of this dissertation is establishing how little the texts that these groups of nerds idolize have changed. These male dominated texts and the male dominated cultures that support them are two sides of the same coin.

### **Tolkien’s Characters and the Vagina Dentata**

Like women in *The Lord of the Rings*, female characters in video games are few and far between<sup>19</sup> (Deitz; Glaubke et al.; Dill-Shackleford et al.; Williams et al.). Women rarely get to appear without being portrayed as a love interest to impress (ex. the princess you are saving like Mario’s Peach, or the princess who sends you on a quest like *Zelda*), or an obstacle to be conquered (ex. the female villain you must kill to progress, like Daisy Fitzroy in *Bioshock*

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<sup>19</sup> In Williams et al’s study “The virtual census: representations of gender, race and age in video games” for example, examined the 150 “top games” across nine systems (constituting over 95% of sales from 2005-2006) and found that out of the 8572 characters studied 85% were white and 85% were male.

*Infinite* [2010], or the kidnapped girl who must be escorted home like Ashley in *Resident Evil 4* [2005]). There are countless tropes about women from Tolkien's work that I could focus on, from the ways the female characters who are included are relegated to the background, to the ways in which even female "warrior" characters in fantasy narratives like Tolkien's Eowyn are relegated to healer roles in which they take care of the male characters (Partridge 192). This trope has possibly contributed to the stereotype that women should always play the healer characters (to support the male players and characters) in team based video games today (Ratan et al.). But I think it would be most useful to explore in depth just one of these tropes that is the most prominent in video games today: the vaginal monster.

Easily the most unsettling portrayal of a female character in the LOTR source text is the terrifying monster Shelob, the giant spider. In both the books and the films Gollum brings Frodo to Shelob, who would eat him, so that Gollum can then regain the One Ring for himself. While the trope of the abject feminine monster and the vagina dentata myth are older than Tolkien himself (Raitt 415), it is still relevant as we see these tropes so frequently in the monsters we see in video games today. The vagina dentata myth is a "foundation for the caricatures of women that are dominant in Christian theology and practice" (Raitt 415). This image is one of a vagina, or a monster resembling one, that contains teeth, which threaten men with castration and consumption (Raitt 415). The dentata myth is still very common in popular culture as it "visualizes, for males, the fear of entry into the unknown, of the dark dangers that must be controlled in the ambivalent mystery that is woman (Raitt 416). Not only is Shelob clearly depicted as a *female* spider in the books and films but as Brenda Partridge points out in her article, "No Sex Please—We're Hobbits: The Construction of Female Sexuality in The Lord of the Rings," "Tolkien is following a tradition [of] portraying woman as a threat, with implied

sexual overtones” (187). Shelob is characterized as evil, like Gollum, but less sympathetically so: Tolkien explains that “her lust was not his lust. Little she knew of or cared for towers, or rings, or anything devised of by mind or hand” (165 *Two Towers*). While other spiders in the text do not have genders, Shelob is described as a “woman” who is interested in only in her all-consuming lustful hunger (165).

Although we can’t know if it was intentional, or entirely subconscious in the books, Shelob reads as a very obvious incarnation of the vagina dentata myth (Partridge 187). In these encounters with Shelob Tolkien repeatedly uses the pronouns she and her to describe the monster and bring attention to her gender through direct characterization as well as the indirect characterization provided through the bodily descriptions. Not only does she “hunger” for men but she is described as having a “huge swollen body” that is “soft” and “squelching” with “hideous folds” and a “pale belly” that “gave forth a foul stench” (167). Jill Raitt explains that myths of this nature can be found in many cultures throughout history and many of these myths end with the male dominating the horrifying woman by either removing the teeth, or penetrating the woman in order to dominate the teeth into submission (Raitt 423). The vagina in the dentata myth is furthermore often depicted as gaining power through consuming men due to insatiable sexual hunger (Raitt 423) much like how Shelob is depicted. In this way these myths are intrinsically linking a specific type of fear with the gender of the monster.

Raitt’s conclusions about the vagina dentata myth and male domination are similar to the conclusions that Sarah Stang has drawn in her 2018 examination of female monsters in contemporary video games. Stang explains:

Shrieking, biting, clawing, stabbing, licking, and spreading infectious diseases are the ways in which these monsters fight. Some of these monsters specifically threaten men,

and most of them appear to be beautiful at first before revealing their true, hideous forms. These female monsters, while often nearly naked, are grotesque and so probably not intended to titillate the assumed male player; rather, they speak to fears of female power embedded in patriarchal culture (30).

It is this line between reader/viewer/player disgust and titillation with sexualized female monsters that Tolkien and Jackson enacted with Shelob, and that contemporary game designers are still enacting with their monsters today (Stang 30).



(fig 2.6) Shelob in Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *Return of the King* (2003)

It's logical that these myths would continue through video games as these images of vaginal monsters are traditionally found in heroic journey narratives in which male heroes take a "perilous journeys through dark passages" where they often have to "thrus[t] a spear into frightening depths" (Raitt 426). Partridge points out that "Shelob' lair, reached by entering a hole and journeying along tunnels, may also be seen to represent the female sexual orifice" (187). The journey through the tunnel within Shelob's lair is described in this exact type of "sexual" language. When the hobbits first encounter Shelob's lair, Frodo's initial reaction is to shout "ugh that smell!" (156). Tolkien goes on to describe the smell at length saying that out of the tunnel "came a stench, not the sickly odor of decay in the meads of Morgul, but a foul reek, as if filth unnamable were piled and hoarded in the dark within" (156). When Sam approaches the hole he

looks at Gollum with disgust and says “D’you mean to say you’ve been through this hole? Phew!” (156). When Sam tries to articulate the type of smell he hints at something indecent or obscene by saying the smell is “like—well, I wouldn’t like to say” leaving adult readers to make their own connections to female genitalia (157). Depicted is not only the entry into the ‘tunnel’ where, “as they thrust forward they felt things brush against their heads” (158) but also the destruction of the hymen-like cover of webbing on the tunnel that a normal blade couldn’t penetrate. Eventually Frodo uses his elven blade to break through: “stroke after stroke he dealt, until at last all the web within his reach was shattered” and the hobbits exit the “mouth of despair”— “he sprang out shouting as he came” (163). Vagina dentata myths are used to stoke a sexual fear and, in the case of Shelob, the sexual dominance becomes quite literal when Shelob penetrates Frodo with her stinger and then Sam later retaliates by penetrating her with Frodo’s elven sword. In her haste to claim Sam as her victim Shelob “heaved up the great bag of her belly high above Sam’s head. Poison frothed and bubbled from the wound. Now splaying her legs she drove her huge bulk down on him again . . . and with a strength greater than any warrior’s hand, thrust herself down upon the spike” (171).

After this encounter she is described as shuddering quivering and convulsing as if she is post-coital. Partridge concludes that the inclusion of Shelob proves that “once again Tolkien interprets myth in such a way as to reveal his inner fear or abhorrence of female sexuality” (191). While we can’t know for sure if Tolkien was purposely emulating the vagina dentata myth, we do know that this myth was typified through Shelob and that Shelob’s character was both inherently feminine and inherently sexual. Partridge argues that “in comparison with the intimacy of the portrayal of the male characters and their relationships” the characterization of female characters such as Shelob “shows a distinct lack of knowledge of women, relying heavily

on mythical literature for inspiration and incorporating many of Tolkien's aforementioned prejudices against women" (192). I would argue that these descriptions of Shelob were the part of Tolkien's text that were the most repulsive and inaccessible to me as a reader who, even before reading any criticism, could not *not* read the descriptions of the encounter with Shelob as vaginal and phallic. Even if an adaptation didn't contain the sexual or gendered descriptions it would be difficult not to mention her gender as her name is *SHElob* a name that simply means she spider, as "lob" is an archaic word for spider (Tolkien, *Letters* 81).<sup>20</sup>

### **Tolkien's Tropes and Contemporary Video Games**

I am lingering on the depiction of Shelob specifically because we see countless similar depictions of abject female sexuality and the vagina dentata in video games today. A short list (some pictured below) would have to include The Hive Mind in *Dead Space* (2008); Arioch in *Shin Megami Tensei* (1992); Saryn from *Warframe* (2013); an unknown enemy from *Blaster Master* (1988); C'thun from *World of Warcraft* (2004–2018); the facehuggers in *Alien: Colonial Marines* (2013); Rakk Hive in *Borderlands* (2009); Ebrietas, Daughter of the Cosmos from *Bloodborne* (2015); the Egg Spawner in *Prey* (2006); the Gaping Dragon from *Dark Souls* (2011); and the "Butt Monster" in *Catherine* (2011). Gabrielle Trepanier-Jobin and Maude Bonefant have theorized the ways in which Barbra Creed's theory of the "monstrous feminine" applies to women in videogames. They argue that "the Monstrous-Feminine articulates how

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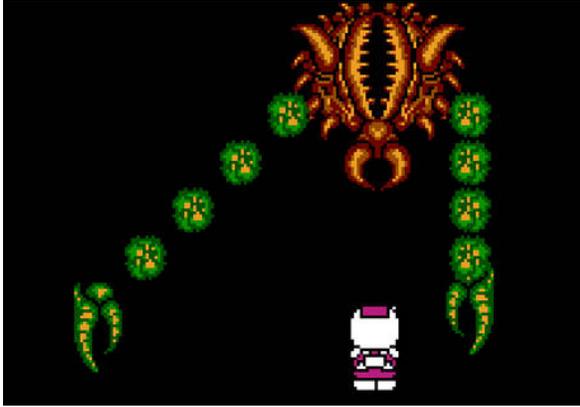
<sup>20</sup> If (or perhaps, when) *Lady Hobbits* got to the portion of LOTR's narrative in which our characters would encounter Shelob, Vist and I have ideas about how we would handle this controversial character. In the spirit of our parody, we thought about reversing her gender, but realized that the scene wouldn't translate if Shelob was male. We decided the best course of action would be to lean into Tolkien's depiction of her, by having a (male) Golem describe all the horrible things about her like in the book and movies, but then have her be a totally reasonable ally on first encounter. Our SJW (short for Shelob Justice Warrior) would have no interest in eating lady hobbits as she actually feeds on male tears. We like the idea of turning Shelob into a caricature of not only "herself" as Tolkien depicted her, but also of the stereotype of the man-hating "misandrist" social justice warrior we are so frequently mischaracterized as. In the end, the encounter with Shelob wouldn't be a battle, but instead a meeting of the minds wherein Shelob educates the (sheltered) hobbits about intersectionality and helps them on their journey by exposing Golem as a fake ally.

monstrosity in video games is associated with female reproductive organs and fears of powerful women” and that the vagina dentata myth plays on the way men “fear women as castrator.” The authors further note that often female monsters are depicted as spiders, including *Diablo 3* (2013), *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (2013), and *Doom 3* (2004) (Trepanier-Jobin and Bonefant).

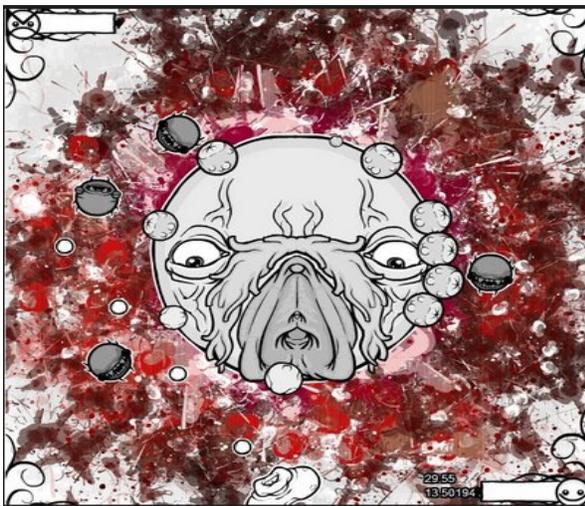
I would argue that depictions of both the vagina dentata and the monstrous feminine are one of the most inescapable tropes about women within contemporary video games. It is not uncommon to see monsters with vaginal heads and/or mouths full of teeth in order to communicate a threat worse than death—that of symbolic rape of a man or sexualized consumption. Possibly the most garish example is a boss fight in *Dante’s Inferno* (2010) in which the male protagonist battles a monstrous Cleopatra, whose disgusting, but sexualized, 100-foot nude body looms over you while her nipples become vaginas which give birth to tiny demon babies that attack you. Worse still, at the end of the battle Cleopatra shrinks down and repeatedly attempts to mount the protagonist in various sex positions, if the player hits the correct buttons at the correct times they will roll on top of Cleopatra, stroke her face and breast and then penetrate her with a sword, although the camera only shows the characters from the waist up so it is framed to look (and sound) like the two are having sex. The trope carries forward into games so well, in part because of the assumed male audience, but also in part because so many games focus around or draw upon figures from classical mythology which is abound with gendered monsters (Stang 21). Therefore popular games such as *The Witcher* series (2007-2015) or the *God of War* series (2005-2018) still rely on classic narratives that revolve around male heroes and female monsters (Stang 21). The death of these female monsters by the male heroes therefore “symbolically represent the victory of the normative, patriarchal symbolic order,

thereby alleviating the anxieties these female monsters represent” (26).

The trope of the female vagina monster is so ubiquitous in video games that *Binding of Isaac* (2011) designer Ed McMillen parodies the trope with his free browser-based game called *Cunt* (2008) which does away with the typical metaphoric—man with a sword fights giant monster who throws things at you out of a giant dark orifice—and in favour of a literal penis shooting various substances at a giant vagina that the player orbits. For its part, the vagina shoots out urine and diseases such as genital warts, gonorrhoea, crabs and syphilis. The player either kills the vagina, moving onto the next vagina, or dies of its various STIs. I bring this up to demonstrate the ways that one simple trope can follow our media throughout history, especially in male-dominated genres like science fiction, fantasy and horror. Male dominated mediums such as video games (consciously or not) use these tropes to make these texts very subtly (or not so subtly) inaccessible to women (and terrifying to all genders) by depicting them as the enemy and by boiling them down to their grotesque sexual organs. As silly as this sentence sounds, every vagina monster I see in a game tells me: “this game is not for you, games are not for you”. This history of male depictions of monstrous vaginas emphasizes a core, simplistic, metanarrative that we see demonstrated in McMillen’s *Cunt*: men are good, women an evil to be overcome. Or, to bring it back to the fantasy genre, as Terry Pratchett once explained: “wizards get to do a better class of magic, while witches give you warts.” These tropes of representing women, whether they are textual or visual, are at the heart of the cultural inaccessibility of these texts and are a subtle way of excluding women from them.



(fig. 2.7) Unknown enemy in *Blaster Master* (1988).



(fig. 2.8) Ed McMillen's *Cunt* (2008).



(fig. 2.9) The "Butt Monster" in *Catherine* (2011).



(fig. 2.10) Ebrietas, Daughter of the Cosmos from *Bloodborne* (2015).



(fig. 2.11) Arioch in *Shin Megami Tensei* (1992).

The creators of all these games had the opportunity to push aside the vagina dentata myth and elicit fear in less sexist ways, but they chose not to. But to do this they would have to recognize the gendered nature of what they are creating, when a trope becomes ubiquitous it starts to feel very normal. Maybe some of them understand the way they are leveraging women's bodies to promote fear, or maybe they don't. No matter the intentions, women and their bodies are leveraged as a source of primordial fear for readers, viewers, and players in a way that enforces the already existing us vs them dynamic of men and women within games culture. Letting women into the clubhouse is literally embracing the enemy. While this may initially sound like a stretch in logic, Gamers already see their opposition to feminist work (and feminists

themselves) in games as a sort of “metagame” in which they as Gamers have been put in the heroic position to defeat the feminist “enemies” attempting to invade their hobby (Boluk and Lemieux 279). Katherine Cross has written about how Gamergate activists have gamified harassment of women across social media employing what Cross calls “ludic discourse” to rationalize their actions (“Press F” 24). For example, the movement can “grind” through sending emails or hateful tweets, they can “level up” if their actions result in their enemy’s silence (Cross “Press F” 24). Furthermore, Gamergate will refer to their enemies as “bosses” and “mini-bosses,” saying for example, that games critic Leigh Alexander was a “final boss” (Cross “Press F” 25).<sup>21</sup> I’m not arguing that women can not or should not be depicted as villains or enemies, but I am arguing that their villainy shouldn’t be rooted in their femaleness, or their sexuality as a way to promote fear and therefore deepening these gendered divides in games culture.<sup>22</sup>

When adapting LOTR, Jackson in turn, had the same opportunity to re-characterize Shelob the same way he re-characterized Tolkien’s other characters, and to do away with the continuation of the vagina dentata myth. He did not need to adapt the continuing references to Shelob’s “smell,” and he really didn’t have to make Shelob’s mouth appear like a small pink toothed vagina (as you can see in fig. 2.2). There was no real reason why the monster needed to be referred to as “she” throughout the film, nor any reason that characters needed to continually speak about her as if she were a human female other than to create an emasculating gendered threat. Beyond the visual depictions signifying the vagina dentata myth there is also the use of Orc dialogue to reinforce the importance of Shelob’s gender that explains that when Shelob

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<sup>21</sup> “Boss” is gamer slang for the more powerful enemy one fights at the end of a level or dungeon, “mini-boss” is used to refer to enemies that are usually more difficult than standard enemies and positioned mid way through a level or dungeon, “final boss” is a term for the boss one would fight at the very end of a game.

<sup>22</sup> Although, I feel that reinterpretations of the vagina dentata myth that center the narrative around female monster protagonists are the exception to this rule, see for example feminist horror films *Gingersnaps* (2000), *Teeth* (2007), and *It Follows* (2014).

stings her victims they “go as limp as a boned fish. Then she has her way with them.” This back-and-forth between the orcs ensures that a viewer can easily interpret this scene sexually, and it also lets us know that Jackson and his writers were well aware of the sexual nature of the scene. These scenes in Shelob’s lair are arguably the only depictions of female sexuality in either the book or the film and they are disparaging, and enforcing an idea that female sexuality is something horrible to be feared.

While Tolkien’s inclusion of the vagina dentata myth may have been subconscious, Jackson's continuation and perpetuation of this myth was both sexist and intentional.<sup>23</sup> These sorts of depictions of femininity and womanhood in works of science fiction, fantasy, and horror in any medium are feeding into both the male-centric nature of these genres as well as their cultural inaccessibility to women. Women, and women’s body parts in science fiction and fantasy narratives, are continually treated as either funny, terrifying, or something to be gawked at, providing a variety of versions of the male gaze for women to feel alienated from (Raitt). Because of Shelob’s importance to the storyline Jackson could not omit her, but he could have omitted a great number of sexist tropes in his depiction. The continued inclusion and continuation of caricatures of the sexual woman as monster in our media is inexcusable. The continued proliferation of oversimplified depictions of women are one of the many factors that

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<sup>23</sup> Jackson is no stranger to depicting women as disgusting giant vaginal monsters. In his 1992 film *Braindead* (known in North America as *Dead Alive*) the main character's mother morphs into a giant grotesque monster at the end of the film. Instead of losing the feminine characteristics of her body, the mother becomes more “womanly” when she grows to be about 15 feet tall with giant buttocks and massive hanging pendulous breasts. If the monster’s enlarged vagina dentata-style teeth were not enough to hammer home these themes, the mother monster’s lower half eventually opens up and parts into a large orifice which then pulls the son back into the mother's body in a type of reverse birth. The son manages to re-emerge from his mother's body by using a relic (a phallic symbol, of course) in order to penetrate and slice open his mother's body which pours out gallons of blood before she tumbles to the ground defeated, with her buttocks in the air (Wu “Trading”). If it wasn’t for *Braindead* one could maybe argue that Jackson wasn’t aware of the sexual and symbolic undertones of the monster, but because this vagina as monster trope has been so heavily explored in *Braindead*, and because this scene is so similar to the Shelob scenes with Sam and Frodo, it therefore can’t be ignored.

make video games culturally inaccessible to girls and women. It is hard to not feel put off by these depictions of women in games, even if you don't quite know why you feel that way. It becomes obvious that female bodies and characters in fantasy, in games, and in fantasy games are simply not treated with the same respect or importance as male bodies (Taylor L. "Games" 166-168; Sarkeesian "Tropes"; Cassell and Jenkins 3; Kafai et al. 1; Leonard 84). The vaginal monster is just one of many tropes that has become pervasive in contemporary video games that has roots in the science fiction and fantasy genres. The hero narratives we consume today, with our white male protagonists, female healers, and mythic monsters, are not very far off from the fantasy narratives we consumed sixty years ago. It's time for fantasy narratives that reflect and respect their current audience.

## **Conclusion**

At the time he was writing his Middle-earth stories, Tolkien likely presumed that he would have an almost entirely male audience and there was very little need for him to appeal to female readers. While this, again, is not surprising, what is surprising is that this is still how many people think of the audience for contemporary video games. The presumed audience for most contemporary video games is still primarily adult men interested in science fiction and fantasy—the same demographic Tolkien (knowing or unknowingly) courted with *The Lord of the Rings*. I think the staying power of the perception that these audiences are made up primarily of men, is of substantial importance to the study of nerd subcultures, including gaming culture. How can women become a part of these "male" subcultures safely, and happily, without fear of harassment when they have been excluded on the basis of their gender for *so long*? The internet, and the quick dissemination of knowledge via memes, videos, and social media is only spreading and solidifying the assumption that women "don't belong" amongst the dominant audience for

science fiction and fantasy—hence Gamergate, which I will discuss at length in the following two chapters. These pages have explored my attempt to create a space for myself within LOTR and the fantasy subculture, through gaming, filmmaking, adaptation and critique. Vist and I attempted to invade the male-dominated culture surrounding LOTR, and to make it accessible to us personally. And, momentarily, it worked. There is so much political weight to the assumptions surrounding the fantasy genre: the assumption that women don't go on adventures, that there can be countless races in the world but all the "good" ones will be white, that there can be dragons but there can't be queerness, and most importantly that only men want to consume these stories.

While preparing to make *Lady Hobbits* I was surprised to discover that there were already a handful of gender-swapped adaptations of LOTR in existence: and they were all porn parodies (Hunter). Because porn parodies are made predominantly for straight men, the *only* way to adapt Tolkien's text was to make all the characters women, which, to my delight, often led to strangely feminist films. Whereas Tolkien and Jackson had presented the vagina as something evil to be feared, hardcore porn adaptations like *Whore of the Rings* (2001) flip this trope on its head by having the vagina be presented as something that is neither fearful or threatening, and instead something that should be worshipped and desired like the male genitals (which are almost entirely absent from this film). These films feel feminist not just in their inclusion of women in the narrative but also for making explicit what was in Tolkien's text implicit. Instead of homosocial tension, we have homosexuality, instead of Sam shouting "I'm coming Master Frodo," we simply have Sam cumming. *The Lord of the Rings* itself operates in a bubble of homosocial love, intimacy, and triumph that women rarely penetrate, and when they do it is to assist the men on their journey. Comparing these adaptations to Jackson's begs the question: which film is more feminist? Which film is more respectful of women? In which film do women

have more agency? The film that not only includes them but puts them at the forefront as objects of desire? Or the film that includes them, but pushes them to the margins? Sadly, I think the pornography is, while not necessarily feminist, a *more* feminist adaptation of LOTR than Jackson's. This is just a few of the things I was thinking about while making *Lady Hobbits* and that I now think about when playing games. What is more important for gender equality: quantity or quality of portrayals of women? And why do we have to choose?

When making *Lady Hobbits* I didn't have to choose. *Lady Hobbits* was a reclaiming of the LOTR story for myself because it was the process through which I felt like I became a part of the LOTR phenomenon. As cheesy as it is to say, the end product of the video itself is really not important. What is important is the experience of making it, of teaching myself those technical skills, of engaging in critical play and the LOTR universe, and of becoming one of the story's adapters with whatever means I had at my disposal. Vist and I didn't just invade the male dominated world of LOTR that I had felt excluded from, we rebuilt it. Most importantly, *Lady Hobbits* gave me a taste for making a clubhouse all of my own—something that would come in handy in the years to come working on *GI Janes* and *FPS*, the projects I will discuss in the following chapters.

## Chapter Three

### Space Invaders and Public Players: Offline Play and the GI Janes

*In 2001, when the Game Boy Advance was released, I begged my mother endlessly to buy one for me. I'd cut out advertisements I found in newspapers, or the Sears catalog and tape them to the wall beside my bunk bed. Eventually, my mother decided to at least humor me and brought me down to Zellers. We get there, and my mom gestured over an employee who unlocked the case, and brought the Game Boy to the cash register. She starts ringing it through. She tells my mom, "\$140." My mom gasps. "What! How can this be \$140? Is there a discount?" "No," the employee says. I stand there, tears welling up, pleading, "But Cousin David has one! Why can't I have one?" My mom looked down at me and she said two things—two things I still can't get out of my head— "It's too expensive. And isn't this for boys anyway?"*

— **Andrea Luc**, *Exploring Gender Identity and STEM Hobbies with Tween Girls*

*The geek girl is fundamentally upending systems of mastery and exclusion.*

— **T.L. Taylor**, *Raising the Stakes*

#### **Introduction — The Games Institute Janes**

In 2012 my colleagues Elise Vist, Judy Ehrentraut and I decided to create a feminist advocacy group for women in games studies at the University of Waterloo Games Institute<sup>24</sup> called The Games Institute Janes (GI Janes).<sup>25</sup> We wanted to ensure that there was a space for women, including ourselves, to comfortably play and talk about games as part of the Games Institute at the University of Waterloo. We had noticed increasing hostility to female gamers online in the years directly preceding Gamergate (which was named in the summer of 2014) and we felt the desire to do something within our community to directly address this sexism. We were part of many games events and clubs at Waterloo as part of the Games Institute, but were often the only women in attendance and would not feel comfortable actually playing games there for various reasons I will outline below. Therefore, despite “growing evidence that many females prefer to

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<sup>24</sup> The Games Institute is a group of researchers studying games and games related topics who have an office on the University of Waterloo campus. The director of the Games Institute is Dr. Neil Randall who is also the supervisor of this dissertation.

<sup>25</sup> Please see appendix for a comprehensive timeline of all events covered in this dissertation, including Games Institute Gatherings, GI Janes events, First Person Scholar developments, and important events in games culture.

participate in gaming within domestic contexts” (Bryce and Rutter 250), and despite our own personal preference to play at home alone, we started to dream up a space where women could come together and play games, a space that was public, but dominated by women—a public feminist gaming space. Feeling out of place in the clubhouses that were available to us, we decided it would be best to build our own. We imagined a place where we wouldn’t feel nervous playing games, where we could discuss the issues we encountered as women, and where we could feel like welcomed participants in games culture.

During our four years of advocacy with The GI Janes, we accomplished these goals to some degree, but not nearly to the extent we had originally envisioned. The group’s tenure was ultimately messy and marked by failures and mistakes. There were, however, also a number of small successes, which this chapter will cover as well. This chapter first outlines the ways that women are excluded from gaming spaces, it then moves on to discuss how a type of hegemonic masculinity is performed through the gamer identity, then I theorize the ways that women have been constructed as “deviant space invaders” within gaming spaces. Once this is established I move on to discuss my experiences as a GI Janes organizer in this theoretical context, I explain how we (the GI Janes founders) were excluded from gaming spaces at Waterloo, how gamer identity and hegemonic masculinity played a role in that exclusion, and how we found ourselves as “deviant spaces invaders” within the culture of the Games Institute despite having administrative support to both be there and hold our own events. I then discuss how we attempted to use GI Janes events to create spaces of inclusion, but how those spaces felt, at the time, like a failure. Lastly I discuss other women’s gaming spaces and initiatives alongside the GI Janes to determine why it’s so difficult to create spaces for women that feel welcoming within games culture.

This chapter contains my own descriptions and reflections on those events as well as anonymous quotations from the other two organizers and the three most regular GI Janes attendees. All five participants were women and all five were English graduate students at the University of Waterloo at the time of their interviews. While not all those interviewed identified as part of game studies, all had done games research and writing and had participated in the larger culture of the Games Institute at Waterloo to some degree. I conducted these five interviews in person in January of 2017 and received ethics approval in November 2016 as part of a larger research project entitled “Feminist Initiatives at the University of Waterloo Games Institute” (ORE #: 21819). I have reflected on both my own and my participant’s experiences, and much of my narration here focuses on my own discomfort in these spaces, as well as that of my participants. These are the feelings that truly define the complications of public gaming while female, or different in anyway. As Sara Ahmed explains, we learn a lot about worlds “when they do not accommodate us ... when you are not expected to be here. These experiences are a resource to generate knowledge” (*Living* 10). I think the presence of the GI Janes within the Games Institute did just that, it is a site of knowledge generation specifically because we did not fit. Despite attempts to accommodate us and financial support, in the end we could never make the GI Janes fit at the GI. My experiences of smashing a square peg into a round hole has generated knowledge around games culture, inclusion, and the failings of institutional diversity efforts.

While discussing the GI Janes and the problems we had, I will also discuss problems in both the local games culture GI Janes was situated in (specifically the GI and FPS), as well as games culture at large, in order to demonstrate that the problems that we faced are not unique to our experiences. Specifically, I discuss the impetus to start the GI Janes, issues with sexism and

gender roles that we encountered when running events with men, and the reaction to our decision to eventually move to a women-only event model. Lastly, I discuss our most successful event (a tutorial night of the fighting game *Super Smash Bros* [1999–2019]) and my experiences at “Smash Sisters,” another women only gaming event, in order to contrast the practices and culture of these similar but very different events. This chapter demonstrates how difficult it is for women to find a place for themselves in games culture even within “women-only” spaces. In order to explain why gaming spaces are so resistant to change, and why GI Janes failed at so many of our goals, I must first explain more generally how women are denied access to and excluded from games related spaces on a cultural level.

### **Gendered Exclusion in Offline Play Spaces**

Women are outsiders within gaming spaces, online and in public. Even with years of experience gaming, or huge reserves of gaming capital, they are still not seen as normative bodies in gaming spaces online or offline, because of the systems of hegemonic masculinity that structure these cultures and spaces. Gaming capital, as theorized by Mia Consalvo, is a type of cultural capital developed and circulated within games culture which, following Bourdieu’s model of cultural capital, “ultimately serve[s] to classify groups by class” (4). This capital is used to determine who is a gamer, who is not, and to what degree (Consalvo 184). While women do have access to gaming capital, it is much more difficult for them to attain because of their marginalized position in gaming culture. As Todd Harper puts it, the fighting game community for example, is situated “in a culture where even the best and brightest of women players are treated with disdain, hatred, and abuse” (116). In other words, no level of success or gaming capital will ever give you the automatic acceptance or sense of entitlement that many male players benefit from.

As a response, informally and formally, women create their own spaces within games

culture, developing unique cultural practices. Despite this, even in spaces that are built *for them*, the way games are played and consumed often creates a culture of exclusion for both girls and women as gamer identities are entrenched in what T.L. Taylor calls “systems of mastery and exclusion” in her book length examination of eSports *Raising the Stakes* (121). These systems are built upon gendered assumptions that have been around much longer than games: they are systems that insist that women who are passionate, focused and technically competent are unusual or neglectful of feminine duties (Taylor T., *Raising* 120). Not only are women historically expected to look after children and perform housework, recent studies have demonstrated that even as children girls are allowed substantially less leisure time and therefore less time is spent on the computer or gaming (Schott and Horrell 42; Bryce et al. 244). In other words, the absence of women from gaming spaces has less to do with interest in games, and more to do with the limitations that have been historically placed on girls and women that make it substantially more difficult for them to master the technologies required to acquire gaming capital (and thereby be considered a “real” gamer). I explore these dynamics by reflecting on my personal experiences and argue that, despite the intent to create spaces for women to play games, gendered inequalities are reinforced unless the organizers focus specifically on upending these systems of mastery and exclusion, which proves near-impossible when men are in attendance. This chapter first discusses systems of masculinity in gaming spaces, and how women’s bodies are treated within them.

### **Masculinity in Games Culture and Gaming Spaces**

If you are a woman who plays games, you have probably run into a scenario where you felt out of place because of your hobby. Maybe you walked into a store that sells board games and were surprised to find it full of men sitting at tables playing a collectable card game and tracking your

movements with curiosity. Maybe you sat down to play a fighting game with your male friends and felt totally excluded from the chain of insults and inside jokes they were volleying back and forth. Or maybe you decided to play a tabletop role playing game for the first time only to open up the player's handbook and see that the hyper-sexualized way that women are depicted doesn't sit well with you at all. These are mild, individual examples of the ways that women can feel like outsiders within traditionally masculine gaming culture. When you put them all together, they create a picture of mass exclusion that is only compounded by gatekeeping movements like Gamergate, and the persistent harassment women receive when playing games online.<sup>26</sup>

It is important when studying games culture not to ignore the construction of masculinity for these male gamers, not to treat them as “normal” and treat female gamers as the abnormal “other” in gaming culture. As Betsy DiSalvo explains, by examining male gamers and their masculinities “we place them outside of the “normal” gamer identity” therefore allow “for others who game to be seen as a part of gaming culture rather than aberrant identities in the world of videogames” (105). I agree that it is important to examine the complex construction of gamer masculinity, and not treat it as simply “normal” in order to understand games culture but it is doubly important to examine the ways in which women *are treated as non-normative bodies* within this culture, in order to establish that these gaming spaces have been and continue to be constructed for white male bodies. While there is nothing abnormal about women playing games, a woman may *feel* abnormal within these masculine constructed space, as in my three examples above, and not totally understand why. This is in part because a characteristic of masculine games culture is a lack of awareness of the impact of gender on a gamer’s experiences (DiSalvo 114). In DiSalvo’s study she found that among the white male gamers she interviewed, it was

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<sup>26</sup> See the introduction to this dissertation for specific examples of these sorts of interactions.

typical that they did not “see gender or race because they are situated in a position of being the social norm” and therefore all their behavior is considered “normal” (114). As long as white male gamers don’t see their own race or gender and how their behavior affects marginalized players we will always be seen as “abnormal” through their eyes, and therefore find ourselves as non-normative bodies in gaming spaces.

One typical example of this blind spot can be seen in one man’s response to a role playing game’s diversity statement. One of the creators of the *Starfinder* (2017) claimed:

We want this game to be as inclusive as possible. The stereotype of gamers as all straight white dudes is really outdated (if indeed it was ever true) and we're really striving to create a game where folks of all gender identities, ethnicities, orientations, etcetera can not only feel welcome but see themselves represented in the stories and the art that goes into it (qtd in DePass).

This statement created some outrage from people who were previously excited to play the game (DePass). One gamer then replied in a manner that has become incredibly typical when the words “diversity” or “representation” are uttered:

They lost my money. Talk about inclusivity and diversity in games and you pretty much have told me, "i'm not valued." Come at us as Gamers, sexless and colorless, but appreciate what we bring to the table as gamers who want to buy your stuff (qtd DePass).

This sentiment, which I encounter online constantly, argues that representing anyone but a white man, who is somehow seen as “sexless and colorless,” is telling white men that they are unvalued as people and as consumers. The commenter seems blind to the irony that other people might feel that way when their identities aren’t being represented.

## **Normative Bodies and Hegemonic Masculinity in Games Spaces**

In *Raising the Stakes*, Taylor discusses what makes a normative body in gaming spaces by examining different performances of masculinity and femininity in the world of competitive gaming. Taylor describes masculinity within games culture as having a “double sided nature” in which a type of “geek masculinity” exists in relation to both femininity and hegemonic masculinity. Geek or nerd masculinity, the basis of gamer masculinity, has been traditionally seen as a “lesser” or marginalized version of masculinity (*Raising* 114; Kendall, “Hanging” 81; Pascoe 7) that has since been “rehabilitated” and “partially incorporated into hegemonic masculinity” (Kandall, “Hanging” 81). In other words, the geek, nerd, or gamer identity has been long been defined in contrast to other more traditional hegemonic masculine identities such as the athlete or “jock,” the “bro,” or other simplified “macho” figures we recognize from our media. Ironically, within the subcultures that they have created geeks and gamers have created their own systems of hegemonic masculinity based around a constant performativity of masculinity through technology (Burrill 13). This type of nerd masculinity "demonstrates both divergence from and convergence with hegemonic masculinity" where men “recognize their lack of hegemonic status" but also "distance themselves from women and from femininity and engage in a style of interaction congruent with hegemonic masculinity" (Kendall, “Oh No” 271).

Derek A Burrill discusses this liminal masculinity in his book *Die Tryin': Videogames, Masculinity, Culture*. Burrill goes as far as to say that this marriage between technology and masculinity works so well because masculinity itself is a technology: “a tool the male uses to navigate, comprehend, and most often dominate or subjugate the object world” (14). Burrill goes on to explain that like a hammer, masculinity is a tool of force that can be used to normalize violence (both real and virtual), but only when wielded by a user (15). Burrill links technology to a “particular strain of masculinity” which he calls, simply, “boyhood” a “privileged site of power

that the subject accesses” at any age “to successfully understand, navigate, and play both virtual and real games,” one from which they can “never escape” once technology becomes “a defining part of their lives” (15). While I think referring to this type of technological masculinity as an inescapable “boyhood” is an overstep and misnomer<sup>27</sup> I do think that Burrill is correct in stating that masculinity itself is a tool, and, to continue his metaphor, that technology can be the arm that swings the tool to give it force. Some have argued that masculinity is actually more rigid and needs to be performed more carefully online (especially in online gaming environments) than in person (Christensen). If men want to be perceived as masculine online, they can not use their bodies, they must make statements that demonstrate their masculinity which becomes tied to their words in forums or on social media, or to their voice in online gaming environments. I would argue, for example, that online harassment and in game harassment are quick and easy ways for men to use technology to demonstrate hyper-masculine identity online.

This masculinity performed online or in gaming spaces is not what we would think of as “traditional” masculinity. In his work on masculinity in gay communities, Demetrakis Demetriou defines what he calls a “hybrid hegemonic masculinity” as a masculinity both subordinate to and congruent with the dominant mode (354). Steven L. Arxer has also studied hybrid hegemonic masculinity and argued that “subordinate” men who are heterosexual also create their own models of hybrid hegemonic masculinity through specific behaviors: “all-men groups provide a context for the emergence of hegemonic masculine traits” such as “emotional detachment, competition, and the sexual objectification of women” (391). Arxer argues that men in fraternities, for example, use “organizational exclusionary tactics” to subjugate both women and

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<sup>27</sup> I take issue with this name in part because I think it is a mistake to infantilize toxic masculinity as it is often written off as being perpetrated by “boys being boys”. Online harassment especially is often falsely attributed to kids with keyboards when in reality toxic masculinity in games is mostly perpetuated by adults. Referring to this “site of power” and “access” as a “boyhood” feels condescending to all involved.

other men “to maintain a hegemonic position” in a larger gendered hierarchy (395). If we apply this model to games culture, we can easily see how a similar gendered hierarchy plays out in which gamers attempt to elevate themselves to the status of “hard core gamer” via displays of masculinity through the mastery of technology via computers or video games (Taylor T., *Raising* 113). In the process, women are kept at a lower status in the gendered hierarchy through labels like “casuals,” “SJWs,” or “fake gamer girls,” and lower-order men become “cucks” or “white knights”.<sup>28</sup>

This need to subjugate others and climb the gendered hierarchy towards hegemonic masculinity impacts all of games culture, including the games industry itself, creating what Fron et al. call the “hegemony of play.” Gamers have their own heavily regulated variety of hegemonic masculinity built specifically for games culture that is “a complex layering of technological, commercial and cultural power structures [that] have dominated the development of the digital game industry . . . creating an entrenched status quo which ignores the needs and desires of ‘minority’ players such as women” (Fron et al. 1). This unique variety of gamer masculinity has been referred to as “technomasculinity” (Johnson “Masculinities”; Johnson “Hiding”; Kocurek). All of this complicates the dismantling of patriarchal structures immensely because men participating in these cultures and in the games industry *do not see themselves* as perpetrators of hegemonic masculinity and therefore “the deconstruction of patriarchy includes overcoming both conventional hegemonic strategies, and those strategies developed from the

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<sup>28</sup> A “casual” is a slur gamers use to insult someone who they believe is not a “real” gamer (i.e. they just play games “casually”), “SJW” stands for Social Justice Warrior, and it is a slur directed at people who are also outspoken about social justice issues such as race and sexuality. “Cuck” while derived from cuckold, or a man who is submissive to his unfaithful wife, has since become a popular insult used to deride men who are seen as submissive to women or feminism. The term can also be short for “cuckservative” which is a term used by the Alt-right to distinguish more “traditional” conservative men and conservative politicians, such as Jeb Bush, who are seen as “weak and effeminate” from those who are more masculine (ex. Donald Trump) (Schwartz). Lastly, a “white knight,” in the gaming community, is a term used to describe a man who is perceived to be standing up for women’s rights, or helping women, in an attempt to gain female approval or sexual favors.

appropriation of non-hegemonic masculine practices” (Arxer 417). In other words, we need to dismantle not only the actions and behaviors of blatant hegemonic masculinity—the sexual harassment of female gamers for example—but also what Arxer calls the “soft” hegemony (417). Soft hegemony “presents itself as less opposed to femininities and as an unlikely candidate for the maintenance and perpetuation of patriarchy” (394). For example, in games culture Gamers perceive themselves as opposed to traditional “jock” masculinities, yet the identity of the “gamer” and membership to gamer spaces is policed by men and women alike. Someone might mock you for liking what are perceived as bad “girly” games or praise you for liking more violent masculine “good” games for example. But this would rarely be seen as gendered, it would simply be seen as conversations about “good” or “bad” games. Furthermore, by insisting that women are actually equal and welcomed participants in the gaming spaces (either by claiming a space is feminist or claiming a space is already safe for women and therefore doesn’t need to be feminist) a soft hegemony can remain in place which can render the patriarchy within that space invisible. Feminist men, for example, can still represent and enact hegemonic values (talking over women in a meeting for example), but they may think that, by virtue of being feminist, they would not do anything to make women uncomfortable or oppress them. One way of confronting and dismantling all types of hegemony is for minorities to invade the spaces of gaming culture, online and offline, but this strategy makes these non-normative bodies vulnerable in creating its own set of complications.

### **Deviant “Space Invaders” in Games Culture**

In her book *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* Nirmal Puwar argues that in any space “certain types of bodies [...] are tacitly designated as being the ‘natural’ occupants of such spaces with others marked out as trespassers” (8). Puwar explains that many

organizations have a goal of creating diversity by encouraging “the inclusion of different bodies” to move towards an end goal where we have diversity and “structures and policies will become much more open” simply because “these groups enter and make a difference to organisations” (1). These are the simplistic assumptions about diversity that I’ve encountered in games culture and the games industry, where there is a focus on a lack of diversity now, and a discussion of ways of increasing diversity in numbers alone in order to reach a time when organizations will be fully diverse (Puwar 1). While the intentions may be noble, these methods often ignore the complications of what happens to these “different bodies,” in the interval between the present and the utopian destination of “diversity.”<sup>29</sup> Alison Harvey and Stephanie Fisher have examined different diversity efforts in the games industry in their research and noted that pursuing “equality in quantitative terms (such as including women on previously male-dominated panels) has tended to be the preferred mode of enacting change” (2). Despite the good intentions behind making sure panels, tournaments, and eSports teams are diverse, putting diverse bodies into these positions as tokens in a homogeneous space opens them up to violence.

One example of this is the infamous “*Cross Assault* incident” in 2012. *Cross Assault* was a reality TV show streamed live online with a live chat. The show was made up of two teams of gamers (with one woman on each team) who played against each other to promote the release of *Street Fighter x Tekken* (2012). While it is obviously important that women were included on this show, and on eSports teams generally, the women were not treated as equal to the male players. The female players were tokenized as being very skilled “for girls,” and treated as eye candy by the audience in the live chat, the other players, and their coaches (Harper 123). At multiple points during the show/tournament, female pro gamer Miranda “Super Yan” Pakozdi is

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<sup>29</sup> In discussions of women and technology a similar concept has been called “add women and stir” and is discussed in the introduction of this dissertation.

sexually harassed by her team captain and coach Aris Bakhtanians live on stream. The comments Bakhtanians made towards Pakozdi on just day one of *Cross Assault* alone were compiled into a video that lasts 13 horrifying minutes. In that time Bakhtanians takes requests from the Twitch stream for different ways to harass Pakozdi (someone even jokes that it is a “harassment stream” while she is playing, including but not limited to smelling her, asking her her bra size, fetishizing her feet, filming close-ups of her body parts, and asking her to mud wrestle the other female player (and Bakhtanians “gets” the winner) while she tells him to “get away!” (Harper 123). For the next eight days Pakozdi attempts to deal with the attention in a variety of ways that will be heartbreakingly familiar to many female gamer, but her attempts to be strategic and brush off the harassment led viewers to insist that she was “enjoying the attention” (Harper 124). On the ninth day Pakozdi forfeited a match so she would be eliminated, saying that she needed “a break from the fighting game community” (Harper 124). At one point Pakozdi leaves the set to get away from the harassment and Bakhtanians jokes that he hopes she is “crying in the bathroom”. While the motivation to include women in the show to increase diversity was sound, these women were then opened to harm within this space specifically because women have been excluded from this culture for so long. If we simply add women into male-dominated environments in games culture, we will not retain them. Until the culture changes to make those spaces hospitable to non-male bodies women will continue to leave them in droves. The Cross Assault incident was not the actions of one man, it was also the actions of the Gamers in the chat who directed and watched Bakhtanians, and the other players and producers who did nothing to stop it.

Puwar names these “different bodies” that find themselves out of place in traditionally

white male spaces “space invaders.”<sup>30</sup> It’s a fitting title for the women who find themselves out of place in games culture and who “overwhelmingly negotiate their play through, and in relation to, a social space encoded as male” (Schott and Horrell 51). Miranda Pakozdi for example, found herself so deep in games culture that, despite being selected to be on high profile sponsored eSports teams, *she is still a space invader*. Puwar argues that when women and racialized minorities invade spaces where they have traditionally been excluded, their presence in those spaces “sheds light on how spaces have been formed through what has been constructed out” (1). These are “moments of change” that “disturb the status quo” in which we uncover who these spaces have been built for all along, via the discomfort of minorities struggling to navigate them. Games culture itself is currently going through many such “moments of change” as people realize to the degree to which it has been constructed to exclude women. This disturbance to the status quo has inspired a massive backlash towards supposed “outsiders” as defined by Gamers and especially Gamergaters. As more women and people of colour enter games culture and make names for themselves, it has become more and more clear that white men are the assumed natural body in games spaces, and that all others will feel like, or be treated as, invaders.

Gray forwards a similar theory in relation to online play spaces in her book *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live*. Gray argues that marginalized gamers are seen as “deviant bodies” who are denied the “full status of gamer by the default white male” (47). Because deviance refers to behavior that “violates social norms in a certain space” (35-36), Gray argues that within the world of “virtual gaming communities” acts of racism and sexism are *not* deviant acts as they have become expected and normalized by that community (36). A culture has been

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<sup>30</sup> By “space invaders” Puwar means those who invade a space they don’t historically occupy and is not referencing the 1978 arcade game, although because of this coincidence, “space invaders” is a shockingly fitting title for women in games.

created within online gaming in which, to use one of Gray's examples, a black male gamer, who has never been called "nigger" to his face, hears the word repeatedly in response to his voice while gaming online (48). Gaming spaces have adopted what Gray calls a "relativist approach" where "no behavior or person is inherently deviant" and therefore the deviance is determined through a process "where some behaviors are identified as bad, undesirable, or unacceptable on the basis of rules made by those in positions of power"—in this case, the gamers themselves (36). Therefore, while sexism and racism *should be* seen as deviant acts anywhere, within online gaming spaces they are anything but (Gray 35). Within these spaces and communities these marginalized players are "deviant bodies".

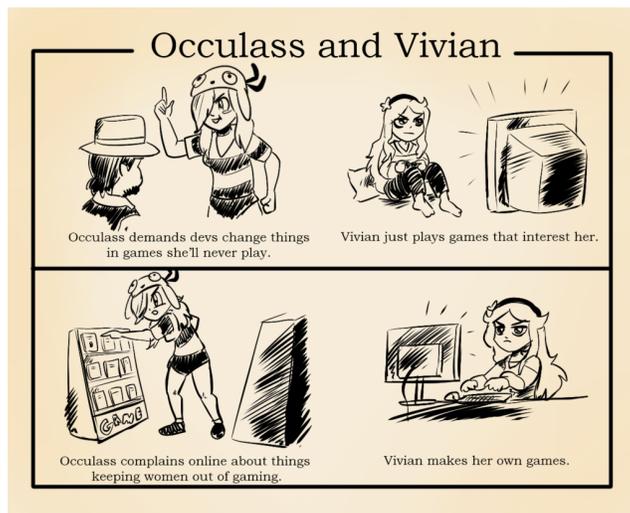
### **"Gamer Girls" and Bad Behavior**

Because those who lack power are more likely to have their behaviors labeled deviant (Gray 35), we see a model where deviant behavior has been flipped on its head and those of us drawing attention to sexism and racism within games and games culture are the ones subject to censure within games culture. The deviance Gray identifies is present not only in online game environments like Xbox Live, but in public game spaces and games culture where the behaviour of women, and especially feminists, is seen as aberrant if they draw attention to bigotry in games and games culture. While all women are space invaders within gaming culture, there is a special position of extreme deviance for feminist gamers like myself who support progressive politics. We are mockingly labelled Social Justice Warriors and ostracized for our failure to "correctly" perform gamer identity. One way this hierarchical typology of female gamers is maintained is through the circulation of memes and comics that use the Gamergate mascot Vivian James to exemplify the way a female gamer should behave. Vivian James<sup>31</sup> was created by a group of

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<sup>31</sup> This name is a play on "vidja games," a popular phonetic rendering of the term video games.

gamers on 4chan's /v board<sup>32</sup> to be “an average female gamer” and quickly became a meme herself (Ringo). Vivian is frequently contrasted with other social justice-oriented women in a Goofus and Gallant<sup>33</sup> style to demonstrate how female gamers should and should not act. The example below (Anaugi) demonstrates that a good gamer girl plays and makes games and a bad gamer girl asks games to change and complains online. This is just one example of hundreds, if not thousands, of similar memes that use Vivian to show “proper” behavior:



(fig. 3.1) A “Goofus and Gallant” style cartoon that compares two types of female gamers (Anaugi).

In his research on Gamergate Matthew J. Rogers explains that “video games are increasingly a site of contested masculine dominance and resistance by a dominant group to the perceived intrusion of a feminine/feminist Other” and therefore “the dominant group seeks to maintain its hegemonic position” (9). These Vivian James memes, just like the “fake geek girl” or “fake gamer girl” memes before them, are a tool men can use to push back against what they

<sup>32</sup> 4chan is a forum-based website where all contributors remain anonymous. It is the birthplace of many of the internet’s most famous memes and has also long been a haven for people to post horrifying content from school shooting threats, to white supremacist ideals, to child pornography (Poland 142; Phillips 65, 158-159).

<sup>33</sup> Goofus and Gallant was a small comic that was in every issue of the magazine *Highlights for Children* running from 1940 to present day. The comic showed two children, Gallant behaving properly (washing hands before dinner for example) and Goofus behaving improperly. The comics were intended to teach children polite behavior. In the example above (3.1) they are intended to teach women proper Gamer behavior.

perceive as the power struggle with the “feminist Other.” Essentially, these memes say to women, if you want to be a gamer, act our way, don’t be a feminist, support Gamergate. Women who choose to participate in gaming culture and contend with this masculinity learn that while we may enjoy games they are not intended for us, and therefore if we want to be present in game spaces, even as invaders, we must “behave” lest we be labeled outcasts.

When women play games they attempt to find ways around this marginalized position—for some women this may involve taking on or performing aspects of the stereotypical “Gamer” identity subconsciously in an attempt to improve their status within the gender hierarchy, as typified by women who’ve joined Gamergate. The #notyourshield campaign was formed in response to the mainstream media’s characterization of Gamergate as homogeneously white and male (Chu). Gamergate asserted that those who opposed their agenda or insisted that the movement was sexist or racist were using minorities as a “shield” in an effort to discredit Gamergate. #notyourshield became a way for minorities to publicly show their support for Gamergate and “stand against” feminism in games. Much like the “Women Against Feminism” and “why I don’t need feminism” movements (Christiansen, Lyng and Hoyer 73), or the “I’m not a feminist but...” phenomenon (Williams and Wittig 886), #notyourshield is an important development in the history of the “post-feminist” neoliberal ideologies that perpetuate oppression while seeking liberation. As bell hooks explains in *Feminism is for Everybody*: “anti-feminist men have always had a strong public voice. The men who feared and hated feminist thinking and feminist activists were quick to marshal their collective forces and attack the movement” (68). One of the forces anti-feminist men access via the internet is communities of anti-feminist women, who defend and support the actions of anti-feminist men as they feel feminism is a regressive movement that frames women as “oppressed victims” (Christensen,

Lyng and Hoyer 73). Understanding how patriarchy works has always involved “acknowledging the role women play in maintaining and perpetuating sexism” (hooks 67), and games are no different.

## **Spaces for Women in Games**

For those of us who *do* identify as feminists while playing games, making space for ourselves involves not only fighting our way into traditional hegemonic gaming culture but also creating gaming spaces of our own with those whom we trust. Such projects present an opportunity to define what gaming culture will look like in those spaces. Working together Jennifer Jenson, Suzanne De Castell, Stephanie Fisher, and Nick Taylor have examined and organized various constructed gaming spaces and diversity initiatives in the form of camps, after school clubs, LAN parties, conventions, classrooms, Internet cafés, and pub-based gaming nights (De Castell et al., “Control”; Fisher and Jenson; Jenson et al., “Disrupting”; Jenson et al., “Dynamic”; Jenson and De Castell, “Theorizing”; Jenson and De Castell, “Simulation”; Jenson and De Castell, “Girls@Play”; Jenson and De Castell, “Marginality”; Taylor N. et al., “Public”; Taylor N. et al., “Cheerleaders”; Taylor N, “Mapping”). These spaces and initiatives attempt to “balance the gender scale” in games culture and the games industry by “encouraging girls to participate in and develop expertise in activities that they believe to be/are discursively excluded from, such as computing and gaming technologies” (Fisher and Jenson 90-91).

Programs like this are especially important for young girls as Reshma Saujani, the founder of Girls Who Code discussed in her 2016 talk “Teach Girls Bravery, not Perfection”. Saujani explains the various ways that girls, especially with a high IQ, are socialized to give up rather than risk failure and therefore as women feel they have to be 100% qualified to apply for a job. Saujani asserts that young girls are both socialized to and expected to be perfect, and

therefore as adult women gravitate towards less risky career options whereas men are “habituated to take risk after risk” a behavior that is rewarded in Silicon Valley where “no one even takes you seriously unless you’ve had two failed startups.” Saujani then founded Girls Who Code as coding inherently requires repeated failure and imperfection before perfection can be achieved, therefore these workshops were teaching girls not just how to code, but how to be comfortable in making mistakes and taking risks. Similarly, I would assert, that playing games requires a comfort with imperfection, you must learn to fail or to “die” many times before eventually you win -- therefore it’s easy to imagine the ways in which girls give up playing difficult games with boys out of fear of appearing unskilled. I know I have. This is problematic not simply because of lack of diversity, but because women are missing out on the financial benefits of these careers in an industry where more and more jobs are being created every day (Margolis and Fisher 2). Margolis and Fisher argue that education needs to be totally remodeled so that girls and women can “find a home” in the male dominated computing clubhouse (4).

In other words, these spaces and programs can be effective, especially when focused on young girls, but problematically the cultural baggage of games culture follows girls and women into games spaces, even spaces built *for us*. When we made the GI Janes we were attempting to create a space that was simply comfortable for adult women to play games. This was much more difficult than I had ever imagined because of the baggage women have from a life time being socially excluded from technological spaces. In other words, even in women-only gaming spaces, female gamers can still find themselves coded as space invaders because we carry the baggage we have developed from our time in the broader culture. Gaming spaces do not simply cease to be influenced by masculine games culture the second they are labelled “feminist” spaces. Nor do they cease to be male-dominated when they reach a 50% female quota. Women

are more than capable of furthering the hegemonic masculine agenda in games culture. These feminist spaces built to “balance the gender scale,” however, do function very differently when men are excluded from them.

For example, Fisher and Jenson discovered when running a game making day camp across three different groups of children, that when they ran a girls-only workshop their participants created games across a variety of genres. Conversely, when they taught gender-mixed groups of children to make games, the girls *only* made pink/girl games<sup>34</sup> and educational games. In other words, when boys were present the girls “created games that reinforce the hegemony of play” but when the boys were not present they experimented (Fisher and Jenson 93). In a similar fashion when we held gender-integrated game nights, women tended to avoid console games and either just socialize or gravitate towards board games; when the events did not have men in attendance, women were much more likely to play a variety of games instead of sticking to games that felt “safe.” Even as an organizer I found myself playing different games at the gender-integrated nights (I played mostly board games, party games, and Kinect games) as opposed to the women's only nights where I played everything from *Bloodborne* (2015) to *Little Big Planet* (2008-2014). I would never have had the courage to pick up a difficult game like *Bloodborne* if there were men present, even though I really wanted to try it out, for fear of either underperforming, or having the game explained to me in a condescending way. These are just a few examples in which girls and women change their behavior consciously or subconsciously when in games-related spaces with men. I will explore at length below my own experiences running both gender-integrated and women-only gaming events with GI Janes to demonstrate

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<sup>34</sup> “Pink games” is a term used to refer to the games that are created for exclusively for girls that tend to reinforce traditional gender roles such as games about fashion, feelings, taking care of children etc. In contrast, “purple games” are games that are intended to be sold and marketed to a male and female audience like *Animal Crossing* (2001-2017) (Kafai et al. xv-xvii).

what events we held worked, and which did not. In order to do this I must first explore why the GI Janes was created in the first place.

### **GI Janes Origins - The Games Institute Gatherings**

In September of 2012 I had just arrived at the University of Waterloo. I was writing my first article as a contributor to *First Person Scholar*, the online game studies publication run by Waterloo graduate students, and there were rumblings about the so-called “Games Institute” and what this upcoming initiative spearheaded by Dr. Neil Randall would become. In these early days there was not yet a Games Institute (GI) space, but there were meetings of English grad students who were interested in becoming part of the GI when it was a more official organization. These events were called Games Institute Gatherings (GIGs). While the GIGs were intended to be informal gatherings of games-interested grad students, the events were run by a group of male PhD students and quickly became structured meetings in which students sat around meeting tables with notebooks and assigned games and readings. At this time I was not studying games, but as a gamer, I was interested in the idea of game studies. I wanted to wade into the shallow end of game studies to test the waters, but attending the GIGs and writing for FPS was like being tossed in the deep end with no flotation device. I was entering a space that was built by very traditional white male game studies scholars and, as Sara Ahmed explains in *Living a Feminist Life*, in these male-dominated academic spaces we can easily become space invaders by simply “referring to the wrong texts or by asking the wrong questions”—both of which I was doing constantly (9). I once brought up the idea of reading a feminist article about the abject alongside the recently released *The Walking Dead* (2012) game and was shot down immediately—the rules were strict: we only played games that had game studies articles written about them, and we only read game studies.

The GIGs were almost entirely made up of male students with one or two women present, and while these meetings were integral to the formation of The GI, GI Janes, and FPS, they were also culturally fraught—men were talking the majority of the time, and when women did speak they were repeatedly talked over or interrupted and the conversation was often inaccessibly theoretical to the students who had not yet done their comprehensive exams. I start the examination of women's exclusion from game play spaces by looking at the GIGs because these were the catalyst for the creation of another secondary space intended to be more casual, more social, and more welcoming to women—the GI Janes.

### **“Typical Girl Gamer”—Typical Gamer Guys**

One night in November 2012, after the ending of a GIG, most attendees headed home save for a group of about 10 who stayed to play a multiplayer *Mario* (1981-2017) game on the freshly released WiiU console. I watched in dread as the last woman at the meeting exited the room, leaving me to make the decision to stay or go. Right away, I found myself taking on a typical female role in a male-dominated gaming space, letting others fight over the controllers as I took on the position researchers have called “a watcher”—without even thinking about it, I was “stepping aside” in order to let the men play (Schott and Horrell 42). After a few minutes of “no thanks” and “I’ll just watch” when the controller was extended in my direction, I hyped myself up to sit down and be the only girl playing with a group of men in front of an audience of male onlookers. The other players quickly started killing each other for fun (even though the game was cooperative and this was making us lose) and I made an offhand comment to another player not to be so scared of “me” because I wasn’t going to kill him (unlike the other players). In response to my declaration of peace, one of the audience members jeered “ah yeah what a typical girl gamer” and everyone laughed.

My blood boiled in this moment and my levels of panic and anxiety shot through the roof. I didn't expect this behavior while among arts grad students, whom I had naively assumed would be more critical of this type of behavior because of their education. I don't think the comment, the laughter, or my discomfort even registered in any of their minds because this was just business as usual; in that moment we were there in our capacity as gamers interested in a new console, rather than grad students thinking critically. As a male friend (who was present during the incident but did not recall it) put it to me years later, women notice the gendered norms of games culture and its effects because it so frequently pushes back on and excludes them, but asking guys to notice the gendered norms of games culture is like asking fish the word for water. This was one of those moments; I was suddenly drowning in my awareness of water while they swam along beside me, obviously enjoying the game. So many well intentioned critical and even feminist gamers simply don't think they are part of perpetuating the gendered norms of games culture and that was frequently the situation at the GIGs, as well as GI Janes, and FPS related events. Only the women seemed to feel that something was wrong, and while we would discuss it with each other, we shied away from taking on the "feminist killjoy" position in our first year of study, especially when we wanted to be accepted into the GI and FPS.

I knew from a lifetime of experience that laughing off comments like "typical girl gamer" would open myself up to jokes about my skill at the game (Harper 129), and other jokes relating to your gender (Harper 123)—so I didn't laugh it off. I knew gamers made jokes like this in a type of masculine ritual that I had been the butt of for most of my life, a ritual I felt much too old to still be participating in. Comments like this instill the gendered hierarchies of who is a "real" gamer and who is a "girl gamer," who is aggressive, and who is passive, who belongs, and who doesn't (Braithwaite 5-6; Harvey and Shephard 494; Harvey *Domestic* 192). Situations like this

also demonstrate why gaming in public spaces still “remains a male-dominated endeavor, at a time when the rate of women involved in video game play is reported to be on the rise” (Taylor N et al., “Public Displays” 773).

I sat silently until we finished the level, passed the controller off to an audience member and left. I bring up this story not to shame anyone involved, as it is far from the worst thing that's happened to me while playing games with men, but rather because this throwaway comment affected all my game-related interactions with other men in game studies that would follow. I thought as an adult things would be different than they were when I was younger, but I walked away thinking, “I guess these guys, this space, these events, game studies, aren't safe either.” These types of hegemonic masculine displays of dominance were executed early on, not only through demonstrations of gaming capital and mastery of gameplay but also through a mastery of game studies theory, which I will touch on in my fourth chapter. Most obviously, this experience demonstrated to me the ways in which playing games in the culture that was the GI at the time was physically accessible to me but not as culturally accessible to me as it was to male participants, who wouldn't have to deal with all of these extra concerns.

### **Talking about Women in Games with the Guys**

Despite my reservations, I kept going to GIGs every month and after about 10 meetings I felt enough sway and membership in the group to propose that the following week's meeting could focus on women in games. While the meeting had more women in attendance than usual, the conversation was incredibly male-dominated and left me feeling as though I didn't have the proper expertise to participate in conversations about gender and games. While I had my personal experiences playing games, that didn't feel like valid knowledge in this setting of men who could list dozens and dozens of games they had played with a female protagonist and

countless game studies texts that they had read. This toting of encyclopedic knowledge is common in games culture and studied by DiSalvo after she noticed that her interviews with male gamers were “dominated by specialized and encyclopedic talk about game titles, game genres, and the histories of game series, as well as specific game developers and trends in game development” (111). DiSalvo notes that this performance was usually less about making a point and more about seizing “the opportunity to display an encyclopedic knowledge of game mechanics or tactics” much like one might expect men to display knowledge in “traditionally masculine sports domains” (112). In other words, when gamers make these lists of games they are creating a masculine space in which the “display of expert knowledge marks one as authentic to the identity of being a part of that culture” (DiSalvo 112).

While I wanted the GIGs to be about discussing the complexities of games and games culture, they instead often became about male participants seizing the opportunity to display encyclopedic knowledge of games and game studies theory in a masculine ritual that made me feel inferior. I often felt that points brought up by men in these meetings were not entirely relevant to the discussion, and were often transparently deployed to get across to the group that they had played a specific game or read a specific text. At the time I would jokingly refer to these one-upping conversations that took place during the GIGs as “Steam library measuring contests,” both because they felt so overtly masculine and competitive and because they often came back to a discussion of how large each participant's “Steam library”<sup>35</sup> was.

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<sup>35</sup> Steam is a digital distribution platform for games where games are often sold at an incredibly low price, sometimes in large bundles. It is common for gamers to acquire hundreds if not thousands of games because of these deep discounts. Users can opt to publicly share their collection of games, which may have been purchased but not necessarily played. It is common for gamers to brag about how many games they “own” on steam, or even how many games they own but have yet to play.

We had a similar problem when the GIG participants decided to record podcasts, and fellow future GI Janes organizer Elise Vist and I wanted to do our own on women in games. Almost every man in attendance wanted to be on the podcast, but we argued that there should only be two for gender parity. After an exchange of a few planning emails with those interested, I backed out of the podcast because I felt so strongly that I wasn't qualified to be on the podcast in comparison to my male colleagues, who were listing 100s of games they had played with female characters. The experiential knowledge and expertise I could bring to bear didn't feel as valid as the encyclopedic knowledge of my male counterparts. Not only did their list make me feel inferior, but I actually felt bad forcing my perspective into the discourse because they were enjoying their own conversation so much. I realize now that the reason I felt so unqualified is that as my male colleagues were performing their gamer identity and their gaming capital through these lists (DiSalvo 111), while my own gamer identity was being chipped away at, both because I had played fewer games and more so, because I did not enjoy displaying my knowledge in the way the men around me did.

The women in games meeting was not a success for similar reasons. A lot of time was taken up with replies of lists how many women characters *were* in games, and who could remember the most games with women in them. One GI Janes organizer referred to these discussions as “binders full of women,” and went on to explain that the discussion of representation in games was “mathematical” and “list oriented” as opposed to discussing the experience of being represented. I brought a friend with me to this meeting in an attempt to entice her to regularly attend the GIGs with me but she was so exhausted and frustrated afterwards that she never came to another games-related event at Waterloo again. When I talked to that friend recently what she remembered from this meeting she replied that she remembers

that her overall sense of the meeting was: “oh, this is a conversation ABOUT me (as a gendered body in games) but not FOR me.” This was her first foray into game studies, and she felt that when listening to discussions of gender and games “the field was exactly replicating the culture's problems even while it gestured towards solving them.”

## **Blind Spots**

It is very important to note here that at this point that other than reading my dog-eared copy of Cassell and Jenkins’ 1998 *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* that I picked up at a yard sale, I didn’t fully grasp that the study of gender and games was something that existed in game studies, because it was not the version of the field I had been presented. Despite my initial research at Waterloo focusing on comics rather than games, I had read some game studies texts during my Masters, nearly all of which were written by men and none of which had much to do with gender. These reading groups and writing for FPS were my main (if not only) connection to game studies as a discipline. Like me, many of the women at these meetings were wholly ignorant of the important work being done by women in feminist game studies. So while game studies itself was more diverse than these meetings were letting on, as I would soon find out, my perspective at the time was one of loneliness and isolation in my desire to study gender.

In 2012 I had never heard of T. L. Taylor,<sup>36</sup> or Jennifer Jenson, or Mia Consalvo, or Adrienne Shaw because we were too busy discussing Ian Bogost or Lev Manovich or Jesper Juul, or Espen Aarseth. This was also partly because everyone we knew (and everyone

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<sup>36</sup> Hilariously, when reviewing the readings and schedule for the GIGs I saw that one of my favorite game studies books *Raising the Stakes* by T.L. Taylor was on the list. Confused I contacted my friend who organized the meetings and he told me that that week was the “eSports” week and no one showed up to the reading group (other than one MA student who was studying League of Legends) due to lack of interest in the topic. I actually remember thinking “eSports, like competitive hardcore gaming? Doesn't get more dude-centric than that” and not doing the readings or attending the meeting. It never occurred to me that these readings would talk about games culture in a critical or feminist way as I had assumed they would be about gaming skill and the games themselves.

participating in the GIGs) was an English graduate student and therefore sociological or cultural examinations of games were rarely if ever discussed, as there was an assumption that scholars of English should be studying the games themselves. It's also worth noting that the readings were chosen by the male graduate students (who were also the FPS editors) who had recently completed their comprehensive exams. Looking back it felt like it was mostly Bogost's theories that were discussed during the reading groups despite none of the readings themselves being written by Bogost, as it was assumed that everyone had already him.<sup>37</sup>

It wasn't until May of 2013 when Vist attended the second "Feminists in Games" workshop in Vancouver that we realized that there was a larger and much different game studies out there that we didn't know about. But by this time our ideas of who was and wasn't a game scholar, and what was and was not game studies, were already formed and had already affected us deeply. None the less these feminist game studies scholars provided a lifeboat for us. Without discovering feminist game studies and the work of female scholars, I would never have joined game studies in 2015 *because* the game studies I was experiencing at Waterloo was so thoroughly mediated by male thinkers, male colleagues and male professors. It is difficult to articulate my ignorance at the time, other than to simply say that it was men who told me what was and was not game studies, (say cultural studies or gender studies) and I believed them. I didn't have any faith in my own authority as a games scholar or as a gamer because in my

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<sup>37</sup> For example, FPS's "launch issue" contained five articles written by the editors and published on December 5th 2012: four of these articles are about Ian Bogost's theories; one is "a defense of Bogost's procedural rhetoric"; and Bogost's name is mentioned in the first ten words of three of these articles. When FPS launched it wouldn't have been a stretch if readers had of thought it was "The Journal of Bogost Studies." When I asked a founding editor about this recently he explained that there was an idea that if the issue was framed around Bogost's theories (specifically procedural rhetoric) more people in game studies would take note because that was seen as the "hot thing" that would draw readers in. So it wasn't simply my perception that Bogost was "the most important" scholar in game studies at Waterloo, it was also the perception by the editors at FPS that he was "the most important" scholar in game studies at large. I discuss this assumption at length in chapter 4.

opinion I was neither. Much of this sheltered perspective of game studies can be tied back to disciplinary, methodological, and formalist divisions within game studies, a topic I will explore at length in chapter four of this dissertation.

On a less complex level, I knew that the alienation I was feeling as a result of these conversations during the GIGs was no different than the alienation I had felt from gamers my whole life, but I had yet to link game studies to games culture as a phenomenon. I had yet to realize that there was a reason I was having the same experiences over and over with different groups of male-identifying gamers, that there was a culture and set of practices that was, for better or worse, unifying all of us who participated in that culture. After this meeting about “women in games,” I realized how badly gender and games *needed* to be talked about *by women*, because even those men who wanted to talk about gender were still marginalizing the women in the conversation. I became convinced that the GIGs were not the right place to have these conversations. Therefore, the few women attending the GIGs decided we needed a space where we could talk through these feelings, and these frustrations.

I was frustrated with what I had seen of game studies so far, and I was frustrated with games culture in general. Furthermore, as Ahmed explains, as a feminist, “it is frustrating to be heard as frustrated; it can make you angry” and then “you are heard as angry” (*Living* 38) and when you are heard as an angry woman, or an angry feminist you are easily written off (Ahmed, *Living* 38). My frustration wasn’t just with the resistance to talking about gender in a way that felt feminist, I was frustrated with my own interest in the topic—if everyone else was sick of talking about gender and games (in 2012 ha!) why wasn’t I? Similarly, one GI Janes founder noted that a lot of the frustration in these early meetings revolved around how she “found it very hard to articulate” why it was important “to talk about feminism and games in the same

conversation.” We felt the need to justify our interest, to justify being the broken record always bringing up gender—or we could talk about it amongst ourselves and have the importance of the conversation be implicit.

### **Birth of the GI Janes — Walking the Walk**

Elise Vist, Judy Ehrentraut, and I started discussing these issues outside of the GIGs and decided that we didn’t want diversity and women’s issues to be a mere sidebar in conversations about game studies and game theory. Initially we considered running our own gender and games conference, but decided instead that more frequent events would better serve our goal of encouraging sustained advocacy. We didn’t want games and gender to be ghettoized to a “topic” discussed at Waterloo once a year, we wanted it to be a permanent part of the Games Institute’s work; hence “the Games Institute Janes.” After we came up with a name, we set up a website with information about our cause and tried to craft a mission statement that would state what it was exactly that we would do. This was more complicated than it sounds; as one organizer put it, “[The group] was such a weird thing because we didn’t know what we were doing and it changed every month.” In retrospect I can see exactly what was happening—we were learning to put names to all of the problems we had long sensed, and with each one we named more sprung to our attention. We were also working out the tools available to us to take on these issues: i.e. giving talks, writing blog posts, relaying women in games news, holding workshops, holding game jams, recording podcasts, creating safe spaces to talk about the problems in gaming, holding play nights, holding a reading group, holding a conference. We should have stuck to one thing at a time, but we knew that the gaming community needed all these things and that without intervention it wouldn’t get them. So we tried to do almost all of them, and ultimately it overwhelmed us.

I would love to say that a creation of our own space, our own clubhouse, was an effort to assert ourselves, but in many ways it was actually the opposite. GI Janes was born out of a desire *not to force people* to talk about gender or feminism in games if they didn't want to. While there is no doubt that there *was* something radical about three queer women breaking off from the male-dominated game studies space to discuss gender, GI Janes was in many ways created out of, as one organizer put it: "an effort not to be killjoys ... we are going to do our own thing over here and you can do your own thing over there." In a way, without knowing that "Feminist Game Studies" existed as a sub-discipline, we had created our own feminist game studies at Waterloo. While we probably should have focused on holding a reading group or a speaker series, we were very interested in doing something "fun" as opposed to something heavy and therefore the idea of running feminist game nights came to be our main focus.

### **The Big Decision: Women Only?**

Our initial plan was to start by holding women-only game play nights in an attempt to create a space where women felt safe and comfortable playing and talking about games, before moving on to holding mixed-gender events which struck us as likely to be more complicated. We wanted to create a space that was free of the hypermasculine displays of cultural capital and gamer prowess that we had been witnessing our whole lives. I hoped that women would get comfortable in the space we were setting up, and then having men attend wouldn't be nearly as bad. The plan to hold some women-only events was announced to the GI via an online statement in early June of 2013, and the reaction to our announcement was the subject of about three months of meetings (ultimately delaying our first event until September 19th, 2013). We told the GI members that we hoped they would "understand that sometimes it is necessary to have a space of our own and that allies and male feminists can support us by not attending women-focused events." I stand by this

logic now, but it didn't work at the time. By the time we released the statement we were already feeling defensive, as we knew the reaction would be negative based on the heated conversations on the matter we'd had with the men in our lives.

While many studies have demonstrated the need for, and importance of, women's only groups, spaces, and tournaments in gaming (Jenson et al. "Disrupting"; Fisher and Jenson; Luc; D'Anastasio "Sisters"), and many more studies have discussed the negative effects male-dominated gaming spaces have on girls and women (Taylor "Mapping"; Taylor *Raising*; Ratan et al.; Harper; Carr) the reaction to women's only spaces in my own experience has been largely negative. We talked to people from the community and from the university and faced a variety of similar reactions: either frustration and disappointment that they (or a man they knew) would not be included in all the events; concern for the controversy or backlash that making such a political choice would cause; a lack of understanding of why women *wouldn't* want to play games with men; and even a general feeling that it was sexist to exclude men. This shouldn't have been a surprise, as there has long been controversy about the necessity of women-only gaming tournaments. Many gamers refuse to acknowledge that there are cultural barriers at play instead arguing that the only factor is skill (and therefore if a woman is skilled enough she should play with men) (Harper 118; Taylor *Raising* 126). The logic dictates that if the same player plays only against other women she is getting special treatment despite not having the skill to compete (Harper 118, Taylor *Raising* 126).<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, we were concerned about how to properly say "women-only" in a way that would seem unthreatening to men, while making it clear that trans women were more than

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<sup>38</sup> For example, the controversial Women's Invitational *Street Fighter 4* tournament at EVO in 2010 (Harper 119) and the various Smash Sisters events that I cover at length at the end of this chapter have met these critiques (D'Anastasio *Sisters*).

welcome. While trans women did attend our events, some participants wanted to know if the events would be open to transmasculine people, genderqueer people, or queer cis men. We had to make these decisions and find a way to communicate who these events were for in order to create a space that was inclusive for those marginalized by games culture, that also felt like a comfortable space for them to play games. Furthermore, how do you fit all that on a poster? When trying to come up with these policies we were actively including or excluding not just potential unknown people but also people we knew. We would have awkward conversations where we had to consider, for example, the queer cis male gamers we knew, and if we personally would feel comfortable playing games with them around. If the answer was no, was it unfair to exclude other queer cis male gamers based on the ones we knew? Also, if we concluded that we did feel comfortable around the transmasculine gamers we knew, and invited them without inviting cis male gamers, were we outing all masculine presenting people in the space as trans simply via their presence? The point of these events was to create a space for those who felt marginalized in standard gaming environments, and it made sense that transmasculine men and nonbinary people would not feel comfortable in typical gaming spaces dominated by hegemonic masculine values. But what if, in turn, their presence read as masculine, read as dominant, made women in our space uncomfortable? How do we explain to our friends that simply their presence in the room as a masculine presenting body, no matter their behavior, could be enough for women to not want to play games around them? At what point of inclusion does it simply become easier to exclude, easier to simply write “no cis men” in the event descriptions? The questions were never ending. All of this is to say, the three of us were in over our heads both personally and politically.

One organizer explained: “we spent so much time trying to decide how to advertise for [the game nights] in an inclusive but non-offensive way. We were trying so hard to create a space for women to play games without having men overtake the space” and this was, as we learned, a very difficult balance to strike. The GI administration was supportive of whatever we decided, and was supporting these events and our time financially, but some problems just can’t be solved with time and money alone. Furthermore, we didn’t want to be the cause of hatred or complaints towards the GI as the institution that was supporting us as employees and as graduate student researchers or towards Dr. Randall who was supervising our research. What if male students, or worse, faculty, were mad about us having women only events? And what if we were responsible for tarnishing the reputation of the GI? It was a lot of pressure to take on as first year PhD students.

Ironically, the discussion of men, specifically cis men, and how to include them or not include them overtook the discussion of the “women’s” game nights. The focus moved off of why women felt they needed these events in the first place, and on to the potential hurt feelings of excluded cis men. While invite-only nights would have been an option, at the time we were all new to the city and really wanted to create a public space where we could meet other female gamers, and create a space that they could enjoy. Eventually, years later, the women-only game nights became more “invite only,” based on those who had “liked” the GI Janes Facebook group and they were held at the Games Institute (essentially a private office space) as opposed to in a bar. But that never felt right either. When it was invite only, many pointed out, why not just have it at one of our houses? It never felt like we struck the right balance between creating a space that felt both comfortable *and* fun.

## **The Reaction to Women Only**

After releasing our first statement we discovered that almost everyone we knew disliked the idea of women-only events. Some women we talked to were opposed to the idea because they wanted to bring male friends/boyfriends with them, or were opposed to women-only events in principle. This is not totally surprising, as past research has demonstrated that it is difficult to locate female gamers in public gaming environments, and those who do attend often attend with a boyfriend, family member or with a group of men (Taylor N. et al. “Public” 773). As Nicholas Taylor et al.’s research of over 20 public gaming events demonstrates, there is a substantial gap between the number of women who play games and the number of women who attend public gaming events<sup>39</sup> leading researchers to conclude that it is not gaming that is the problem, but gaming in public (“Public” 773). Similarly, we had no shortage of men interested in attending and helping to run the events, but recruiting women to get involved was much more difficult. Even among the organizers there were varying levels of comfort in regards to gaming in public or gaming with men. The three of us still felt strongly that a women’s only space would be best, but we struggled with mostly negative feedback to our concept. It was very hard to reach a decision of any type.

Soon after our first event in early October, in which men were both present at the event and helping us set up/take down equipment and organize, we received a complaint from a female professor on behalf of an anonymous male student. The professor was concerned that this student felt excluded by the GI Janes. They reported an alleged conversation between our organizers and a male student (who identified as a feminist) in which we had stated that he couldn’t be involved

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<sup>39</sup> Taylor N. et al. discuss how they targeted female participants for their study but despite their efforts in the end women only made up 15% of their participants across all sites (773).

with the GI Janes because he was a man. Although none of us remembered having any conversation of the sort, we held a meeting with Games Institute staff to figure out how to respond. The problem was not just this one complaint; it was that there was a wave of false information about GI Janes flying around campus. People were saying that they heard we were already holding women's only events or that they heard we weren't letting men help with the planning of GI Janes events. I didn't know the sources of any of the rumors, I just knew that people were talking about us when we weren't present and not in a good way. At this point, we had held one event open to all genders, but still encountered concerns about the ways men might be or feel excluded. One GI Janes organizer remarked that she felt so worried that we would be accused of supposed "reverse sexism" by our colleagues that those worries "overshadowed everything else." I strongly remember sharing this feeling and thinking that if it was this hard to just decide *what it was okay to do*; how would we ever actually accomplish anything? We were naive and underprepared for the work that we had undertaken by even just suggesting we could in the future hold a women's only event.

We ended up creating a second, more refined, statement in response to the rumors that went up on the GI Janes website, a sample of which follows:

Although we appreciate the support from our allies who do not identify as women, we believe that limiting some events to people who identify as women is necessary to create a space where women feel safe speaking or learning about games. If there is an event we are hosting that you would like to attend, but believe that the limitation restricts you from attending, please feel free to contact us via email and we will discuss our options, such as hosting the event a second time. [...] When looking for volunteers to help run events, workshops, or discussion groups, we will prioritize any women who come forward, but

that does not mean that men are unwelcome in the GI Janes—we are happy to accept help from our allies.

When I look back at this statement I can see how badly we wanted to make a difference and how much pressure we felt to be the ones to do it. While other major Canadian cities had organizations like Dames Making Games or Pixelles,<sup>40</sup> Waterloo didn't have a community for feminist gamers. We were being overly accommodating because we lacked the authority to assert ourselves properly, and furthermore we weren't really sure what it was that we wanted to assert. For a while we thought about just giving up completely but eventually we concluded, as one organizer put it, that “we have to let everyone come otherwise people are going to hate us and they are going to say that we have a really sinister feminist agenda.” And so, for a few years, women's only events were off the table.

### **Running Gaming Events with Men**

We held a grand total of two GI Janes game nights (September 19th and October 31st 2013)<sup>41</sup> that were open to all genders (as opposed to seven women-only nights). We saw these events as an opportunity to educate the broader community about the things that make gaming spaces uncomfortable to women as well as a place to play games. We joined forces with community partner and local “Nerd Nite” event organizer Charlotte Armstrong, who had space and a large network of locals to invite to the event as well. I think a lot about what we were “selling” GI Janes as at the time. Were we, by telling people they were safe in our space, actually exposing

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<sup>40</sup> Dames Making Games is a Toronto “not-for-profit videogame arts organization that creates space for marginalized creators to make, play and critique videogames” that was founded in 2012. They hold game making events and a monthly speaker series (Robinson). Pixelles is a Montreal non-profit that is “dedicated to empowering more women to make and change games, founded by Tanya X Short and Rebecca Cohen-Palacios,” which “organizes free monthly workshops, a mentorship program for aspiring women-in-games, game jams, socials and more” (Short et al.). Both of these organizations are non-academic but have worked with academics in the past.

<sup>41</sup> Please see timeline in the appendix for breakdown of all events referenced in this dissertation.

them to the very unsafe situations they were avoiding? Was the promise of a feminist space actually creating more problems than it was solving by making people let their guards down? The events felt both like a lie and a liability. These initial two events did not meet our lofty goal of being a comfortable and feminist space for a number of reasons that I am going to explore in the following pages. These game nights drew my attention to the more complex and insidious elements of gamer interaction which extend beyond out-and-out harassment. I will outline the top three lessons I learned, with specific examples from our game nights, as well as academic commentary on similar issues. These three lessons demonstrate the ways that, despite GI Janes representing a feminist space for women, women still found themselves coded as space invaders when we held gender-inclusive play nights.

*1) Women have been conditioned to both play and socialize differently and carry this around as “baggage” that they bring into gaming spaces with them*

Despite the feminist mandate of our events, the men that attended still took over the space, and the games themselves, almost right away. As one organizer noted we had “the typical problem where they were louder and more outspoken than the women and taking over.” Even the most soft-spoken, introverted men who were hesitant to contribute to a conversation happening over drinks were quick to pick up a controller and play one of the games that were set out. Whereas the many women in the space sat down to catch up with friends instead of playing games. I remember panicking within 10 minutes of our first event when I noticed that, despite this being an event “for women,” gendered social norms were already taking hold of the space and there were exclusively men playing games. Research has demonstrated that for women gaming is very contextual, and that gaming in male-dominated environments is not seen as “socially rewarding” and “therefore generally avoided”; instead women tend to “play computer games at home over

and above other contexts” (Schott and Horrell 39). I had hoped that at an event intended specifically for women to play games socially these norms might not play out.

I went around asking women if they would be interested in playing a game with me and all of them replied that they were catching up with other women, or they were having a drink with someone, and they would play some games in a bit after they had finished talking. Women felt the need to, and wanted to, exchange social niceties before they sat down to play games. It felt rude to them to start playing games before saying hi to the people who they knew—which made sense, because it also felt rude to me. It’s interesting to note that this pattern also unfolded during the later women's only game play nights, but it seemed less dire as the games simply sat unplayed while we all caught up on each other’s lives for the first 30 minutes of the event and then settled into gaming. Fisher and Jenson also observed this dynamic in their gender-integrated game making workshops. In their work they refer to it as performing femininity via a “good girl” identity, where participants would sit in a large group of girls combining tables to include and help other girls as well as “working in a quiet, almost invisible manner in a very loud space” (94). Fisher and Jensen hypothesized that these behaviors (and the creation of educational and “girl” games) were “a means of protection from anticipated harassment by demonstrating strength in numbers” (94).

In Fisher and Jenson’s research the male participants “moved around the entire space, were louder and exhibited ‘stronger’ personalities, challenged everyone to play their games with ‘impossibly hard’ mechanics, and generally exercised the accustomed male privilege offered by gaming culture” (94). Men inhabited our space, the back room of a bar, in much the same way, maybe worsened by the fact that many of them had spent a lot of time in the space attending other “nerd centric” events that were frequently held there. Men went right for the games as soon

as the event had started, were loud, and seemed comfortable playing games. These men who were simply playing games, and socializing in their own way were not necessarily doing anything wrong; it was an event for playing games. The problem was more that women didn't feel comfortable doing the same. I felt extremely aware of how men were dominating the space, and I felt the need for women to demonstrate they were interested in the games, and claim the space as their own. One organizer explained she felt like "I had to be more into playing than I was because I had to demonstrate participation." She elaborated that during these events she was extremely stressed about a variety of things, including people having a good time, people respecting the rules, people thinking she was a bad feminist, and women feeling comfortable. I remember feeling all these anxieties as well, at every event.

In her autoethnography about gaming spaces, Genesis Downey discusses her experience at LAN Parties where she was the only woman playing games. In the space, she recounts, "all conversations that took place ... revolved around game play. It's another kind of code. Play space does not acknowledge the world outside of that circle, or in this case, basement" (237). I think for the men present walking into the first GI Janes space, which was in a dark room, with a variety of televisions and gaming consoles set up, turned on, sitting on the opening screen, they treated the space as they would any other gaming space, where everything "revolved around gameplay"; by contrast, the women in our space felt the need to acknowledge the outside world first. Downey also notes that the girlfriends and wives of the men she played with would remain upstairs, making food, and socializing, complaining "about the lack of social interaction" on behalf of their husbands (237). I've seen this dynamic play out countless times, in countless scenarios, even when the women were all also gamers. Sadly these integrated GI Janes nights were no different.

I became aware that each woman in our play space had “baggage” that they had picked up from other games-related experiences. Sometimes they felt they were bad at games, sometimes it was they feared being made fun of for not being skilled, sometimes it was that they would be perceived as not knowing how to use a specific controller or console. Diane Carr theorized that “cultural baggage” would be a problem for girls playing games in classrooms in 2007. Carr explained that games and gameplay could not be encountered in a “neutral” fashion separate from constructions and expectations of gender, and therefore students and teachers would bring “cultural baggage” they had picked up into the classroom, contributing to the “potential alienation of female students” (526-528). Even though all the participants in these play nights were adults their cultural baggage towards games was on display. Sometimes women in attendance would tell me about this baggage, sometimes it was obvious from their body language or the sheer terror on their faces. As other researchers have discussed, a lot of the tension in gender-integrated play environments is not communicated through words so much as actions and body language (Taylor “Mapping” 7).

One of Nick Taylor’s studies of children’s gameplay focuses on a single interaction caught on camera, in which two boys enter the space of a girls-only game club and ask ““how come you guys didn’t get *Underground 2* yet?”” then immediately walk over to “reconfigure the console,” before one of the girls leans in and presumably asks them to leave, which they do (“Mapping” 7). Taylor argues that what makes this interaction significant isn’t what was said, so much as “the absence of verbal exchanges between the girls during the period the boys are first in the frame and then off-frame at the console,” as normally the girls would engage in “friendly banter” when others entered the space (“Mapping” 7). When the boys enter, one of them immediately asserts his gaming knowledge. The girls are described as becoming uneasy,

immobile, tense, anxious and silent when the boys disrupt their play space. Taylor suggests that the boys' intervention into the girls-only game space where they immediately moved to the console suggest that, even in a feminine space boys feel "a degree of entitlement ... towards games" that supports the female participants' descriptions of game play at home being controlled by male family members (Taylor, "Mapping" 7). In a similar way, I observed less out-and-out sexism during the gender-integrated GI Janes nights, and more of these patterns of small gendered interaction with gaming. These were visible through women's body language; reluctance to play; nervousness; anxiety; proclamations of lack of skill; and avoidance of more complicated games. While some of these interactions were still present at women's only nights they were lessened by a large degree. Women were more likely to sit down and play whatever video games were available rather than gravitating towards board games or just socializing without games. Lastly, I observed the entitlement and comfort that male players had gaming even in an unfamiliar environment, their body language much more relaxed, confident, comfortable and lacking hesitation. I found myself conscious of my own body language and tried to imitate the confidence of the male players while attempting to mask the anxiety that I saw the female players exhibiting and that I felt as well.

This shouldn't have come as a surprise, as traditionally girls have less leisure time than boys, and women less than men (Winn and Heeter 13; Bryce et al. 244). Some studies have shown that women who game as adults game less because they are still expected to do more childcare and housework (Harvey *Domestic* 47), which creates an "imbalance between male and female gaming habits" in which "male gaming habits appeared to be the cause of friction between partners" as women's "gaming is often consigned to second place following housework" (Schott et al. 49). I would liken these observations to my own about women

exchanging niceties before playing games during GI Janes nights. Women had been socialized in such a way that when they entered the space they felt a need to perform their domestic duty as good guest or good host before participating in gaming activities, whereas the men started to game immediately.

Furthermore, the women are likely building on a deficit of gameplay time compared to the men in the room because during childhood this leisure time for girls is so highly policed. Parents are less likely to buy games for their female children, creating a gap of experience between men and women later on in life, and even, from my observation, a gap between women with male siblings (like myself) and those with female siblings. Because many parents see video games as “for boys” many women reach adulthood having played very few, if any, games. For example, in their article “My Mother and I: Gaming and Toxic Relationships,” Jynx Boyne explains that during their childhood their mother frequently controlled what video games Boyne and their sister would play despite not exhibiting the same control over their brother. Boyne explains that their mother “seemed to think a lot about what games would do to her precious little ‘girls.’” In my discussions with GI Janes participants and organizers for this thesis, the two women who were the most anxious about group game play both had female siblings and little or no access to games as children. They felt there were often gaps in not only what games they had played, but also their gaming knowledge, and their comfort gaming socially as adults. Gareth R. Schott and Kristy R. Horrell’s study of female gamers also demonstrates this trend in access in which they interviewed both child and adult gamers who revealed a consistent dynamic of their use of a console or computer being secondary to their father, brother, husband, boyfriend or even son (40-42). This position as secondary consumer creates a lifetime of baggage and a position of confusion when brought into a space where women are intended to be the primary actors.

Similarly, Andrea Luc demonstrated this when she ran a series of video game play events for young students, separated by gender, at an elementary school. For six weeks she provided and set up the games and allowed the students to play however they wanted. Luc discovered that the participants with the most confidence were not necessarily the participants with the most skill but they were the participants with “*direct* access to video games in their personal lives” (2). Luc also found that her participants’ skill and confidence was mediated by not only their access to video games at home but their gendered experiences playing those games at home as well (2). One of her participants, 11-year-old Leah, was a skilled player who frequently stopped to help others learn to play the game. Luc was not surprised to find out that she had access to a Wii at home, but she *was* surprised to find out that that the video games are totally mediated through her brother, who gets to determine not only what games they own but when she plays. This was very similar to my childhood access to gaming; despite playing games as frequently as my brother, all of our games and consoles were purchased for my brother not myself. Furthermore, Leah mentioned to Luc that when her extended family is around she is excluded from playing games because of her gender (4). At only 11 Leah has already experienced exclusion from games culture, and is aware that boys are seen as better at video games. She explains: “usually, people say boys are better but if girls practice too, they can be just as good. It’s a stereotype” (Luc 4).

Luc discusses another of her subjects, Shana, who is both very skilled at video games and very competitive, often exclaiming that she is the best at the game and laughing at other players’ mistakes. Unsurprisingly Shana had direct and unmediated access to technology at home and when asked by Luc if girls or boys were better at games she replied, “Well most girls are probably at home fixing their hair or something, and boys are mostly on VG so I think boys.” Despite her skill and her direct access, 11-year-old Shana had *also* internalized that people think

boys are better at games. The interesting thing about Luc's work when compared to mine is that we have both independently concluded, despite working with girls and women who are roughly 15-20 years apart in age, that while access to technology at a young age is important and helps girls develop skill, skill alone does not save anyone from internalizing the sexist baggage that come along with games. The same stereotypes affect girls today as when I was a child, and they are still using the same coping methods to deal with it. If someone had asked me, a girl who just wanted to be one of the guys, if girls or boys were better at games when I was 11, I would have without a doubt, replied just like Shana. In many ways, when girls are exposed to the internet from a young age, it may be *harder* to fight the stereotype that girls don't mix with games because they have already encountered the rampant anti-feminist and anti-girl gamer content that is easily found online.

In a more adult form of baggage, one GI Janes participant who I spoke with told the story of an all-too-common experience in university. She remembers "sitting there on someone else's computer and having an audience of guys laughing at how bad I was at this game I had never played. I must have played it for 10 minutes before [deciding] nope." and then getting up from the game never to play it again. The participant elaborated that her experience was so traumatizing because there was "more on the line than just losing the game," and that playing the game "properly" was a key part of fitting in with these male friends. Another GI Janes participant explained, "I don't like to play video games in front of other people or with people watching ... I don't even like playing *Mario Party* (1998-2007) with people I don't know." That same participant cited an adult experience of being pressured into playing a game on a projector screen in front of a university class as an experience that increased her already existing anxiety about playing games in front of others. Alternatively, some women were extremely aware of how

lucky they were, as one participant put it, to have “good early experiences,” and even they remarked that they would frequently perform the common ritual of telling whomever they are playing with that they are bad at  $x$  type of games before they start playing to temper the other players’ expectations. I realized while running these play nights that each individual felt vulnerable for unique reasons, and there was no way for me to know what they would or would not feel comfortable doing, or with whom. All I could do was examine my own comfort levels and conclude that if I was feeling uncomfortable, I probably wasn’t the only one.

Research shows that men, in contrast, do not struggle with this same problem (DiSalvo 111). While almost all the women I interviewed commented that they vastly prefer to play games alone, other studies have indicated that men prefer to play with friends, and in the same room if possible (DiSalvo 111). For example, one male gamer who prefers in-person social play interviewed in DiSalvo’s 2017 study described a scenario in which he was one of the last two players playing *Doom 3* at a LAN party thusly: “it was just us two battling it out for first place and everybody is like behind me watching. It just kind of felt like ‘Wow this is cool. I’m like the important guy here’” (DiSalvo 111). It is hard to imagine a female gamer describing the same scenario as positive instead of anxiety-inducing. While focus on women’s gameplay often makes us feel small, focus on men’s gameplay in contrast seems to make them feel “important” (DiSalvo 111). This is especially important as many women I talked to during our game nights told me they, like me, felt intense anxiety while playing games in public spaces.

***2) Many women will feel the effects of stereotype threat when playing games even in a feminist space.***

I realized very quickly that because of this baggage having a space run by feminist didn’t automatically make things any different than they were before. I still felt nervous playing games around men, but I felt that as an organizer I had to pretend I didn’t feel that way to set a good example. I felt powerless to help these nervous women, beyond playing alongside them and

trying to seem like I was comfortable. When female gamers are playing with groups of male gamers in person they must contend with the pressure to play proficiently in order to demonstrate that they are good at games personally, *and that women are good at games in general*. Therefore, women are struggling with the pressure to represent their gender as a whole, while no one is concluding that men are bad at games based on one man's gameplay. No one is saying "you play like a boy" or "you play like a man" or "typical guy gamer" in a derogatory fashion.

One recent study on this topic focuses on the popular Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) *League of Legends* (LOL) (2009). In their article "Stand by Your Man: An Examination of Gender Disparity in League of Legends," Ratan, Taylor, Hogan, Kennedy, and Williams studied LOL players to determine how easy it would be for female players to enter and excel at this eSport. The authors explain that their study focuses on "the possible social and psychological factors that may discourage females from playing *League*, and that prevent those who do from playing as intensively as their male counterparts" (Ratan et al. 19). The researchers found the presence of "stereotype threat" to be a large factor in the performance of women in their case studies. In turn, I would say that stereotype threat was a huge contributing factor to why hosting and attending these game nights was so difficult.

The term "stereotype threat" was coined to describe the ways in which minority groups perform poorly or perform with high anxiety when made aware that they may be reaffirming a negative stereotype about their demographic. A woman playing games will experience nervousness that her performance will confirm an onlooker's bias that girls and women are bad at games, whereas a man playing may be concerned about his own skill, but not how it will reflect on men writ large. It is important to note that the stereotype that women are bad at games is based on the dominant assumption that they are *biologically inferior* when it comes to

intelligence, physical reflexes, and strategy (Taylor *Raising*, 124). Women internalize this idea at a young age (Luc 2) and it affects their performance as adults (Taylor N. et al. 18). The *League of Legends* researchers found that “the stereotype of females as being less adept at gaming than males, affects their perception of their own abilities, even when those abilities are no different from males” (18).

I realize now that when I was hosting the game nights I was experiencing a type of double stereotype threat. I felt like if I didn't play games the entire night I was confirming the stereotype that women don't like games as much as men, but I also worried that if I did play games I would mess up and confirm the stereotype that women were bad at games. Stereotype threat was ever present at every GI Janes night I ran, whether or not men were in attendance. Making an event feminist, and explicitly stating your feminist policies, does not rid of us of the stereotypes that we have been carrying with us our whole lives. Realizing this changed my expectations from wanting women to be comfortable, to wanting women to be as comfortable “as possible” under the circumstances.

The stereotype that women aren't good at games has led to the assumption that men and women are different not just in skill but in “play style” as well. Recently a tournament for another MOBA (*Defense of the Ancients* (2003)) disqualified a team of women because the organizer argued that he could tell the difference between “girl and boy game style” and therefore he believed one of the players was a man (Figueira). The captain of the banned team replied to the organizers' sexist decision as follows:

so you're hosting tournaments for girls to show what they're capable of, but you disqualify them when they've exceeded your expectations and encroach into what you think is the exclusively male territory of skill? So what are girls tournaments for? To

perform as poorly as possible to reinforce the stereotype that all girls suck at gaming, so you can feel safe in your already male-dominated community? (qtd. in Figueira).

This example proves that even when women are skilled enough to enter the world of pro-gaming they will still be dogged by biased assumptions about women being inherently inferior.

Despite knowing about stereotype threat, organizing the event, and recognizing my responsibility to be a role model for the types of interaction I wanted to see, I had a *very* hard time getting myself to sit down and play with people. I put so much effort into planning these events because I wanted to create game play events that I would enjoy participating in, but sadly I never fully enjoyed myself. I would describe my experience at these game nights as forcing myself to sit down and play with men in order to be a good example of the cross-gender identity game play we wanted to see. I knew that I was failing at creating a space in which women felt comfortable just grabbing a controller and playing video games. With the gendered baggage we all carried around, I started to wonder if creating that space was even possible. If I was having to force *myself* to sit down and play games in “my space,” who was I to expect that from other women?

***3) Even when you tell a room of men explicitly not to be sexist they will unconsciously turn around be sexist.***

After weeks of organizing and hours of hooking up TVs and game consoles, we started our first game night by giving a short talk outlining the current sexism in games culture and the microaggressions women in games culture often experience while playing games in person and online; in effect we were telling the audience “don’t do these things.” We assumed this talk and instruction would solve any potential problems we would face throughout the night, but it turns out, it was not enough. A lot of the examples of undesirable behavior we used in the talk had

come from our own experiences, but it was hard to help people identify these behaviors in themselves. After running these events I had the feeling that when we were expressing critiques of masculine gamer behavior, most men tended to think, “ah well, *I* don’t do that” or “this doesn’t apply to me.” This kind of attitude allowed attendees to listen politely to this talk before turning around and replicating these very behaviors. As part of the talk, we made it clear that we had zero tolerance towards any sort of racist, sexist, transphobic or homophobic harassment or microaggressions, but I feel that that statement is of little comfort to minorities in the company of strangers.

This is the longest of all my “lessons” because this was the hardest lesson to learn—and it was the lesson that led to my decision not to hold any more gender-integrated play nights. For the most part the sexist behaviors that we encountered at the gender-mixed GI Janes nights were subtle, small behaviors and microaggressions that kept the gender hierarchy of games culture firmly in place. One participant recalls that at one gender-mixed GI Janes night, “there [were] a few instances” where there was “a dude bro trying to mansplain certain games and things, and making rude jokes and it seemed like ... they weren’t really taking seriously the reasons why it was also a GI Janes event and what that meant.” In other words, despite sitting through an explanation of why something like GI Janes is needed to create a welcoming safe and feminist environment, this person didn’t see how their jokes might compromise someone's comfort. Another participant remarked that she felt like the talk we gave before the game playing started was good but that there were a lot of “people who didn’t get it.” She recalls playing games with a man who she had just met who was calling her condescending names like “sweetie and hun.” One organizer told me they remembered hearing the aforementioned conversation as it was happening and thinking, “why can’t I stop this?” She found it extremely difficult to intervene in

the conversation and explain to a man she didn't know how his behavior, which he saw as welcoming and gentle, was patronizing and disruptive. As organizers we found it increasingly difficult to police a space that despite being created by us, still felt inaccessible to us. It was amazing how much I felt like a space invader—even in “my” own space. I started to wonder if a public gaming space could ever properly feel like “mine.”

On a different gender-mixed GI Janes night, I got to see just how bad I was at owning my own space. I sat next to a table of people who were drinking, one of them was a man I knew and did not like very much. He was in no way associated with the GI but was friends with many of my friends. I eavesdropped on a story he was telling about traveling while I played a board game with another group of people. His story was somehow sexist, transphobic, *and* racist all at once. I remember sitting frozen to my seat as the story unfolded, trying to figure out what I should do in this situation as an organizer. Half of me wanted to stand up, leave the game I was playing, walk over to the table and tell him he was going to have to go, but another part of me was scared of this guy after knowing him for some time. I knew that no matter what I said he would make it into a joke, I would be framed as overreacting, and I would be the one left feeling embarrassed. I pumped myself up to at least go “check on” the table as an organizer, and I stood up to walk over to his table when suddenly the eightish people (of mixed genders) sitting with him erupted into laughter at the conclusion of his story. I completely lost my nerve and told the people I was playing with that I had to go to the washroom.

I should note, that at the time the concept of a “safe space” was brand new to myself and my co-organizers. We had no idea what creating a safe space would entail, we had not read the literature, we had not yet talked to people from other organizations. This was partly because we didn't think we would be contending with this sort of behavior. I assumed, naively, that if

someone was explicitly coming to a feminist event, the worst thing that could happen would that they would have “slip ups”: use the wrong pronouns but then correct themselves, talk over someone and then apologize and ask them what they were going to say. I was imagining attendees like myself who weren't perfect but who were trying hard to be better. If someone had of told me I was going to encounter sexual harassment and homophobia from men, I wouldn't have even tried. I would have said I wasn't up to that sort of behavior policing. I'm much too anxious and fearful a person.

I sat in the stall for a long time, taking in my failure and trying to lower my levels of panic. I was filled with self-hatred, wondering, “why am I such a spineless loser and terrible feminist?” In the end this was the moment that led to me deciding that I didn't want to do any more game nights that were open to men. I felt that if I could listen to someone say such things, and still be too afraid of them to confront them, I shouldn't be running these sort of events. It would be, simply put, irresponsible. I did eventually confront the storyteller weeks later when he said something racist at a non GI Janes event. I confronted him partly, if not entirely, because I felt so guilty about wussing out previously. Thinking about him saying those things in a space I claimed was feminist was literally keeping me up at night and affecting my ability to study during the day. I called him out in front of a table full of people, to which he replied, “See this is why women shouldn't be able to drive.” I should have walked away but instead I grew angrier and yelled at him some more. While I feel justified in what I said that night, I don't feel powerful or satisfied. I feel ashamed and embarrassed. I still cringe at the memory of telling him off.

I wish I could “own” the moment I confronted him but I can't. Even had I been totally mature and composed in the moment, which I was not, I couldn't enjoy calling him out because in that moment confronting him about his behavior was, sadly, more disruptive to the

environment than his sexism. In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed discusses this problem at length. Ahmed calls it “becoming the problem,” summing it up thusly: “when you expose a problem you pose a problem” (36-37). While this is a problematic truth it is a reality of being a feminist—sometimes you will piss off more people by calling out someone's prejudice behavior than they will piss off for doing it. As Ahmed explains, “the one who speaks up as a feminist is usually heard as the cause of the argument. She stops the smooth flow of communication. It becomes tense. She makes things tense” (37). When I called out the storyteller, his comment about women not driving was a deliberate attempt to wind me up and put me in my place, while also attempting to escalate the situation so that I would be perceived as the aggressor and as overly emotional. This sort of over the top or “ironic” sexism is an all-to-common tool of trolls (Phillips 17). As Ahmed notes, that despite the fact that a feminist becomes tightly wound in these situations because someone is winding her up, her “spinning” out of control creates the illusion that had she not interrupted, the situation would have been civil. Calling out this behavior is a double edged sword, it makes one more than just a space invader, it makes one the problem.

I bring up this moment, and Ahmed’s theory about moments like this, because it is in a way connected to every moment where I heard a man say something sexist in a gaming environment and I pretended it was okay because I was afraid—afraid of losing friends, afraid of losing a boyfriend, afraid of being perceived as uncool or, most importantly, afraid of being accused of not being able to “take” games culture or afraid of being undermined as a scholar. Looking back at this incident, I can see now that I was identifying as an interloper in my own space, and because of that was terrified to interrupt the other table. Drawing a comparison to online gaming spaces, Gray explains that while there are rules in place in Xbox Live that prohibit

certain types of speech and behaviors, Microsoft can't actually control what people do in that space, or what is considered culturally deviant or normative by its members (37). We established rules about what kinds of behaviors were "not allowed" at a GI Janes event, but because of our status as women, and the hybrid hegemonic masculinity of games culture, we actually had very little control over what was actually considered a deviant act in that space.

I didn't have to confront the storyteller during the GI Janes night to know that my reaction, whether that entailed kicking him out or simply calling him on the offensive nature of his story, would have been subject to scrutiny and distorted by retellings. Even in a feminist space, the feminist who actively polices the space, or points out problems, can still be a ruiner, can still be deviant. As Ahmed puts it, "when you speak of something as being wrong, you end up being in the wrong all over again" (38). This is especially true outside of formal work or academic situations where I have called out countless instances of sexism or racism; those are environments that are not meant to be "fun," whereas we were trying to create a space that was "fun," "casual," and "social". Ironically, I think that the space *was* fun, casual, and social for people like the mansplainer, the storyteller, or the shy man who picked up a controller straight away but not for someone like myself. When you are a feminist, people will constantly wonder, out loud, to your face, why you can't "simply enjoy yourself," why you are always looking for problems, "as if these problems are not there until you point them out; it is as if pointing them out is what makes them there" (Ahmed, *Living* 39). I had naively assumed that by the space being "ours" we could create a space where women had the power, where these problems would no longer be problems, and where we would have the power to point them out, where men like the storyteller would fear us instead of us fearing him. In reality, I had never felt more powerless.

## So What Now?

When we allow toxic behavior in gaming spaces we are contributing to the inaccessibility of these spaces, but ignoring these behaviors is also a survival technique for making it through, and being accepted into, an extremely male-dominated culture. Not calling out this behavior is a way of making sure you are included; calling out the behavior is a surefire way to make sure you are excluded and seen as deviant. What do we do in these moments where it is up to us to attempt to police the behavior of the men in our spaces *but we still feel as if it is their space and their culture?* These experiences taught me how complicated (if not impossible) creating a “safe space” truly is.<sup>42</sup> For a space to be safe, it is very difficult for it to also be public. I actually stopped using the term “safe space” after our first event, as I felt that it implied a standard the space would never be able to meet as long as it was public. Yet, it was very important to us that our space be free and open to the public, as women in games organizations and events that required membership or payment can often feel unwelcoming or intimidating (Harvey and Fisher 652).

Harvey and Fisher have studied some of these “women in games” (WIG) and “feminist in games” (FIG) spaces through participant observation and interviews. They found that issues of “membership” (either literal or symbolic) are at the heart of the difficulties of running one of these organizations: “in aiming to foster a safe, inclusive space for women [...], these FIG organizations face the challenge of being interpreted as a private rather than public space and for aligning inclusion with tiers of membership” (652). We wanted the GI Janes spaces to feel open

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<sup>42</sup> A safe space is ideally a curated space where participants can expect to not encounter the harassment and microaggressions that they may otherwise encounter in their daily lives. Often there is policy in place with how to deal with those who are perpetrating harassment. A good example of this in a games environment is the Hand Eye Society’s “safer space policy”: <http://handeyesociety.com/safe/>. Much has also been written about creating safe spaces in educational environments (Stengel and Weems; Anzaldúa; Henry).

and diverse, and with the three organizers all being new to the city, if we had of invited people exclusively from our own networks alone we would have ended up with an incredibly homogeneous group (i.e. mostly white male English graduate students of a similar age). But, on the other hand, having the event be open to the public and pulling from other local networks meant that we had less of an idea of who was in attendance and what their motivations to be there were.

There was a large portion of people attending these early two events who were simply there to play video games and drink, who didn't seem to care about a mutual agreement to hold up certain standards for the space. We made it clear in our pre-event talk that unwanted behavior could be reported to us, but did not receive any reports despite witnessing worrying behavior. I talked to one woman who I felt was on the receiving end of worrying behavior that night but she did not want me or anyone else to talk to the perpetrator. She didn't want me to make a big deal of it. I was honestly relieved because the man committing this worrying behavior was substantially (at least 10 years) older than us and a local business owner. I didn't feel I had any power in any interaction we might had with him. Frankly, I think we were both a little afraid of him. After running the gender-inclusive game nights I realized that I couldn't create a "safe space" while having it be open to anyone; what I could do, however, was take personal accountability for what did happen in that space and attempt to modify the space to make it safer. Our later, less public women's only events did feel like a safer space than the original events, but these events were never as well attended as the first two.

Running these events also taught me that giving free lessons on how to behave in a feminist space (i.e. explaining and enacting policies against bigoted speech or sexist microaggressions in a space) is often ineffective, as those who already *see themselves as*

*feminists* will not take what you are saying to heart and therefore continue to behave in a way that makes women feel unsafe and uncomfortable. Even those who don't see themselves as feminists will often think "oh they aren't talking about me, I don't do stuff like that" when their behavior is being described to them. Many men take on the label of feminist but don't in turn change their behaviors. I have encountered this type of person countless times in gaming culture; they are what feminist writer Nona Willis Aronowitz calls "the woke misogynist" a man who "talks a big game about gender equality and consent, uses vocabulary like 'triggering' without rolling his eyes, wears a pussy hat to the Women's March, prefers to fuck feminists and may freely call himself one, too—then turns around and harasses you, assaults you, or belittles you." While blatantly anti-feminist men and Gamergaters are (probably) not going to attend a feminist gaming event, the woke misogynist will, and they will try to find someone to take home while they are there! Having any men at these events, unfortunately, meant having *all men* at these events, and I concluded that we were better off not having the events at all than having to welcome these people into our space. So for two years, we didn't hold any GI Janes events, we focused on posting on the GI Janes blog and I tried to process the failure of these events.

### **Smashing Successes and Small Victories: GI Janes and Smash**

Eventually, in 2015, we decided to go back to our original idea of having women-only game nights despite the fact that, as one organizer put it bluntly, "a lot of people didn't like that." From February 4th, 2015 until March 2nd, 2016 we held monthly GI Janes "Ladies Nights" at the Games Institute. These events were sometimes moderately attended and sometimes very well attended, drawing members of the community as well as Waterloo undergraduates, masters students, PhD students and even faculty. Not having men dominating the space any longer, the new problem seemed to be that women didn't know how to dominate one (or at the very least

were hesitant to). We realized early on that with so many nervous participants the space had to be friendly to beginners in order to be accessible—we couldn't simply let this space become dominated by the strongest female gamers and have a new gender hierarchy to contend with.

The most successful GI Janes event that took place over that year was a tutorial/play night of *Super Smash Brothers* (1999–2014) (from here on referred to as *Smash*). Instead of talking about the year of events, I'm going to focus on this event specifically. We called this event “*Smash 101*” and invited about 25 women to come to the GI and listen to Alexandra Orlando give a detailed overview of how to play *Smash*. Topics covered by Orlando included the basic controls, the lingo and terms used by players, which characters were easier or harder to play for newcomers, and even what strategies to use against “try-hards”—gaming speak for people who are incapable of playing “just for fun,” because they always need to win.

I felt that this event had the most impact and was the strongest feminist intervention because it put women in a space where they could feel comfortable playing a game that is associated with a very competitive and male-dominated community. Personally, I know that *Smash* as a game *is fun* but if you asked me I would tell you I hate playing it because the culture around the game is so intensely competitive and focused on mastery as opposed to “just for fun” play. We could not have held this tutorial or game play night under our original gender-integrated format. The women who were nervous to play *Smash* would have been more nervous, men would have dominated the space by being louder and more eager to play, and Orlando's instruction would have been interrupted many times by men who felt they had more expertise.

As opposed to every other event we held, at the *Smash* event women took up space, they were loud, they were animated, they laughed, they joked, some were competitive, some were trolling, some were helping. This event also encouraged the most discussion of gameplay-based

inequalities, as lots of participants, including our teacher, shared their negative experiences playing *Smash* and what it was about the game itself that made them feel so anxious. While we went into all our game nights wanting to disrupt and dismantle the hegemony of play, I feel that we only accomplished this feat at the *Smash* night. I think this is in part because it was the only GI Janes nights where many of the women (including myself!) were doing something they would not do at home, or in another social setting and therefore I felt we really were pushing back at the gendered doubts we had as players about our skills, knowledge, and desire to play. These findings replicate Fisher and Jenson's earlier findings about gender-integrated versus girls-only game-making camps, in which they found that in gender-integrated spaces the girls would self-regulate their behavior in part because in that space they were marked as "female," whereas in a space that was all girls they were much more likely to take risks and less likely to adhere to gender norms (96). Fisher and Jenson conclude that "the point of feminist intervention [in this study] is not to immediately change the hearts and minds of our participants, but to provide an alternative experience to what is supported by the patriarchal hegemony of play" (96). This statement sheds some light on why our *Smash* event felt like a success: it wasn't that we turned our participants into pro-*Smash* players, or that we cured their fear of playing competitive games—it was that we coupled a positive experience with a game that so many had negative experiences with. As Fisher and Jenson did with their game making, we provided an alternative experience to the hegemony of play through play itself. Positive experiences help change our self-perceptions, help us feel competent, help us feel confident: like "real" gamers, in other words. While these women-only events were safe, and even fun, they never took off the way we wanted them to, and eventually attendance dwindled to just the organizers. I think the office like environment we held them in was controlled and safe (and had gaming equipment set up and

ready to go) but was not conducive to socializing or “just dropping by” in the way we wanted. We often had to run down to the locked front doors to let people in, we couldn’t have alcohol, and while we did provide nonalcoholic drinks and snacks at the end of the day you were sitting in office chairs under florescent lights. There were also always men who wanted to stay late in the office and work even though that was against the GI rules. Sometimes we would tell them it was time to leave but they would still be there hours later. While women seemed comfortable at our other women’s only events, and the gaming itself was fun, we never took up the space again the way we did the first night (the *Smash* night) and we never got the attendance we’d had at the gender-integrated nights as we were working with half the potential attendees.

### **Why *Smash*?**

We picked *Smash* as the subject of our “101 Night” because it is one of the multiplayer games you are mostly likely to encounter and be pressured to play in your daily life, at a party or otherwise. Because of its lengthy popularity, if you are part of games culture, and you are a certain age, it is almost expected that you have been playing for years, know how to play it, and will be willing to sit down and play it at a moment's notice. It is frequently played at social functions, and there has been a version of *Smash* for almost every Nintendo console from the N64 (1999) to the WiiU (2014)—and people can be *very* competitive about it despite it being a “party” game (Jakobsson). Many of the women attending that night’s event mentioned casually that they either avoided the game entirely or had had negative experiences playing it in the past. Teaching this game brings up a lot of memories for some. I alone must have sat aside during hundreds if not thousands of matches between my high school friends (all male) while I insisted on “just watching” because I wasn’t that strong of a player and I couldn’t “handle” the level of

trash talk and insults involved<sup>43</sup>; one can only imagine the cumulative number of *Smash* sessions skipped by women attending our event.



(fig. 3.2) Alexandra Orlando demonstrates the basics of *Smash* for GI Janes attendees.

The other reason we chose *Smash* is that it deploys “lenticular design,” a term coined by *Magic the Gathering* (MTG) (1993-2018) card game designer Mark Rosewater and later applied to video games by writer Gino Grieco. Lenticular design refers to MTG cards that “appear on their surface to be very simple, but once you understand more about how to use them, they become more complex” (Rosewater). Grieco explains that Nintendo games like *Smash* use “lenticular design to keep themselves accessible to newcomers and engaging to experienced players.” During our GI Janes event we took advantage of *Smash*’s design to demonstrate the more accessible parts of the games to our group of newcomers, while also making them aware of some of the more complex elements. Unlike other games in the fighting game genre, the default multiplayer mode in *Smash* implements randomness that allows for players with no skill to play with players of high skill level and still succeed (Grieco). The “randomness” of the design (items dropping, levels changing etc.) of the game allowed us, the organizers of the *Smash* 101 night, to assure that our new players would have fun (and win) playing alongside our more experienced

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<sup>43</sup> More about this in my article “Consent and the Magic Circle” in *Feminism in Play* (2018).

guests, increasing the likelihood of their feeling fully included in the night. We wanted to level the playing field as much as possible through the randomness, and through Orlando's instruction.

### **Make it Random, Make it Fun, Make it Fair**

After Orlando finished her tutorial, we pit eight women at a time against one another in a fight to the death. Choosing to play eight players at once meant that there was less focus was on any individual player, allowing them to figure out the controls as they went; we also chose large maps (the level you fight on) in order to give players lots of space to figure the game out. By giving the women playing the information and tools they needed to succeed, as well as configuring settings in the game to improve the chances of success for inexperienced players, I felt that for the first time we were succeeding in the goals of GI Janes. It felt as if we had finally built our own clubhouse, our own space of play, where (hopefully) none of these women felt like invaders. The winner of the first match turned out to be someone who had never played the game before and was ecstatic to have beaten seven other competitors, including a few established ones. It was so satisfying to see not only that she enjoyed herself, but that everyone who had lost had also enjoyed themselves a great deal because we had created such a low stakes environment. Other groups of people also play *Smash* in specific ways to decrease its competitiveness, as Mikael Jakobsson discovered while studying "anti-smashers" groups of gamers who go out of their way "to take the sports-like competitive edge out of *Smash*" (387). One of Jakobsson's participants explained that they started adding more randomness to their tournaments because of a frustration that "entering the *Smash* tournament as an intermediate player is pointless" (387).

This type of randomized play is a far cry from what I encountered a year later at a women's only gaming event called Smash Sisters at the convention Good Game Con, where the matches were one on one, with no items, and only static stages in order to make the play as skill-

based as possible—and pointless for intermediate (or, in my case, beginner) players. Smash Sisters is an organization that holds women-only gaming events across North America. In the pages that follow, I will discuss this event at length because, strangely, I learned more about the inclusive space we had created at our women's only events from attending someone else's event and feeling excluded. It is only by directly comparing the GI Janes *Smash* event to the Smash Sisters event that I can really demonstrate how special the event that we held was. The point of this section is not to “call out” the Smash Sisters but rather, like I did with the GI Janes, highlight how these well intentioned feminist spaces can fail to be inclusive because of their position within games culture.

### **Smash Sisters— “You’ll be right at home as a beginner”**

The day before Good Game Con, I searched Facebook and Twitter for any information about Smash Sisters (SS). I couldn’t find much, other than a picture of some pins they were handing out, people tweeting about other SS events in the US, and a couple articles written about the event series. I decided that I wouldn’t play but that I was totally okay with accompanying my friend and colleague Alexandra Orlando (who ran our GI Janes *Smash* event) to watch her play. We were already on edge walking to that event because earlier that day we had somehow been street harassed by five different men in our 20-minute walk to find lunch. Despite the heat, we both changed into different outfits before heading to the event, hyper aware that we were about to walk into a building that, I was guessing, would be filled with 80% men. Upon arrival we confirmed with each other that it was actually closer to 95% men. The fee to get in was \$35; no small price to attend an event to play a game that was sitting in a drawer unplayed at home.

Orlando and I decided to find the SS organizers so that she could sign up for matches. The organizer quickly nabbed me as we were walking away, remarking, “Aren’t you going to

sign up?" I replied assertively saying "No, it's okay I haven't played since high school so I'll just watch." I was prepared to stick to my guns, even about the "I haven't played since high school" lie, but once she started begging me to play I was immediately reminded of my own experience running events with the GI Janes. I *knew firsthand* how hard it is to get women to play games at your event. Despite being framed as a tutorial, and being a space with exclusively women, many women who showed up to our *Smash* event were *still* terrified to play. The organizer assured me, "You will be right at home as a beginner, it will be totally fine," and, at least in part because I was writing about the accessibility of gaming spaces, I thought "oh what the hell" and wrote my name down for two games. Which was a mistake.

## **Serious Leisure**

First I thought we should "warm up" in the SS area. We walked around the table looking for a console with controllers and realized something very obvious that we had missed before; every person at the event was carrying a controller, many of them featuring custom paint jobs. We were totally unaware of the BYOC policy and it was not displayed on any of the event descriptions online; it was simply assumed knowledge for *Smash* players. This is commonplace at eSports events, as Taylor notes, where if default keyboards are provided they are often discarded by competitors who bring their own, sometimes even within special cases and backpacks (*Raising* 40–41). How were we even going to participate without controllers? Was everyone going to think we were stupid for not having them?

Eventually, other people started to arrive for SS and immediately we were asked very specific questions, like what pools we were competing in and when our matches were. My nerves set in as I realized that we were probably the only people there who were not also competing in the larger tournament, but I reminded myself of the *Smash* 101 night and how all

those women were nervous like me but had fun anyway. When we finally were called over to hear the rules I found myself totally lost in the lingo that was being used and it was clear I was the only lost one. I had thought we were going to do four-player matches as teams but we were actually doing one on one matches or “crew battles.” We were all assigned to teams with captains and from what I understood two people on the team faced off against each other and when one person ran out of lives the game started again with the next team member coming in to play, with the winner remaining. No fun or complicated levels, no items, no special rules. In other words, we were playing with a team-based version of full tournament rules. And teams being involved made the situation much more high stakes and competitive because if you lost you were letting the whole team down and I lost *hard*.

There were about 25 women there, many of whom were dressed very similarly in jeans and gaming shirts or hoodies or jackets that displayed logos of eSports teams. They were all very young, no one in the whole space appeared to be over the age of 30. No one told me that official tournament rules were going to apply in this space. So the first thing I did upon being called to play was sit down and start “chatting up” the other player. “Hi I’m Emma, I didn’t bring a controller, but I’ll just use this one sitting here if that’s okay, I have only really played this game today so sorry if I’m bad. What character do you play? I don’t know who I like yet but I think I’ll play Ganondorf, I’d like to change his hair color though, can you make it purple? What stage do you want to do, can we do a weird one?”—this was how much chatter I managed to blow through without a single word in response from my competitor who was just staring at the screen not acknowledging my presence. When I pressed start she turned to me and said, “Aren’t you going to change your name?” Relieved that she was talking to me, confused about her ignoring

me before, but also ready to get this over with, I replied that I was fine with whatever name was in there already and I started the match.

Despite playing with this character only an hour ago I felt like the buttons weren't doing the same things they were doing before and I quickly flew into blind panic. I felt myself flood with performance anxiety as I attempted to get even a single hit in on her. I was so relieved when I was finally dead because I knew I was playing terribly and hated that there was a large group of people behind me yelling "advice" at me. "Use your shield," I heard someone yell at one point, but I was too nervous to even get the basics down let alone use my shield! I got up and smiled trying to be cheerful despite being destroyed by someone who was actively ignoring my attempts to make conversation. Orlando pulled me aside and asked if my controller was weird, I replied that I felt like something was wrong but I assumed it was just my nerves. It turns out that the girl who had played before me had set custom controls to her profile and because I had not changed her name to mine I was playing with those controls. I didn't complain because I was afraid that they would make me do a rematch, but I also thought it was weird that no one explained that to me.

After the first set of matches was finally over I looked up and realized that on the other side of the table a *huge* crowd of male spectators had grown around the few women who were playing *Melee*, the most popular version of *Smash*. There was something about this crowd that seemed wrong; it was as if the women playing were something to gawk at, a spectacle. I quickly imagined how weird it would be if that was how GI Janes nights worked: i.e. only women were allowed to play, but men were there to spectate. I thought I might have a panic attack if I had to sit down and play in front of all those people. I started thinking about the fact that this may actually be somehow the least accessible games-related event or social space I had *ever* been

in—and it was a “women’s only” event. Beyond that, it was a women's event in the sense that only women were allowed to play but the idea seemed ironic when the space was filled with hundreds of men. I was all in favor of a place for female pro-*Smash* players to compete against each other and make friends, but why did I feel like that wasn't how the event had been advertised to me online? Or by the organizers who promised a “beginner-friendly space”? Somehow this event was mirroring the inaccessibility of competitive play to the point where only women with the deepest reservoirs of gaming capital would feel comfortable.

Eventually it was my turn to play *Smash Melee* and I told myself that I should just get losing over with so that I could relax. I sat down and made an effort to be friendly, I disclosed my skill level and introduced myself. Instead of using silence this woman turned to me and said, angrily, “Are you trying to game me?” which at the time I didn't understand. So I replied “Nope just making conversation!” and turned away. She told me I could pick the course. When I asked her which courses were off limits, she looked baffled that I didn't know, but informed me which ones were not okay and I picked one of the few that remained. I knew enough to know that *Smash* players were picky about what levels you could play on, and what characters were perceived as “cheap.” As Todd Harper explains in *The Culture of Digital Fighting Games*, of all fighting games *Smash* is the most well known for having competitive players that “go totally overboard in their restrictiveness playing the game” (50).

The restrictions were in full effect as my opponent and I played, one on one, with no items, in silence and by the end I was more than a little embarrassed by how unprepared I was for the match. How could you just have fun playing when no one would talk to you? And when, if they did talk to you, they were so mean? There was no laughing, no joking around from the

players—just the audience. Harper argues the tension I was experiencing in this moment is actually why *Smash* is so contentious:

Hardcore or serious *Smash* players, in accordance with their playstyle, are not interested in the game's potential as a 'party game' solely for a given external definition of "fun"; for competitive players the "fun" comes from the challenge of fighting another person without "the random wackiness that erratic factors such as items involve (51).

It makes sense that for players trying to perform their skill it would not be "fun" to lose simply because one's opponent lucked out and received a random strong item. However, the idea of taking it that seriously outside of tournament play was baffling to me. As Harper concludes, when a competitive and casual *Smash* player sit down to play together "each is playing a version of the game that is effectively incompatible with the other" (51).

After I got up from my chair and apologized to my team I whispered to Orlando, "What did she mean are you trying to game me"? She explained that she thought that I was trying to trick her by downplaying my skill, or distracting her by chatting. Professional players often "develop a mental model of their opponent and in turn work out what kind of game they are playing" (Taylor, *Raising* 95). My opponent didn't understand that I really *was* a novice player, and, I assume, thought I was trying to figure her out, or attempting to "psych her out" by downplaying my skill. Orlando informed me that in tournament play you were not supposed to converse with your opponent at all, which was why I had been stonewalled the first time I tried to make friends. I was unaware of these rules of etiquette, and Orlando had assumed they would not apply in a space that we had been told was good for beginners and was supposedly just for "fun."

The SS space required assumed mastery of not only the game, but of the very specific practices surrounding the game as well. These rules were not displayed anywhere; the only way to know would have been to attend a previous *Smash* event, or have a friend explain it to you beforehand. Taylor notes that not talking after a certain point is a common rule in eSports, sometimes even displayed on signs at the event (*Raising* 72) but there was no such sign at SS; in fact, I doubt it was even an “official” rule, it just one that the players *chose to follow*, even when it wasn’t necessary. I wonder now if all women new to this scene learned the rules this way, by accidentally breaking them. After all, as Taylor explains, “from the moment a novice player steps into a server to game with others, they are also being socialized into community norms and expectations ... [which] range from mundane things like how you behave before, during, and after the match” as well as if trash talk is permissible (*Raising* 95). I learned a lot about playing *Smash* that day, but to what end? I was definitely *not* interested in joining the *Smash* community or attending another SS event. In contrast our GI Janes “just for fun” *Smash* night made me think that maybe with the right people the game could be fun.

### **Making (Very Competitive) Friends**

Afterwards, most of the SS participants either went to practice for the real tournament in the center of the room or find their groups of guy friends. We sat and chatted with two really nice women who did stay afterwards to socialize. We told them about our research and GI Janes and asked them some questions about playing competitive *Smash*. I brought up getting into gaming—did we all have brothers whose stuff we stole in order to get into games? Three out of the four of us did, the fourth had a Dad who was really into games but otherwise it was the same story. I asked her how she got into playing *Smash* and she replied that in high school her friends would just hang out and play *Melee*. She also added that there were usually two girls who would come

hang out but didn't play. "That was me in high school," I laughed. I then asked how they got into playing Smash competitively and one of the women said that her boyfriend competed and so one day she thought "why not"—this was her fourth competitive tournament. She told me that one time a guy pulled out her chair for her and then tried to tuck it under her "like a gentleman" when she played with him, which was weird. She also mentioned that she had heard that some guy say that he supported Smash Sisters because it "increased his dating pool." The other woman remarked that sometimes after she would play against guys, despite *not* giving her contact information, she would wake up the next day to a bunch of FB friend requests.

This chat was the highlight of my otherwise unenjoyable experience but one thing really stuck out to me: both girls, despite being visibly two of the friendliest of the Sisters, went out of their way *repeatedly* to say that they were really *very competitive people* and that it was dumb that people thought SS would be less competitive because it was women. "Women are just as competitive as men," one said. They clearly identified "competitiveness" as one of their personal traits that brought them to gaming and that made them gamers. Ironically, in DiSalvo's interviews with male gamers she notes that most of her male participants did not see "competition as a motivator for playing games" (110). So "competitiveness" may be less about the division between male and female gamers and more about the division between gamers who do and do not participate in eSports. Because I am an intensely non-competitive person, the type of person who has on many occasions (but not at this event) lost on purpose to avoid conflict, I found their insistence on being competitive noteworthy. Intense competitiveness, it seemed, was a way of these women asserting that they were no different as players than the men.

Taylor notes that how competitive you are is what sets you, as an athlete, aside from other gamers (like me) who are simply playing for fun (*Raising* 115). Taylor argues that this is

actually not “tied to any deeply held geek identity but is instead part of the trajectory of being a competitive and athletic person” (*Raising* 115). In other words, I was running up against a gamer girl identity that was disconnected and, if anything contradictory to, my own. My “geeky” identity has always been deeply tied to my bookishness, on my ability to solve puzzles in games, or taking on a “life of the mind” in academia, whereas in eSports, the “physical” skill and your identity as an athlete is seen as incredibly important (Taylor, *Raising* 115); therefore female players must assert that women are just as competitive as men in order to be seen as equal to men. My presence, and lack of desire for competition, was inherently a threat to their female gamer identity. I was encountering a new (to me) type of stereotype threat, in which the performance of competitiveness was a point of insecurity simply *because* the stereotype that women are less competitive is so prevalent. Hence the over-performance of the tournament rules in this non-tournament event, and the defensiveness of the woman I had played against when I tried to socialize.

Both Orlando and I felt intensely uncomfortable in this environment but did the other women? It didn't seem like it. I realize now that I was encountering, for possibly the first time, what Taylor theorizes as the gap between play and serious leisure when examining professional game play (*Raising* 102). Serious leisure is a hobby or activity that “people find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling” that they embark on a “leisure career” that focuses on developing “skills knowledge and experience” in that hobby (Stebbins). So while gaming for fun is leisure, focusing on becoming exceptionally good at playing one specific game, or in the case of *Smash*, playing one specific character in one specific game, is serious leisure. While SS wasn't an official tournament, playing *Smash* is by definition an act of serious leisure amongst these women: their participation, and the seriousness with which they approach participation,

reinforces the perception that *Smash* is a legitimate eSport, and that they by extension are legitimate competitors. Encountering these women at SS would be like encountering an academic while giving a practice run of their conference paper—they would expect total silence, they would time themselves, they would stand, they would run through their slides—but it is only because I am an academic that I know this. I may have been a space invader in the SS space because I wasn't socialized in the same communities of practice—but, if I was looking to join this community of practice, I also wasn't welcomed with open arms or helped along the way, even though the organizers claimed the event would be “perfect for beginners.”

### **Smashers vs Anti-Smashers**

Jakobsson's study of the Swedish *Smash* community answered a lot of questions I had about the ambiance of the GI Janes *Smash* event versus the Smash Sisters event. In the Swedish community there are two types of fans and tournaments: “Smashers” who play eSports-style tournaments, and “Anti-Smashers” who play a highly randomized version of the game with “silly” rules in an attempt to disrupt the seriousness of the competition (389). While both are fans of the franchise, the Smashers consider themselves as “personify[ing] the idea of gaming as sports” whereas the Anti-Smashers “have no understanding for this dedication to one particular game” (Jakobsson 390). Without knowing it, the GI Janes has organized an anti-*Smash* event where we held mini tournaments with no restrictions that contained random and silly weapons and maps, with eight players playing at once and lots of giggling and shouting. The Smash Sisters tournament was for players interested in testing their skill using custom controls and silence. As Jakobsson concludes, despite playing the same game, Smashers and Anti-Smashers “see two completely different games.” I think in a similar way SS and GI Janes saw two different versions of what it meant to have a space for female gamers: one was a place for women to

demonstrate their prowess, their seriousness, and their competitive edge and the other was a place to escape all of that, to let loose, and to have fun without having your skills scrutinized. The first was born out of a desire to be seen as a functioning part of dominant games culture, the second out of a desire to hide from it. We were both creating events for extremely different types of female gamers.

### **The “Segregation” Question?**

The one thing that SS and GI Janes had in common is dealing with a backlash from male gamers opposed to women's only events, which they feel are a type of “segregation.” Women's events in eSports spaces have a lengthy history of opposition that Taylor describes as “alternat[ing] between grudging acceptance and outright vilification” (*Raising* 125). While there are no physical or biological reasons men and women can't play together, there are a laundry list of social reasons why their tournaments are maybe better off separated if we want to retain female gamers, and especially female pro-gamers (Taylor *Raising* 129). Taylor notes that while there are a variety of concerns about women's only tournaments, the largest concern seems to be that women will unfairly benefit from this arrangement or have an advantage, such as receiving more sponsorships and prize money (*Raising* 126). While this economic concern was never an issue for GI Janes, there were men who voiced concerns that they were going to “miss out,” or that they felt like they couldn't hang out with their friends or girlfriends at the event, or that there weren't a lot of casual gaming events in general for them to attend, or later, that it was unfair that they had to leave the GI space at night when GI Janes events were being held. There was this idea that it was unfair for women to have their own events, that they were getting something that men could not have.

For the women in the *Smash* community, there are also more very troubling reasons to hold women only events. Neha Chhetri, an independent researcher and competitive *Smash* player, has done multiple investigations into what the experience is like for women. She has published two reports, one in 2014 with statistics about sexism and sexual assault in the community called “The Voices of Women in the *Super Smash Brothers* Community,”<sup>44</sup> and a guide about consent and assault in 2016 called “Smashers Against Sexual Assault.” Chhetri discovered that 23% of women she interviewed had been sexually assaulted; 66% of these assaults had involved someone in the *Smash* community; and 58% of those assaults were rape (Chhetri “Expanded”). Since Chhetri’s study was published, many other competitive *Smash* players have come forward with rape allegations, with five such claims emerging during the summer of 2016 alone (D’Anastasio, “Consent”). In her report Chhetri explains that many of the women she interviewed attempted to go to the police to file a report about their assault, but none resulted in a criminal trial. It was because of these interviews that Chhetri published her “consent guide” for the *Smash* community in 2016, but the guide was not well received by all players. Her reports have been called “ridiculous, inflammatory propaganda,” and she has been called a liar and a “hostile misandrist” (D’Anastasio, “Consent”). Many felt that Chhetri’s study was intruding on their enjoyment of the game; as one critic on Twitter commented “Eh, sexual assault is wrong, but let’s keep toxic ideology out of my competitive fighting game, yeah?” (D’Anastasio “Consent”). It’s worth noting that while women will often use the term “toxic” to talk about harassment and sexism in the games community, some men, like the commenter above, have appropriated the term and applied it to what they see as the “toxic ideology” of feminism.

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<sup>44</sup> These statistics are based off an interview pool of 53 women in the *Smash* community (Chhetri “Expanded”).

Chhetri's report also asked women about witnessing sexism in the community. Only one of 53 women in the study claimed to have never witnessed sexism, the rest had witnessed a variety of kinds (Chhetri "Expanded"). The most common aggressions were demeaning comments and jokes, as well as assumptions about the woman's skill and knowledge of the game (Chhetri "Expanded"). Chhetri comments that *Smash* events and tournaments are places where "women are at risk" of sexual assault, and that predators will "take the opportunity" to assault women during competitions when everyone is staying at the same hotel and many players are often staying in a single room (D'Anastasio "Consent"). Knowing this information puts a very sinister turn on the comments that male Smashers are okay with Smash Sisters because it "increases their dating pool." These statistics also demonstrate that there is huge physical and personal risk for women as space invaders in, at the very least, this subset of the gaming community.

### **Female Gamer Identity and Newcomers**

Attending this event not only reminded me about the extreme inaccessibility of this type of gameplay for myself, but it made me realize how accessible we had actually made the gameplay at the GI Janes events—we often referred to this lovingly as making events "n00b friendly." "Gamer" behaviors by women were rarely on display, and there was never an expectation that you would know how to play a game. After attending Smash Sisters I had to admit that women's only events were not inherently better or more accessible—a women's only event could be physically accessible to all women and culturally accessible only to a very few women with a very specific knowledge set. I was forced to realize that there were other things that we were doing as organizers, some consciously, some subconsciously, that were making GI Janes a more accessible space whereas before I had concluded that it wasn't anything we had done, it was

simply that men weren't there and weren't playing the games. But really it was that we were weeding out hegemonic "Gamer" behavior and expectations that exist if men are present in the space or not.

I realize now, that while women are frequently excluded from games culture and feel uncomfortable playing games publicly because of it, many women may feel they have overcome this problem and Smash Sisters demonstrates that. They have "overcome" the problem by exhibiting a very specific identity, by proving they have mastered the game, and in no way embodied the stereotype of the casual gamer or the girls who are just there to watch their boyfriends play (Taylor *Raising* 118–119). Some women in the space even adopt an aggressive attitude that Taylor describes as a type of "monstrous feminine" which includes "engaging in trash talk, having an in-your-face attitude, and even making sexist remarks" (*Raising* 123). While I've seen this persona countless times (and even tried to adopt it for a very short period of time in my teen years) I have never been able to fully understand if it is a persona which women enjoy taking on in games culture, or if they are adopting it as a means of surviving. Are they, as Taylor suggests, "participat[ing] in more conservative gender moves so that they may stay in the scene" or are they "playing the metagame according to rules that have been established well beyond [eSports] culture" (*Raising* 127)?

I had never felt less like a gamer than I did walking away from that space supposedly *for* female gamers—but for a very specific kind. I felt insanely self conscious walking away, not only about my gaming skill but suddenly about my looks, my age, my weight, my personality. Feeling too ugly, too old, too fat, and not aggressive or competitive enough to be a "real" girl gamer. This was in stark contrast to how I felt at the women's only GI Janes nights. In those events we formed an intimate public that affirmed our own gamer identities. It was a space

where if you liked playing games you were seen as a gamer, even if outside of that space that wasn't "enough" for people. I do think though, that for some women, with sufficient experience and mastery of the game, Smash Sisters *could be* an affirming place, but these events are by no means a place where beginners would feel at home, as the organizer implied. I would assert that one would need significant gaming capital and mastery of *Smash* to feel comfortable at the event I was at.

### **Conclusion: The End of GI Janes and Intimate Publics**

In August 2015 I took over as Editor-in-Chief of FPS, and in March 2016 we held our last GI Janes event. The attendance of the GI Janes events had dwindled as the novelty of monthly play nights wore off. Our initial aim was to make thinking about gender and games a daily task, and for the FPS staff, I do think we created that change and met that goal. I also think that the idea that there was a women's organization at the GI made the space more accessible to, at the very least, the women who joined the GI and FPS after myself. There is no doubt in my mind that FPS would not have become what it is today without the GI Janes. The GI Janes were, as founding EIC Steve Wilcox himself puts it, "a wakeup call" to FPS that they needed to diversify their publication, and that, if the women of the GI were willing to start another entire organization rather than join FPS, there must have been a problem with how FPS was being run.

GI Janes taught me a lot about how the social interactions between women and games are broken in a way that I couldn't have learned from simply reading about the disconnect. More than anything, I learned that the exclusion of women from games starts in childhood and follows women who continue to play games into adulthood in a debilitating way, creating a constant state of conflict around their relationship with games that can't be remedied by a gender-segregated space alone. In founding GI Janes, we attempted to create a space within the University and

within the community that had explicit political aims to intervene in debates about gender and gaming. We also tried to create safe and fun spaces for men and women to play games together. While we did not succeed in that goal, looking back years later I can see the good these events, and the GI Janes in general, did do, if only in changing the way that gender was perceived and discussed in the Games Institute, and by the *First Person Scholar* staff. I can see now that, as young and optimistic feminists, we had set ourselves an impossible task; eradicating sexism even in our small local context was a task beyond our means. What we *did* do was expose the sexism we were personally facing, and while we didn't solve any problems, we convinced a great many people that a problem existed, and that I feel is a success. As Ahmed says, when you expose a problem, you pose a problem. We posed a problem for our community at the Games Institute and therefore increased awareness of these issues.

The idea and impulse behind the GI Janes was deeply rooted in very emotional feelings of exclusion on both a local and broader level. Two things brought us (first the organizers, and then the organizers and the attendees) together: a feeling of exclusion from games culture, and a desire to in some way be included in that culture. I focus on the *feeling* of exclusion specifically because it represents a lifelong lack of belonging that can't easily be articulated, and it is that feeling that commonly brings women in games together. GI Janes wanted to take those feelings of exclusion and turn them into something positive, turn them into inclusion in a space where women would not be marked as unwanted or unusual by virtue of their gender.

Although we didn't know it at the time, we struggled with our desire to be both a counterpublic and an intimate public. What we really needed as women trying to survive the toxicity of games culture was to create a sense of belonging. We needed an "intimate public" that affirmed the beliefs that we already held (that we deserved to play games in public and that we

belonged in games culture) as opposed to a counterpublic, which works against and addresses an institution (in our case the “fight” against heteronormative hegemonic masculine games culture [Berlant 7–8]). An intimate public is formed via “emotional and affective transactions” which attempt to remedy structural problems (Berlant 7-8). We wanted to make structural change, we wanted to be antagonistic to a dominant paradigm, but we also wanted to protect ourselves and each other from a culture that had forced us out. Lauren Berlant explains that intimate publics are spaces where members “*already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge” derived from a similar life experiences that shape how we belong in certain spaces. These intimate publics are formed around “embodied experience of living as a certain kind of being in the world” in order to increase feelings of belonging (vii). In other words, it was lack of belonging in larger games culture that made participants belong in the GI Janes; and the second someone who belonged in games culture was in that space it was disrupted, ceasing to function. An intimate public “seeks to harness the power of emotion,” in our case the emotions related to feelings of exclusion, to “change what is structural in the world” (Berlant 12). Intimate publics wouldn’t be necessary if minorities found themselves included in the larger public. We were therefore motivated by, as Berlant explains “fantasies of transcending, dissolving, or refunctioning the obstacles that shape their historical conditions” (8). While we needed to create an intimate public as the GI Janes to survive our exclusion both locally and publicly, GI Janes could not solve the larger problem of the exclusion itself. For that, the spaces that were excluding us would have to change. We were looking to address the obstacles in our path which prevented us from enjoying full participation in the GI and FPS, but we could only do that by building ourselves up, not exposing ourselves to more pain and exclusion. The open gaming nights didn’t provide, as Berlant puts it, “a place of recognition and reflection” or a sense of belonging (viii). What we needed was a space that

provided “confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an x” where the x in question is “feminist gamer” (Berlant viii). When trying to intervene in the public at large, we were unable to foster the intimacy we needed to help women feel comfortable playing games. The women’s only nights, on the other hand, may not have impacted the public at large but provided a space of support and survival.

While I do feel that the women's only nights we ran two years later did create, to an extent, a space where we could explore our “commonly lived history” and our “experience of living as a certain kind of being in the world” (Berlant vii), it was almost too little too late; at that point not only did we lack the time to devote to running such events, but Gamergate had already happened, we had all retreated away from the discussion surrounding gender and gaming for our individual safety. What we needed was an affirmative feedback loop which would help to validate our opinions and feelings. The comforts of such a loop may sound unproductive to many; we are taught that talking to people who agree with you is a sort of self-aggrandizing ignorance, but when you are marginalized within a specific culture, a feedback loop can be a method of survival. When men interrupt that feedback loop of discussions between women about sexism with “well actually,” or “but what about men?,” or by questioning the validity of our experiences, it ensures we can never become intimate and we also can’t become equally autonomous participants in the gaming community.

We discovered that even though women are equally interested in games, the masculine-dominated nature of gaming spaces, or what other researchers have called the “general gender dynamics of public gaming” (Bryce and Rutter 250), prevented our spaces from ever being fully comfortable or successful as spaces for women, even though they were run for and by women. Over the four years of running events we learned the various ways in which the spaces and

norms of gaming culture, both formal and informal, are incredibly resistant to change. These norms seep into all spaces, even women's spaces, more than we had ever anticipated. As organizers, we underestimated the degree to which many systemic and structural factors beyond our control would affect the comfort and enjoyment not only of our participants but ourselves. We were overambitious and misjudged our own ability to police a space, to explain and enforce "proper" behaviors, and to change the prevailing gendered dynamic of games culture that entrenches systems of hegemonic masculinity and subjugates female gamers. GI Janes is a poignant example of how difficult it is for women in games to manage the immense pressure placed upon us to expose and correct the countless systemic and structural problems that exist in games culture, all while remaining unthreatening to men. While it seems in retrospect a near impossible task, especially for three young and inexperienced graduate students, it was a task we took up because we felt our only other option was to live with things the way they were. Given the alternative of simply assimilating into the male-dominated culture we encountered when we arrived at Waterloo, what else were we to do?

While the success of our events increased substantially when men were excluded from our spaces, this proved to be a controversial position that made us unpopular in our both our professional and social networks. In the end both spaces (gender-integrated and women-only) required a level of affective and emotional labour (towards participants and towards those excluded) that none of the organizers could handle, and we decided that our efforts were better spent elsewhere. This chapter outlines the ways in which, despite good intentions, we struggled to create the feminist spaces we wanted as the GI Janes and decided to stop holding events.

T. L. Taylor made a claim in 2012 that I find quite inspiring: in games culture "the geek girl is fundamentally upending systems of mastery and exclusion" (*Raising* 121). On a mass

level, over time, I think this will prove to be true, but on the level of individual moments, events, and organizations we have a long way to go. At Smash Sisters I did not see any attempts to upend systems of mastery and exclusion; if anything, I saw women doubling down on them. While I think on a broad level the SSs are fighting against systems of exclusion as an organization, that doesn't mean that individual members of their organization aren't going to feed into those systems, just as my motivations as organizer of the GI Janes didn't change the actions of all the participants at my events. As the organizers of GI Janes we wanted to end these systems of mastery and exclusion, not participate in them. We didn't want to become "proper" gamer girls accepted by Gamers, we wanted to be accepted just as we were, even if that meant only being accepted by each other and remaining space invaders. Attending Smash Sisters made me realize that while the exclusion of men from a play space changes the dynamic and may protect your participants from a certain kind of anxiety and attention, it does not go hand in hand with a feminist environment that seeks to upend these systems of exclusion. An environment can be women-only, and still enforce the values of mastery, of exclusion, of hegemonic masculine gamer identity or it can not, and ultimately that burden falls to the organizers. In the end, I imagine we will need all types of organizations. We need organizations like Smash Sisters that are for a select group of highly skilled women as well as groups like GI Janes that are more for casual play before women can find their place as equals in games culture.

In the conclusion to her study of Xbox Live, Gray discusses the spaces that marginalized people have created and wonders if, in the groups she is examining, the people privileged enough to create these spaces are upholding the "liberatory potentials or merely perpetuating stereotypes and inequalities?" (76). She goes on to explain that even if these spaces the marginalized have created are successful, they may make "temporary gains in that the resources needed to sustain

this empowerment may not exist,” resulting in spaces of “temporary empowerment” (76). This is how I see GI Janes now: it was a space of temporary empowerment for a small number of women who didn’t have the resources to make the liberatory potential of such a space last. In our case, we took that liberatory potential and focused instead on a space that *did* have the resources to create more lasting change: *First Person Scholar*.

## Chapter 4

### Defining and Defending “Real Game Studies”: Gender, Game Studies, and First Person Scholar

*Games continue to be made primarily by men, for men; we see it in the top-down design, in discussions of audience, in every aspect of games studies [...] largely it's men who study them, too, and who write about games in mainstream contexts. And not just men. Often it's white, cis, heterosexual men. But this isn't just about SJWs and identity politics. This bears discussing because we cannot talk about the experience, the gameness of a game, if you will, without talking about all the bodies attached to it. All the entanglements.*

— **Alisha Karabinus**, *From Cordons to Coalition: Further Thoughts Toward Feminist Games Studies*

*Perhaps it's that feminist game studies works to claim and create a space in the gaming community—a space that actively works to ensure that people aren't left out, that people are listened to. [...] I'm reminded, now, of something else that Offred says in *The Handmaid's Tale*: “By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. So I will go on. So I will myself to go on.” Perhaps, then, the goal—of feminist science fiction, of feminist game studies, of feminist work overall—is to tell each other our stories, to believe each other into being. To will each other into existence.*

— **Bianca Batti**, *Imagining Things Differently: On Dystopias, Feminist Futurities, and the Freedom to Survive in/through Feminist Game Studies*

#### Introduction

In 2012 I had just started my PhD at the University of Waterloo. I wasn't studying games when I arrived, but almost every grad student I knew at Waterloo was part of the university's bustling community of game scholars. As a lifelong gamer, I liked to tag along to their events and reading groups, and I was writing things for their publication *First Person Scholar* (FPS) but I never ever thought that I would join game studies, that I would write a game studies dissertation, co-edit and co-author a book about game studies, or present at game studies conferences. I really never thought I would join the staff of *First Person Scholar* let alone become its editor-in-chief. After approximately three years of working on and with FPS in some way and insisting I “wasn't in game studies,” the founding EIC of FPS Steve Wilcox asked me to take over his job. I was

shocked by this proposal, as I was the editor with the least seniority, and the only editor who was not writing a game studies dissertation (at the time). I decided to not only take the position, but to also switch all my efforts and research to game studies. But, it is important to note, this almost didn't happen; for every event that pulled me into game studies there were countless others that pushed me out. Before I made the decision to take over FPS I swore up and down countless times that I would never *ever* be a part of game studies; as a feminist it didn't seem worth the effort, I wanted to belong to a field where I didn't have to constantly fight for my place in it. The sexism that I encountered in game studies, both internally from other scholars as well as externally from games culture, including Gamergate, made me want to avoid game studies like the plague—and I don't think my experience is unique.

For a long time, despite my intense interest in games and game studies, I resisted. I didn't think someone *like me*, who was interested in what I was interested in, could be a games scholar. My experiences with both game studies and games culture made me feel that I could never be “enough” of a gamer to be part of game studies. Furthermore, based on my research and discussions with male colleagues, I felt, and was told, that my games research, on gender and games culture, wasn't “really game studies”—a powerful idea that kept me on the margins of the field for years. Many factors contributed to this overall feeling of exclusion: from the performances of expertise from my male colleagues both as gamers and scholars, to the male-dominated canon I had been presented as “game studies,” to the popular game studies debates and methods.

This chapter is a deep dive into my experiences as a woman researcher reluctantly transitioning into game studies, as well as my experiences as the first female editor-in-chief of FPS. This chapter will highlight the issues of systemic inequality that are present in game

studies, much like games culture and the games industry at large. At the beginning of chapter three I discussed the concept of the “space invader,” the term Nirmal Puwar coined to demonstrate that in any space “certain types of bodies [...] are tacitly designated as being the ‘natural’ occupants of such spaces with others marked out as trespassers” and therefore different bodies find themselves out of place in traditionally white male spaces as “space invaders” (8). I was, without a doubt, a space invader when I joined FPS, and when I first joined game studies (as you have probably gathered from reading chapter three), but I will also argue that *all* women and non-binary people are space invaders within game studies, even those who have achieved considerable success, and will still experience barriers to entry and success due to systemic sexism.

## **Outline**

This chapter demonstrates that game studies as a discipline takes place *within games culture*, and that therefore game studies itself embodies many of the same qualities that make games culture unwelcoming and inaccessible to women and non-binary people. To demonstrate this point, this chapter uses a series of semi-structured interviews with the gender-queer, female, and male staff of FPS (both at the student and faculty level) to supplement my observations and to support my points about both FPS and game studies in the humanities. First I discuss the male domination of game studies while also considering how this affected our attempts to diversify the staff and submissions at FPS. At this point I look in depth at the statistical gender breakdown of contributors to not only FPS but the field's top journals. I then move to discussing the founding debates of the field of game studies conducted by prominent scholars, focusing on the ludology versus narratology debate, in order to outline how these debates are both gendered and have been used by male scholars to gatekeep game studies as a field, establishing certain research as “real

game studies” and other research as “not really game studies.” Next, I talk about online harassment, and external threats to marginalized voices in game studies, focusing specifically on the effects Gamergate and other harassment had on myself and the FPS staff. Lastly, I conclude by addressing the issue that gave the staff I interviewed the most pause: the feminist identity of FPS as a publication.

To put it simply, game studies is a field that is much easier for men, and specifically, for white men, to traverse than women, non-binary people, and people of colour because of assumptions about gamer identity and normative bodies in games culture.<sup>45</sup> How can we change this reality when most game scholars are raised in the toxicity of games culture? How can we make game studies a refuge from, instead of an extension of, the toxic reality of games culture? My time as EIC of FPS was spent attempting to create a refuge from this toxicity. I attempted to shape the FPS I had inherited from a group of men into a feminist publication that addressed the topics and highlighted the voices that I felt were understudied or under-published, or that fell outside the boundaries of what most publications would consider “academic work.” Whether the other FPS editors and I succeeded in this goal is up for debate. In fact, most FPS staff had a difficult time considering FPS a feminist publication due to the male-dominated history of the publication, a problem that will be addressed at length in the conclusion of this chapter. FPS’s struggle to become more diverse, and more feminist, is relevant to anyone seeking to improve diversity and accessibility in game studies as a whole. The barriers that we encountered, while specific to our situation, exist because of internal systemic issues within our field of study that need to be both addressed and eradicated.

## **Credibility**

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<sup>45</sup> These assumptions are covered at length in Chapter 3.

When I presented a summary of the research in this chapter at the Canadian Game Studies Association in 2017, the reception I received from conference attendees (most of whom were Canadian but many were international scholars from as far as Brazil) indicated that, while my experience of game studies is not universal, the experience of a very specific kind of male domination, sexism and gatekeeping is commonly experienced by game scholars. There is a general feeling of exclusion or lack of belonging within the field among marginalized groups. A sort of exclusion and lack of belonging I had personally never encountered in my previous years of schooling as an English major. Many people confided in me after my presentation about the countless experiences of sexism they have encountered in game studies, just as people have been confiding in me for years. More than anything else, it is because of the stories that I've been told within feminist game studies circles that I believe this sexism is an issue of the field at large. The stories that you hear range from sexist microaggressions, to professors being dismissive towards grad students who have been harassed by Gamergate, to sexual harassment and assault perpetrated by male scholars in the field. Furthermore, much like elsewhere in the academy, there is an overriding and understandable desire to keep sexual assault and harassment a secret from professors for fear of damaging one's career, for fear of becoming a problem.

When I joined game studies as a female grad student, I was slowly fed stories as a member of a backchannel we have developed to protect ourselves and each other. A backchannel that tells you which men are safe and which men are not. While you learn about the cultural inaccessibility of game studies through these stories, ironically, knowing about it also makes games studies more culturally inaccessible as you become more aware of the drawbacks of doing this research. This became more and more clear to me over the years as women I knew would either leave game studies or drop out of their PhDs entirely not because they couldn't do the

work, but because of issues in the culture of their game studies networks and programs. While I struggled with the inaccessibility of game studies at Waterloo it became clear to me that the problem was much worse at other schools. But backchannels have flaws: it's hard to make sure every woman has this information and it's hard to pass on that information when it's not your story to tell and when you don't have all the facts. Furthermore, how can you confront women grad students new to game studies with a list of men to avoid, as well as information about how to protect yourself from Gamergate, and expect them to stick around? These stories are a constant reminder of talented friends who left game studies or academia completely because of the continued abuse of power by men in the field. While these stories are a horrifying and constant reality in game studies they are not mine to tell. They remain un-citable, undocumented and unreported. Therefore, in this dissertation, I focus on the stories that are mine to tell, my own and those my interviewees have entrusted me with. I should state clearly up front that while my interview participants discuss this sexism of game studies, as well as these larger issues with sexual abuse, I am not implying that there was ever sexual impropriety amongst the FPS staff or at the GI. Despite our conflicts, I feel grateful that, to my knowledge, sexual impropriety was never a problem with the FPS staff or at the GI.

I opened this chapter with epigraphs from two US-based academics to demonstrate that myself and my interview subjects are not the only ones who feel that sexism and male domination in game studies is a discipline-wide issue. I hope that, as Bianca Batti stated in the second of these epigraphs, that some credence will be given to the reports of sexism attested to in this dissertation, just as we have to believe women who attest to sexism in culture as a whole. The issue of belief has become especially pressing as the long standing abuse of women in academia is continually being exposed in the media. The various conditions of the academy such

as “the male dominance of virtually every field other than women’s studies, [...] and junior scholars’ desperate dependency on good references for career advancement” ensures not only that sexual harassment and abuse can take place but also that “abuse of all kinds [...] can flourish with impunity” (Kelsky). A 2017 anonymous crowd sourced survey of sexual harassment in the academy received over 2000 heartbreaking stories varying from coercion and sexual comments to sexual assault and rape. Many of the women describe having lost their jobs and PhD funding, having dropped out of grad-school, walking away from an academic career, and/or dealing with depression, PTSD and suicidal thoughts. The data was collected by Karen Kelsky who concluded that academia parallels the Hollywood model of abuse in which “powerful older men are gatekeepers to vulnerable younger women” these men are then protected by those “invested more in preserving the power structure than defending the victims”. Kelsky notes that women of colour are “doubly bullied when they see redress”. In a more specific example, at least three male professors have had formal complaints of sexual harassment filed against them in the Concordia English Department (Rukavina). This one program is not an outlier, instead it is the ubiquitous abuses of power within academia that keep women silent about sexism and abuse for so long. In other words, this chapter only scratches the surface of a much larger problem of sexism in academia at large. The problems I address in this chapter may seem trivial in the face of larger sexual abuse in the academy, but I argue that it is the minutia of sexism in the academy that allows and enables the larger sexual abuse. No problem, in my opinion, is too small to be addressed.

Furthermore, Keza MacDonald recently wrote the timely article “The Video Game Industry isn’t yet Ready for its #MeToo Moment” saying that journalists have been “pestering” women in games to speak out about the harassment they’ve faced but there are “good reasons

why few have spoken out so far.” MacDonald goes on to explain that while the press is suddenly interested in unmasking sexual predators “the sudden impatience for there to be a reckoning is at odds with the hesitancy that the games press has generally displayed when talking about the long-running – and hardly secret – problems with sexism in the industry.” It’s not that the games industry doesn’t have the same problems with sexual harassment and sexual assault that Hollywood does, it’s that the women in the industry are battle worn from years of talking about harassment from Gamergate and rarely being taken seriously (Macdonald). Game studies sits at the nexus of these two cultures of academia and the games industry and, I believe, is also not ready for its #MeToo moment. But I can feel it brewing as the number of women in game studies increases, and as we open up to each other, as more of these stories are told. Many women in game studies, understandably, do not want to go public with their stories of sexual harassment or abuse. They don’t want their stories written about in the news or in dissertations; hell, I don’t even want to discuss my most troubling encounters with men in game studies in these pages. There are so few of us, most of us grad students, that our stories would become easily identifiable. Due to the need to protect those who have confided in me I won’t discuss those more troubling stories, but I will attest to the veracity of sexism in games studies in general in the following pages. I am not attempting to argue that sexism in game studies is worse than it is in other fields, or that it’s better than other fields, I am instead using my expertise (and the expertise of those interviewed) in this field to demonstrate the specific brand of sexism that exists in game studies because of its relationship to games culture.

## **Interviews**

While much has been said and written on the difficulty of doing research in games as a woman because of Gamergate (Chess and Shaw; Vossen “Smoky Room”; Andrews; Van Veen;

Straumsheim; Cross “Press F”; Cross “We Will”) there has been very little written on the difficulty of doing research as a woman due to the nature of game studies itself. There are obvious reasons for this; it often goes unnoticed and uncommented upon, and by speaking about the male domination and sexism of game studies, women researchers risk alienating their colleagues and complicating their own careers. Because of this, this chapter will rely heavily on the few pieces of work that do exist, which includes: data collected on the gender composition of journal authors and conference attendees, my interviews with the staff of FPS, and my own experiences. I conducted 14 ethics-approved interviews with past and present FPS editors in January of 2017 in order to source their opinions about the history and growth of FPS and game studies at large. These interviews repeatedly came back to a few issues, and it is around those issues that I have structured this dissertation chapter.

These interviews are presented anonymously; participants are only named when necessary and with the prior approval of the participant. Participants have been given pseudonyms (that are italicized) for readability, which were assigned alphabetically and do not correspond to the interviewees’ name in any way. Those who were interviewed were all living and working in Canada, most at the University of Waterloo, and all but three pursued their PhDs at Waterloo. Therefore, this interview pool will represent a specific perspective on these issues shaped by their time at Waterloo and running in specific game studies circles; as such their views may not reflect the larger views of all game scholars. Future research would involve conducting similar interviews with female and non-binary people in game studies on a national or international level in order to determine whether my findings are applicable to how people view game studies everywhere, or are more indicative of how game studies is viewed in Canada, or at Waterloo, or even by the FPS staff. While I don’t offer evidence of the sexism in game studies

beyond the interviews, testimony, and arguments included in this chapter, I hope readers will understand how difficult it is to compile information on your own field, and thus take the statements made in this chapter at face value and in good faith. The male domination of game studies is real and it needs to be discussed and challenged. I hope my interviews with the FPS staff and my observations in this chapter can help advance that conversation and challenge that male domination in some way that helps to make game studies more and not less culturally accessible to the marginalized.

### **FPS Context and Background**

*First Person Scholar* was launched in December of 2012 after Dr. Neil Randall, director of the Games Institute, approached a few GI members from English in the Fall of 2012 about creating a publication about games as an ongoing project. The founders (Steve Wilcox, Jason Hawreliak, Michael Hancock, and Kent Aardse) decided that they would publish once a week and they would each edit a section of the publication: Essays, Commentaries, and Book Reviews. Over five years later, FPS is still publishing content in these three sections every Wednesday.<sup>46</sup> The original editors (FPS 1.0.) also brought on Gerald Voorhees as a faculty advisor in addition to Dr. Randall. A later addition to FPS 1.0. was Meghan Adams, a genderqueer games scholar from the University of Western Ontario. What I will refer to as FPS 2.0 was later formed when the FPS staff expanded substantially, adding associate editors to each section as well as a team of copy editors. This was the stage at which I was brought in as an editor. Alongside Adams, I argued for more diversity from both our writers and our staff and I was assigned to head up the struggling Commentaries section alongside Rob Parker. I felt the Commentaries section could be

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<sup>46</sup> Initially Jason Hawreliak ran Essays, Kent Aardse ran Commentaries, Michael Hancock ran Book Reviews and Steve Wilcox was Editor-in-Chief of the publication.

used to attract more experimental and diverse work that fell outside the traditionally academic “essay” or “book review” formats. Furthermore, I thought that Commentaries, if experimental, could play fast and loose with ideas of what games studies was and wasn’t and therefore attract more diverse submissions.

FPS 3.0. was formed when Wilcox asked me to take over as EIC of the publication.<sup>47</sup> Working together, Wilcox and I created a new succession plan in which the founding staff (who were all within months of finishing their PhDs) stepped down and the copy editors (Alexandra Orlando, Betsy Brey, and Chris Lawrence) would be promoted to take over their sections.<sup>48</sup> Multiple other grad students also joined the staff around this time, including Elise Vist, Judy Ehrentraut, and Phil Miletic, who were all part of FPS 3.0. FPS 4.0 was formed when I stepped down as EIC alongside other editors who were nearing the end of their PhDs. A new team, headed up by Orlando, took over the publication. FPS 5.0. is FPS’s current iteration as of 2018, with Brey as EIC. For now though, I would like to go back to the first years of FPS 1.0 to discuss why and how the publication and its content was so male-dominated and to demonstrate how FPS reflected larger issues of diversity in game studies.

## **Male Domination in Game Studies and Gender Parity at FPS**

There are many reasons game studies continues to be male-dominated. For one, it is a technical field, and academic technical fields have long been dominated by men. The larger struggle to

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<sup>47</sup> When Wilcox stepped down we decided it would be best if the EIC position was a terminal one year (September to September) term as to increase the amount of students who could gain the experience of being EIC. Wilcox was EIC from 2012-2015, I was EIC from 2015-2016, Orlando was EIC from 2016-2017, and Brey was EIC from 2017 until present day. As of 2018 the position is once again, no longer terminal.

<sup>48</sup> Prior to this point, no one had ever left a position at FPS before. This was cause for concern as copy editors would miss out on the valuable experience of running a section unless existing editors stepped down. At the time there was much debate between the faculty advisors and FPS staff about if the publication should have an ever-changing staff or if the founding editors should run the publication indefinitely. While the decision to promote the copy editors to section heads was controversial amongst the FPS staff at the time, I am confident it was the right decision for the longterm survival and success of FPS.

attain gender parity in academia (Kulis et al), in major literary publications (VIDA), and in book publishing (Leach) have long been a thorny issue to navigate. There has long been a gap between the number of women earning PhDs (43% in the late '80s), and the number of women becoming full time faculty (25% in the late '80s), with numbers even lower in the sciences (Kulis et al. 657). Figures produced by the European Union in 2015 demonstrate that this gap still exists: while many women are earning PhDs (between 40 and 60% worldwide) only 21% of full professors are women (European Commission 5-6). Furthermore, women are much more likely to have part time and precarious work, were less likely to receive funding for their work, and are paid 17.9% less in research positions (European Commission 5). This problem, often described as a “leaky pipeline” that loses women along the way to a career in a specific field, is also often an issue of directional flow within that pipeline; certain fields become gendered and therefore women tend to flow more heavily to some fields than others,<sup>49</sup> especially technical fields (Kulis et al. 658; European Commission 5-6). The largest gender gap is in fields involving computing, where women make up only 21% of PhD candidates (European Commission 20). The lack of women in game studies could be easily attributed to these issues in educational pathways, as it is based in both computing and a male-dominated hobby. The women I personally know tend to find their way into game studies through more feminized disciplines like English Literature (where 55% of PhDs are women) and Education (63% of PhDs), or more gender-equal disciplines such as the social sciences where 51% of PhDs are women (European Commission 28). In other words, attempting to represent women’s voices as equal to men in game studies is going to be difficult if there are fewer women than men in the first place.

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<sup>49</sup> Women are twice as likely to study education, and men are twice as likely to study engineering for example.

Four months into my tenure as EIC I started to wonder if it was even possible to attain gender-parity while getting submissions from mostly game scholars because game studies is so male-dominated. If game studies was, for example, 80% men, would I have to find a way to solicit from every single woman and non-binary person left in that 20% to achieve parity of the publication? Was the only way to parity to reject submissions from men until it was on par with how many submissions we had received so far that year from women and non-binary people? Or was the solution to offer some sort of incentive for people who were not men to publish? I started to wonder if, even if FPS was run by feminists, could FPS ever *be* feminist if we couldn't even attain gender parity? This was, of course, a larger issue than just FPS and just game studies.

It was incredibly difficult to achieve my goal of having gender-parity of staff and submissions at FPS while I was EIC because there were so many more men in game studies, and men submitting their work, than women. I desperately wanted to have both our staff and contributors be only 50% male, but by the time I left FPS I had fallen short of that goal. In its very first year FPS published 47 articles: 18 essays, 14 commentaries, 12 book reviews, three editorials, five interviews, and four podcasts that received 45,475 page views (Wilcox "Year One"). In this first year, the key struggle was to attain submissions from outside of the core staff, as FPS wasn't yet that well known. About 27% of those initial articles were written by women and non-binary people. Eventually submissions started to flow in as more people found out about FPS, but the articles that we were receiving without solicitation came mostly from men (which is still true today) and the submissions from women frequently came about only after repeated solicitation. I can attest to this personally as before I joined FPS I was asked *constantly* to submit by its editors, to the point of annoyance. Problematically, there being less women in the field means that if publications, panels, boards, committees and conferences want gender parity they

need women and non-binary people to do *more work* than men in the field if they want to reach gender parity. For example, if FPS in the early days just needed more contributors, they had many people to ask for content, but if they wanted more female contributors then the pressure was on the four women who attended GI events to provide that same content. Hypothetically, if there are five women and 15 men and you want gender parity in the articles published, women will have to write three times as much as men, shouldering more of the work. Furthermore, they would also face critique for having less competition.

When I became EIC I pursued submissions from women and non-binary people relentlessly. In my year as editor-in-chief I solicited a *lot* of articles, almost exclusively from non-males. At every conference I would spend most of my time walking up to people I'd never met and asking them if they would like to turn their talk into something for FPS. I would volunteer to look at it first before handing it off to my editors if that made them more comfortable. I would explain that we never let unmoderated comments through to the site. I would promise a larger readership than they would get from competing more academic outlets. While this strategy improved our gender statistics substantially, as did our relationship publishing special issues of articles based on talks at both the Queerness in Games Conference (Ruberg) and the Different Games Conference (Schoemann et al.), it still wasn't enough to achieve any sort of parity. As I mentioned above, this is an issue in publishing at large, to use two publications with much wider pools to draw from for example: only 30% of articles written in *The Atlantic* in 2016 were written by women, and only 37% of articles at *The New Yorker* (VIDA).

In my first editorial as EIC, I talked about trying to improve gender parity of the publication by soliciting more women to contribute to the Commentaries section. In the year I

ran the Commentaries section (FPS 2.0), 17 of the 45 articles we published were written by women. We started with 27% in our first year, and rose to 33% in our second, then 37% in our third. It was hard for me at the time to celebrate my wins; despite their significance they felt small. In my exit editorial a year later my disappointment in myself is obvious:

I may have accomplished some of my goals as EIC of FPS but I failed miserably at some of the others, mostly my mission to create gender parity amongst FPS authors. [...] I could have solicited harder for submissions from women and gender nonconforming people, I could have been pushier, I could have done more cold calling, I could have done a lot of things, but this section is about how I failed, not how I could have succeeded (“Vigilantism”).

I went on to explain that our overall stats had risen to 40% female contributors, an improvement over the previous years’ 37%, but a far cry from the 50% I was trying to achieve. While I now recognize that I had set out a difficult, if not impossible, task for myself to accomplish in a year, and I see the success in my small gains, at the time I felt like a failure. Such a huge amount of work went into that 3% increase, but it takes more than just hard work to fix the systemic problems of gender disparity in game studies. Furthermore, despite growing diversity in the gender and sexual orientation of the staff, I knew FPS had further diversity issues with race that had not been addressed, our staff while not entirely white, was overwhelmingly white. I *am* still optimistic that more diversity and even gender parity will one day be achieved at FPS (both staff and contributors), especially since the publication started paying its senior editors and contributors an honorarium in 2017. I feel the real gains FPS made aren’t necessarily reflected in the numbers. In my few years in game studies, I’ve seen a real shift towards a focus on social justice, feminism, and games culture post-Gamergate. FPS was part of that shift. FPS allows its

contributors to respond to social justice issues such as Gamergate as they happen, instead of waiting for a journal article to make it through review. I've also come to see how difficult a task achieving gender parity was as I began to realize that, despite these gains, games studies and game discourse are still slanted toward men. When I was EIC I knew that we were struggling with gender parity, but I didn't realize how common that struggle was, nor did I realize how much closer we were to parity than other publications. The next section of this chapter will examine the statistical evidence to demonstrate the extent of that imbalance.

### **Gender Representation in Game Studies Journals and Conferences**

While FPS didn't have gender parity when I stepped down as EIC, with 40% female and non-binary contributors we were still doing *much* better than many other game studies journals.

While there is no study that can tell us exactly how many women are “members” of the game studies community, Alisha Karabinus conducted a gender analysis of three popular game studies journals including *Game Studies*, the oldest running game studies journal. Karabinus counted the male versus female authors for the first two years of each journal compared with the two most recent years, using the pronouns in author bios to determine gender identity at the time of writing. In the four years examined in the study (2001, 2002, 2015, 2016) *Game Studies* published only 14 women (Karabinus “Histories”). In this same time period *Game Studies* published 46 articles written by men (Karabinus “Histories”). Two of the 14 articles were actually interviews conducted by a woman with male game designers, and one woman of the 14 was third author with two men on an article; only eight of the 14 were single-authored journal articles by women.

The most telling statistic is that in the first two years of *Game Studies* 22% of authors published were women, and in their most recent two years 22% of authors were women—

showing no progress towards gender parity over the past 16 years. In comparison, *Games and Culture* had 30% women and non-binary authors in their first year and 40% women and non-binary authors in their last two years (Karabinus “Histories”). The *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* which started in 2009 had 31% women authors in its first year but has dropped to 22% over the past two years (Karabinus “Histories”). While who is being published in these journals does not necessarily demonstrate how many women are in game studies as a whole, it does suggest the necessity of an intervention in the field. As Karabinus puts it, “knowledge perpetuates itself, particularly once we begin privileging certain kinds of knowledges and experiences over others, and more so if we don’t consider the embodied context surrounding the knowledges we perpetuate” (“Histories”).

I’m using this data to demonstrate that game studies scholarship is statistically dominated by men in our most prominent journals, and in some cases, like FPS, it’s male-dominated despite our best attempts to the contrary. The main difference between these journals and FPS is that FPS rarely rejects articles submitted to us; we work with the author until we feel they are ready to be published. The gender makeup of journal rejections is data we will likely never have access to, so we can only speculate on the women who were rejected, or who didn’t submit because they feared rejection. It is also worth noting that, while *Game Studies* has always had a male EIC, *Games and Culture* currently has a woman EIC, and *The Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* is run by a team of two female and one male researchers. It is possible that women are more likely to submit to a publication run by a woman, or that the publications run by women are more conscious of issues of gender parity.

The issues of homogeneity apply to content as well as authors. As a discipline, we continue to produce more knowledge on the same topics, and less on those that are understudied.

Consider this infographic Wilcox made by compiling five years of tags from *Game Studies*:



(fig 4.1) A visualization of *Game Studies* metadata by Steve Wilcox (“Feed Forward”).

This graphic, in which the larger words are the more frequently used, really helped me grapple with game studies as a field, and my place in it. The larger words were things I wasn’t interested in studying or writing about and the topics I did care about, games culture, or politics, or gender, were there in tiny print. Wilcox explains that this graphic is:

identifying areas that attract the most critical attention (MMOs) and those that are marginalized (gender and ethics). Perhaps most noteworthy of all, however, are those terms not present at all, such as feminism, misogyny, ableism, and racism. In fact, these marginalized and missing terms likely indicate imminent areas of research, and it’s the task of middle-state publications to facilitate that emergence into a full-fledged discussion (“Feed Forward”).

In a strange way, this graphic, and the corresponding article, was one of the things that made game studies feel accessible to me. Wilcox's article wasn't saying, "this is what the field is and this is what we should be writing about"; he was identifying holes, noticing what we weren't writing about, and insisting that FPS could be the place where we fix that problem ("Feed Forward"). When I read this article for the first time I felt hailed by game studies. The conversations about how my research "wasn't really" game studies suddenly felt less like a dismissal and more like a challenge. I wanted to find the people who were trying to fill those holes, and I wanted to fill them too. I felt like I could insist that my research *was* game studies instead of backing away when I felt I didn't belong.

Conferences present similar problems with male domination. I reached out to the organizers of the 2017 Canadian Game Studies Association (CGSA) and Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conferences to inquire about the gender makeup of their presenters, both current and historical. These organizing committees expressed to me that, because of the male-dominated nature of the field, they have gone out of their way to make their spaces more enticing to/comfortable for women and non-binary people. The DiGRA 2017 organizing committee has worked "aggressively" to increase "non-cis male gender representation" and has even implemented deeply discounted conference fees for non-cis, non-white, and/or non-male attendees. For DiGRA, 2017 marked what was noted as a dramatic increase in women and non-binary presenters at 41%. The DiGRA 2017 organizer I spoke with pointed out that only 31% of women and non-binary people who attended DiGRA 2017 could afford full priced tickets, whereas 59% of men could afford the full fees. This could indicate that men are more likely to be fully employed individuals in the field. CGSA 2017 indicated that they hosted approximately 43% women and non-binary people. Neither representative had access to

historical data on gender representation at past conferences but both acknowledged that it was a problem.

A few initiatives have been started in these spaces to increase diversity. For example, in both 2016 and 2017, CGSA had gender pronoun ribbons (i.e. colored ribbon stating “he,” “she,” or “they” which could be attached to name tags) available for all participants with the idea of simplifying social interactions for non-cis attendees. Both conferences implement a safer spaces policy and had explicit rules about harassment and the use of Twitter after Gamergate. These are just a few examples of ways conferences can implement inclusive policies to demonstrate that they are the type of conference that women and non-binary people would want to attend. These conferences have also benefited from having successful women in game studies at their helm for long periods of time: Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne De Castell for CGSA for 10 years, and Mia Consalvo as president of DiGRA from 2012-2016. Like DiGRA and CGSA, at FPS our diversity also increased after putting women in positions of power. It is, however, worth noting that even with these policies in place, gender parity has not yet been reached. The only game studies conference I have personally attended in which men were not in the majority were at those specifically for research about gender and games.

### **FPS Diversifies its Staff and Content: The Problem with Inclusion**

This section will discuss FPS’ struggles to diversify their staff and content in their early years.

As one of the founding editors, who we will call *Andrew*, explained: “We were very aware from the beginning that it was four white dudes running FPS and right from the get-go we weren’t happy about that and wanted a way to address that.” Another founding editor, who we will call *James*, took issue with the idea that FPS 1.0 was focused on the diversity of its staff in any way explaining that “we were largely focused on the diversity of our contributors, not editors—like at

all”. *James* asserted that he felt that FPS 1.0 had a problem not just with homogeneity but also with “a lack of passion and what I see in retrospect as entrenched anti-feminism.” *James* feels that this status quo was eventually upset, not by intentionally increasing diversity of the staff, but by seeking out those who were interested in challenging traditional views of publishing and game studies (like myself) who were coincidentally not men. The first big change that was made to the FPS staff was made when in July of 2013 Wilcox asked Meghan Blythe Adams, a PhD student from Western University, if they would be interested in submitting a conference paper they had presented at CGSA. Adams replied that they would submit and were also interested in volunteering, at which point Wilcox mentioned Adams could join the editorial team as a “special issues” editor (the site’s attempt to focus on particular topics as opposed to their existing sections which largely published articles in the order they were submitted). At this point Adams started to contribute a considerable amount of high quality feminist content, which was the first and most important step to FPS becoming an inclusive periodical. Multiple people mentioned Adams joining FPS as a big shift in the journal’s dynamics as Adams’ work represented a different and crucial perspective.

While Adams was happy to join the FPS staff as special issues editor they also felt a lot of pressure to represent perspectives that they didn’t necessarily feel comfortable with. As Adams explained when I interviewed them for this dissertation,

at my first meeting someone said [to me] “you’re our first woman.” Which kind of necessitated this conversation of, “Well actually I would identify as more of a gender neutral type person. I can’t occupy that slot for you, and it would be dishonest for me to try.” So that was weird, because I felt that I had to represent this queer feminine thing that didn’t fit with how I actually identify. It was a weird balance.

The pressure on *anyone* who joined FPS after a series of six men would have been considerable, but this pressure on someone who identified as non-binary was much more complex. Adams' presence at the table was incredibly valuable, but the pressure to represent the "women in games perspective" was unfair no matter how they identified. When minorities are included they are supposed to feel "grateful" and not insist on further changes (Ahmed, *Included* 163). When I joined FPS, first as the "GI Janes Representative" rather than as an editor, I also felt this pressure to be grateful and not to be the squeaky wheel at meetings. But at the same time, I felt pressured to be the one who would represent both the feminist and "female" perspective as my inclusion and my enjoyment of my inclusion had to demonstrate that FPS was attempting to reconcile their diversity problem. When in reality, as *James* pointed out, my, Elise, and Meghan's inclusion likely wasn't made in an attempt to "address homogeneity at FPS" but it did have positive results in increasing diversity as we displaced "the masculine view of scholarship" which was "a passive and in-direct form of communication" with a "more active, direct, and feminist one" which in turn attracted more diversity.

This brings me to the other major factor that contributed to the increased diversity of staff and submissions: the GI Janes. The GI Janes, in a way, served as a wakeup call for the editors of FPS to see that the women at Waterloo did want to talk and write about games, that they wanted to publish that work, and to record podcasts about games—we just didn't want to do it as part of FPS due to our experiences with FPS 1.0 and at the Games Institute Gatherings (GIGs) that I described in chapter 3. In a recent conversation with founding EIC Steve Wilcox, he told me he'd even found an old chat log between himself and another founding FPS editor where he'd remarked, "I really wish GI Janes didn't take away three good gaming folks." Wilcox and I laughed about this comment because we both now recognize that the reason the GI Janes formed

was due to how male-dominated the Games Institute was at the time, a fact the FPS editors were oblivious to. Between our (the Janes') experiences at the GIGs and reading group that I discussed in the last chapter, and our interactions with FPS as contributors, FPS just didn't feel like a space that wanted us and what we had to offer *as we were*. We weren't willing to change ourselves or our work to make ourselves fit. But, as the nature of FPS changed over the years, not only did I join, but so did the other GI Janes. In fact, we became so invested in FPS we decided to focus on it and discontinue the GI Janes project. The lesson herein for anyone in a position of influence in a space lacking women, isn't so much to find ways to *attract* women as it is to find ways to not *repel* them. Finding ways to make the women already working with you feel happy and valuable will eventually mean that more women will want to join.

This is why, as Charlotte Bunch said in 1987, "you can't just add women and stir" (qtd Minnich 74). I think FPS is a good example of how simply adding women to the team didn't have as much effect as making changes to the culture to make sure the women on that team felt comfortable and valued and empowered. I do think that this conflict represents common scenarios in gaming culture where men *really do* want more women to join, to play, to write, to work at their companies, but are unwilling to interrogate the cultural practices they are perpetuating that are making women uncomfortable, or making their spaces unappealing to women.

Wilcox recently remarked when we were talking about GI Janes and FPS 1.0 that he now perceives the conversations at the early GIGs and FPS meetings as quite "masturbatory." In other words, the discussions didn't accomplish much other than allow each speaker to demonstrate how much he knew about games and game studies theory (as was discussed in chapter three). Wilcox wanted to elevate the discourse around games at Waterloo in some way, but making the

discourse more theoretical only made matters worse. He explains: “What I needed to realize was that what was actually holding back the conversation in game studies—as least game studies as I pursued it at UW—was who was allowed and encouraged to speak up and contribute to that conversation,” and not the level of academic discourse. Wilcox gets at something very important here: what repelled us, or at least me, from FPS was less any sort of blatant sexism, and more these masturbatory conversations that required knowledge of theory we didn’t have and an understanding of games that we didn’t have—and that, in fact, we couldn’t have because we were just starting out. This model can be applied to game studies at large, where men have a head start on women because women are space invaders. There was an insidious idea that, to the young grad students hoping to join the GI, these conversations about the same games and same male game scholars were synonymous with game studies itself. The conversations we were having as the GI Janes were not seen as game studies, they were something else—feminist discussions of games. None of us saw the ways in which feminist games studies could be part of game studies at large. One FPS staff member, who we will call *Bianca*, remarked that she felt FPS simply wasn’t ready for explicitly feminist discourse in its first year, which was “why FPS and GI Janes in the beginning were separate.”

When I asked Wilcox explicitly if he, as EIC, felt threatened by the GI Janes and our competing website he commented, “I don’t think I felt threatened but it was certainly a wake-up call. It prompted me to reflect on why FPS wasn’t attractive to you and Elise and Judy. Shortly thereafter I think I realized I couldn’t really be proud of FPS unless it at least aspired to be such a place.” This was the groundwork that led to the shift from FPS 1.0. to FPS 2.0. when I came on board. But this didn’t mean that FPS wasn’t still male-dominated in both staff and contributors, and that there weren’t other factors at play in that male domination.

This problem, of course, is common: the all-male staff of a publication may want to diversify the perspectives of their staff for the most positive reasons, but those diverse bodies can quickly become tokenized or marginalized if they feel used or misunderstood. For example, Adams' feminist writing had a huge impact on my decision to join the FPS staff despite my initial reluctance. Problematically, I can't help but wonder if it was on some level because of tokenism that Adams and I were aggressively recruited to FPS 1.0. And, if it was, was it the right decision? We had to deal with discomfort and work to overhaul the organization, but because of that FPS became a safer space for future female staffers to join.

This raises questions about flawed processes of inclusion that originate with forms of tokenism. As Sara Ahmed discusses, inclusion comes with its own pressures, and its own problems. Often inclusion in and of itself is seen as "success" in which "the liberal promise of happiness and freedom have been extended to those who were previously excluded" (Ahmed, *Included* 163). Ahmed explains that simple inclusion can be "understood as a national fantasy" in which once minorities are included in the organizations of the nation, the nation is repaired and therefore racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia and the like are simply bad memories of the past when those people were excluded (164). Minorities are supposed to be grateful that they have been included, and to play into this fantasy that the organization is miraculously "fixed" (Ahmed, *Included*, 163-164). The inclusion of women and non-binary editors on FPS's staff, and the inclusion of more diverse writers was necessary, but the problems of FPS and of games culture at large were not fixed through simple inclusion and diversity. The only way to begin to fix these problems is by understanding the systems through which those bodies were excluded in the first place.

Ahmed points out though that once inclusion has happened, minorities are expected to be pleased by this success, and to cease to focus on issues of discrimination; in the majority's narrative, it is the focus on these issues itself that is getting in the way of true happiness and diversity (Ahmed, *Included* 166-167). It is because of these reasons that I find it difficult to frame FPS's increasing diversity as a success in and of itself. Even if we suddenly achieved 50% female contributors, that doesn't necessarily indicate that the journey to "diversity" is over. As long as women are space invaders in games culture, their inclusion in those spaces will always put them at risk of trauma via discrimination and harassment. In games culture some gamers are angry that we are "still" talking about diversity and representation in games and games culture—the mere inclusion of women and people of colour as characters and gamers is seen as sufficient. The continued discomfort of minorities is seen as a problem of their own creation. Once you've been included, what more could you ask for?

### **Feminist Content**

Even after FPS had begun to include non-binary and female staff, we still needed to increase the diversity of the authors we published and the writing itself. In my interviews, many staff members mentioned the February 2013 article "The Other Difficulty Mode: What Halo Can Tell Us About Identity and Oppression" from Samantha Alan as representing a turning point for the content of the publication. Alan's article, which was solicited by Wilcox on Twitter, was the first article from outside of Waterloo that wasn't written by Adams. Its publication represented the possibility of outsider contributors becoming a regular and consistent part of the journal. Soliciting articles on Twitter became common practice at FPS as a means of accessing more diverse authors with more diverse ideas than those we knew at Waterloo, or in Canada, alone. Alan's article, about using *Halo* to teach people about identity and oppression, exemplified the

type of academic-yet-accessible content FPS wanted to produce. The article quickly became FPS's most read piece (at the time) and a few more diverse submissions did start to arrive unsolicited. I know, as an outsider at the time, Alan's article changed the way I viewed FPS. I stopped seeing FPS as a place I was only really publishing because the editors were hounding me for submissions, to a place that I thought might be a suitable home for my research. While my perspective is surely coloured by the fact that I myself went on to become an editor for FPS, I do think seeing FPS publish social justice-oriented work made the platform more accessible to me as a reader and a contributor, and I can only assume it had the same effect on others who may have been wary of contributing to a publication that was run by a group of white men.

Logical or not, I know I am less likely to submit my writing to a publication that I see publishing mostly white men, and more likely to submit to a publication with more diverse voices and more feminist content. This is not surprising, as studies have demonstrated that women in STEM are more successful, and more likely to be retained, when they are exposed to female mentors, role models, and teachers in STEM (Drury et al.). I do genuinely believe that diversity begets more diversity; in fact, this is how, years later, we came to publish our most read article from 2012-present day (2018), "We Will Force Gaming to be Free" by Katherine Cross. Cross reached out to me after reading my two-part Commentary about Gamergate, asking if we would be interested in another article discussing similar topics. Cross' article was not just well read (21,000 page views the week it came out alone), it also helped raise Cross's profile in the world of games writers. Helping edit and publish that article is something that I still consider as one of my greatest accomplishments at FPS, as the article, like Alan's article before it, came to symbolize the type of accessible feminist content that I wanted FPS to be known for. At the same time, the more traditional game studies voices and writing are still being submitted frequently

and without solicitation to this day. Now that I've outlined the difficulties of achieving gender parity in game studies and FPS, the next section will look specifically at retaining the minority of women game studies already has.

### **Retention of Women in Game Studies and Game Studies Capital**

While I was initially excited about joining FPS, before I had even started my PhD, my excitement died soon after my arrival. When I had the opportunity to ask the editors what type of writing they were looking for their answers were confusing (for example no one could effectively explain the difference between their "Essays" section and their "Commentaries" section), impenetrably theoretical, and intimidating. Despite being interested in games academically, I felt that I didn't have anything to offer FPS as a scholar or a gamer. Later, after I'd been persuaded to join FPS, I obviously wanted more women on the staff, but it also wasn't easy to attend those first FPS meetings (as multiple interview subjects have corroborated). There were apparently two women who attended the early planning meetings before I had even arrived at Waterloo who quickly stopped attending. While I can only speculate on their motives for not attending, I can imagine that they felt the same discomfort that I had. I was frustrated and questioned my involvement every single step of the way, every step up to EIC. I didn't want other women to feel my frustration, but I also knew the only way I would feel less frustrated was to get more women to join. Hence why I aggressively courted Brey and Orlando to join FPS as copy editors from their first day of orientation in our PhD program. I told myself that if I was going to bring women into the space, I was responsible for ensuring that they were treated fairly as well. Luckily, within FPS, as more women and non-binary people joined, the team grew much larger, the publication became more successful, and more diverse editors eventually rose in the ranks. I can say now that FPS was initially the thing making me fear joining game studies, but in

the end it was the thing that made me want to stay as well. FPS is without a doubt why I finished my PhD, and why I'm writing this dissertation as it made me feel as if I was having an impact on my field, and on the discourse of games culture, in a way my strictly academic publications never did. Others I interviewed expressed the same sentiment. Most importantly, we are now on our third woman EIC in a row.

Despite this, every fall, when people move on from the PhD, we find ourselves again panicking about finding female editors, and particularly a new EIC. It is difficult to retain gender parity of the FPS staff because it's difficult to first attract and then retain women in game studies. While there always seem to be many male grad students interested in games and ready to work, female grad students often have to be talked into joining. This of course is also true of game studies as a larger field, which is why many of our female editors are gamers who specialize in fields other than game studies. All of this has often led me to wonder how we can retain women in game studies, and how many potential female scholars have already been lost. Past FPS editor Elise Vist was one of these lost scholars, and in 2014 she published an article explaining why, after years working as a games scholar, she left the field to focus instead on fan studies: "I don't consider myself a games scholar in the same way that I don't consider myself a gamer," her article begins. She continues: "I look like a gamer and I quack like a gamer, but it's just *easier* if I don't call myself a gamer." Vist explains that she often felt like she wasn't looking at games in the "right way" because the other scholars she would meet were such "hard core" gamers who "had been playing games *for literally ever*" and who it seemed "only ever thought about games." Vist goes on to discuss the differences between game studies and fan studies, and it becomes clear that in one field she felt a sense of belonging immediately, even as a newcomer, and in game studies she felt no belonging after years of ostensible "membership."

In other words, women like Vist are leaving game studies because they don't feel enough like gamers, and because game scholars police their field and the identity of "game scholar" in the same way gamers police who gets access to the gamer identity<sup>50</sup>. As a woman in game studies, I have struggled with these thoughts and I understand Vist's perspective. I constantly feel the imposter syndrome of academia colliding with the imposter syndrome of games culture to create a cocktail of constant self-doubt. I find myself thinking: am I enough of a gamer to be part of game studies? Have I played the right games? Am I good enough at those games? Have I read the right articles? In other words, do I have the cultural capital to be part of game studies? The answer almost always feels like no. This is because the main method of gatekeeping games culture is by policing what knowledge, actions, and skills are considered culturally important. As we established in chapter 1, Mia Consalvo has termed cultural capital in games culture "gaming capital" and I think this idea is actually quite relevant to game studies as a subculture of games culture as well (*Cheating 2*).

In game studies we see a subset of gaming capital that I will call "game studies capital." Game studies is a culture that expects women to exhibit traditional academic capital, as well as traditional gaming capital, making it next to impossible to feel a sense of belonging in the field. As one of my participants, who we will call *Caitlin*, explained in her interview, she feels that men in game studies don't have to experience the same stresses or anxieties that women do: "when you are a woman in games you assume you will have to defend yourself at some point

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<sup>50</sup> This possibly happens in part because, as José P. Zagal and Amy Bruckman discovered in their 2008 study of the complexities of teaching about games, prior non-academic experiences with video games may make students more committed and dedicated to studying games it also "interferes with students' abilities to reason critically and analytically about games". Instructors explained to the researchers that students already felt like experts on games without any game studies education (Zagal and Bruckman). So while there may be an expectation that one should be a Gamer to be a game scholar, Zagal and Bruckman's study demonstrates that Gamer knowledge does not actually create better critical analysis of games, if anything it may be the opposite.

where men don't have to"; people will ask you questions like "what games have you played,' or 'list the games you have played.'" *Caitlin* goes on to say that you feel the need to constantly prove yourself "as a nerd" by proving you can "write more about the hard core games." *Caitlin* also highlighted that women in game studies have to deal with the assumption that if you write about gender "people will think [...] that is all that I know to talk about. There are those little underlying biases that make it difficult." This game studies capital that my participant describes is ever present for women in the discipline. In game studies gamers can gain such capital via the confirmation of academic institutions: through writing comprehensive exams about game studies, defending a game studies dissertation, publishing in certain journals and presenting at certain conferences, being members of certain research networks, making games, and teaching game studies. Furthermore, one can gain and demonstrate their understanding and knowledge of critics, designers, academics, and terminology to gain linguistic game studies capital. Objectified game studies capital can be gained through the number of books and journal articles one has published. This is all on top of one's ability to attain typical gaming capital, which as we have established, is easier for men than women; therefore, women when entering game studies need to establish first their gaming capital and then their game studies capital to be taken seriously.

If there was one thing I learned in my time as EIC of FPS it was that the many men who submitted articles to us seemed to feel self-assured in their opinions about games and their role in game studies in a way that the few women who submitted never did. The staff of FPS spent much of our time encouraging (or begging) women to contribute, whereas we received more unsolicited articles from men than we could handle. I link this to the fact that the men I encountered in game studies had a wealth of positive experiences in games culture and as gamers that taught them they were already experts on games, whereas the women I spoke to often

already felt like their gamer identity and expertise were being called into question (Zagal and Brukman).<sup>51</sup>

No matter how much we know about games, men come into game studies already feeling like insiders—whereas women come into game studies inevitably already feeling like outsiders. While men *do* have to prove themselves as scholars, their gamer identity and knowledge is assumed as the normative bodies of games culture and therefore game studies culture. Unlike other fields I've been a part of or dabbled in, game studies seemed to have all these extra barriers to entry, to full participation *in addition* to all the academic ones. When writing about games, I feel that I need to constantly make it clear that I am a lifelong gamer in a way I wouldn't feel the need to establish myself as a lifelong reader of Middle English texts, because my experience in games culture has taught me that if I don't establish myself as someone who has been gaming since childhood, I won't be taken seriously. Because of my gender, if I don't insist on my expertise—and even when I do—I will be assumed not to have it. I've been asked by male scholars and students if I've ever heard of *World of Warcraft* or *Skyrim*, yet as an English major no one has ever asked me if I've heard of Nabokov or Dickens. Game studies is unique in this way because it's part of games culture, but also because all game scholars are in some way gamers and therefore even while we study games and those who play them, we still replicate the problems of games culture within our own field and therefore within our own culture.

If we don't admit to the failings of the discipline to make a space for women, then it is young women themselves who will bear the burden, who will feel that it is their fault for not fitting into the space—as opposed to the fault of the space for not accommodating them. Vist bore this burden when she left game studies after years of trying to make it work. Vist has

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<sup>51</sup> This comfort and expertise gap with gaming and technology more broadly has been theorized by Elisabeth Hayes in her article "Girls, Gaming, and Trajectories of IT Expertise."

explained that her initial reluctance to join FPS was not only because of her lack of belonging in game studies, but because she felt that, the male founding staff didn't seem to want her ideas or her help. Adding female staff was easy: making room for their ideas and differences of opinion was much harder. In our interview, Vist pointed out to me that we were initially invited to join FPS as "feminists doing games stuff" and not to be editors in our own right. While Vist attended the first meeting with me out of obligation, she thought that if she said no then it would "be proof that they didn't need to reach out to women." After the first meeting I kept coming back, but Vist did not. About a year later Vist expressed interest in working on improving the Book Reviews section but was offered the position of "second reader" instead of being offered an official editorial position. When I was promoted to EIC I immediately offered Vist a position as editor of Book Reviews, and she was motivated to accept as she felt that her ideas and voice would be heard since that the founding editors were all stepping down to make room for new staff. Vist explained that once I was EIC she felt she could "work on interesting projects" and hone her skills as an editor or podcast producer, "without ever requiring" her to be accepted by others as "a 'gamer' or a 'game studies person.'" I'm proud that even though Vist left game studies, she remained with FPS and helped us diversify our staff and submissions. At the same time, I'm very aware that Vist is not the only woman to leave game studies because they felt they could not attain enough cultural capital to gain true membership. All of this leads me to wonder how much of the male domination of game studies is the result of women being unable to attain gaming capital in their youth, and then facing barriers in game studies as adults in result. This section has explained differing levels of access to cultural capital as one possible reason for the lack of women in game studies. The following section will explore the perceptions of my participants on the topic of diversity in game studies.

## Perceptions of Male Domination and Game Studies

In my interviews with the FPS staff I asked every person if they saw game studies as male-dominated, and how they felt the diversity of the FPS submissions could be improved. I feel it is important to include what young scholars (and our faculty advisors) in game studies *perceive* the gender makeup in game studies to be. When asked, “Do you think game studies is male-dominated?” all female and non-binary participants immediately replied yes, and then gave explanations as to how they knew, citing feelings or experiences of displacement and exclusion. Male participants were more likely to take their time before saying yes, often noting that they had no idea about the actual numerical breakdown. They would often then go on to cite the external factors they felt were at play mostly focusing on Gamergate and online harassment. Sometimes, they would come around to internal factors. One male editor, who we will call *David*, explained that he saw women as being “held to different standards” because the gender “problem” is the “big problem” in games and “in game studies it’s just assumed it’s a woman’s problem to solve.” *David* hits on something that was brought up in multiple interviews by participants of all genders; sexism in games is clearly a problem, but whose problem is it to solve?

Before I get into details about the factors brought up in my interviews, I would like to note that answers to these questions took on a very similar dynamic to the answers given in the recent article “The Blame Game: How Video Game Workers Frame Barriers to Diversity” (O’Meara et al.). The authors note that women interviewed in the International Game Developers Association’s (IGDA) Developer Satisfaction Survey (DSS) responded to questions about diversity in the games industry much differently than men. The authors argue that while it is becoming more common to note that the lack of diversity is a problem, “there are differences in

what men and women see as the primary reasons for this underrepresentation. These differences reflect an important chasm in how the problem is experienced across gender” (O’Meara et al.). Male respondents would focus on things external to the industry itself and women would focus on problems within the industry (O’Meara et al.). For example, men were more likely to place “blame” on the fact that there were very few applicants who were not white or male, or that white males were simply the most interested in making games (O’Meara et al.). By contrast, women were more likely to see the ways in which the lack of diversity was caused by sexism within the industry and culture that made women feel unwelcome (O’Meara et al.). The authors argue that the men interviewed “emphasized barriers that were external to the industry itself and therefore were seemingly insulated from accusations of direct discrimination,” whereas women were more likely to acknowledge that “the internalized attitudes and beliefs of existing industry members act as a hindrance to diversity” (O’Meara et al.).

I asked my participants first if they thought that game studies was male-dominated, and if so *why*, and secondly how they thought FPS could gain more diversity. I did this in an effort to focus on issues internal to game studies and not only the larger issues with gender diversity in games culture which can often be used as a shield for internal problems. An example of an external problem would be: “women don’t join game studies because of Gamergate,” as opposed to an internal problem such as “women don’t join game studies because of experiences with sexism from game scholars.”

### **Toxic Masculinity and The Monstrous Feminine**

Multiple people mentioned that on a broad level the male domination of game studies was partly because of a “boys club” mentality. *David* explained: “I feel like there is still a lot of toxic masculinity inherited from the academic institution in general that we have yet to navigate,

reconcile or deal with in anyway.” Similarly, *Andrew* stated, “it just seems so obvious, that gaming culture the thing that we study is still very bro-driven”. The idea of there being a “bro-ish” culture amongst Gamers and game scholars was brought up many times. One participant, who we will call *Evan*, noted that this toxic masculinity present in game studies is performed not only by men in the field, but by many women too: “this sort of ideology of masculinism or masculinity is something that I think even a lot of women in game studies adhere to.” *Evan* extrapolated on this statement with a fascinating story about the sort of “locker room talk” that can take place in the discipline, even among women. *Evan* explained that someone sent out an email in the Games Network email listserv asking for people to reply with their three favorite game scholars in order to collect some informal data about what work was being the most frequently read. After a few emails, someone else replied by saying “hey this sounds like ‘marry, fuck, kill’ let’s do that instead” and the listserv proceeded to play the sexist party game in which you list three people (usually celebrities), and decide which one they would marry, which they would fuck, and which they would kill. But in this case these scholars were playing this game using *other scholars from their own field*. *Evan* explained that watching these emails he was horrified and thought to himself, “Holy shit who is going to be the first person to really chew out this person and really put the hammer down on them?” *Evan* then explained that they saw that “a notable feminist” in the field responded to the email and he was excited that someone was going to put an end to the immature game. Upon opening the email he saw with total disbelief that the notable feminist scholar reply amounted to, “‘oh I’d marry this one, fuck this one, and kill this one’.”

I include this story not to call out this person (*Evan* didn’t even tell me who it was) but to say that I don’t think this sort of performance by women in game studies is an uncommon event.

I frequently see women in game studies perform a type of masculine behavior (i.e. making fun of or shaming people for having not played certain games, making fun of someone's skill at a game, making fun of someone for not knowing certain games related knowledge) that I have not seen women perform in the other fields of study I have been a part of in the Arts. I think this reality is partly the result of game studies being so steeped in the toxic masculinity of games culture. Even women feel they need to replicate the patterns of toxic masculinity to be accepted. This phenomenon has been studied amongst female gamers and is referred to as a type of "monstrous feminine" performance where women gamers "engage in trash talk, having an in-your-face attitude, and even making sexist remarks" (Taylor, *Raising* 123). I can totally understand why women in game studies would feel the need to perform this "hypermasculinity and femininity" (Taylor, *Raising* 123) to demonstrate that they are a gamer, and that they fit in with other gamers, that they are "one of the guys." Really, your options are to join in on the game, or be the one who ruins the fun, the problem, or even worse, a "mother" like figure. Performing this type of hegemonic gamer masculinity is a technique to survive game studies; becoming "one of the guys" ensures you are not seen as a feminist killjoy and that the men of the discipline who enjoy this type of performance will want to keep working with you. *Evan* concluded the story by observing that "patriarchal ideology is part and parcel of the cultural discourse that as gamers we are taking into our work as game scholars—men *and* women [alike]."

## **Masculinity and Methods**

The perception that some approaches to games scholarship are more valid than others was referenced repeatedly throughout all of the interviews. A few people pointed out that the male-dominated nature of game studies can also be located in the methods employed in the field. As *Evan* explained:

I think there's very much a masculinist ideology to the way that games research is conducted and evaluated and the way that it is assessed within the community. It would be very hard to argue that the vast majority of scholarship in game studies is anything less than organized by masculinist ideologies of argumentation, of reasoning and of masculinist, if not patriarchal, epistemological assumptions and frameworks ... I think there is a strong masculinist bias in the type of research [we do].

I speculate that the “masculinist bias” that *Evan* is noting is related not only to the number of male researchers, but also their quest for validation in a field that many have deemed unimportant or frivolous in academia because of the perception that video games are inherently juvenile. If our methods are seen as “scientific” and “rigorous,” there is a hope that game studies as a whole will be seen as a valid field of study. This concern about games not being taken seriously as an academic subject was outlined by Espen Aarseth in 2004, when he explained that “after forty years of fairly quiet evolution, the cultural genre of computer games is finally recognized as a large-scale social and aesthetic phenomenon to be taken seriously” and that is recognized as “field of great scholarly potential, place for academic expansion and recognition” (1). I would argue that game studies suffers from an overcompensation complex where the supposed “unseriousness” of the subject matter means that it must be treated not only seriously, but technically and pseudo-scientifically—hence the argument behind “ludology”, that we should focus less on narratives, representation, and culture, and more on procedures, coding, and platforms.

This sort of complex gatekeeping leads to a field in which some are unsure if their research “counts.” These debates even happened in the early years of FPS, and some women I interviewed expressed concerns that FPS 1.0 didn't see their research as “real game studies”

(despite being academic writing about games). One participant, who we will call *Francine*, explained that she was told by FPS 1.0. that a piece she had written for FPS was “theory heavy,” but she wasn’t “citing a lot of game studies people” so it didn’t “fit” on FPS. I know that I felt these pressures from FPS 1.0 when I was a contributor and was once told to make my writing “more academic” and to cite more game scholars in order to get it published on FPS. There was a deep-rooted concern about FPS appearing as “real” game studies to outsiders. Women writing work on the margins of game studies could bring the reputation of FPS as a “real game studies” publication into question. One of the founding editors, who we will call *Greg*, explained that there was a subconscious policing of content published at first because the founding editors were “being overly self-conscious of how we appeared.” They felt if they cited the wrong people, or published on the wrong topics, they would not be taken seriously by game studies at large.

I brought this struggle up with the FPS 1.0 editors in our interviews, and in retrospect I believe that it is clear that there was a search for legitimacy that initially held FPS back from reaching its full potential as middle state publication read by the public and academics alike. As one editor explained about my writing specifically, the early FPS editors did like the arguments in my work, but were extremely unsure about my writing methods, which were very subjective and vernacular. When I was told to make my early writing for FPS “more academic” I felt unsure how exactly to do that; so instead, I ended up feeling that my writing was not good enough to be in FPS at all. In my discussion with *Greg*, we returned to my early work with FPS. *Greg* explained that one of his regrets “was putting too much editorial stamp” on my writing. He expressed to me that he didn’t so much have a problem with my writing so much as he was nervous and afraid of the reaction to it: “You had written a [piece] that was very personal in relation to your own perspective ... and I was worried that [your piece] would get push back in

the comments or in the round of editing, so I asked you to basically go a little more formal with it.” *Greg* concluded looking back that the 1.0 editors were “afraid of ghosts”; in other words, they were imagining critics that weren’t really there who would decide if something published on FPS was or wasn’t game studies. *Greg* also mentioned that they wanted to focus on less academic and more diverse content but had “internalized the lack of value” that the field had applied to less theoretical writing. In the process of being afraid of these imaginary critics, the FPS 1.0 editors unintentionally became the critics themselves, turning myself and other women off of publishing with them.

Obviously I hold no hard feelings about this interaction now, and *Greg* and I remain good friends, but I bring it up because it was clearly a defining moment for both of us in our understanding of ourselves as academics, and our understanding of how accessible we actually wanted the publication to be—to women; to contributors like myself who did not write in a traditional fashion; to those who did not like to read the writing FPS was known for at the time; and to journalists and enthusiasts who were not trained to write (or read) as academics. This interaction gets at the push and pull that took place in early FPS. There was a push to move what we were publishing out of the academic box, and then a pull back towards publishing traditional academic content out of fear. This push pull continued and may continue into the future depending on who is in charge of FPS and what their goals are. The FPS team would constantly talk about publishing content that was more accessible than what you would see in your average journal, but most of the content actually being produced did not meet this lofty goal as it was densely theoretical and/or difficult to read. I think this is because many of the FPS editors and staff were, as *Greg* put it, “afraid of ghosts”: the faceless “real” game scholars who would criticize the site and its content.

It wasn't just *Greg* bringing this idea up, multiple participants came back to this same idea over and over, that there was a "real game studies" and how they often they felt outside of it because of some dynamic of their research or identity: it was about the wrong games, it was too narrative focused, it was too focused on building and not focused enough on theory, it was too personal, too new, too queer, too feminist. I know this is something I struggle with still, often feeling that my research is only considered "real game studies" within feminist circles. This feeling is the result of years and years of the boundaries of our field being argued over and policed as well as women's research being marginalized. While there are multiple debates in game studies that I could discuss here, I think it would be most useful to focus on the single debate which has caused the most confusion and strain on our field: the ludology versus narratology debate.

### **Ludology versus Narratology**

When pressed to focus more on what it was specifically that makes game studies male-dominated, many participants commented that they felt as if there was a focus on an "old guard" of male scholars (with particular reference to the perceived founders of the seminal journal *Game Studies*). *Francine* explained that she felt that there were subsections of game studies that were less male-dominated, such as "games criticism circles on Twitter,"<sup>52</sup> but that these represent the "fringes" of the field. Many identified a separation between the general perception of game studies as a field, and the parts of game studies they felt they participated in. Many participants brought up feminist games studies or the Canadian Game Studies Association, or FPS itself, as

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<sup>52</sup> On twitter there is a loosely defined network of progressive games academics, journalists, activists, developers that this participant was referring to. This group tweets about games and games culture but also creates memes and discusses politics. This group is relatively young and is made up in large part by grad students, games journalists, and independent developers. FPS's twitter followers probably represent this demographic quite well.

examples of these smaller subcultures within game studies that they felt they belonged to while they didn't necessarily feel like they belonged to game studies at large.

In these same conversations, many pointed to the game studies "canon" as proof of male domination in the discipline<sup>53</sup>. As one participant, who we will call *Henry*, explained: "if you look at the history of game studies, there are a lot of these foundational texts ... it's pretty dude-oriented which is why personally I try to make that conscious effort to cite women." *Evan* explained, "a lot of the biggest names in game studies are women ... that said I don't think there is anything close to parity." One way of developing a sense of the canon of a field is through text books that collect the most influential works in your field. For example, *The Game Design Reader* which is over 900 pages long and features many important essays by game scholars has only 3 women contributors out of 37. Similarly, the *Video Game Theory Reader* has only 2 women contributors out of 18. This pattern continues through many game studies books unless they are explicitly about gender, therefore it is no wonder that young scholars get the sense that there are very few women in the field. Multiple participants stated that to them the most important, most influential voices in games are women, but that they didn't feel that these women received the same respect as male scholars in the field. *Andrew* went as far as to note that he felt that some of the male game scholars were just *mean* to the female scholars stating: "Aarseth was such an asshole to Janet Murray ... she was not saying anything that controversial but he was just such a jerk. The ludologists all were ... they were like a boys club in a lot of ways."

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<sup>53</sup> Worth noting that all those interviewed for this dissertation had PhDs (or were working towards PhDs) in either English or Communication studies. People who studied game studies in the social sciences, for example, might feel the game studies "canon" is less male dominated, while people in Human Computer Interaction, for example, might feel that the game studies "canon" is even *more* male dominated. Despite game studies being a well developed field it is still not a discipline and therefore the discipline individual researches come from will effect our perceptions of the field and what is part of the "canon".

*Andrew* is referencing the infamous ludology versus narratology “debate” in which some scholars studying games declared themselves “ludologists.” Led by Espen Aarseth of *Game Studies*, they styled themselves as being in opposition to other scholars whom they called “narratologists” (usually exemplified by Janet Murray or Henry Jenkins). The narratologists were scholars who were supposedly looking at games as narrative texts the same way they have previously looked at books and films whereas the ludologists were looking at the procedures and rules of the game and not as concerned with narrative or aesthetic trappings. In the game studies text book *First Person* Noah Wardrip-Fruin pens the introduction to ludology saying that the ludologists’ “image of the field of computer game studies is significantly different from that found in literature or film departments, the popular press, or media industry conferences” (35). Wardrip-Fruin explains that Aarseth was primarily focused on “the texts themselves” and not the cultural context as the ludologists did not want to be “held back” by the trappings of other disciplines (35). Instead they wanted to understand “new media text[s] on [their] own terms, rather than as a reflection of the already understood” (Wardrip-Fruin 35). In other words Aarseth saw the way he and the other ludologists were studying games as fundamentally opposed to the way that games were being studied by others (Wardrip-Fruin 35).

The ludology versus narratology debate was therefore about the “proper” way to study games. When attempting to understand what happened during the ludology versus narratology debate for my PhD comprehensive exam in New Media Studies<sup>54</sup> I found myself intensely confused. The debate didn’t seem like much of a debate at all: it seemed like some people were doing research about narrative, or representation, or culture in games, and then other people

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<sup>54</sup> It is worth noting that the comprehensive exam lists at the time were pre-set lists created by the department. The students would create a “blist” of texts that corresponded to their research interests but did not create the core reading lists.

arguing that that research wasn't worth doing, or wasn't as important. I had a lot of questions: could anyone really believe that narrative and representation were not important? Was my research expected to take a side in this debate? Why did no one seem to identify as a narratologist? How could you study a game looking at only the narrative? How could you study a game ignoring the narrative? If I wasn't a ludologist and I wasn't studying narrative, then what was I? Where did I fit in this field?

One of the books assigned, that claimed to explain the debate, was the above mentioned *First Person*. I read the articles within the text but I found myself *more* confused. In his introduction to ludology and narratology Markku Eskelinen, a ludologist, outlines his feelings about the two perspectives saying that if game studies is “very open to intrusions and colonization from the already organized and scholarly tribes” and that “resisting and beating them is the goal of our first survival game” (36). In this “us versus them” paradigm that was being established in the pages of this text book, how could I, as someone with three degrees in English Literature, where Narratology comes from, see myself as anyone but “them”? Sure, I didn't want to study narrative, but I didn't want to leave behind my training, it felt highly relevant to studying games. I, the graduate student who took classes and had training in “print narratology, hypertext theory, film or theater and drama studies”<sup>55</sup> was the invading force that they wanted to beat back. I was the exact type of scholar that Aarseth was warning would come along in the future and create, as he put it, “slanted” “crude” “incompetent” scholarship (“Genre” 45).<sup>56</sup> How was I to read this book for my exams and still feel that I could have a home in game studies?

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<sup>55</sup> These are the theories that Eskelinen claims that “we can't apply ... directly to computer games.” Eskelinen wrote in 2004 that people from these disciplines were “would-be-colonizers” of game studies (36).

<sup>56</sup> Aarseth's full warning about incoming grad students with narrative training reads as follows: “My warnings about narrativism and theoretical colonialism might seem unduly harsh and even militant. Why not let the matter resolve

I was especially shocked by Aarseth's assertion in his article "Genre Trouble" that "the dimensions of Lara Croft's body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently. When I play, I don't even see her body, but see through it and past it" (45). Aarseth goes on to support this assertion by saying that chess is still chess no matter if the pieces are mud and rocks or look like the Simpsons. As a young game scholar and feminist, reading these words from the person I had come to see as one of the founders of game studies was damaging. This was one of the *only* mentions of studying gender I had encountered in game studies and it was disparaging. While what Aarseth was saying was that the way Lara Croft looked was "irrelevant to [him] as a player," I couldn't help hearing his message as "feminist analysis of the representation of women in irrelevant to game studies." After all, "Genre Trouble" was about establishing what types of games and subjects are most worthy of our attention as a field (Aarseth 45).

The most confusing part about these chapters from Eskelinen and Aarseth in *First Person* is that after making these statements about how narratologists are invaders and colonizers, they go on to make arguments about games as a narrative medium. In their essays outlining the downfalls of narratology they also *examine the narratives of various games*. Eskelinen's essay discusses how time unfolds in narrative using narratological theories and Aarseth's goes on to discuss "story-game hybrids" in the genre of adventure games. Aarseth discusses the relationship between interactivity and narrative in games just like any other scholar studying similar texts.

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itself, through scholarly, logical dialogue? The reason for this vigilance, however, is based on numbers. The sheer number of students trained in film and literary studies will ensure that the slanted and crude misapplication of "narrative" theory to games will continue and probably overwhelm game scholarship for a long time to come. As long as vast numbers of journals and supervisors from traditional narrative studies continue to sanction dissertations and papers that take the narrativity of games for granted and confuse the story-game hybrids with games in general, good, critical scholarship on games will be outnumbered by incompetence, and this is a problem for all involved" (45).

When Aarseth examines narrative in video games it's "ludology" but when he discusses Katherine Hayles doing similar work around electronic literature she is "fighting for critical turf," her connections are "weak," and she wants to "claim all the territory" for herself (Aarseth "Genre"). Why would someone with narrative training study games any differently than they would? What was so special about their approach?

Furthermore, when looking back I can't help but see troubling parallels between the ways that Aarseth in "Genre Trouble" insists that "interactive narratives" are not games, and that "adventure story-games" like *Myst* (1993) and *Half-life* (1998) don't have as much to offer game studies as games like *Warcraft* (1994) or *Counter-strike* (2000) (45) and the way that many contemporary Gamers insist that Twine games like *Depression Quest* (2013) and "walking simulators"<sup>57</sup> like *Dear Esther* (2012) are "not games" and that narrative heavy "SJW Games"<sup>58</sup> like *Gone Home* (2013) are not worth playing because of the simplistic game play and focus on narrative (Kill Screen Staff; Phiri). These assertions feel unnecessary, they feel more about getting to be the person who decides what is a game and what isn't a game, and what is good gameplay and what isn't, than they are about ludology. Aarseth later responded to his own essay (and Stuart Multhrop's negative reaction to it) by clarifying that he thinks we should "deprivilege

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<sup>57</sup> A walking simulator is a game in which the player's primary interaction is walking through and exploring an environment as opposed to shooting or fighting enemies. *Myst* would be an early popular example of the genre a more recent popular example would be *Firewatch* (2016). The term walking simulator was originally meant to be derogatory (i.e. what sounds more boring than a game that simulates walking) but people who like the genre have started using it to describe game play they enjoy (Kill Screen Staff). The detractors of the walking simulator genre will argue that they are not games at all as they don't include any aspect of physical challenge, and that they are "over-hyped, underwhelming and, frankly, boring" (Mason).

<sup>58</sup> I frequently hear the term "SJW Games" thrown around online by Gamers to describe narrative heavy games or games with female protagonists. On Steam users can create groups and lists of games as "curators". The curator of the Steam group "SJW Awareness" lists "SJW games" to avoid buying or playing (D). The curator of SJW Awareness writes to his audience: "here's the group for you where you can put your money to the right people. Send a message and say no to Social Justice, Feminist, and other Progressives by not giving them money for their product" (D). He recommends games like *Nier Automaton* (2017) which he feels "triggers SJWs" with "sexy women" and posts negative reviews of games like *LadyKiller in a Bind* (2017) for having a "SJW Developer" in Christine Love. SJW Awareness also features a forum called "The Evidence Room" where Gamers can post games that they think have "SJW problems" be that content or developer connections to "SJWs".

textual and cultural perspectives, by showing that they are not necessarily as essential to gameplay as our humanist ideology would have us believe” and that that is not the same as saying we should ban textual and cultural perspectives “although the shocked reactions seem to indicate that it is” (“Eспен”). Reading “Genre Trouble” now it seems as though Aarseth was defining “good” game studies work, narrative or otherwise, as what he was doing, while insisting others doing similar work on games were outsiders or invaders.

After reading Aarseth’s comments I attempted to find *anyone* arguing that games were media simply just for telling stories, or raging against ludology, but I couldn’t find anyone insisting that narratology was the only way to look at games. Multhrop instead writes (again in *First Person*) in a section hilariously titled “Play Nicely” that ludology and narratology are not “antithetical” suggesting that Aarseth probably has more in common with Murray than he thinks. Multhrop approached the debate not as a war, but as a misunderstanding of the work being done by theorists like Murray, Brenda Laurel, and Sherry Turkle (47). Murray has a chapter in *First Person* but does not talk about her supposed “narratology” position (2). Similarly, Jenkins has a chapter where he discusses “Game Design as Narrative Architecture” where he responds to the debate (which he calls a “blood feud”) by offering “a middle-ground position between the ludologists and the narratologists” (119). *First Person* promised me that there *was* a “debate” but I could only find one side aggressively drawing lines in the sand and on the other side people simply presenting their research (which had to do with narrative) and not commenting on what game studies should or should not be.

As you can maybe imagine, I didn’t like *First Person* much. I found the structure of the book, in which scholars write statements and then another scholar responds to what they wrote, oddly reminiscent of a rap battle, or debate club, or angry forum posts. Not every response in the

book is like this of course, many of them are very respectful, but the book frames our field as one of disagreements and “sides”. To a young scholar the book outlined a field ripe with not just disagreements but with membership policing, passive-aggressive comments, and intense conflicts that I, ironically, did not want to get involved in. It wasn’t just that I found it uninviting, I actually found it boring, as it didn’t speak to any of the things I wanted to study and this was, as far as I was told, the most important book for outlining what game studies was as a field. I put the book aside not because I thought it was bad, but because, like game studies, I thought it wasn’t for me.

Thankfully, I decided to do additional digging about the debate online before my exam and I came across a 2005 DiGRA talk by Murray that critiqued both Aarseth’s assertions about Lara Croft and chess *and* the ludology versus narratology debate. Murray’s talk “The Last Word on Ludology vs Narratology” was unfortunately far from the last words on the topic, and has only become more important in recent years as the debate rages on. Murray forecasted my exact confusion in this essay, saying that “the students flooding our graduate and undergraduate programs [should not continue to be] confused by the appearance of an either/or choice between games and stories” (“Last”). But I *was* confused by the “choice” in place, especially since it was presented as having such high stakes. This wasn’t just a fight over what was the right way to study games—it was a war over what game studies *was* and therefore who would get to be a part of the field.

While I was reading texts which argued that games could be interactive texts and stories, like Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, none of these stipulated there weren’t other ways to examine them. Murray’s “Last Words” cleared up this confusion for me by explaining that this crucial “other” side in the debate did not actually exist.. Murray, who was often held up as the

leader of the narratologists, explains that there were in fact are *no* self-declared “narratologists” in game studies and that the term was a straw man created by the self-declared ludologists to control the discourse of the field. Murray explains that the term narratologist was being used by the ludologists to cover anyone who discussed games as “cultural, dramatic, narrative, psychological, emotional” or in any manner that is not “ludology.” In other words, the ludologists were using the “debate,” and their made up teams, as a method of gatekeeping the discipline and what “counts” as game studies (“Last”). Without knowing about any of this, when I joined game studies I became part of this debate by finding my research undermined and left outside a prescriptive definition of “real” game studies that I had created in my head based on my cultural environment and the texts that I read. I didn’t know why my research, about gender and my personal experiences in games culture, wouldn’t be considered game studies, I just knew that it wasn’t accepted as such<sup>59</sup>.

Gonzalo Frasca also did his part to point out that this debate, as he put it, “never took place” (“Ludologists”). While I didn’t read Frasca’s talk until years after I read Murray’s “Last Words” it actually predates Murray’s talk by two years as it was given in 2003. In this talk he attempts to address the misconception that the “so-called” debate had created including how, “ludology” has two vastly different definitions. When I was taught what the word “ludology” means by my peers, I was taught it meant examining game play *as opposed to game stories* (and nothing I read contradicted this assumption), whereas Frasca originally intended ludology to mean “the study of games” no matter ones’ feeling on narrative (“Ludologists”). But the term,

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<sup>59</sup> It’s worth noting at this point that I have talked to two different young game scholars at conferences who were not from North American who told me that they thought “ludology” was just another English word for game studies and they had no idea about its history or context in the debate. This is likely because in 1999 Frasca proposed a non-existent discipline that would focus on games that would be called simply “ludology” and that would have a “set of theoretical tools” for studying games, much like what narratologists use to study narrative (“Ludologists”).

and the debate, took on a life of its own. In other words, it's not just that the concept of the narratologist that I had learned about didn't exist, but originally this concept of a ludologist (in its present definition) didn't exist either: it wasn't until scholars started to insist that they were ludologists and others were *not* that this became a "debate" ("Ludologists"). This reminded me of the way in which "gamer" once meant anyone who played games before some people took the label upon themselves and decided other people were not Gamers. It's worth noting that Frasca, could not see Murray as the opposing "narratology" force to his ludology as she supervised his ludological dissertation ("Ludologists"). Therefore, he knew, inherently, that the divide was false. Frasca concludes, as Murray did two years later, that the narratologists who are evoked in the debate never existed.

If in Frasca's opinion, a ludologist was someone who studied games, no matter what "his or her position on narrative and games" then how did it get to the point where it meant something so exclusionary ("Ludologists")? How could I, after reading *First Person* in 2012, call myself a ludologist? If the debate was just, as Frasca put it, a "serious misunderstanding" then why was I, a graduate student, taught 10 years later that this was the founding debate of our field? Also, was it really my fault that I was getting it wrong? If I'm still getting it all wrong (which I very well might be) is that my fault? It's not as if I haven't tried! The majority of game scholars, young grad students like myself, weren't there when these debates were happening and yet we have to deal with them anyway. So what is the purpose of passing this debate along? Why teach "Genre Trouble" and the debate as legitimate?

Gerald Voorhees argues, that having this "debate" has a purpose, it allows certain scholars to exercise a type of control over the field of game studies where they get to decide who belongs in the clubhouse and who doesn't. These debates that structure game studies are, as

Voorhees explains, not only a “methodological, or perspectival disagreement,” but also “ultimately... an effort to control the nature of the field” (9). Ultimately Voorhees argues we need to be cautious of the “false dilemma” that causes us to privilege the game over the player or the story over the procedures or vice versa (10). Similarly, in his article, “Preemptive Strikes: Ludology Narratology, and Deterrence in Computer Game Studies,” Kevin Moberly argues that early game studies work like what I read in *First Person* establishes “the outside boundaries of what constitutes game studies” by “firmly locating Aarseth, Eskelinen, and other ludologists firmly at the center of the discourse” (163). Moberly goes on to explain that, specifically, “Marxist and poststructuralist approaches—are not acknowledged and, therefore, not allowed to enter the contest” (163). I would expand what Moberly is saying even further to include cultural and feminist approaches (which he may have been implying by referring to Marxist approaches) as not allowed to “enter the contest” as well. It would be difficult to do cultural or feminist work in the “carefully delineated arena” set out in those early texts.

In Aarseth’s “Genre Trouble” and Eskelinen’s “Towards Computer Game Studies” the two scholars frame themselves, and other ludologists, as victims of an imagined attack on their field of study, by those of us from literary studies who are colonizers (54). It is ironic to label those from literary studies as invaders when the ludologists are the ones writing articles criticizing narrative work in games to, in effect, shout “get out of our clubhouse.” I can not help but bring up the comparison here, as controversial as I know it will be, between the perceived underdog status of the ludologist, and the perceived underdog status of contemporary Gamers who don’t want politics in their games, or game reviews. Both seem to feel like games were under attack by an outside force that is looking at or talking about games in the wrong way, that was overstating arguments about representation, that was focused on narratives, and that just

happened to include many women. I explain this to assert the ways in which game studies was/is a masculine space; that ludology was a masculine ideology; and that the “debate” of ludology versus narratology was masculine posturing that made the space less accessible to women interested in entering the field to study narrative, culture, or gender. In other words, I think by purporting the idea that there is a ludology narratology divide we are making game studies less accessible to women, at the very least, it made game studies less accessible to me.

### **Epistemological Gatekeeping in Game Studies**

Murray concluded her 2005 talk by explaining that: “The ludology vs narratology argument can *never* be resolved because one group of people is defining both sides of it. The ‘ludologists’ are debating a phantom of their own creation.” A lot has changed since 2005, but, like Murray predicted, the debate *can’t* be resolved. Most recently, game scholar and designer Ian Bogost<sup>60</sup> declared in an article for *The Atlantic* that “Video Games are Better Without Stories,” causing the ludology versus narratology debate to play out on Twitter and Facebook in a way I’ve never seen any other game studies debate explode online. Academics were restating their positions, while people outside of academia were discovering the debate for the first time and digging in. In this article, not only did Bogost not mention any of Murray’s last words on the topic, he also made continued passing reference to Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck*—without ever mentioning or citing Murray, a scholar at his own institution, in a way that could only have

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<sup>60</sup> I’m focusing on Bogost here because of his influence on the field on Game Studies as well as on games discourse at large. Bogost is currently not only a well established scholar within game studies (he has published nine monographs on games), and a well established game designer (having eight games under his belt) he is also a well established pop culture critic and regularly writes for the Atlantic. His influence is felt not only in academia but outside of it as well. For example, he currently has over 100,000 twitter followers. In contrast the DiGRA account has 341 followers. I have no way of knowing how many times “Video Games Are Better Without Stories” has been read but when you google the name of the article you can see that there are countless Reddit threads, YouTube videos, academic articles, non-academic articles, tweets, forum posts, and blog entries that have been posted in response to it. It is also worth noting that, during my interviews, of all the scholars in game studies, Bogost’s name came up the most.

been intentional. Bogost is known for writing controversial think pieces that go viral, but this article was different as it was interjecting into a 15-year-old debate, without actually acknowledging the debate itself. Therefore, many outside of academia began “having” the “debate”, while focusing on this singular article in which Bogost argues: “if there is a future of games, let alone a future in which they discover their potential as a defining medium of an era, it will be one in which games abandon the dream of becoming narrative media.” As someone who wanted to forget the “debate” even existed, it was exhausting to watch as my social media feeds were absolutely flooded with Gamers, journalists, developers, and academics alike arguing in earnest: what are games good at? Gameplay or narrative?

While most academics had agreed that the ludology narratology “debate” never took place, Bogost was *making it real* by declaring that video games are better without stories in his viral article. Bringing the ludology versus narratology debate back into the limelight also brings its key players back into popular games discourse, it means pouring fuel on a dying fire in an effort to recenter game studies discourse around the debate and the male scholars who continue to conduct it. Even if scholars disagree with your argument, they are still talking about you, and citing you, like I am here. Creating controversy is one way to become a household name in a field. For this reason, I am unsure if Bogost even really believes that “video games are better without stories” so much as he knew that that headline could be used as click bait, that it would get people to click on the article and get his name trending even if just as a “hate read.”

Bianca Batti and Alisha Karabinus have addressed how these “debates” and articles like these affect women in game studies in their essay on Bogost and “epistemological gatekeeping.” They explain that in game studies there is in place:

a fantasy of male power that allows Bogost to believe himself the arbiter of truth and

knowledge in games. The male power fantasy inherent in believing oneself to be the judge of what is good and right in games, what makes certain games better than others. It's the kind of thing that results in these methods for gatekeeping in games studies—not just whose games get to count as games, but whose study of them then gets to count as legitimate and valid as well.

In other words, Batti and Karabinus, are acknowledging a type of male power fantasy that is fueled by overconfidence (Kirkpatrick “How” 460). At the beginning of this chapter I mentioned that at my time at FPS I noticed that male grad students came into game studies already feeling like experts and women came in already feeling as if their expertise was being called into question. Bogost's assertion that video games are better without stories is the perfect example of this, as Batti and Karabinus explain he is positive that because he knows “what makes certain games better than others” he believes himself the arbiter of what is “good and right in games.” When encountering men who play video games, you will often come across the idea that they objectively know what is good and what is bad. In fact, Kirkpatrick says that a key moment in the development of the masculine Gamer identity was when the concept of “gameplay”<sup>61</sup> came into discourse and one could prove they were a Gamer by differentiating between what was “objectively good” and “objectively bad” gameplay. In Kirkpatrick's own words: “the [G]amer was the arbiter of great ‘gameplay’ and gaming discourse was structured around this figure” and his opinions (“How” 460). It is because of this belief that Bogost, as the Gamer, as the arbiter of quality, can insist that critically well received and culturally important games like *Gone Home* (2013) are “teen fare” and “nothing to praise” instead of confronting the truth: maybe, it's not *for*

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<sup>61</sup> Gameplay encompasses the tactile interaction between player and game. While in theory the plot or narrative in a game would be part of this in games discourse people (academics and non-academics alike) will often state a type of false divide along the lines of: “the gameplay was really fun but the story was boring” or “the story was great but the gameplay was repetitive and clunky.”

you. But historically, every game has been “for the Gamer” so it is no wonder that the positive critical reception of games like *Gone Home* or *Depression Quest* confuse, frustrate, or upset many Gamers.

This overconfidence in one's own expertise when it comes to games is at the heart of how gatekeeping works, but it is not limited to Bogost alone. It is an example of how male confidence leads to gatekeeping: it leads to a certainty that how you see the world, or how you see a game, is the correct way of seeing, as your perspective as a man is the default perspective in video games, maybe even in the world. This confidence leads men on the internet to comment on everything I do, insisting that I am both not a gamer and not an expert in video games—they are<sup>62</sup>. In feminist circles we have a saying: “Lord, give me the confidence of a mediocre white man.”<sup>63</sup> While many women are crippled with imposter syndrome and a general lack of belonging, many men seem to be suffering from the opposite—a complete lack of knowledge of their total mediocrity. I do truly believe you would need to be dangerously overconfident to argue the losing side of a debate that never took place 15 years after its heyday and 12 years after a woman gave the “last word” on the topic.

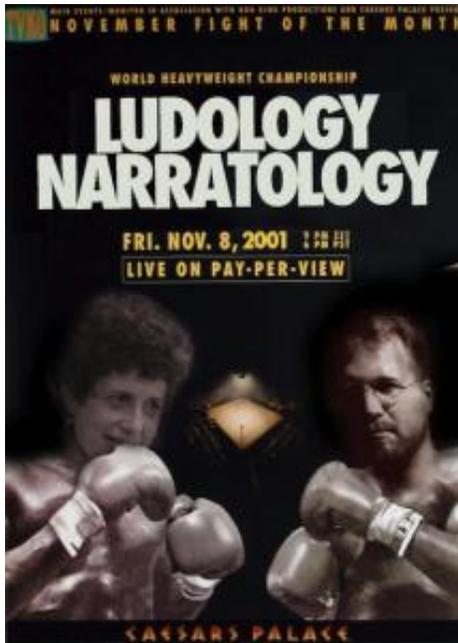
It is also worth noting that the whole reason Murray posted her 2005 “last words” online in 2013 was because of an image that Bogost himself had photoshopped of her boxing Aarseth (as a visual manifestation of the ludology versus narratology debate) that was, according to

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<sup>62</sup> This was demonstrated very clearly in the summer of 2018 when games company AreaNet, fired female developer Jessica Price for expressing anger at a streamer who was mansplaining her job to her on Twitter. Her male colleague Peter Fries was also fired for standing up to her harassers for her. Instead of seeing Price's action in the context of how women are treated in the games industry, Area Net president Mike O'Brien stood up for those who were harassing Price saying that she had made “attacks on the community” when she confronted the mansplainer (Farokhmanesh). This one event created a culture of fear for women in the games industry who have faced harassment. Worse still, some Gamers celebrated these firings as evidence of control they had over who gets to stay and go at the companies that make the games they love. In the following weeks many women have reported Gamers contacting their employers about their social media presence in an attempt to get them fired (Farokhmanesh).

<sup>63</sup> I believe that writer Sarah Hagi was the first one to tweet these words.

Murray, being heavily circulated online in 2013 (fig. 4.2) (“Last”). This made her feel that she had to put the talk online to point out again that the debate was false and one sided (“Last”).



(fig. 4.2) An image photoshopped by Ian Bogost of Janet Murray boxing Espen Aarseth (“Last”).

Then, in May of 2017, Murray posted an excerpt from her re-released and updated version of *Hamlet on the Holodeck* on *First Person Scholar* entitled “Janet Murray on Why Some Players and Critics Still Cannot Tolerate Narrative in Games,” as a response to Bogost’s most recent article. Murray is forced to continually defend and explain narratologists in games, a job and title she did not choose for herself. She is forced to constantly insist that this debate didn’t happen, yet ironically this statement becomes less and less true with each passing year; the fact that this fictitious debate is constantly revisited at conferences and in classrooms makes it real.<sup>64</sup> I’ve been to many a conference or seminar where I had to listen to male grad students gleefully

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<sup>64</sup> I once had a contract job where the lectures were prewritten and the “debate” was taught. While the lecture did explain that the debate didn’t happen, it then went on to oversimplify the debate by having a classroom activity where students were forced to debate certain statements from one of the two “sides.” My students, bless them, didn’t want to participate as they felt that there was no point in arguing one side when clearly neither was right.

reenact the debate, not unlike how teenage boys everywhere will tussle over Marvel or DC, The Beatles or The Stones, *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*. While many of us remain uninterested in participating, plenty of male game scholars continue to subtly force women to go through the motions of the argument. It all leads me to wonder: is there an appeal for some in having these “debates” themselves? And is it more about the performance and the controversy than the actual argument at hand? And am I unwittingly participating in this performance and controversy by examining the gendered elements of the “debate” in this dissertation?

### **Phantoms and the Shape of the Field**

The politics of these debates over the boundaries of game studies were alive and well at Waterloo when I arrived. The ludologists may have been, as Murray put it, “debating a phantom of their own creation,” but the grad students I knew were very real and debating each other, not knowing that these debates were ill-founded. These attempts to control the field and determine what is proper to study are *very effective*, especially on the many young people eager to learn what that field is with few mentors to guide them. The early culture of the Games Institute and FPS 1.0 was saturated in these attempts to figure out what game studies was and how to do it properly, and it was these texts and figures we turned to for answers. In my interviews multiple participants joked about FPS 1.0’s “obsession” with Bogost as a theorist and icon. It sometimes felt like Bogost *was* game studies in 2012 at Waterloo and multiple women I interviewed cited a lack of interest in Bogost’s work as one of the catalysts to withdraw from game studies. As one female FPS editor, who we will call *Isabelle*, put it, she felt that very early FPS work was “fawning” admiration of Bogost and that he was treated as an “idol” by the FPS 1.0 staff. *Isabelle* worried that because she did not feel the same way, she would never fit in.

While Bogost never entered any of our meetings directly, he was ever present in our minds as young game scholars. Discussion of Bogost's research about topics such as object-oriented ontology (a philosophy that does not privilege human existence over the existence of objects), alien phenomenology (the title of one of Bogost's philosophy books that raises various methods for examining and studying the non-human), procedural rhetoric (a concept Bogost created for examining video games as objects that enact rhetoric through interaction which can create a unique type of argumentation), and platform studies (a term for examining the underlying computer systems behind the software as well as the materiality of systems and games), abounded in the game studies reading group and early GI and FPS meetings. Even though we were all English majors, trained in narrative, the topics were much more under the umbrella of "ludology" than anything else. Like Janet Murray's explanation of the ludologists lumping everything they were uninterested in studying into "narratology," I felt that my interests in gender studies and games culture were marginalized by the FPS 1.0 culture. As someone who was interested in talking about people, players, and culture, the discourse of FPS talking about platforms, procedures, code, and objects couldn't have been further from my own interest in games. It's not that I thought we should have been looking exclusively at the things I was interested in, I just thought the things I was interested in weren't seen as equally relevant.

By the time FPS 3.0 began the staff had grown substantially. More people drawn to a larger variety of topics had joined FPS, and our ideas of what constituted game studies were much broader. We would even joke about FPS's early idolization of Bogost as a thing of the past. Eventually the "cult of Bogost," as it was sometimes called, was effectively dismantled. Nonetheless, his presence as a game studies giant in our world meant that he still haunted many of our conversations; one day in the FPS offices I referred to him jokingly as "Ian Boo-Ghost"

who then strangely became a kind of ironic mascot for FPS 3.0. The whiteboard in the FPS office, where we kept track of the progress of upcoming articles, was decorated with two ghosts, one Pac-Man style and one Super Mario style, both outfitted with Bogost's signature long black hair and goatee. Our own phantom to watch over FPS's operations. While not intentional as such, I now see that these jokes still demonstrated a type of awareness of Bogost as an ideological giant looming over FPS, rather in the same way you might feel and joke about the Prime Minister of your country whom you accept but did not vote for. I focus so long on Bogost not because I think he is the source of game studies' problems, and not because I think he is necessarily the most cited or most important voice in game studies, but because he had such an influence on FPS for better and for worse. He came up constantly in my interviews because he came to represent "game studies" for this small culture. For myself and other women I spoke to, a lack of interest in his work, an inability to "get it" represented a lack of belonging in a field dominated by male perspectives.

I was being influenced by these ideas of what is and isn't game studies before I even knew such divides were discussed. Which leads me to wonder, if game studies as a field has collectively "known" that this debate "never happened," or at the very least that one side of the debate didn't exist, then why do we still teach it to young scholars as though it did happen? Why are we passing it down as legend instead of bullshit? In part, I think the answer is that many people are taught the debate, and never learn the cultural context, they never hear "the other" (Murray's) side. Furthermore, many are sick of discussing the "debate" and therefore don't want to spent time explaining it in all its complexity. As a young scholar I knew the debate existed, and that older scholars hated when it was brought up. For years I had read about the narratology versus ludology "debate" as though it was the founding debate of our field, as though it was the

most important thing to know about game studies, with no one contradicting that assumption, only to discover years later that it was a phantom. Furthermore, every time the debate is reopened, the discourse of the field is re-centered around those who started it, and those essays continue to be cited and they continue to influence our ideas of what the field is and what is published. While I would argue that the gatekeeping within game studies that I've described so far is the biggest barrier to attracting and retaining women to game studies (and therefore attaining gender parity at FPS), it would be insincere of me to not to also acknowledge the monumental impact of external threats on both women in game studies and on gender parity at FPS such as Gamergate.

### **Gamergate and First Person Scholar**

On top of women in game studies having to survive internal cultural barriers they also have to survive the threats coming from outside of academia. They have to publish to keep up with male scholars but that publishing may put their safety at risk. Furthermore, if you teach, you likely teach gamers, some of whom see themselves as opposed to feminism and see any feminist research around media that suggests change to said media as a “form of social control” (Chess and Shaw 215). While I was very aware of issues of harassment in and around gaming, and had experienced negative attention online, the safety concerns of joining game studies didn't really fully sink in for me until August of 2014 when I was promoted to Commentaries section head at FPS at the FPS Annual General Meeting. I was now at the same level of FPS hierarchy as the founding editors, and I was excited to put myself and my writing online and change game studies for the better. This promotion took place exactly one week before the word “Gamergate” was tweeted for the first time and two days after the infamous “Zoe Post” that inspired the Gamergate

mobs.<sup>65</sup> It was a hell of a time to become an editor at FPS. The entire world of gaming and field of game studies had changed overnight, although not everyone recognized it at that point. While harassment of women who discussed sexism in games was not new, a unified and organized movement that planned harassment “attacks” and discussed potential targets at length online was something very different. Gamergate saw themselves as soldiers fighting a war to save video games from feminists and they saw their harassment, threats, and doxxing as justified measures (Cross). As the newly minted head of the Commentaries section, I wanted to promote writing about gender and games culture because I wanted people to see this writing as equally important to other work in game studies. Little did I know that, because of Gamergate, no matter what I did as the Commentaries editor the field was going to be *forced* to see that work as important.

In the weeks to follow, FPS had many behind closed doors debates over how to address Gamergate and, in the end, Gamergate would help define who we were as a publication. Some felt it wasn't our place to address these issues or release a statement. Others felt that it was outside of the purview of what we did as academics. Still others believed we needed to release a statement right away to demonstrate that we were not aligned with the movement. The problem was that, in order to decide how to respond to Gamergate, we had to answer a lot of tough questions about ourselves: What *is* FPS? What is our purpose? Who is our audience? Are we activists? Are we trying to build a community? Or do we just want to write about videogames and not engage in politics? Luckily Wilcox and I (as current EIC and future EIC, although I

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<sup>65</sup> While the “Zoe Post” was not the beginning of women in games being harassed by Gamers it is considered the official “beginning” of Gamergate. The Zoe post was a blog post that was 9,425 words long and posted on August 2014 by Eron Gjoni, game developer Zoe Quinn’s abusive ex-boyfriend. The post detailed their relationship and how Gjoni believed Quinn was unfaithful to him. This was moved to 4chan where people speculated that Quinn received positive reviews for *Depression Quest* by sleeping with a journalist. Although there is no proof of this assertion, and no review of Quinn’s game by that journalist *even exists*, Gamers still felt the positive reviews of *Depression Quest* were the result of a systemic problem with “ethics in games journalism” and began to harass Quinn and others. This movement would evolve into Gamergate, covered at length in chapter 1.

didn't know it at the time) were on the same page about this issue. In a private email, he stated simply that he believed that "careers in academia should be defined by addressing exigencies, and the problem of sexism and misogyny, for game scholars, is the exigency of our time." In those emails Wilcox and I had basically determined the future direction of FPS by agreeing to this credo. Responding to Gamergate and injustice in general was the right thing to do and staying silent was not an option. While this was not something everyone on FPS agreed with (some felt that it wasn't our "problem" to deal with) from then on Wilcox and I always insisted that FPS was an activist publication as well as an academic one.

After many heated debates about if we should engage, and if it was FPS's "job" to engage, and if engaging fell under the purview of what FPS did, we decided that as an introduction to myself and my vision for the Commentaries section, I would "walk the walk," so to speak, and write not only the type of content I wanted to attract for the Commentaries section, but also the type of coverage I wanted to see of Gamergate from academics. This worked: my article was well received by other academics and game writers and I was soon after contacted by Cross who's *We Will Force Gaming to be Free* went viral. With over 39,000 views it only has slightly less hits than our landing page. Both articles set the tone for the future of the Commentaries section and showed that we clearly weren't afraid to publish controversial writing by opinionated women despite the attacks against our website that would follow. After this, everything was different for FPS. Daily brute force attacks on the website became a new reality for FPS as people set up bots to attempt to gain control of the website. The comments section went from dead to impossible to manage as we had to moderate countless hateful comments that were thousands of words long that we never let see the light of day, although we had to read them as part of our screening process nonetheless. The FPS Twitter had to face down Gamergate

and so did I, much more so than any of the male FPS staff, which I will return to later in this chapter. Lastly, on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2014 Gamergate started “investigating” the Games Institute and its members. Through Googling we discovered Pastebin files<sup>66</sup> and YouTube videos talking about how FPS, GI Janes and the GI were part of the larger games “conspiracy” related to DiGRA that Gamergate was “investigating” (Chess and Shaw 211). Since then I’ve been implicated as part of this “conspiracy” many times and have been forced to constantly change my passwords, make my accounts private, pay for password protection services, and consult personal security experts. While I am still writing about games, every time<sup>67</sup> I see someone sharing links to my personal accounts, and passing around photos of me out of pure hatred, or plans to doxx me, I think about quitting the PhD, and quitting writing about games forever, despite the fact that I know that is the reaction they want. The one thing that stops me from leaving time and time again is the knowledge that games culture needs more people like me, not less. While I know I am prioritizing this goal of games culture changing over my own personal safety and often happiness, after years of harassment it becomes a normal part of your life. In this way it also became a normal part of FPS.

## **FPS Diversifies its Staff and Content—A Second Time**

Despite Gamergate, around this time FPS was becoming more diverse both in terms of contributions and in staff. By the time we reached FPS’s second birthday that December we were

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<sup>66</sup> Pastebin.com is a website popularly used by Gamergate to “paste” plain text into and circulate as opposed to circulating an article or set of tweets which can be deleted. Gamergate used the website to anonymously publish texts online, and to post a lot of information about a person when doxxing them, i.e. their phone numbers, their addresses, links to their Facebook and Twitter etc. Pastebin has also been used for doxxing tutorials, or to share Gamergate’s various manifestos.

<sup>67</sup> There have been approximately five “times” I have received substantial attention of Gamergate. Sometimes they are watching me and trying to communicate with me for a few days and sometimes it goes on for months. Although it feels silly to count “times” when in reality I have been dealing with online abuse in some form or another, from some group or another, since the fall of 2012. There are quiet periods but only when I am actively not publishing my writing, engaging with the press, or using public social media. If I am doing public facing work, I am dealing with abuse.

getting as many as 21,097 pageviews in a single week and had published over 100 articles. We were being cited and linked to by outlets like *The Huffington Post* and *The New Yorker*. We realized that FPS was becoming much more than just another grad student publication. In the second year we had an influx of four women editors and copy editors who had joined the team. I was very proud of the improvement as I had been making an effort to convince women to join and was doing my best to ensure that FPS was a place they would feel comfortable. I had struggled to find my place on FPS, but I didn't want any other women to have the same experience. I think having Orlando and Brey join the GI was a turning point for me, as I saw an opportunity to create a space that was more accessible and welcoming than the one I had encountered two years prior. I didn't even realize at the time how important this was, as both women later told me that they had come to Waterloo, and the GI, because they were readers of FPS, not thinking that they would get to become a part of it but merely that there were other like-minded game scholars here. It was such a pleasure to have them arrive so I could pull them on board and help them climb the ranks. Both would eventually serve as editor-in-chief.

Although we were ecstatic that there were more women on FPS, there were downsides to this as well. Every woman at FPS was both a target and a node in the conspiracy in a way the men at the publication just were not. In my interviews, every woman who worked at FPS said Gamergate impacted them and their work in some way. Even those who didn't see themselves as part of game studies or who didn't do gender research felt that, as *Francine* put it "it has impacted the way I act on the internet, the things I engage with, the things I choose to talk about." *Isabelle* noted that it was a part of why she left game studies, she elaborated: "even if no one was going to create a mob of people to follow me everywhere, I'm anxious enough that I'm just constantly terrified of someone coming on social media to say something cruel about my

work or me personally.” While game studies was already culturally inaccessible to women, especially women doing feminist research, Gamergate was for many, the last nail in the coffin. This may seem obvious but I think it’s worth pointing out that none of the men I interviewed said that they thought about leaving game studies because of Gamergate, or for other reasons, whereas every woman and non-binary person I interviewed had either already left, has left since the interview, or commented that they at least considered leaving sometimes, and that Gamergate was one of many factors in this decision. While Gamergate has changed game studies for men in the field, it did not necessarily make it any more difficult for most of them to conduct their research or do their jobs. While *Isabelle* explained that Gamergate made her feel that writing about games “wasn’t worth it to me anymore”, *David*, in contrast, ranted that

As a white dude involved with the publication, I appear to have near immunity to targeting and harassment from Gamergaters no matter what I say or do online or whatever we run. Cause if we run anything vaguely feminist, anything that riles up the Gamergate community, they are going to attack the FPS Twitter, and they are going to attack the author, and they are going to attack the female members of staff. I’ve never been touched.

On a similar note, *Henry* pointed out that the FPS Twitter itself is still not subject to as much harassment as the female staff were. He recalls that at one point he wrote an article that was very controversial with those who affiliated with Gamergate and instead of yelling at him, the author, on his Twitter, or the FPS Twitter, they yelled at the female EIC and myself, the past EIC.

Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw have written about how women studying games, and feminists studying games, become targets for this very specific kind of criticism and harassment. They describe their examination of Gamergate in their article *A Conspiracy of Fishes* as “a case

study of a cultural moment in which masculine gaming culture became aware of and began responding to feminist game scholars” that “illustrates the extent to which feminist research in particular is devalued within and outside academe” (215). I experienced Gamergate’s sudden awareness of my existence personally as an editor at FPS and as an individual scholar presenting at conferences. Gamergate would flood my mentions on Twitter wanting to know exactly what I did, what a game scholar was, what I studied, what my degree was called, what my exams were in, if I could program, if I made games, who decided I was qualified to do this job and countless other questions. Most of the reason Gamergate was so convinced scholars like myself were part of a conspiracy was because they couldn’t understand what exactly it was that we, as games scholars, do. But more so, it also reflected the criticism of our work we were used to receiving from inside the academy. As Chess and Shaw explain:

these specific conspiracy theories tap into a long history, both inside and outside academic departments, of treating feminist scholarship as unscientific (e.g., dividing up academics and feminists), ideological (assuming all other research is neutral), and frivolous (distracting from important research on games that should be done) (216).

Suddenly our research was being questioned not just internally but externally. One Gamergater remarked to me that it was silly to be afraid to post my work for them to read saying, “that’s peer review sweet cheeks.” In other words, they truly believed not only that our work as feminists was not rigorous but that they—as gamers with (I assume) no PhDs—are peers qualified to determine its worth. In many ways, the more accessible your research was, the more of a target you became, leading many people to move away from accessible forms of sharing their research even though, ironically, we need it more than ever: “the lack of understanding about academic research suggests a need for an accessible and public intellectualism that helps to bridge the

space between academia and non-academia” (Chess and Shaw 217). In other words, what we need right now is the exact sort of work that FPS is attempting to do, but thanks to Gamergate people, who were otherwise interested in publishing publicly, were much more hesitant to publish with FPS as opposed to a more traditional closed access academic publication because of the attention it would garner from Gamergate.

The most interesting part of Shaw and Chess’s observations about Gamergate were the inequalities in games studies that the conspiracy highlighted. Gamergate saw feminist academics as powerful actors capable of making unwanted change. Criticism of any type is seen as an attempt to convince large corporations to stop making the lucrative games that Gamers love. It was hilarious to many game scholars, who had been doing their research on the margins of their discipline, to be treated by Gamergate as if they had so much (or any) power and influence in the games industry. Nothing any feminist could say is going to stop the games industry from making the next *Call of Duty* (2003-2017) or *Grand Theft Auto* (1997-2013). *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), has been heavily criticized, but it is also the best selling media title of all time, selling 90 million units and making \$6 billion dollars, more than any *Star Wars* (1977-2018) film when adjusted for inflation (Cherney). While I hope the sudden attention feminist games research has received will result in more critical Gamers who demand less sexist media from the industry, money still dictates the market. In reality, as Shaw and Chess explain, gender research is not at all a priority when it comes to gaining funding or power: “academic conferences often marginalize discussions of video games and diversity, and women’s studies in particular are regularly on the chopping block when budget cuts force universities to downsize” (217). We are being treated as powerful actors, but in reality most academics would love to actually be as impactful as Gamergate thinks we are. FPS also suffered from this strange division of imagined power:

labeled by Gamergate as a target for being a target above other game studies publications, ironically FPS is not technically a “journal” and therefore lacks traditional power or influence in the academic sphere.

I also experienced this misplaced attribution of power and influence on a very personal level when I, along with the other non-male members of the FPS staff, were harassed by Gamergate members after they took over our conference hashtag at the Canadian Game Studies Association in 2015. Gerald Voorhees, a faculty member at Waterloo and one of the FPS faculty advisors, tried to pull some of the attention off of us and onto himself. He had, after all, actually presented about Gamergate at the conference, unlike any of us. He pointed that out in the hashtag to the Gamergaters who seemed uninterested in him. At first I was relieved by this and thankful that Voorhees was using his privilege both as a man and a faculty member to divert their attention. But that relief quickly turned to horror when one Gamergater replied that “no one cared” about Voorhees because he simply “wasn’t important.” The significance of this moment was monumental for me. I sat there baffled that anyone could ever think that I was more important than Dr. Voorhees, who had a job as a university professor, who had edited multiple books on games, who had written and published, and who was a respected scholar in our field. He had a PhD and a career and taught hundreds of students each year, and I was just a third-year grad student with no power or influence. Yet in the eyes of Gamergate none of that influence or power mattered; the fact that he presented about Gamergate didn’t matter—all that mattered was that he was a man, and I was a woman, and therefore I was the “real threat.” This was particularly rich given that, at the time, Gamergate was still attempting to argue that they were not targeting women specifically, just anyone who was against their mandate of “ethics and games journalism.” But when Voorhees, as their “enemy,” and an influential one at that, tried to

get in their way, they wanted nothing to do with him. They wanted to go after people like me, and people like my friend and colleague Natalie Zina Walschots who had been live tweeting the conference. While Walschots had not presented about Gamergate either, it was known online that she was examining the hate movement for her dissertation research.

## **Gamergate and Female Grad Students in Game Studies**

Reflecting on the abuse in an interview with online publication *The Mary Sue* Walschots comments that “saying #Gamergate online has basically become analogous to standing in front of an Internet Mirror and saying ‘Candyman’ at midnight” (Goodyear). Gamergate implemented a plan to take Walschots down, not just by tweeting at her, but by “watch[ing] her closely,” “talk[ing] to her dean,” or “buy[ing] a domain name in her name” and starting “SEO work” (i.e. optimizing search engines to bury her work). Here is an example of a single post from Gamergate outlining their plan of how they were going to undermine her until they can take her down at “the most vital time in her career” (Terfwarz):

We have many ways to stop this. First way, considering she was a candidate since sept 2014, she has yet enter the phase of being assigned a supervisor and proposing what her research will be. We can scuttle her efforts by contacting the dean and talking about her problematic interactions with GG. I am sure (but its hard to prove) she is actively engaging in shilling within our community. We need to talk to her dean about the problems we have in our community with shills and how so many people want to profit from both gamers, the backlash to gamers and the backlash from us, which is what she wants to do. If that doesn't work, we need to follow her trajectory closes. In her last two years she will be presented a lot of her research to conferences. The function conferences serve here is for her to get feedback from what she is doing. When she does this, we can start reading what she is doing and looking for bias and contradictions and amount a second case, again, to her dean or supervisor. If this fails, and she presents and defends a thesis, she will likely want to turn that into a book. This is the formula that gaberila coleman used to find a tenureship or that cunt who followed r.i.p trolling. If we did this properly and watch her closely, we can present an alternative account at the most vital time in her career: finding someone to invest into her and her account of GG. One of us should also buy a domain name in her name and start SEO work.

(fig 4.3) A screenshot of Gamergate discussing Natalie Zina Walschots’ research (Terfwarz).

There are over 200 lengthy posts in just a single Reddit thread about how to stop her from conducting her research. The screenshot above is taken from that thread in which the Gamergaters read Concordia’s full code of academic conduct and policy on conflicts of interest, attempting to find ways Walschots might have violated it by studying and writing about

Gamergate. They also discuss scrutinizing who her comprehensive exam examiners are to determine if they have sufficient qualifications and are free of bias. In this thread multiple posters, some of whom seem to have a lot of familiarity with dissertations and PhD requirements, argue over research methodologies, methods of data collection, what is considered a qualification and what research is “ethical.” It is worth noting that some people were still posting in this thread two years later, demonstrating that they were watching her for years. Gamergate was determined to end Walschot’s research by any means possible before it had even really begun.

I bring up what happened to Walschots because it was watched closely by other female game scholars, including those at FPS who were regularly publishing work that talked about Gamergate as well as publishing Walschots’ work. It became clear to us that writing about Gamergate meant being dogged for every second of your PhD. No amount of institutional support could fight that sort of negative attention. As one participant, we will call her *Lisa*, explained, Gamergate, “made a lot of editors afraid” of working at FPS and “made a lot of contributors afraid” of publishing with FPS. *Lisa* elaborated that “there was a piece where someone dropped out because they thought they would be harassed” if their writing was published on FPS. Our approach to publishing women’s work changed, we still wanted to do it, but we now we felt we had to warn contributors about the potential consequences and have a damage control plan in place for when something inevitably happens.

For a long time after CGSA 2015 I didn’t talk about Gamergate on Twitter, I didn’t write about Gamergate, and on FPS we made sure it was absolutely necessary before publishing anything with the word Gamergate it in as it would become more findable by the wrong people via search engines. This also affected how FPS published and how accessible our platform was

to grad students. We moderated all our comments, we had a zero tolerance policy for Gamergate's attempts to comment on our articles, but beyond this we couldn't really offer more safety to our contributors. We felt that we had to warn prospective authors that we had been targeted by Gamergate and articles written by women were retracted, or never submitted, because of fear of being targeted. I felt like, in this one way, Gamergate had been successful: I felt scared to write and publish with the speed and openness that I had previously, not so much because of the harassment that I had faced, but because of the threat that at any moment it could escalate from comments saying "I wish you were dead" or "someone should kill you" or "you should kill yourself" to comments saying "I'm going to come to your house and kill you." I knew that I had evaded the specific death threats thus far but if I continued down my path of publishing about games and gender they were not far off.

Essentially, as women studying games we need to make a decision between choosing to be harassed or staying silent about certain topics. As academic expert in online harassment and what she calls "cybersexism" Bailey Poland explains in her book *Haters: Harassment, Abuse, and Violence Online* that many of the threats she receives are not just violent but "explicitly [state] that the intent is to silence me" (49). Poland goes on to explain that cybersexists often state openly that if women want to express their opinion online they should *expect* harassment and if they are not okay with the harassment than *they should not speak in the first place* (80). This perspective goes hand in hand with the attitude of gamers who feel that if women do not enjoy trash talk they should not play online games. We are told again and again that we either expose ourselves to harassment, or we just don't participate. I am often faced with cybersexists online who act like my complaints of online abuse and harassment are akin to complaining about getting wet while walking in the rain. Abuse by men for speaking out about abuse has been

normalized, it is treated as inevitable. Not just for those of us studying games but for anyone who is abused online (Poland 80).

One academic writes about this tension between action and silence under the pseudonym A.D. Andrews. Her article, entitled “Even Doing Academic Research about Video Games Puts Me at Risk,” outlines many of the same concerns that I had after Gamergate. Her article recounts the length she has gone to keep her digital life private post-Gamergate; spending hours trying to scrub her existence from the internet. She concludes: “to do the work at all is to become a target. We have to choose between silence and the acceptance of risk” (Andrews). She also illustrates very clearly the rock and a hard place bind scholars find themselves in. Having a web presence (a website, an active Twitter profile, an internal Facebook network of scholars) is beneficial to your career but detrimental to your personal life if Gamergate uses it to track you down or threaten you. Andrews explains this, saying, “I can’t afford to disappear completely, though I know others who do, who have no social media presence, despite studying digital communities. What will that do for their academic credibility? In a few years we’ll find out; for now, they’ve chosen safety and peace of mind.” Almost every FPS staff member I talked to about Gamergate mentioned having to make a decision between safety and “web presence.” For *everyone*, even those who had not been harassed, the potential for harassment was there. This is the new state of hyper-awareness marginalized people (and their allies) in game studies find themselves in.

### **Conclusion: Is FPS a Feminist Publication?**

One thing that has made game studies and Gamergate easier for women in game studies to navigate is the presence of feminist game studies networks. Just as the GI Janes created a space because we felt like our work didn’t belong on FPS, feminist game studies has created their own spaces, their own communities, their own networks, their own conferences, and their own

publications, that are part of game studies while also being explicitly feminist. These spaces are integral for the survival of feminist game scholars, allowing them to have access to an academic backchannel of female scholars who are also struggling to survive in male-dominated game studies, and helping each other out behind the scenes. The feminist game studies community has grounded me, supported me, and sustained me, throughout both my tenure as FPS EIC and my PhD. These academic backchannels are not only about reading, citing, and supporting each other's work; they are about sharing private knowledge. They are about letting each other know which game scholars have demonstrated unethical behavior, from plagiarism of a woman's work all the way to sexual assault. As Bianca Batti writes, feminist game studies is a space of survival, explaining that the goal of feminist work is to "tell each other our stories, to believe each other into being. To will each other into existence". Batti argues something that is very rarely spoken: that feminist work is often about believing the things that can be said but not cited. This idea is very much in line with how I've seen feminist game studies at work: both on an official level through Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne De Castell's research initiatives "Feminism in Games" and "ReFiguring Feminism in Games" (ReFIG) and through publications like Samantha Blackmon's *Not Your Mama's Gamer*, but also on an unofficial level through a type of emotional support I haven't encountered anywhere else in academia. This is also how GI Janes started. A group of women were honest with each other about how they were feeling, about our feelings of exclusion and vulnerability. This strategy of radical honesty and belief is also how I helped FPS grow into a space where feminist work could be done and where feminists felt comfortable. These are networks of not just women helping women, but networks of feminists of all genders helping other feminists survive both games culture and the academy.

These spaces give feminist games scholars, as Batti mentions in the epigraph to this chapter, the will to go on, even when their scholarship feels less valued, even when they are being “investigated” by Gamergate, when their “gamer” status is drawn into question, or when they are being harassed by other game scholars. If there is anything I’m sure of, it is that these feminist spaces are critical to making game studies culturally accessible to women, and that FPS, eventually, made game studies more culturally accessible to me personally. But is FPS a feminist organization? A feminist publication? That is something that I and many of the other FPS staff are still unsure about, and it’s that which I will focus on for the remainder of this chapter.

Orlando took over as EIC in the Fall of 2016 and ran FPS until the Fall of 2017 when Brey took over as EIC. It means so much to me to see two women that I worked with and promoted from copy editor up to EIC run the publication. Since I left FPS, it has been amazing to watch it grow, to watch new people join, and to read what they publish. I’ve never felt as proud of anything in my life as I do of FPS and how I get to watch feminist after feminist join, change, grow, and run the publication. But for some reason, even after being run by four feminist EICs, I would still hesitate to call FPS a feminist publication for the reasons I will explain in the following pages. This examination of FPS is the story of the continued growth of FPS, but within that is the story of all of the staff’s personal growth as professionals and more importantly as feminists. Every member of the FPS staff grew as a feminist throughout our time with the publication, and I don’t mean just by writing about gender—I mean by wrestling with what it meant to be a feminist, and what it means to be a *good feminist*, as an editor, as an academic, as an employee, as an employer and as a friend. I don’t think that growth is something to be ashamed of or swept under the rug, and I don’t think it’s worth it to pretend we were perfect all along. I think that growth, which is still ongoing, is something to be proud of. It is a sign we have

not become complacent. I think FPS should be proud of its journey from a more traditional male-dominated publication to what it is today.

Despite this, in my interviews with the FPS staff the question of whether the publication itself is feminist caused the most pause, the most elongated sighs, the most confusion. Everyone agreed that, from the outside, people probably saw FPS as feminist; it wouldn't be a Gamergate target if not for the fact that we were seen as the enemy. Furthermore, everyone agreed that the end goal was to be a feminist publication, but felt that the process was more complicated than just saying you were. It was your actions, not your intentions, that were important. Many pointed out that they did *call* FPS a feminist publication when telling people about it in an official capacity, but were worried we didn't actually meet our own standards. As *David* put it, "the dark corners of the internet would label us a SJW publication" but internally, for many, FPS feels like it's still struggling to get "there." Saying FPS is feminist feels a lot like tooting your own horn, and therefore our imposter syndrome comes out to play, but saying it's not feels like a cop-out as well. While it may be easy to say that the benchmark of a feminist publication is a certain number of female staff, or percentage of what you post, or a simple declaration, for a lot of people the answer to this question felt much more personal. While we all identify as feminists, we are all critical of our feminism, we always know we could do better, and therefore we began to view FPS the same way.

There were two main reactions to the question: a very few people immediately said yes and then qualified the answer. *Caitlin*, for example, replied with no hesitation "yes" and elaborated while laughing "for better or for worse yes I see it that way and I think a lot of people see it that way ... it's great and I wouldn't change it for the world, but at times it can scare people off." But the great majority of people paused, sighed, paused, sighed again and then said

no. As *Isabelle* elaborated: “I think FPS is trying [but] my standard for a feminist organization is so fucking high.” She went on to say that being part of a university is part of the problem: “we are Marxist feminists in a way we’ve never really had to articulate, for me feminism is not just intersectional, it’s also anti-capitalism, and you can’t fit anti-capitalism into a capitalist system.” *David* explained we weren’t meeting his standards either (although he didn’t specify what his standards were) saying FPS wasn’t yet a feminist publication but that he thinks “FPS is the primary intervention in making me a better feminist.” By the end of my interviews it was difficult for me not to laugh at the struggle this question caused because it was so similar for most participants. Participants would make statements such as “it certainly tackles feminist issues” or ask questions like “what IS a feminist publication?” but it was hard to come up with a clear answer. Similarly, *David* explained, “I would say that FPS is a pro-feminist or a feminist friendly space but I’m not sure what it would mean for FPS to be a feminist publication.” *David* was one of many people who pointed out that “everyone who works for FPS is a feminist,” but they also aren’t sure if that makes us a feminist publication. Some who said yes right away, like *Henry*, also had qualifiers: “at least now ... at the start maybe not so much.” *Andrew* framed the feminist label as a sort of goal one works towards but cannot reach as long as we are still trying to better themselves: “I think all I can do is try to be a feminist, we tried to be a feminist organization while I was there.” Although *Andrew* also pointed out that he doesn’t feel it is “really my place to say what is or isn’t feminist,” he concluded: “I hope it is.”

The history of the publication was also a recurring theme. Because FPS didn’t start out as feminist it was difficult to determine if it was now. Have we come far enough, five years later, from FPS 1.0 to be considered feminist? *James* remarked that he sees it as a process that we are working on: “I think it’s becoming one on the editorial side of things, I think it wasn’t at the

outset.” *Greg* bluntly stated: “It sure didn’t start out as one,” pointing out that it wasn’t that they were anti-feminist but simply that it was more about “where we all were in our own personal evolutions.” This last observation is of the utmost importance, because I think it is the key to why this question was so hard to answer, both for those who replied yes and those who replied no. The feminist identity of FPS was and is, without a doubt, intrinsically tied to our own feminist identities as editors that have been growing, evolving, and improving as we move through our PhDs over a period of almost 7 years. Simply put, I don’t think any of us thinks we are as good of feminists as we could be, and therefore neither is FPS. One participant, who we will call *Kyle*, remarked that he thinks “you can tell we are interested in becoming a feminist organization” but like many participants he felt like we weren’t reaching our own high standards. Everyone was quick to point out the many complex intersectional issues with editor and contributor identity and diversity as well as the lack of social justice, personal, or feminist content in the early years of FPS, and a few even talked about how the structure of the publication plays a big role in the question. *James* pointed out that, because FPS published the work of many different types of writers (enthusiasts, academics, journalists, designers) from many different backgrounds, FPS was “never going to be about defending a single position or stance which I think is inherently feminist.” I agree with *James* here and would argue that it’s FPS’s politics when it comes to publication (i.e. highlighting non academic voices, highlighting scholarship by marginalized voices, paying our contributors, offering real editing to contributors and never giving “revise and resubmits,” using accessible language) that makes FPS feminist more than anything else.

I think the FPS editors struggle to answer the question “is FPS feminist” mirrors the difficult feminist growth of game studies as a field. It’s easy to say “there are more women in

game studies now than ever before” just like those interviewed cited female leadership in the later years as evidence that the publication is becoming more feminist. But these participants were also aware of all the internal struggles to gain that leadership. In the same way I’m very aware of the ways that feminist game studies still feels, to me, as very separate from game studies as a larger field. FPS has been trying to straddle that divide between traditional game studies and feminist game studies for years and I think that has created increased self awareness (and self-doubt) about FPS’s feminist identity. This is the secondary complication of having to take responsibility for both how the publication is perceived and also what you know is taking place in the publication behind the scenes. Saying it is feminist is like taking responsibility for how you act yourself, but also everything you think in your own head. But, in this case, you feel like the statement also applies to everyone else who is part of FPS *and* everyone who writes for FPS. You can’t know the motivations and thoughts of every contributor, or even every editor, and this makes giving FPS the feminist label so complicated. In the end, the FPS staff is made up of precarious grad students who all poured our hearts and souls into an unfunded side-project in addition their own dissertation research and teaching. Therefore, there were times where we could have done better, we could have done more, but we were already spread too thin working on our PhDs. I’m not saying this to eliminate responsibility, but to contextualize how impressive it is to have come as far as we have, essentially building something from nothing. FPS was, and is, a group of feminists learning how to be better feminists by running a publication about games. While that may not make it “a feminist publication” it does make is something that game studies so badly needs.

From a personal perspective I can’t help thinking that I wouldn’t be writing this today if Wilcox didn’t insist I become a member of FPS *even after* I had explicitly started a second

website where I and other feminists were publishing our work *because* I didn't want to be a part of FPS. Founding GI Janes was like creating a feminist game studies space outside of game studies at Waterloo (as represented by FPS to me at the time). Eventually, when it felt like FPS had become a feminist space and feminism was part of everything we did, GI Janes didn't feel like something we needed to do for ourselves anymore. In this regard, I feel like FPS *is* ultimately feminist and that this evolution would be the ideal (but likely impossible to reach) end state for game studies: to get to the point where feminist scholarship about games is so normalized that we don't need to denote it as "feminist game studies"—it's just game studies, and it's all feminist.

### **Post-Script**

A lot has changed with FPS since I left, and a lot has changed in the years since I conducted the above interviews and wrote this chapter—and for the better. I was recently updated about the publication by the current EIC Betsy Brey. FPS is now receiving some funding through feminist organization ReFIG which demonstrates an acceptance of FPS by the feminist game studies community. A feminist game studies special issue is in the works, as are special issues about queerness in games and indigenous games, and more and more feminist policies are being put into place each day. FPS is now finally to a point, where I believe it has grown out of its adolescence and is without a doubt a fully formed feminist organization and an important touchstone of game studies culture. Lastly, since Brey took over leadership in September 47% of articles published on FPS have been written by women bringing us closer to gender parity in what we publish than ever before.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

### **Where Does Games Culture End? The Lasting Impact of Gamergate, The Alt-right, and Future Research Directions**

*“They don’t have to fear us. It’s always the left that brings the violence,”*

*— William Fears to CNN, mere hours before shooting into a crowd of leftist protesters after seeing Richard Spencer speak in Gainesville, Florida.*

*“I can’t believe a person would spend such effort in getting a PhD just to destroy my industry”*

*— YouTube commenter, “Duke Perenolde” speculating on the motives behind my research.*

*“Funny isn’t it? Women are sooo oppressed[sic] and men are soooo privileged [sic]! For that sow doing basically nothing productive for years and making a PhD in BS ten men have to work and pay taxes and her daddy also has to work his ass off to pay for her tuition”*

*— YouTube commenter, “LIBERTASetVERITA5” speculating on the gendered and economic value of my research.*

### **Changes**

My desire to do something to challenge the toxicity of games culture has taken me all the way from starting a gender and games advocacy group and making silly videos about lady hobbits with my friends in 2013; to being targeted online after writing one of the first academic essays about Gamergate in 2014; to redefining *First Person Scholar* as EIC in 2015; to being the subject of a nationally-broadcast radio documentary about the connections between games culture and the Alt-right with the CBC in 2016; to being interviewed by NBC about the white nationalist events in Charlottesville and seeing my name mentioned on *InfoWars* and *Rolling Stone* in 2017. Well, that escalated quickly. I don’t even want to know what 2018 will bring.

In 2012 I could never have imagined that my frustrations about being treated differently by gamers would lead me to where I am today. But I also could never have imagined in 2012 that games culture would look the way it does today. When I was angrily reading and tweeting about Milo Yiannopoulos and Steve Bannon in the early days of Gamergate, I could have never predicted they would become close friends and advisors of Donald Trump—the president of the

United States of America. The toxic masculinity that had long dictated the nature of games culture went from being something talked about, to something named, to something organized, to something feared, to *something else entirely* in the time it took me to finish this PhD. Games culture was always inaccessible to women, but now I don't think "inaccessible" is a strong enough word. Now I think it is downright dangerous.

In October of 2017, NBC contacted me for an interview about games culture, the Alt-right, and the deadly white supremacist rally in Charlottesville on August 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> 2017. I was interviewed on multiple occasions for soundbites and I also helped provide research and context. After I got off the phone with NBC the first time I had to stop and ask myself: "I just wanted to study video games, how did I become an expert people contact to talk about neo-Nazis?" When I started my PhD I was casually researching the small problems about games culture that have affected me through my life as a gamer. Things like: if I loved playing games why wasn't I considered a Gamer? Why did male gamers hate when I talked about gender and games? Over the following six years that question snowballed until I was attempting to understand a problem *much* bigger, and *much* more dangerous than just games culture.

After making a documentary titled "The Dangerous Game: Gamergate and the Alt-Right" with the CBC in 2016 a friend sent me a link to a video on YouTube of two white adults sitting in a home studio of sorts talking about me and the commercial I had made to promote the documentary. The channel had almost 100,000 subscribers and I immediately assumed, from the hundreds of comments about how "you can't claim to be a Gamer while using a Mac," that it was Gamergate. I sent it to another friend for him to watch. He replied quickly that the people in the video weren't Gamergaters, they were neo-Nazis, the Alt-right, white nationalists. They were making fun of the way I looked and calling me a "race traitor." This was the first time it hit me

personally that it wasn't just that movements that were colliding, it was the hatred colliding as well. Neo-Nazis and Gamers may not have agreed on much, but they didn't seem bothered by their differences when talking about the different ways I should die. They agreed on me and, more specifically, on their disgust and hatred for me. Here they were together in the comments of this video, joking about how fat, ugly, "crazy," and disgusting feminists are, how fat, ugly, "crazy," and disgusting I am—among them was peace and harmony. Other than their assertions that I'm clearly not a Gamer, no one responded to any of my ideas, no one mentioned video games at all. No one felt the need to pretend that any of this was about games anymore, we could be honest that it was against feminism, against social justice, against progress.

After this experience I had to ask myself a lot of new questions. Should I be relieved that the video isn't Gamergate? Or should I be terrified? Had I been underestimating the extent to which games culture reflected challenges for women in mainstream culture? Was I simply underestimating what games culture was? This dissertation has examined games culture, and women's access to it, from many different angles. I started by trying to determine the roots of the sexism in games culture by looking at one of the earliest and most prominent "nerd culture" texts, *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as the "male culture" of J. R. R. Tolkien and his friends, The Inklings. I then went on to examine some of its subcultures, from the fighting game community, to the field of game studies, to the community surrounding *First Person Scholar*. In this conclusion, I'd like to return to the macro-perspective of my first and second chapters to examine games culture as a whole. This time, however, instead of looking at its beginnings, I'm going to make some educated guesses about where it's going. Where does games culture end?

What I have discussed in this text thus far are the roots, branches, knots, and leaves of games culture. I've looked at the seeds that planted the culture, the growth of the culture, and

some of its countless twigs—sometimes zooming in on one particular leaf to study it quite closely, sometimes chopping the tree up to study its rings. But recent events have made me wonder if I’ve been looking too closely at this one example. Maybe I wasn’t concerning myself enough with the other trees in this forest of cultures, which looked *strikingly similar* from my perspective. In fact, when I looked up I could no longer tell where the branches of games culture end and others begin. Chalk it up to cross-pollination if you will, but these shared characteristics mean it is necessary to look beyond games culture in order to see it clearly. And in my estimation, in 2018 the culture enmeshed most intimately with gaming from root to crown is that of the Alt-right.

### **Gamergate versus Neo-Nazis versus Trolls versus “Causefags”**

Obviously the concept of an “end” to a culture is much too simple. The current situation might be better described as many overlapping digital cultures creating a sort of Venn diagram that delineates an overall “culture war.” But these overlaps are taxing to identify. When someone yells at me Twitter, or sends me an image like the one below, I have to stop and ask myself: “is this person Gamergate or Alt-right? Or just a troll? This is Nazi related, but are they a real neo-Nazi, or a fake neo-Nazi? Do they want to scare me with their intentions of genocide? Or do they want to laugh at me taking their fake jokes about genocide seriously?”



(fig 5.1) An image sent to my direct messages on Twitter in 2017.

What may initially seem to be neo-Nazi propaganda, like the image above that was direct messaged to me on Twitter, is actually an image of Sam Hyde (right), a “comedian” who makes YouTube videos “pretending” to be a bigot. His “post-irony” comedy is both beloved and mocked in the worlds of so called “chan culture” or “chanterculture” (Bernstein, “2015”). 4chan users often send an image of Hyde holding a very large gun to the media after mass shootings. They claim that the shooter was in fact Sam Hyde, and then they have a laugh when the media publishes this false information, as CNN did during the Oregon shooting in October 2015 (Eordogh).

Similarly, Hyde’s collaborator, sketch comedian Jan Rankowski, claimed to be a member of Gamergate and made threats on game developer Brianna Wu’s life under the fake name/persona “Jace Connors.” Rankowski later told BuzzFeed that he was actually attempting to satirize “the over-the-top, super-hyper-macho armed GamerGater” in his YouTube videos (qtd. in Bernstein, “GamerGate”). Rankowski claimed that once Gamergate realized he was making

fun of them they began doxxing and harassing him claiming that the harassment he received from Gamergate “ruined his life” and caused him to be afraid for his own safety. But it is impossible to know if Rankowski actually was being harassed, or if he was taking advantage of the interview to mock those of us who Gamergate has affected. Maybe his BuzzFeed interview was just a chance to take one last shot at Wu and other women harassed by Gamergate in the name of “satire.” Interviews with Hyde and Rankowski seem to very clearly be just one long troll of the media after another in which they are asked real questions but give fake answers (Eordogh; Bernstein, “Gamergate”).

When people ask me if it is still Gamergate harassing me, I often have to reply that I don’t really know. I don’t reply to any of the harassment, so I don’t get more information. One of the problems with online abuse is that we can never know the motivations of our abusers, is it someone who wants to physically hurt me? Or someone having a laugh? Beyond that *why* do they hate me? Because of video games? Or because I’m openly very against white supremacy? Or is it something else? I do know that in all likelihood, some of the people harassing me are members of the Alt-right, some are members of Gamergate, and some are trolls just along for the ride. Many of them are hoping that I’ll be gullible enough to reply to them so they can screenshot my replies and post them on one of their various websites and laugh about how I’m a “lolcow.”<sup>68</sup> Trolling itself has no one universal motivation; while trolling can be political, and it definitely has political implications, it is not *inherently* political (Phillips *Things* 7). Some are doing it, simply “for the lulz.” That said, trolling as a practice can be used by people of all political stripes<sup>69</sup> and weaponized trolling is a practice used by the right to create outrage towards to the

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<sup>68</sup> A term for people, often journalists, who are manipulated by trolling and “milked” for laughs (lols). Much like a “cash cow” would supply a steady stream of revenue, a lolcow provides a steady stream of lols.

<sup>69</sup> Feminist trolling and “counter trolling” exist. But, of course, while you can troll someone as a feminist you can’t be a feminist troll, as this disrupts the credo of lulz above politics (Phillips 160-164).

left<sup>70</sup> and should be taken seriously as part of the fake news/propaganda cycle (Phillips *Things* 7). Furthermore, dismissing Gamergate, or the alt-right, or all of 4-chan, or Trump's administration, or Trump himself as "just trolls", undermines the real world dangers that these groups represent (Phillips "Donald").

Whitney Phillips' book on the history of trolling culture, *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things* surprisingly, but rightly, does not cover Gamergate. Gamergate and other movements with specific political aims are often referred to as "causefags" or "moralfags" within trolling culture where it's not cool to care about anything (Phillips *Things* 147). Phillips refuses to call Gamergate's behavior "trolling" and instead refers to it as "sustained, coordinated, and ... violently misogynic attacks" in a "unmitigated shitstorm" ("Trolling"). When you are harassed you know that some are in it for "the lulz," some are there to forward their anti-social justice cause, and some are genuinely yelling at you because of what they think of as "ethics in video games journalism." Despite the methods used, Gamergate proper often seemed to be painfully earnest, targeting feminists either "for video games" or out of a profound (and often unacknowledged) hatred of women and other minorities. If the goal behind trolling is "to disrupt and upset as many people as possible, using whatever linguistic or behavioral tools" you have available to you (Phillips 2), then it made sense that Gamergate would attract trolls like flies to their rotting corpse of a movement—the trolls could milk both the feminists targeted, and the "causefag" Gamergaters for lulz. At the same time I couldn't simply write off the racist and sexist things a lot of these people were saying as "just trolling." But, in this way, trolling culture has provided the perfect invisibility cloak for Gamergate and the Alt-right: they can blame literally everything on "the trolls." It becomes impossible to tell which threats are legitimate and

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<sup>70</sup> See, for example, the recent campaign of fake images and tweets of white people claiming to be attacked at screenings of Marvel's *Black Panther* by black people (Robinson).

which are mere provocations. You are put in a position where you have to take everything seriously, or nothing seriously, or become incredibly literate in chan-speak<sup>71</sup>, so you can interpret which threats are credible.

## **Trolling Is Not What it Used to be**

Since Phillips' book came out in 2015 she has written numerous articles that clarify her position once the concept of trolling, and the term itself went mainstream during the 2016 presidential election (Phillips et al.; "Donald"; "Trolling"; "Reason"). In her article "Donald Trump is not a Troll" Phillips points out that at least ten publications have "explicitly framed Trump's behaviors as 'trolling'" in the headlines alone. We don't know how many publications, and journalists, and news segments, and voters have called Trump a troll, but what we do know is that it is happening and it's happening *a lot*. Phillips explains that while she understands the impulse to call Trump a troll, and that while some things he says do sound an awful lot like trolling, Phillips asserts that "Donald Trump should never be described as a troll. That assertion is, in fact, *dangerous*" ("Donald"). Calling Trump a troll when he says, for example, that he is going to build a wall between the United States and Mexico, undermines the fact that people believe him, and that those statements cause harm to immigrants, undocumented or otherwise, if he builds the wall or not. The problem is, as Phillips asserts, that "the troll frame mitigates harm and privileges the antagonist" therefore, for many, "if something is trolling ... then it's not really real; it's a big game being played on the internet" ("Donald"). This paradigm enforced that the problem is "how someone reacts to powerful behavior, not the specifics of the harm itself" ("Donald"). Trolling creates distance between people and harm between behavior and

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<sup>71</sup> The mode of communication that is used on forums like 4-chan and 8-chan that consists of memes, made up words, jokes, images, "edgy" rhetoric, and references that would be totally impenetrable to outsiders looking in. The only other similar "language" I can think of that would be equally impenetrable would be cockney rhyming slang.

responsibility, which is why trolls can, say, threaten a school shooting, and then laugh when the school gets shut down and people fear for their lives. Or they send images of Hyde to the media, or tweet them on Twitter, claiming he committed one of the many recent mass shootings, and find it hilarious when people believe them.

Therefore, when those of us who are targeted by these groups see images of Hyde as a neo-Nazi, or videos of Rankowski as a violent Gamergater and we are not in on the “joke,” we fear the worst. As one journalist put it, these viral hoaxes seemed like “proof, to a lot of people, that some kind of catastrophic act of violence was imminent” (Bernstein, “GamerGate”). One of the many problems with trolling is that “just because somebody doesn't mean the evil things they say seriously, it doesn't mean that people aren't out there taking them seriously [...] and it doesn't mean that they don't leave damage” (Marcotte and Penny). The biggest problem with these “satirical” comedians, is that what is a joke to them, and their audience, as privileged white men, is not only the nightmare of others—but the reality of 2018. People issuing death threats and “joke” memes about neo-Nazis like the one above that was sent to me in late 2017 are not funny when neo-Nazis, alt-right supporters, men’s rights activists, and violent Gamergaters are very real, and are killing people. Phillips feels that “trolling” is never an appropriate label when looking at the alt-right as one can, as I’ve discussed in the examples above, act like a Nazi, talk like a Nazi, and then claim that in fact they were just trolling and therefore they don’t need to explain or defend their decision to invoke violence or be held responsible for the violence that follows. Maybe there was a time, when you could make a joke about someone being a Nazi, and it was so out of the realm of possibility that it was funny, that time is not 2018. There was also a time, like when I started writing this dissertation, that I felt online harassment was a niche problem that was making games culture inaccessible to myself and people like me. But in 2018,

the type of harassment I received from Gamergate, is now being perpetrated from many groups, towards many minorities. The toxic masculinity and misogyny that makes gaming culture so inaccessible to minorities is now making all culture inaccessible online. Anyone could be harassed for expressing a progressive political opinion online and, as violence from the alt-right continues, anyone could be the victim of this culture war offline as well.

What follows is a short sample from a list of examples of the real life violence perpetrated by the alt-right: 33-year-old Lane Maurice Davis stabbed his father to death in July 2017 during an argument where he allegedly accused his parents of being “leftists” and they allegedly called him a Nazi (Brennan). He was a member of the Alt-right who claims to have worked for Milo Yiannopoulos; his YouTube channel featured a three-hour video about Gamergate (of which he participated) and he even attempted to fund a Gamergate related project on Patreon (Hankes and Amend; Bernstien “Alt-Rght”). Also consider 20-year-old James Alex Fields Jr. who murdered Heather Heyer and injured 19 others when he plowed his car into a crowd of people protesting the white nationalism rally he was attending in Charlottesville in August 2017 (Hankes and Amend). Fields’ mother, who is paraplegic, had called 911 twice when Fields became violent with her, once pulling a 12-inch knife on her, another time hitting her in the head and covering her mouth so she couldn’t breathe after she asked him to stop playing video games (Shapiro et al.; Hernandez et al.). Fields had, according to one of his teachers, held pro-Nazi views and an “idolization” of Hitler since High School (Shapiro et al.). Then, just last week (April 2018), here in Toronto, 25-year-old Alek Minassian, who was allegedly associated with a men’s rights group, ran a van into a crowd murdering 10 people (8 women and 2 men) and injuring 13. Before the killings Minassian posted a Facebook update with references to 4chan, a misogynistic men’s rights group, and another mass killer associated with

that men's rights group. These are just a few of at least 13 men associated with the Alt-right that have injured and killed over 100 people between 2014 and 2018, according to a study by the Southern Law Poverty Center (Hankes and Amend)<sup>72</sup>, with nine of the 14 incidents taking place in 2017 alone (Hankes and Amend). It's hard to convince yourself that the men who hate you on the internet don't *really* want to kill you when they are out there, killing people<sup>73</sup>. We can no longer insist that this behavior isn't dangerous, or is "just online" or is "just trolling". Is the abuse that Gamergate, men's rights groups, and the Alt-right send out online, really still considered "online abuse" if they are also killing people?<sup>74</sup>

### **Who are the Alt-right?**

Some of the answers to these questions may lie in the origins of the Alt-right movement.

According to the report by the SLPC:

The "alternative right" was coined in part by white nationalist leader Richard Bertrand Spencer in 2008, but the movement as it's known today can largely be traced back to

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<sup>72</sup> This SLPC study was published on February 5th, 2018; 10 days later those numbers may be out of date as 19-year-old Nikolas Cruz, who murdered 17 people, mostly children, in Parkland, Florida that same month, may also have connections to the Alt-right. At this point it's predictably difficult to tell because Cruz's real digital footprint is mixed in with fake information that trolls are feeding the media and researchers for their own entertainment (Musgrave). The coordinated effort to confuse media outlets with false information about the shooter was largely coordinated on 4chan and Discord, a chat platform designed to be used by gamers that is also popular with the Alt-right (Musgrave). While the shooting itself was horrifying to watch, reading about the men whose entertainment is built on mass shootings is disturbing in a completely different way. One article about the shooter with false information has been retweeted over 35,000 times as of this writing, which was being celebrated as an achievement by trolls on 4chan in the days after the shooting (Musgrave).

<sup>73</sup> In June 2018 Japanese Blogger Kenichiro Okamoto was stabbed to death when he went to the bathroom after giving a public lecture. It was later discovered that the perpetrator (who surrendered) was one of Okamoto's online harassers and had been harassing Okamoto online using 100s of different accounts since 2016. Okamoto had previously commented that he wasn't afraid of online harassment and that it wasn't a problem for people like him (Hudson). News of this murder was chilling for those who have faced abuse online, especially those of us who continue to give public talks and lectures despite the harassment.

<sup>74</sup> It is import to note how online harassment perpetrated by these groups kills people indirectly as well. In June 2018 game developer Chloe Sagal died by suicide when she set herself on fire in a Portland park (Fogel). Sagal was facing online harassment from a group of people who planned their attacks on her on Kiwi Farms. On multiple occasions Sagal reached out for help by discussing suicide on Facebook but the group would get her Facebook page locked down to encourage her suicide (Fogel). It is worth noting that encouraging suicide, especially for targets who are open about their struggles with mental illness, is a very common online harassment technique.

2012 and 2013 when two major events occurred: the killing of the black teenager Trayvon Martin and the so-called Gamergate controversy, where female game developers and journalists were systematically threatened with rape and death. Both were formative moments for a young generation of far-right activists raised on the internet and who found community on chaotic forums like 4chan and Reddit, where the classic tenets of white nationalism—most notably the belief that white identity is under attack by multiculturalism and political correctness—flourish under dizzying layers of toxic irony. But despite these historical connections, Gamergate insists that they have nothing to do with the Alt-right, Trump, or white nationalists (Maiberg). They make this claim despite their affiliations with Milo Yiannopoulos, Steve Bannon, and Breitbart (Berstein, “Breitbart”; Maiberg; Sherr and Carson). Gamergate, like all facets of the Alt-right, is opposed to social justice, to feminism, and to so called “political correctness,” so what practical difference does it make? Where is the line that Gamergate feels the media is crossing when it links the movement to the Alt-right? These are just some of the questions I hope to answer in my future research. This is easier said than done given that research on this topic has to be done covertly, as I discovered first hand when I was interviewed for NBC’s video “How Gamers Are Facilitating The Rise Of The Alt-right.” As of April 10<sup>th</sup> 2018, the video has just shy of 200,000 views on YouTube alone, has been downvoted 63,000 times, and has received well over 9,000 angry comments. There are more “response” style videos to the NBC video than I could ever find, with their own horrible comments.

I don’t mean to imply by any means that these groups get along or are conspiring together. You don’t have to spend long on the internet to see the Alt-right mocking Gamergate, Gamergaters mocking the Alt-right, trolls mocking everyone. But, sometimes you have someone

like Yiannopoulos, who somehow stretches easily over all three groups, uniting them by playing up different parts of his persona (Penny “I’m With”). It was not the Alt-right, Gamergate, or the trolls that drove Yinnapoulos to fame—it was all three. Despite their sometimes fractious disputes, the shared animus of these groups can be a powerful force for those who are able to harness it. The climate they create makes any sort of feminist research and writing impossible to do without enduring constant backlash. The real question isn’t about what future work could follow from this dissertation, but what it might cost those who wish to do that work? How can anyone study the radicalization of young white men online without putting themselves at risk? And how can we even attempt to start solving the problem of these radicalized young men, if we can’t discuss, write and publish about the problem without being attacked?

### **Hypervisibility**

The backlash to the NBC video was the worst I had ever experienced. Despite dealing with online harassment since 2012, I wasn’t prepared to deal with a new level of, as Zoe Quinn calls it in her memoir about her domestic and online abuse *Crash Override*, “hypervisibility” (117). Soon I was reading my name all over the popular Gamergate subreddits, seeing my name on white supremacist websites, seeing my photos, my writing, links to my social media profiles, and the names of my places of work being circulated around the internet. Threats to stop my research were arriving in my Twitter mentions and direct messages, and there were more YouTube videos being made about the NBC video than I could keep track of. If the NBC video got *any* positive attention, even a *single* positive comment, then I didn’t see it in the hundreds if not thousands of negative comments and tweets I read. This may be in part my fault. I never shared it with anyone—I just hid. In the past when I had been involved with something new there was usually positive feedback to counteract the negative. This time, there was just mountains of hate. My

LinkedIn and Academia.edu profile views shot through the roof but I knew it wasn't the right kind of attention. I knew it was people searching for more information on me, addresses, phone numbers, office addresses, and every time they did I would get notifications, and emails. Seeing "someone just searched your name on Google" used to excite me as a writer; now I read those words with dread. The men "investigating" me were even watching and posting about *Lady Hobbits* before we made it private!

People will often say "well just block them" as advice, not realizing just how time consuming "simply" blocking people can be. For about two months following the release of the NBC video, I would spend about half of my day editing this dissertation, and the other half locking down my web presence, documenting harassment, and blocking Twitter users doing their best to doxx me or lure me in by "nicely" asking me my thoughts and opinions as an expert (nice try). One of the best things I did was meet (digitally) with someone who was a security expert for online abuse. They told me I was much more prepared for this situation than most people, and that the preventive measures I'd taken in smaller attacks prepared me for this larger one. For example, I haven't had my own website since 2013, because I knew that your website was the first thing Gamergate and other online abusers would go after. Not having a website felt like an overreaction, like shooting myself in the foot, until the NBC video came out and it became a blessing. While I've had to make myself digitally small and quiet over the past few months, I haven't pulled away from the ideas that have brought so much hate down on me. In fact, I feel more committed than ever to explore them. But I know now that if I want to do that I have to be even more careful, as Gamergate has taken down people and organizations much larger than myself.<sup>75</sup> I know I have to be careful in part because while Gamergate used to be something you

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<sup>75</sup> Look for example, at the once-powerful web company Gawker, which shut down in 2016. Gawker's former EIC Max Read explained that, "of all the enemies Gawker had made of the years—in New York media, in Silicon

could point to, that you could predict, it has now bled out into North American culture in such a way that it feels pointless to differentiate between Gamergate and the other conservative participants in the larger culture war.

### **When Games Culture Becomes Mainstream Culture**

In November 2016 it was suddenly as though games culture became North American culture in the worst way possible. Steve Bannon, once a man who I knew primarily for giving a platform to Gamergate through Breitbart, became one of the most powerful men in the White House as Donald Trump's chief strategist. It was beyond surreal to watch Bannon become influential, hated, and well-known enough to be parodied on *Saturday Night Live*. As Quinn puts it in her memoir about online abuse,

Seeing people who personally profited off the abuse against me being selected for Trump's cabinet scares the hell out of me. I don't know how to express to anyone the extremely weird issues of having your personal trauma wrapped up in international trauma (235).

Similarly, Milo Yiannopoulos was, at one point, seen as one of the "leaders" of Gamergate. He decided where hate would be directed and made money out of selling t-shirts that said "feminism is cancer." Now Yiannopoulos is a friend of the President who heads up the "Gays for Trump" organization and gives public lectures on how to expose undocumented immigrants (Oppenheim).<sup>76</sup> Yiannopoulos and Bannon were the subcultural villains of Gamergate, well-known to people like me, but far from household names. When I started writing this dissertation,

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Valley, in Hollywood—none were more effective than the Gamergaters." Read credited Gamergate with making Gawkers' "continued existence impossible."

<sup>76</sup> Although, much more recently, in a very satisfying fall from grace, Yiannopoulos was banned from Twitter, lost his job at Breitbart, lost his book contract with Simon and Schuster, and has been seen endorsing supplements on conspiracy theorist Alex Jones' Infowars (Worgaftik).

“Alt-right” was a term that people who were invested in online and games culture used to refer to the “trolls” and bigots flooding our Twitter mentions; now it’s a term people use to refer to the President of the United States. Things are very different then they were in the early days of Gamergate.

It is probably no surprise that I feel the research that directly follows this dissertation is further examination of the larger white supremacist anti-feminist culture war that gamers have been a part of these past five years. Whether I was writing specifically about fantasy literature, or girl gamers, or eSports, or game studies, my conclusions seemed to come back to this larger culture war between the Alt-right and those of us who fight for social justice. As Quinn explains, GamerGate wasn’t really about video games at all so much as it was a flash point for radicalized online hatred that had a long list of targets before, and after, my name was added to it. The movement helped solidify the growing connections between online white supremacist movements, misogynist nerds, conspiracy theorists, and dispassionate hoaxers who derive a sense of power from disseminating disinformation. This patchwork of Thanksgiving-ruining racist uncles might look and sound like a bad joke, but they became a real force behind giving Donald Trump the keys to the White House (4-5).

I came to a similar realization during my own harassment by Gamergate in 2014–2016. When a Gamergater would appear in my mentions, or my direct messages to yell at me, I would go look at his profile. I wanted to understand what he was about. I still do this, although it might not be healthy. I saw the same things over and over. Uncontained white male rage pointed at a variety of targets, from critics like myself, to female politicians, to Black Lives Matter, to the new *Star Wars* movies, to progressive video game websites like Polygon.com. Oftentimes, I would observe that myself and my harassers liked a lot of the same things, the same movies, games, and

TV shows. But we felt very differently about what would make that media better. In a weird way, it was because of digging around my harassers' profiles that I knew from the second that Donald Trump announced he would run for President that he would probably win. Almost no one agreed when I would say that I thought he would win, with the exception of other people who had been targeted by, or studied Gamergate—somehow we were all just on the same page and terrified. As Matt Lees put it in his article for *The Guardian*, “What Gamergate should have taught us about the Alt-right”:

The similarities between Gamergate and the far-right online movement, the “Alt-right,” are huge, startling and in no way a coincidence. After all, the culture war that began in games now has a senior representative in the White House. As a founding member and former executive chair of Breitbart News, Steve Bannon had a hand in creating media monster Milo Yiannopoulos, who built his fame and Twitter following by supporting and cheerleading Gamergate. This hashtag was the canary in the coalmine, and we ignored it. Post Trump's election, plenty of media outlets, like *The Guardian*, are covering the connection between Gamergate, the Alt-right, and Trump supporters. It's almost treated like a given by the media (Crecente; Lees; Sherr and Carson; NBC News) and even by some Alt-right Trump supporters (Bokhari). One article from Breitbart entitled “Leftists think Gamergate caused Donald Trump; Maybe they're Right,”<sup>77</sup> frames victims of Gamergate's harassment as “feminist provocateurs and censorship advocates,” and Gamers as an “already-downtrodden demographic,” but also manages to perform a rather compelling statistical analysis of both Gamergaters and Trump voters using multiple studies that demonstrate that a large portion of

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<sup>77</sup> The article was written by Allum Bokhari, who was Yiannopoulos' ghost writer at Breitbart. They wrote the well-known “An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-right” together. When Yiannopoulos' emails were leaked to the public, one interesting interaction between the two was an early draft of the aforementioned article sent from Bokhari to Yiannopoulos with the subject line ““ALT RIGHT, MEIN FUHRER” (Bernstein, “Breitbart”).

both groups were “unemployed young men without a college education” (Bokhari). The author brings up many connections that are not often discussed because Gamergate so often refuses any association with the Alt-right; an academic study found that fears of cultural displacement were the second most important factor leading someone to vote for Trump, just after Republican identification (Cox et al.). It is not a stretch to see the ways that Gamergate was a movement based in the fear of cultural displacement within games culture and loyalty to the Gamer identity (Bokhari). The author also brings up the ways in which Trump's anti “political correctness” platform became one of his most appealing qualities, and Gamergate was a movement against “politically correct attacks on video games” (Bokhari; Maiberg). Reading Bokhari’s article, you start to wonder just how many Gamergaters identify with the Alt-right and/or voted for Trump, but also whether the Alt-right could have even formed in its current iteration (and if Trump could have won the election) without Gamergate first helping to shape the discourse around the oppression of dominant groups via political correctness. I feel strongly the answer to both those questions is *no*.

Beyond this, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence of members of the Alt-right claiming that Gamergate was the thing that got them to care about politics in the first place (Bokhari; Maiberg). *Vice* reported on an extended examination of the most popular Gamergate subreddit Kotaku In Action (KIA), which demonstrated that the majority of posts were not about games or Gamergate at all but about far-right politics: “out of the 25 hottest posts on KiA on February 6 [2017], only four threads were loosely connected to the subject of games” (Maiberg). When *Vice* asked the head moderator of KIA why the majority of threads were about Trump if Gamergate was not a conservative movement, he insisted that KIA was “a hangout for Gamergaters,” but that Gamergate and Trump have “nothing to do with each other” (qtd. in Maiberg). In other

words, despite the obvious connections, no critical self-examination of the movement seems to be taking place. Gamergate simply denies these connections time and time again while mocking those who make them (Maiberg). Gamergate’s focus on the media is a “convenient loophole” for their support of Trump and the Alt-right; they once claimed to be about “ethics in games journalism,” and they can now claim to be about “ethics in journalism in general,” which is why they are concerned with “unethical” coverage of far-right politicians (Maiberg).

Buzzfeed reporter Joseph Bernstein also dug into KIA in 2014, discovering that while KIA *claimed* to be a politically liberal place, KIA moderators were also members and moderators of many other subreddits including anti-feminist communities (r/INeedFeminismBecause, r/TumblrInAction, r/WhatFeministsLookLike), rape porn communities (r/struggleporn and r/gor,), fantasy communities for rape porn about feminists as slaves specifically (r/breakfemiNazis)<sup>78</sup>, and even porn communities about female rectal prolapse<sup>79</sup> (r/ProlapseVille) (“Disturbing”). The connections Bernstein made between KIA and Reddit at large demonstrated how much of KIA’s “liberal” politics were smoke and mirrors (“Disturbing”)<sup>80</sup>. Gamergate will also often claim that no one in *their movement* has ever perpetrated abuse or harassment and that the very real harassment was done by “trolls.”

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<sup>78</sup> A description of r/breakfeminazis follows: “A Fantasy BDSM Subreddit devoted to a Supervillain [sic] who enslaves, degrades, and humiliates Feminist Superheroines to teach them their place as women This Subreddit is centered around creatively exploring Female psychology under imagined speculative conditions in which Feminist indoctrination has been removed. A Historical Chronicle of the Gender Civil Wars, in which Radical Feminists finally push Men too far, leading to a hot War of the Sexes in which the forces of the Feminist Menace are smashed in battle. What would a hypothetically constructed world in which Feminism has been decisively defeated, and women have been returned to their natural condition as Slaves look like?” (qtd in Bernstein “Disturbing”).

<sup>79</sup> Male rectums are against the subreddit’s rules.

<sup>80</sup> After the writing of this dissertation KIA was actually briefly shut down by its creator David. David explained his decision in a lengthy post stating that he felt responsible for the hate spread because of the forum saying that it was a “cancerous growth” that was “infested with racism and sexism” (Kircher). His post was explicitly anti-trump and called KIA a “mimi-me” of the hateful pro-Trump subreddit r/The\_Donald. Despite KIA’s creator doing the right thing Reddit handed the keys to a new man and the subreddit was sadly alive and active again within hours (Kircher). In the end, even once the truth of KIA was acknowledged, it really made no difference.

Alternatively, if confronted about the abuse they will toss up one of their other standard responses, as Lees explains:

Prominent supporters on Twitter, in subreddits and on forums like 8Chan, developed a range of pernicious rhetorical devices and defences to distance themselves from threats to women and minorities in the industry: the targets were lying or exaggerating, they were too precious; a language of dismissal and belittlement was formed against them. Safe spaces, snowflakes, unicorns, cry bullies. Even when abuse was proven, the usual response was that people on their side were being abused too. These techniques, forged in Gamergate, have become the standard toolset of far-right voices online.

I would assume that some members of Gamergate *genuinely believe* that they are the victims and that no Gamergater has ever sent a death or rape threat. Alternatively, I am sure there are others who are orchestrating the abuse and giving up these same lines over and over to keep the movement's PR clear instead of owning up to what they have done. Those Gamergaters who see themselves and their movement as pure of bigotry, harassment, and doxxing will also simply disavow anyone from their movement who has done any wrong. I've read countless comments saying things along the lines of: "Oh that guy from the FBI report who called Brianna Wu 50 times threatening to kill her? Fuck that guy. He isn't a REAL Gamergater, he doesn't represent us"; or more recently, "oh that guy who stabbed his Dad to death? Fuck that guy. He isn't a REAL Gamergater." To oversimplify it down into two portions of Gamergate that are left four years after it began, one portion of Gamergate continues to insist that it is a movement about games that does not harass people and has what they see as liberal politics despite their abhorrence of feminism and social justice; the other portion has embraced Trump and the Alt-

right with open arms, declaring that they should “Make Gamergate Great again” (Bernstein, “Disturbing”; Maiberg).

In line with this, I often see throwaway comments from the Alt-right that feminist games critics actually elected Trump, or that we function as a “recruitment tool” for the Alt-right as we created the Gamergate monster:

if GamerGate had an impact, it’s because video games are (or were) the most important hobby for a generation of disaffected, disillusioned male voters with little to no prospects in the economy. Having seemingly denied them a future, the established political order then tried to impose its values on games, their one avenue of escape from an increasingly grim world. That kind of unnecessary cruelty against an already-downtrodden demographic generates more than mere disagreement—it generates motivation that is easily converted into relentless political activism. As one poster on 4chan put it: “I’ll hate you and fight leftist causes the rest of life because of this (Bokhari).

Similarly, Quinn has received emails “blaming me for Trump’s election,” and saying to watch out now that “they are in charge” (235). Despite all of this, we will likely never know how many of the people who perpetrated the Gamergate harassment went on to perpetrate Alt-right related harassment—or how many voted for Trump. What is really needed is a large-scale, well-funded quantitative study of Gamergate and the Alt-right... that could never be performed because the data would be faked and trolled and the researchers would be doxxed. Furthermore, do we really need to know the numbers? Don’t we have a pretty good idea of what happened? Whom do we need to prove it to?

I’ll admit that it is possible that the overlap between the two groups is very small and the Alt-right is simply using the same tactics and tools that Gamergate used against Quinn, Wu,

Sarkeesian, and countless others. This is possible, but it also feels so unlikely. It was hard on the day that the Charlottesville riots took place, to do anything other than just watch with horror what you knew would be a historic day with lifelong implications. As a games researcher, it was hard to look out at that audience of young white men and not imagine that most of them play games, that many of them identify as Gamers, and that some of them must have been a part of or at least have been sympathetic towards Gamergate. Until more research is done, we can't undeniably prove that Gamergate fed the Alt-right, that the tree of games culture helped seed the tree of the Alt-right. But what we do know is this: much like Anita Sarkeesian and others had received anti-Semitic and violent messages during Gamergate, journalists covering the election also received violent and anti-Semitic messages during the 2016 American Presidential election. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) tracked at least 800 reporters who were targeted with anti-Semitism through 19,253 anti-Semitic tweets (Sherr and Carson; Anti-Defamation League). The ADL emphasized that the users tweeting these attacks at reporters were "disproportionately likely to self-identify as Donald Trump supporters, conservatives, or part of the 'Alt-right.'" A *New York Times* editor quit Twitter over the anti-Semitic harassment he was getting (Kludt). Soraya Chemaly, who is the director of the "Women's Media Center's Speech Project" tracking online abuse, claims that Gamergate "was an excellent breeding ground and practice ground" for those invested in harassing progressives (qtd. in Sherr and Carson). She goes on to say something I've heard over and over again, that "for those of us familiar with Gamergate," the pro-Trump / anti-Hillary rhetoric, memes, and harassment of the election simply felt like "more of the same" (qtd in Sherr and Carson). Or, as Lees puts it:

In 2016, new wave conservative media outlets like Breitbart have gained trust with their audience by painting traditional news sources as snooty and aloof. In 2014, video game

YouTube stars, seeking to appear in touch with online gaming communities, unscrupulously proclaimed that traditional old-media sources were corrupt. Everything we're seeing now, had its precedent two years ago.

These challenges, the harassment, the escalating violence, the connections between the groups, made it hard to finish this dissertation. The projects I was writing about seemed intimately connected to the things that were happening, but they also felt totally insignificant in comparison to the larger issues that we are facing.

### **Survivor's Guilt**

The night Trump won the election I was driving home from giving two guest lectures about online abuse, Gamergate, and the Alt-right in Waterloo. That night I'd warned students not to joke about or underestimate the very real threat Trump posed, but they really didn't seem to take me seriously. It took me four hours to get home because roads were closed, traffic was bad, and there were lots of accidents. For those four hours I listened to the CBC specialists who were doing the election coverage go from scornful and dismissive of Trump and his influence to scornful and absolutely devastated. They went from starting the night off relaxed and positive Hillary Clinton would win to, as I was parking my car, calling the election for Trump. I was weirdly calm despite feeling both like the world was ending and also like it was somehow my fault, like I should have done something, should have yelled louder. Quinn described similar feelings, explaining that on the night of the election

most of the activists and survivors I know had similar feelings—unsurprised but grieving all the same—and then went back to work. The scale might be larger, but it confirms what we already knew. We knew the loudest, most hyperbolic garbage will rise to the top if left unchecked (235).

Before the election people outside of games culture (and sometimes in it) were so dismissive to my serious discussions of the toxicity of the memes, of the tweets, of the hacking and doxxing, and of the harassment that I couldn't help but wonder if maybe I was catastrophizing. Now you turn on any major news network and all of these things that people had once written off as "Gamers being Gamers" are everyday topics of conversation. The first time I heard someone on the news, who had nothing to do with games, use the term "social justice warrior" I thought I was going to pass out. It is as if, as Laurie Penny explains, "they came for the nerd girls first" (Marcotte and Penny). The statement sounds, and feels, over-dramatic, because there were obviously numerous groups of marginalized people being targeted by the alt-right long before largely privileged people like myself drew the ire of Gamergate. But there is still some truth in it when you look at the reality of how the Alt-right progressed, and how that progression, and the voices of women speaking out, were ignored in part because the conflict *appeared* to be over video games. As Penny explains:

it started with Gamergate and with anti-feminist trolls in general, the harassment of women online. And this started years ago, years and years ago. I've spent years, and so many other people I know have spent years saying, "This is serious. These people really mean us harm, and they are doing harm [...] we were told, "Oh, just get off the internet. You're overreacting, silly women. It's just words. Words can't hurt you." And now, these people are taking power around the world [...] I feel like it's not something I enjoy being right about, actually. It's not a kind of "I told you so" that gives any of us any pleasure, but I feel like if more attention had been paid to the tactics and techniques that were being used against women and writers of color and minority activists five or six years ago, not necessarily the election would've been different, but the left wouldn't be so much

on the back foot right now. But it was just ignored because it was only women and people of color being targeted (Marcotte and Penny).

I spend a lot of time thinking about the “I told you so” feelings that Penny mentions above, which I harbour not out of pleasure so much as a sort of anger. When I read my writing about Gamergate from 2014, I find myself visibly cringing from how optimistic I was trying to be. In these writings, I am trying to convince myself that, while games culture will never be the same, the worst is over. At the time I felt like you were supposed to conclude academic writing with possibilities and solutions, not dramatic predictions that things will get worse. I knew deep down and told friends and colleagues, that all of these events indicated something larger and more worrisome but I was afraid not to be optimistic in writing. There was a point during the writing of this dissertation when I had to go back and edit any sentences that referred to the possibility of a Trump presidency to reflect that the event had indeed transpired. Similar changes were required during the recording of the CBC *Ideas* documentary. Neither felt good. They made me feel guilty, like I had failed to get the word out fast enough. In reality I know it wouldn't have changed anything. I felt strangely validated hearing that Quinn had to do largely the same thing with *Crash Override*, going through and changing every “this could happen” to “this happened” (235).

After the Alt-right felt they had “won” through Trump I was left with a question: how do we continue to write about the little things in the face of fascism? How do I sit and stare at an image of 70 high school students giving the Nazi salute in their class photo reportedly shouting “Heil Trump” and “Heil Hitler” (Schladebeck)<sup>81</sup>, or watch a video of a group of adult white men

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<sup>81</sup> The senior class of the Cypress Ranch High School in Texas in February of 2017

giving the Nazi salute to Richard Spencer (Lombroso and Appelbaum)<sup>82</sup>, or watch a 2016 video where Milo Yiannopoulos sings “America the Beautiful” at karaoke while Richard Spencer and others give him the Nazi salute<sup>83</sup> (Bernstein, “Breitbart”) and then just keep on writing about video games? Or, worse still, how do I watch thousands of Nazis march in the streets and murder a protester in Charlottesville, or watch those same men return to Charlottesville to march again, proud, not ashamed, of what their movement accomplished that day (Stevens) and then just keep writing about video games? How do you watch all of that, and then just return to writing about how it feels bad when boys make fun of how you suck at games? How do you tend to the fire in your hearth while you look out your window and see that the world is burning?

I often felt like I shouldn’t be writing about the microaggressions that I witnessed between a male and female gamer four years ago—I should be talking about how two of Yiannopoulos’ fans, went to a Yiannopoulos speaking event with a gun and a plan to target “snowflakes” and shot a protester in the stomach (Politi; Staff). Or I should be writing about the three white men who performed Nazi salutes and shot at protesters in Florida after attending a speech by Richard Spencer (Levenson). One of these men spoke to CNN before the speech and attempted murder saying that the protesters: “don’t have to fear us” and that it is “always the left that brings the violence,” a statement that I think of *every time* someone involved with Gamergate or the Alt-right claims that those of us who are targeted have nothing to fear

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<sup>82</sup> The salute was response to Spencer’s declaration: “Heil Trump, heil our people, heil victory!” at the annual conference of the National Policy Institute in November 2016 (Lombroso and Appelbaum).

<sup>83</sup> Yiannopoulos has since stated that he wasn’t aware of the salutes because of his “severe myopia” and that he could not ever be racist for a variety of reasons (Bernstein “Breitbart”). Yiannopoulos often uses his gay and Jewish identity (as well as his husband’s black identity) to brush away any accusations of wrongdoing. Lastly, Yiannopoulos’ leaked emails indicate that he has long held many white supremacist friends and views but needed his official persona to appear as if he was not openly racist to keep his job at Breitbart (Bernstein “Breitbart”).

(Levenson). I could keep listing events like these until I'm blue in the face but we will still be told we should not be afraid of the "trolls" online.

There is a thing that has always bothered me about horror movies. At the end, the final girl is always sitting in an ambulance safe and sound and the people who didn't believe her will come up to her and hug her and tell her she is all right. Maybe they tighten a blanket or bring her a tea. She is always placated and never vindicated. I've always wanted that girl to stand up, throw down the blanket and exclaim "IT *WOULD HAVE BEEN* ALRIGHT IF YOU HAD JUST LISTENED TO ME!" If this was a horror movie, the police would have promptly let the perpetrator go as the FBI did. Despite having mountains of evidence provided by Wu and others, as well as names and confessions, the FBI decided to close their case on Gamergate. One suspect the FBI tracked down admitted to calling Wu and threatening her life 40-50 times and stated that he knew it was a "federal crime" to send "threatening communications to anyone" before he "apologized" to the FBI and promised to never do it again—and that was that, the FBI left him alone (Menegus). It's worth noting how ignorant the FBI's public report seems to be of basic information about Gamergate, as one journalist who dissected the report put it:

Horrifying levels of internet ignorance are revealed by the document. For example it calls 4chan a "chat room"; refers to Twitter as "Tweeter" and the Tor browser as "Thor"; failing to ascertain a suspect's IP address due to basic countermeasures like proxies (Menegus).

The FBI report is painful to read for these reasons and it leads me to wonder if the suspects who were tracked down just told the FBI they were "just trolling" to get out of being charged with anything. After these documents were released in December of 2016, it became equally clear to

victims that criminal prosecution was not the correct avenue to pursue justice, and to serial harassers that there were no consequences to what they were doing—federal crime or not.<sup>84</sup>

Furthermore, I feel the need to mention, as an educator, that Gamergate and the Alt-right have changed the way our classrooms function as well. I know that the first thing I do on the first day of a new class, when meeting my students and when reading their first assignments, is try to determine who in the class holds these extremist views (there are always a few, always male, students) and then determine if they are a danger to me or anyone else in the class. When I teach I know that there are students in my class who sympathize with my harassers, who share their perspectives. I know this because my students *tell me*. They have complained when I talk about the rise of Nazism in class, they have complained about having to read things written by Sarkeesian or other known “SJWs,” and worst of all they have *told me that they first learned about me from YouTube videos “about” me from anti-feminist YouTubers who they like*.<sup>85</sup> How do I continue to teach students, as an authority, when they have access to countless resources online undermining my authority and the authority of the scholars I assign them to read? While this is a small minority of students, I still have to consider them in everything I do.

This isn’t just a problem when teaching games, another university instructor, recently wrote a post on Reddit entitled: “I’m a college philosophy professor. Jordan Peterson is making my job impossible.” In the post they outline the ways in which University of Toronto professor

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<sup>84</sup> As of early 2018, you can still read KIA threads and news articles of Gamergate celebrating the FBI’s conclusion that “there were no actionable leads on any kind of harassment or threats from Gamergate” (LivebeefTwit; Billy D).

<sup>85</sup> The video in question refers to me as “an autist” (a slur against autistic people often used on 4chan) and insists that no one should listen to anything I have to say about video games because my PhD is in English. The YouTuber who made this video about me has since been convicted of a hate crime for another video in which he teaches his dog to do a Nazi salute to the words “gas the Jews” as it was seen as “inciting racial hatred” by a Scottish court. He has become somewhat of a martyr for “free speech” because of this and celebrities have come to his defense, most notably, the star of *The Office* (2001), Ricky Gervais (Shappi).

Jordan Peterson's popular YouTube videos<sup>86</sup> make teaching *much* harder. Writing under the name "annoyed professor" they explain that after a decade of teaching they are suddenly having difficulty with their history of philosophy students. Some students actually write that the ideas taught in his class are "entitled liberal bullshit" on their exams instead of just explaining why they disagree. He explains that while disagreements are "the bread and butter of philosophy" he is not used to dealing with "the anger, the hostility and complete fabrications" from his students who come in with preconceived and false ideas about feminism, postmodernism, and Marxism from Peterson and other online sources. Much like myself, this professor feels they need to spend the entire semester "deprogramming" their students making it next to impossible to teach them anything (annoyed professor). I think in a way, that is how I've always taught games, not trying to teach my students anything new, but just trying to get them to forget what they *think they know about games*. In other words, even teaching has become culturally inaccessible to me, as I find myself teaching students who, at least on some level, agree with my harassers, that feminists like myself are "crazy" and should not be listened to. Worst still is the idea of one of my students enacting violence on myself or others as Seneca (a local college where I have taught a class about gender and games) student Minassian did recently as a result of his anti-feminist beliefs.

I'm interjecting all of this meta-commentary into my conclusion because, in part, I fear that this dissertation won't age well. I fear that people will forget that there was a time in the recent past, when I started this dissertation, when the rampant rise of fascism wasn't a daily news item. I fear that, while the women who aggressively stood against online threats and harassment

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<sup>86</sup> Peterson is a psychologist who Vice has described as "Canada's Most Infamous Intellectual." Peterson makes videos about a variety of topics including politics and education. He became well known for refusing to use correct pronouns for his students and he has a best selling self help book for young men called "12 rules for life" (Vice News). In the past he has proposed a website that aims to cull enrollment in classes with "post modern content" that he sees as "indoctrination cults" such as women and gender studies classes (CBC Radio).

will be remembered for their bravery, no one will remember the initial reactions and dismissal that they received. I was once afraid even to bring up sexist depictions of women in games with men for fear of others asking why we were *still* on the subject. Maybe it is largely selfish to wish for those who are on board with feminist criticism of games now to remember there was a time where they weren't. But I do think this point is integral to understanding the situation we are in. So many people underestimated Gamergate, Yiannopoulos, Bannon, Spencer, Trump, the Alt-right. We must remember how every step of the way we insisted on underestimating people simply because they were wrong.

### **Keeping on in the Never-Ending Culture War**

A future dissertation by another grad student will be about the larger culture war that Gamergate was a part of, about the roots of online hatred, of online abuse, of online fascist activism, of the Trump election, of all the horrible things that are still going to happen. But that isn't this dissertation. For myself, this dissertation is an attempt, like many other women before me have attempted, to explain the complexities of misogyny in games culture on a very small scale—my own experiences and the experiences of those around me. But to Gamers, this dissertation is an attempt to ruin the thing we all hold dear: video games. As one man said of me in a YouTube comment on one of the aforementioned videos: “I can't believe a person would spend such effort in getting a PhD just to destroy my industry.” While the problems I've addressed in this dissertation may seem small, they need to be recorded, documented and analyzed just as much as these larger problems do. Every death threat is sent from the top of an iceberg of microaggressions and entitlement—and that is what I've studied here—just a small portion of the large looming mass that's hiding underneath. This dissertation has examined games culture, which has become part of the foundation of everyday ignorance and systemic

inequality that supports the Alt-right celebrities that command our attention above the water.

This dissertation chronicles the interventions I've attempted to make into games culture in order to attack the cultural inaccessibility that I saw there. I began on an individual level with *Lady Hobbits*, then on a local level with the GI Janes, and then on a public level with my work at *First Person Scholar*. This text chronicles both my personal journey as a feminist in games doing activist work—from the first frustrations at the lack of discussion of gender in the games reading group in the Fall of 2012—all the way to being interviewed about the topic live on 13 different radio stations across Canada in November of 2016. But this dissertation also chronicles the raising of the stakes in feminist games activism, though this was not my intention at the outset. There was no Gamergate when I started any of the projects in this dissertation. When I made *Lady Hobbits*; it was just a response to the lack of diversity in my media. When we started GI Janes, it was a response to the lack of women at the Games Institute. When I joined *First Person Scholar*, I was simply trying to address the lack of diversity in both the FPS staff and submissions. Despite this, each of these things grew in relevance as the backlash to social justice in general grew. After all, Gamergate, the Alt-right, this culture war, are all a part of our culture. We have created, as Phillips puts it, “a culture in which Trolls thrive”:

Trolls may be destructive and callous; they may represent privilege gone berserk; they may be a significant reason why we can't have nice things online. But the uncomfortable fact is that trolls replicate behaviors and attitudes that in other contexts are actively celebrated (This is how the West was won!) or simply taken as a given (“Boys will be boys!”) Trolls certainly amplify the ugly side of mainstream behavior, but they aren't pulling their materials, chosen targets, or impulses from the ether. They are born of and fueled by the mainstream world—its behavioral mores, its corporate institutions, its

political structures and leaders—however much the mainstream might rankle at the suggestion (168-169).

We are also a culture where Gamergate thrives, where the Alt-right thrives, but also, thankfully, a culture where social justice continues to survive. And while I think things will get worse before they get better, I believe in the resilience of social justice movements. This is no longer about subcultures, or games culture, or gamers, or Gamers, or Gamergate. It's about a new kind of conservatism that has made doing anything genuine and earnest (being a feminist, fighting for social justice, fighting for class consciousness and economic equality) much, *much* more difficult than it was before. In that way, Gamergaters, SJWs, neo-Nazis, Trump supporters, feminists, and whomever are all easy targets for trolls: you are so much more vulnerable when you care about something, when you are trying to achieve something (no matter how horrible) than those who claim to care about nothing, for whom everything is funny, and nothing is taken seriously (Phillips 1). So how do we continue our work, in the face of conservative enmity, and in spite of the trolls. How do we fix this?

## **Solutions?**

The solution to online harassment isn't some sort of mass incarceration of online abusers. It's unlikely the systems we have, criminal or civil, will ever offer real solutions to online abuse. Nor is a government or corporate-regulated internet the answer, and I am by no means a proponent of the argument that online identity should be tied to our real identities. But I also want there to be *some, any*, sort of deterrent for abusers of online harassment. Allowing these abusers to continue to use platforms like Reddit, Twitter, YouTube, Patreon, Steam, Xbox Live, and Kickstarter is supporting the abuse. Especially when they profit off of that abuse, as many anti-feminist YouTubers do. Taking away their access to these platforms is not censorship,

but it is a real and effective deterrent. Let them yell into their self-made void of 8chan<sup>87</sup> all they want, just don't support their ability to yell directly at me or others, or to direct more and more yelling our way. As Quinn suggests, "restorative justice—justice that seeks to rehabilitate while keeping the focus on the needs of the people hurt—should be the priority above all else" (220).

I've had people say to me, "I wish my dissertation was relevant like yours is" but I truly wish mine weren't. I wish it was what I originally planned it to be: reflections on the worst parts of "culture war time" politics, "Gamergate-era" politics, with a conclusion that notes how things are better now. Instead I'm writing reflections on how things went from bad to worse, and how *I know* things will get worse still. But because of this, I guess some of my conclusions are obvious—diversity work, accessibility work, and social justice work are more important than ever and I hope that the place I can have the largest impact doing that work is in games. I hope that my concept of cultural inaccessibility is useful to future scholars for talking about games culture as well as other subcultures, and I hope the case studies I have provided here can be used to demonstrate how changes big and small can lead to progress within a group or subculture. Without a doubt, I know that not only FPS, but the Games Institute itself is a more feminist place because of my efforts—and I hope that these spaces only continue to become more accessible long after I'm gone. Most importantly, I hope that this dissertation demonstrates that the quickest way to make feminist change within an organization, a lab, or even a text, is to put women in positions of power as creators and decision-makers and allow them to create spaces that work for them. Give them titles, give them responsibilities, but also acknowledge the work that they do.

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<sup>87</sup> 8chan is an imageboard website similar to 4chan that was created in October 2013 as an alternative to 4chan that allowed for more "free speech" (O'Neill). Users who felt that the almost entirely unmoderated 4chan was too strict moved to 8chan. Many forums of 8chan are used to share child pornography or to discuss politics (O'Neill). Gamergate moved their central hub to 8chan in 2014 when discussion of Gamergate was banned from 4chan by its founder who had put anti-harassment rules into place (O'Neill).

Pay them. Cite them. Promote them. Furthermore, do not become complacent with the gender politics of a space just because you yourself are a feminist—there is always work that can be done to make your space more culturally accessible. Interrogate the structures in place behind them to reveal the underlying hegemony of men. The worst thing we can do is receive diversity training, or safe space training, call ourselves feminists, and then determine that the work is complete.

Solutions like “get more women in the games industry” and “get more women to play games” all feel reductive and under-ambitious considering how much matters have escalated. But despite everything, I’m not, as we say on the internet, all out of fucks. I still have *so many fucks to give* and that would be my one main solution to offer. I didn’t start the GI Janes or take over FPS in an attempt to gain anything. All the changes and initiatives we’ve made as feminists in games, came from giving a fuck, giving a fuck about a culture that did not want us, and that *did not give a fuck back*. The trolls do not and *will never* give any fucks, so we have to try our hardest to always *always* have fucks to give. To never let the trolls drain us until we are all out of fucks like they are.

## **Conclusions**

I started this chapter discussing my desire in 2012 to do “something,” whatever small thing I could do, to “challenge the toxicity of games culture.” That instinct to do something is motivated by a constant feeling that I’m never doing enough, and that there is nothing I can do, with my skills, to make the world a better place. I’ve never had the mental or emotional fortitude to be a surgeon, or a therapist, or a nurse, or even a lawyer. But I’m good at listening, at learning, at empathizing, at thinking, at caring, at making connections, and (I hope) at conveying my own experiences and the experiences of others. I hope to continue that work and I hope I will find and

convey some answers to the many “whys” that motivate me. These “whys” keep me reading the comments, keep me reading the news, and kept me writing this dissertation. Why do men threaten women online? Why do they join Gamergate? What makes them so angry? What makes them take it to the next level? What makes them doxx women? What takes you from 4chan to Charlottesville? What takes you from Reddit to Elliot Rodger?<sup>88</sup> What patterns indicate that a radicalized young man is going to make the leap from harassing women online to killing them? How far back can we track this anger? How has gaming culture insulated and supported this anger? How do you go from making YouTube videos about Gamergate, to stabbing your father? How do you go from assaulting your mother in an argument about video games, to driving your car into a crowd of protesters? How can we interrupt this radicalization process? Then there are the more personal questions that motivate me: how many of my students are Gamergaters? How many of them abuse women online? How many of them have sent a death threat? What can I say to them, show them, that will turn them around? How can I interrupt that anger with knowledge and stop it before it’s too late? How long can I do this research before I break?

I don’t believe we can attack this anger with love and positivity and I don’t think it will go away if we just don’t talk about it or ignore it. I think it will grow, I think it has grown substantially and I think it will continue to grow and I think we need to understand it. Maybe I’m entranced from staring into the void too long, but I think if we understand this brand of anger,

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<sup>88</sup> Rodger killed six people and injured fourteen more on May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2014 before killing himself. Rodger uploaded both a 107,000 word manifesto and a YouTube video online explaining his motivations which stemmed from his hatred for women, couples, and interracial couples despite he himself being of mixed race. His video outlined his ideal future which included putting women in concentration camps and letting them starve to death. Rodger detailed his violent and misogynistic beliefs online at length before the murders in various online forums as well as on his own blog. Rodger identified as an “incel,” short for involuntarily celibate, an internet community for adult virgins who blame women for their lack of sexual interaction. In some incel and MRA circles Rodger is seen as a hero who is highlighting what women have done to men by depriving them of sex (Wilkinson). Sadly, the recent attack on Toronto that killed 10 was committed in the name of Rodger. The killer posted “All hail the Supreme Gentleman Elliot Rodger!” on Facebook right before his attack (Swain).

this brand of abuse, we will be able to profile it, predict it, track it, and do *something* about it. Because sadly, the burden of identifying the problem, of solving the problem will fall to feminists, to the marginalized, and to the victims themselves. We need to do more than the FBI, who located abusers, and simply told them “not to do it again.” We need to do more than Twitter who, despite hemorrhaging users has banned only a few high profile white nationalist and abusers. We need to stop humanizing and giving platforms to neo-Nazis. We need to stop saying that there are “very fine people” on “both sides” in a war over the basic human rights of people of color.<sup>89</sup> We need to stop pretending that there *are* two sides. Most importantly, we need to stop justifying and making light of the abuse of others, and ourselves, online. We need to admit that online abuse is real abuse that takes place in real life and therefore it is a real problem. I don’t think I can solve this problem, I don’t think I can answer all these questions, but I know I can do *something*.

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<sup>89</sup> After the deadly white supremacist riots in Charlottesville President Trump did not condemn the actions of the neo-nazi and Alt-right participants, instead he said that he thought “both sides” were violent. When asked about the violence of the alt-right he said “what about the ‘alt-left’ that came charging at, as you say, the ‘Alt-right,’ do they have any semblance of guilt?” (Merica).

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# Appendix

## Timeline of Events

Red = Personal, Teal = GI event or GIG, Orange = FPS, Pink = GI Janes, Green = Lady Hobbits, Yellow = Relevant Events in Games Culture

### June 2011- September 2013

June 11, 2011: Revisions to Games Institute (GI) proposal approved by Senate. GI begins  
May 25, 2012: SSHRC Partnership Grant officially announced, confirming the beginning of IMMERSe and the founding of the GI  
May 18th 2012 - Tropes vs Women in Video Games Kickstarter is funded  
June 2012: Neil Randall calls meeting with Jason Hawreliak, Michael Hancock, and Kent Aardse to propose the start of a publication that will eventually become First Person Scholar (FPS)  
September 6th 2012 - My first day of the PhD  
September 24th 2012 - First G.I. meeting I attended  
October 9th 2012 - GIG (Games Institute Gathering) - Platform studies  
October 11th 2012 – GIG – Unknown Topic  
October 18th 2012- GIG - Planning podcasts  
October 25th 2012 - GIG - Talking about FPS  
October 31st 2012 - GIG Halloween play night at the CML  
November 1st 2012 - GIG - Theory reading group - critical code studies  
November 22nd 2012 - GIG –Theory reading group - games and the sublime - we play WiiU after the meeting  
December 5th 2012 - FPS's Launch  
December 6th 2012 - GIG – Theory reading group  
December 11th 2012 - I post about having a “women in games” conference in the GI Facebook group  
January 2013 – The article I wrote about *Twilight* went viral and I had to deal with online hate for the first time  
January 15th 2013 - I make a Facebook group to plan GI podcasts. 15 were proposed 4 were recorded, 0 were ever published  
January 21st 2013 - GIG - Bioshock  
January 30th 2013 - Elise and I attend the Waterloo Women's Wednesday talk about gender and games at the grad house  
February 2013- Zoe Quinn releases “Depression Quest” many members of the GI play it and love it  
February 25th 2013 - GIG - Topic was Metal Gear Solid and Hardt and Negri  
March 7th 2013 - First Tropes vs Women video is released  
March 11th 2013 - GIG - gender + Tropes vs Women  
March 11th 2013 - Meeting with Neil Randall to propose a conference that would become GI Janes  
March 2013 - Meeting with Shelley Hulan about applying for a SSHRC connection grant to fund the GI Janes conference  
May 23rd 2013- GI Janes conference planning meeting

March 25th 2013 - First GIG that was canceled due to lack of proposed attendees  
April 8th 2013 - GIG - Dystopia  
April 15th 2013- GIG - Paratext and games  
April 22nd 2013- GIG - Played 2 game jam games  
May 9th 2013 GIG – Event planning  
May 16<sup>th</sup> 2013 - GIG – Unknown Topic  
May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2013 - GIG – Unknown Topic  
May 30th 2013- GIG - Sex in Videogames  
June 2013 - Meghan Blythe Adams receives an email from Steve Wilcox about getting involved with FPS  
June 2013 - Steve Wilcox publishes his article about “Feed-Forward Scholarship” and middle state publishing.  
June 5th 2013 - I publish my first article with FPS  
June 13th 2013 - GIG - Watch new Tropes vs Women video- the topic was “brainstorm how we can adopt/critique her style” and make it into a piece for FPS  
June 20th 2013 - GIG - what happened at E3  
June 27th 2013 - GIG - First Person Shooters  
June 1st 2013 - I make official announcement about the GI Janes to the rest of the GI in the GI facebook group  
July 4th 2013 - GIG - reading group  
July 12th-14th 2013 – We make a public announcement of GI Janes. We hold a public panel to get feedback on what sort of events GI Janes should hold.  
July 18th 2013- GIG - We talk about how THAT Camp went  
July 25th 2013 - GIG - Theory reading group - Bioware  
July 26th 2013 - We meet with Charlotte Armstrong and start planning the first GI Janes events  
July 30th 2013 - I finish course work  
August 1st 2013 - GIG – Unknown topic  
August 5th- 2013 Aug 12th - Making Lady Hobbits  
August 8th -2013 GIG – Unknown topic  
August 12th 2013 - Released Lady Hobbits  
August 31st 2013- I arrange a field trip for the GI to go to the Game On exhibit in Toronto

## Sept 2013 - Sept 2014

September 2013 - Gerald Voorhees joins FPS as Faculty Advisor  
September 3rd 2013 - GIG AGM  
September 12th 2013 - First GIG of the school year at the grad house  
September 14th 2013 - Creation of the GI Janes Facebook group  
September 19th 2013 - First ever GI Janes event at the Rum Runner  
September 26th 2013 - GIG event planning meeting  
October 1st 2013 - GI Janes receive their first complaint for rumours of excluding men  
October 11th 2013 - GI Janes have a table at the Ada Lovelace Day celebrations in Kitchener  
October 23rd 2013 - GIG - Theory Group - The Sublime in Games  
October 31st 2013 - 2nd GI Janes Night - Halloween edition with costume contest  
November 28th 2013 - GIG - Event Planning  
December 5th 2013 - FPS's 1-year Birthday

January 7th 2013 - We record a GI Janes theme song for our podcasts

Jan 10th 2014 - Steve Wilcox emails us asking how we want GI Janes and FPS to work together  
I agree to come to some meetings

Jan 10th 2014 - We record our first and only GI Janes podcast about Gone Home

January 18th and 19th GI Janes have booth at TriCon and talk to the local community

January 19th 2014 - GI Janes hold TriCon Panel about the state of gender and games

January 19th 2014 - GI Janes hold game design workshop at TriCon

January 23rd 2014 - My first FPS meeting, extremely awkward, Elise comes but decides she doesn't want to come back, I decide I will.

January 28th 2014 - GIG - Video Game Play Night at the Grad House

February 11th 2014 – The last GIG

April 23rd 2014 - The first FPS article I helped edit is published

June 6th 2014 - I write my primary comprehensive exam

June 20th 2014 - I pass my oral comprehensive exam

July 22nd 2014 - I become an FPS “editor” but not to any section

July 24th 2014 - Judy Ehrentraut joins FPS

August 2014 - The infamous DiGRA Fishbowl takes place

August 18th 2014 - I attend my first FPS AGM and Steve Wilcox makes me editor of Commentaries. I have a heated argument at the bar with a few members of FPS where they are hesitant to see work on gender and games as game studies.

August 19th 2014 - I write to Steve Wilcox after the AGM concerned that other members do not see games culture as part of game studies and worried I don't fit in

August 19th 2014 - Steve Wilcox emails me back assuring me that he and I are on the same page and we start a dialogue about how to make FPS better

August 16th 2014 - Zoe Quinn's ex-boyfriend posts the essay now known as “The Zoe Post” and Gamergate has officially begun.

August 27th 2014 - Adam Baldwin names the movement that has been harassing Zoe Quinn  
Gamergate

## September 2014 - September 2015

September 1st 2014 - Gamergate starts to investigate academics at the DiGRA Fishbowl and editing the google docs used to take notes about the fishbowl i.e. “operation digging DiGRA”

September 4th 2014 – Steve Wilcox emails the staff about making a public statement against Gamergate

September 3rd-5th 2014 - FPS meets Alexandra Orlando, Betsy Brey and Chris Lawrence for the first time

September 5th 2014 - First time I tweeted in the Gamergate hashtag

September 4th 2014 – Steve Wilcox emails staffs saying that we should publically oppose Gamergate

September 4th-6th 2014 - The editors argue for 35 lengthy emails on if we should make a public statement about Gamergate and if so how

September 11th 2014 - We are contacted by UW security about Gamergate's Pastebin file that names many GI members including the GI Janes

September 17th 2014 - My first article about Gamergate goes up and we start getting comments from Gamergate

October 1st 2014 - My second article about Gamergate goes up - in this article I talk about shutting down the GI Janes website to work on FPS

October 7, 2014: GI moves into space in the building then called Blackberry 1, shortly to become East Campus 1

October 2014 - I suggest Chris Lawrence, Alexandra Orlando and Betsy Brey become the FPS copyeditors

October 2014 - Anita Sarkeesian cancels talk at Utah State university after "a Montreal Massacre style attack will be carried out against the attendees, as well as the students and staff at the nearby Women's Center"

October 2014 - Brianna Wu and her husband flee their home after increasingly worrying death and rape threats

October 6th 2014 - We make the FPS Facebook group because we are drowning in internal emails about Gamergate

October 8th 2014 – Katherine Cross' Gamergate article goes up

November 8th 2014 - FPS starts receiving brute force attacks as unknown individuals try to gain access to the website. These attacks continue to this day but the start coincides with Gamergate coverage on FPS

December 5th 2014 - FPS's 2nd Birthday

January 6th 2015 – Steve Wilcox is away at a conference and I run my first FPS meeting

Feb 4th 2015 - GI Janes night at the GI

March 3rd 2015 - GI Janes run a game design workshop for 100ish Rec and Leisure students

March 4th 2015 - Steve Wilcox and I meet to talk about restructuring FPS he surprises me by asking me to take over from him in the Fall

March 4th 2015 - GI Janes Night at the GI

March 4th 2015- I start planning a new dissertation that aligns more closely with taking over FPS and joining game studies

March 7th 2015 - I officially accept the position of EIC

March 10th 2015 - Steve Wilcox and I meet with Neil Randall and plan to implement new structure and positions for FPS

March 24th 2015 - FPS AGM - Neil Randall unveils that I will be taking over as well as new structure that moves younger editors up the chain creating redundancies for existing editors

April 1st 2015 - GI Janes Night at the GI

June 2015 - Jennifer Whitson joins FPS as the third faculty advisor

June 2nd - 5th 2015 - My first time attending the Canadian Game Studies Association

June 5th-7th 2015 - Huge Gamergate backlash to CGSA my twitter is unusable

June 8th 2015 - Video "a sinking scholarship" posted about FPS and DiGRA attracting some additional attention from Gamergate

## September 2015-September 2016

October 7th 2015 - GI Janes Night

November 1st 2015 - GI Janes Night

December 5th 2015 - FPS' 3rd Birthday

January 8th 2016- GI Janes Night

March 2nd 2016 – Last GI Janes Night

March 11th 2016 - I find out I've won SSHRC storytellers with my video about FPS

April 5th 2016 – Faculty advisors and I conduct the EIC interviews to find my replacement

May 20th 2016 – Alexandra Orlando and I attend Smash Sisters event

May 30th 2016 - Am on CBC Ideas panel at Congress

May 31st 2016 - I win the second and final round of SSHRC Storytellers

June 30<sup>th</sup> 2016 - Interviewed with CBC about upcoming Zelda, receive slew of hateful comments

July 27th 2016- I publish my outgoing editorial. I am no longer EIC of FPS

August 2016 - Brianna Wu hires a full-time staff to document her harassment and threats which are still ongoing

## **September 2016- September 2018**

September 1 2016 – Alexandra Orlando Takes over as EIC of FPS

October 19th 2016 - Start interviewing with CBC Ideas for documentary about my research

November 21st 2016 - Give my talk about middle state publishing at FPS at SSHRC Impact awards

November 30th 2016 - I do 15 live radio interviews at the CBC with different CBC stations across the country about Gamers, the American election and the Alt-right.

November 30th 2016 - My CBC documentary comes out

December 3rd 2016 - White supremacist YouTube channel publishes video about my work with the CBC which receives 100s of sexist comments, mostly about my appearance

December 5th 2016 - FPS's 4th Birthday

February 2017- FBI releases documents about Gamergate

August 2017 - FPS AGM transition of power from Alexandra Orlando to Betsy Brey

November 2017 - I am interviewed for the NBC video and start receiving more harassment from the Alt-right

July 2018 – I successfully defend this dissertation

## Sample Interview Questions - FPS

How did you get involved with FPS?

Why did you want to be part of FPS?

What was FPS like when you started?

What is FPS like now?

How do you think FPS has changed?

What do you hope to get out of your time with FPS/what did you get out of your time with FPS?

Do you see FPS as a feminist organization?

How do you think FPS can cultivate more diversity in its staff and submissions?

How do you think Gamergate and online harassment have impacted FPS?

Have they impacted you personally? How?

Do you think game studies is male dominated?

What is it like to be a woman in game studies?

Do you think it is harder to be a woman in game studies?

Do you think it's harder for women to conduct their research because of online and in game harassment?

What is it like to be a woman who writes about games?

Do you think you would use social media more or less or differently if your gender was different?

Do you ever think about leaving game studies?

Do you think FPS is making a difference in game studies?

How did having a physical office in the games institute impact FPS?

How did having official meeting space in the GI impact FPS?

### **Sample Interview Questions - GI Janes**

How did you get involved with GI Janes? Why did you want to attend?

Tell me about your experiences at the GI Janes play nights.

Did you ever have a negative experience at GI Janes?

If so, can you describe it?

Do you ever feel nervous or scared to play games in front of other people?

If so why?

Do you ever feel nervous or scared to play games at the Games Institute?

If so, Why?

Do you feel like some bodies are more accepted in spaces of game play?

Where do you feel most comfortable playing games?

Can you think of a time in your life where you felt uncomfortable or unwelcome while playing games?

Does an all women play space appeal to you?

If so, why?

Do you think all women play spaces are important for the community at the GI?

Do you feel like the GI Janes play nights were an accepted practice at the GI?

Did you ever hear someone complain about the lady's nights?

Do you think you would game in group settings more or less if your gender was different?

Do you call/consider yourself a gamer?

Do you call/consider yourself a feminist?