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Summary of

**Gender Representation and  
Cultural Myth in Video Games  
and the Gaming Community**

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**Key words**

Computer games, gamer culture, cultural myth, gender, hegemony, masculinity, femininity, subculture, ideology, cultivation theory, queer theory, gaze theory, performance theory, media studies.

## I-1 The Background, Social Relevance, and Need for Gaming Studies

This work explores the role of gender ideology in the video gaming subculture. The study looks at the signifiers of masculinity and femininity in the gaming community and how behaviors and practices in the community reinforce its hegemonic gender ideology as well as signs of resistance against this hegemony. It also explores how gaming subculture is viewed vis a vis the gender ideology of the larger culture and how this impacts gender ideology in gaming culture. Specifically, this work proposes the hypothesis that mainstream culture views the members of gaming culture as violating established gender norms, especially the stereotyping of gamers as masculine failures. In reaction to this, gaming culture has developed and demands adherence to a gender ideology emphasizes sharp divergence between masculinity and femininity, with the aim of empowering gamers to prove their masculinity or, at least, escape to an idealized fantasy of that masculinity. The work draws on cultural studies theory to investigate this claim and references texts from several facets of gaming culture, namely video game content, game journalism reviews and news, and comments by individual gamers in online public spaces such as forums and in game chat, relating these to cultural studies theories about ideology and hegemony. The hypothesis is looked at from a variety of points of view using a mixed methodology including statistical content analysis of game content, forum content and relevant public content.

If such a large segment of the population is investing such a large amount of time, money, and effort into them, then it is reasonable to conclude that games play an important role in the day to day cultural and social life of Americans and, therefore, the study of games is necessary to get a full understanding of that life. Further, the status of something as entertainment, does not invalidate it as an object of study, as entertainment and leisure play a major role in the human condition and the shaping of thought. this work makes the argument that video games are important not in spite of but specifically *because* they can serve as a form of escapism, an embodiment of the hopes and dreams of the players.

## I-3 Literature Review: Ways of Thinking about Gaming and Gender

Many thinkers and scholars have proposed paradigms for ways of thinking about and approaching gender and cultural values, as well as the significance of media, though admittedly theories specifically about video games are rarer. By examining the ways these paradigms overlap, play off of, and influence one another it is possible to construct a train of thought of increasing specificity that concludes in the in-depth consideration of how gender ideologies function in the subculture of gaming while, in response to pressure from hegemonic society outside the subculture has created its own hegemony that privileges straight cis males by defining them against the Other of women, gays, and others who do not conform to socially accepted gender conventions and how this system is reinforced though the use of the media. However, as video games are perceived by some to

function differently than other forms of media, it is also necessary to look at whether or not these theories are applicable to gaming as well as ways in which the nature of the media might impact their application.

In order to look at any cultural phenomenon, it is necessary to understand the principles of ideology and cultural myth. The basic premise behind these lines of thought is that the conventions of human society, any human society, are rarely based on universal principles, such as biology. Rather, they are specific to that time and place, created and maintained by humans. However, the majority of people who live under these social structures and beliefs are unaware of this fact. Through the process of representation certain values, actions, or even people, can be coded as good or bad, proper or improper. Therefore, it is important to recognize and understand the representational code. This allows one to recognize why one is being shown a given image and what the creator of that image wants the viewer to take away from it. Armed with this knowledge the viewer can make an informed choice whether to accept the image at face value or impose a different reading on it, based on their own values which may run counter to the social ideology. Unfortunately, uncovering the constructedness of an ideology can be a complicated process due to the power of representation described above. This is especially true in the modern world where mass communication has brought about the cross pollination of cultural myths.

It can be argued that the media forms one of the preeminent institutions in the modern world for the transmission of cultural or subcultural ideologies and standards of conduct. New media serves a particularly important function in terms of the legitimization of these ideas to the next generation given the increasing adoption of technology, as shown in the previous chapter. Media culture is an especially potent weapon of ideology because it is based on pleasure. People consume media in order to obtain enjoyment, something especially true of video games which are frequently perceived as being solely for enjoyment and often not very reputable enjoyment at that. Presenting ideological values in an enjoyable package, makes them more likely to be adopted as the one consuming the media may come to associate the pleasure of the consumption with the ideology. It also eases the path of naturalization as the pleasure may distract attention from the fact that the media is presenting specific values.

Further, media, especially forms of media that are considered “low brow” such as video games are particularly insidious as ideological tools as they are often seen as beneath the concern of arbiters of cultural taste and, sometimes, even of morals. This is an important perspective as the gamer subculture frequently tries to walk both sides of this line. As will be shown, the subculture protests against the popular view that games have no redeeming value, can never be considered art, and serve primarily as



an escapist fantasy for awkward adolescents. But, at the same time, members of gamer culture attempt to deflect any kind of social criticism about games, like the claims that they promote violence or sexism, by denying that video games possess any real-world efficacy, thus denying them the social relevance that might win them more widespread respect. This idea that the process of play is free from ideas of right and wrong can be seen reflected in the argument that an enjoyable game is exempt from moral censure because of the very fact of the enjoyment, the value of the play provided, renders all other concerns void. This lack of scrutiny regarding the ideological messages in media can be especially problematic if the ideological values promote negative or limiting ideas about certain groups. In *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the margins of gamer culture*, Adrienne Shaw expresses the power of representation to silence or shape our perceptions of marginalized groups. This shows that media is much more than entertainment. It has the ability to influence values through representation. It is important to emphasize again that ideology frequently works by making people feel good about adhering to it, not just by embedding it in forms of entertainment but also by boosting people's self-esteem and sense of moral rightness.

To understand fully how a society, ideology, or symbolic universe functions, it is important to consider how such an institution handles threats to its social construction of reality. As has already been discussed, an important element in the process of ideological formation and reinforcement is the sense of comfort and security it provides to members of society. It does this by defining certain things as definitively bad, as outside the bounds of social acceptability. By identifying as not those things, the receiver is able to come to the conclusion that they are, in fact, good. This is the basis of the concept of the Other, where a person or a group defines themselves by what they are not and what they define themselves against is perceived as having negative qualities. Therefore, since they are not that, they are better and can take pleasure in their feeling of superiority. Closely related to the idea of the Other is the practice of stereotyping. The idea here is to render the outsiders who do not conform to social ideology non-threatening by rendering them exaggeratedly ridiculous. In this way, the receiver is granted a two-fold reassurance: that they themselves are safely on the inside and that the forces on the outside are unable to mount a serious threat.

However, for ideology to work, it is necessary for the receiver to believe with certainty that they are on the correct side of the binary divide. Since the receiver is encouraged to identify with the normal, dominant, superior side of the binary, they have a vested interest in maintaining the system. This also harks back to the central principle of cultural myth, the idea of naturalization. Naturalization and social consensus serve to reinforce one another by promoting a view that the ideological values are

both right and individually beneficial. In other words, stereotypes create a division between normal society and the Other but this separation then creates a sense of unity between the members individual members of each of the divided groups. This is also the way, as mentioned earlier, that ideologies can play a role in the formation of identity as the system of the other frequently places people into specific groups, which can then be used as a type of identity formation.

However, there is one set of binaries that is particularly complicated and problematic for ideology to negotiate: the binary of male versus female. In many ways, this pairing seems to function like a normal binary. Each of the categories largely defines itself against the other, as having the qualities the other lacks, one category, male, is perceived by the ideology as being superior to the other, and both have clearly defined rules as to what constitutes proper behavior, all of which will be explored in detail later. Now, though, it is important to look at how the idea of male and female is different from other binaries. This is because, at least historically, both categories were necessary for any given society to perpetuate itself. Given that women are needed for reproduction, they cannot be rendered fully Other and outside the way, at various points in history, blacks and communists have been. This is because, while neither blacks nor communists are necessary for a society to exist, and many historical societies have existed without them, it is very difficult to conceive of a society without women.

This also suggests some of the ways in which the dominant system attempts to preserve control in the face of this difficulty. Essentially, it falls back on the base component of cultural myth, naturalization. By perpetuating the myth that men and women are fundamentally different, it creates a basis for psychological separation between the two, which then also serves as a justification for physical separation. When exploring how the male/female binary functions, it is important to keep in mind the special status of this pairing and the fact that women represent a special threat to male centered ideology due to the fact that they can never be completely removed from the system. Like all cultural myths, the categories of male and female are regulated by ideological values for the sake of an ordered and stable society but, through the process of naturalization, this becomes unconscious so that those who follow the cultural rules regarding masculine and feminine are not aware they are doing so. If our ideas about gender and sexuality are simply a reflection of the natural order, rather than something constructed internally, than, even if they cause suffering or give one group power over another, it serves no purpose to question them or try to dismantle them as they are perceived to be governed by a force beyond human control.

It is important to keep in mind that this is true on both sides of the coin. Much attention has been paid to the ideological views and stereotypes regarding the groups on the “outside” of the binary

as these groups are disadvantaged in terms of power relations and certain groups like feminists want to free them from their oppression and disadvantage. However, ideology presents rules of conduct and standards for proper and improper behavior to both groups in a binary. In fact, in some ways, following the proper standards of conduct may be considered even more essential to the group on the inside as failure to do so might result in the loss of an individual's position in the privileged group. Despite their constructed nature, rules of masculine conduct have real world efficacy in that men must follow them or risk the loss of their status as masculine. Further, despite the privileged status of men as a group, it is necessary to remember that the ideological values of masculinity may be as restrictive and damaging to individual men as those of femininity are to individual women.

To understand how these concepts play out in a real world context, as well as to lay the foundation for looking at gender myths in gaming culture, it is useful to look first at the gender myths in operation in mainstream American society. One of the most basic gender myth here, the one that informs all others is that males and females are “fundamentally different” at a deep, untouchable, biological level. Men and women simply think differently, feel differently, want different things from relationships, from life, and, even, from their computer games and that these differences are hardwired and unable to be changed. As with most ideologies, this is coupled with the corresponding belief that this state of things is natural and good and, consequently, pressure is put on those who do not conform to the biological differences presented in the myth. However, this could mean many things, for example, that there are significant differences between the average man and the average woman, but, due to individual temperament, hormonal levels, etc. certain individuals may manifest traits that usually belong to the other gender. It could also mean that biological differences are minor to non-existent but that the differences are still very real due to social conditioning. Even though many of the trends of male and female behavior described below are based on actual observation or scientific studies, this does not mean that the differences observed were due to hardwired, unchangeable biology. One of the lenses through which these ideas will be explored here is assumptions on how males and females respond to video games or what they desire from them

The above leads to the aspect of cultural gender myths probably most central to this work, the presumed divide between male aggression and ambition and female gentle nurturing and passivity, specifically that cultural gender myths grant permission for aggression and ambition to males or even require it of them but deny this same permission to females (and conversely require gentleness and passivity of women but deny permission for these behaviors to men). Later chapters will explore in detail how this particular gender myth contributes to the idea that video games are a “male” medium

and the subsequent gender policing this generates, as well as the perceived need for men to defend “their” turf in terms of video game content. Here, only the broad strokes of the myth will be covered concerning how they affect female behavior and perceptions of femininity, even in a “post-women's liberation” society. Since a large portion of gaming activity is focused on winning this causes complications regarding women's interaction with the medium. Some have even tried to categorize video games as a male medium specifically because of its focus on winning since girls are known to not be interested in winning.

However, if it is true that these ideas about men and women are the product of culture, rather than nature, then some individuals will have a personal inclination to act contrary to the culturally established binary. This in and of itself calls the ideology into question and so, the ideology must make efforts to discredit this potential evidence against it. In particular, it is important to look at how the ideological system deals with situations where men and women do not act in accordance with the cultural myths about gender, especially where they attempt to break the binary by taking on characteristics culture has decreed belong to the other gender.

One of these sites of cultural anxiety regarding gender binaries, as mentioned in the previous chapter, is the topic of sexual orientation. It is part of the modern western cultural ideology of proper behavior that men will engage in relationships with women and vice versa, not with members of their own gender and those who do not conform to this expectation are designated as Other. In addition to removing an incentive to follow gender binaries, alternative sexual orientations can also provide an active encouragement to violate them for the exact reason that heterosexual relations may serve to reinforce gender binaries. This happens when non-heterosexual relationships are operated along the same lines as heterosexual relationships. For example, if, in a relationship between two men, one man acts the part of the woman, then he will be behaving exactly opposite to the way a man is meant to behave. If, on the other hand, neither man acts as a woman then, in a way, both are violating cultural gender expectations since, as explained above, men are expected to exercise dominance. However, both cannot simultaneously exercise dominance.

This is concerning enough from an ideological perspective when applied to homosexuality but when applied to other more subtle and complex permutations of gender identity and sexual orientation, it becomes even more problematic for naturalized cultural myths. In the case of bisexuality, there is the added complication that the person in question may conform to cultural expectations some of the time and violate them at other times, playing directly into the fear discussed earlier of hidden deviance. Then there is the further concern that, if people of alternative sexual orientations can violate

societal ideas about gender, perhaps seemingly “normal” heterosexuals could do so as well. Specifically, Butler presents the idea that heterosexuality serves as a stabilizing force for gender as it serves as a basis for a person to construct their identity in line with social expectations, specifically, that a person, should have a female body, act in accordance with social perceptions of femininity, and be attracted to men, or the opposite, have a male body, behave according to social rules of masculinity, and be attracted to women.

The maintenance of uniform gender identity is so important because of the asymmetrical relationship between men and women mentioned above. If it becomes clear that a significant number of individuals are not one hundred percent male or female according to cultural ideas on the topic, then it becomes increasingly difficult to determine who receives the privileged male position in the unequal binary. This creates a circular logic that argues that real men will be attracted to women but only to real women, that is women who behave in a feminine manner, and real women will behave in a feminine manner because real women are also straight and, therefore want to attract real men, who are only interested in feminine women etc. etc. The cultural myth is that “proper” women will want the most masculine of men and vice versa. Therefore, a man who accepts a woman with masculine qualities is seen as “settling,” as admitting that he is not good enough to get something “better,” which would result in a loss of social standing. However, to admit one prefers women with masculine traits would be even more detrimental as desiring a masculine woman is seen as only marginally more sanctioned than desiring a man and may, in fact, be seen as a cover, perhaps on a subconscious level, for doing so.

If ideology succeeds in fully naturalizing the cultural myths it wishes to maintain then, at least to some extent, they will become self-perpetuating due to the sense of shame people will feel over their “unnatural” behavior. Thus, it is not only the fear of physical violence or even of real world consequences like the loss of a job, that can lead people to attempt to conceal or repress their alternative gender identities and sexual orientations but an internal sense of shame or self-hatred. This stems from the fact that they have internalized the naturalization of society's values and so feel that there must be something “wrong” with them because of their desire to act contrary to those values.

This is directly applicable to video games which started out as the province a small marginalized group and, over time have certainly been used as a scapegoat for various social woes, such as lack of communication skills in young people or growing rates of violence. It is true that now, as has already been noted, over half the population plays video games. However, despite this fact, it still preserves its identity as a marginalized subculture. Given its mass appeal, gaming is no longer a

marginalized element in society. However, its marginalized nature is now part of the commodity. Game publishers are selling not just the physical game but the idea of belonging to a subculture, specifically, an angry, rebellious, marginalized subculture. In mainstream society, subcultures become the other, the thing to measure oneself against and feel good about not being. Thus, video games are branded as “low brow” entertainment as a way of policing the boundaries between their non-hegemonic messages and the rest of society.

Significantly, individuals inside of a subculture can also be invested in this policing of boundaries between the subculture and society at large. This is because of the need of the larger symbolic universe to merge deviant elements back into its social construction of reality. For this reason, member of a subculture can fear that failure to reinforce this boundary will result in them being subsumed back into mainstream culture. On a more immediate level, the fact that society as a whole brands members of deviant subcultures with lower status as a way of neutralizing the threat the pose causes members of those subcultures to resent and further reject the greater society. These two intertwined elements of resentment of low social status and the feeling that the space to escape that is under threat are key components in the conceptualization of gamer identity as chapter II-1 will explore.

Having explored how mainstream society views gaming culture, it is now necessary to look at the subculture from the inside, keeping in mind that subcultures function as their own microcosms of culture with their own, myths, ideologies, and hegemonies. At first glance, the cultural myths about gender present in gaming culture seem quite similar to those of mainstream society in terms of the relative degree of agency, aggression, sexuality, etc. permitted to males and females. However, in some ways, gaming culture shows and even stronger division between the masculine and the feminine, both in terms of how different genders are physically portrayed in games and in the range of behavior considered acceptable both on and off the computer. This is particularly striking because, as shown in the previous chapter, gaming culture lags behind mainstream culture regarding what is acceptable for different genders. In fact, in some ways, as the events involving Anita Sarkeesian and other victims of gaming harassment show, the gaming community not only actively resists change, but sometimes even seems to move to police gender more strictly in response to the wider culture relaxing its restrictions.

A possible theory as to why this might be is because, as shown above, mainstream culture defines gamers as unmanly and, therefore, not in accordance with acceptable ideas about gender expression and, to counteract this, the gaming community embraces hyper strict gender divisions and exaggerated versions of traditional gender ideas and aesthetics. Again, it is useful to look at this as a form of negotiated hegemony. Here, the exaggerated gender roles are part of the hegemonic ideology

in the gaming culture and, as with all hegemonies, there are voices of protest and the dominant culture must induce consent, if it wishes to maintain its control over the culture. The majority of this work will explore the process of this hegemonic struggle, including the tactics the dominant gaming culture uses to maintain its position, including intimidation, harassment, shaming, portraying strict gender portrayals as empowering, and a form of negotiation in which individuals are allowed to deviate from gender expectations in some controlled way but, in turn are required to conform in other aspects of gender. However, in order to do this effectively, it is necessary, to establish a theoretical framework for how to examine gender in the gaming community, taking into account a wide variety of representational and decision-making elements. Gaze theory and gender performance theory appear ideal for this purpose but as they were not originally created for use with gaming media, it is necessary to first consider their applicability in this context.

Many voices in game studies are quick to point out that games are not the same as films or other media, claiming interactivity as the key element of difference. The idea of preferred reading is directly connected to the level of interactivity in the game or the level of control the player has. This idea of a preferred reading is important to keep in mind since some theorists, such as Kerzner, argue that as long as elements of a game are optional or alternatives are provided, the game cannot be considered a form of social commentary or influence. However, this work takes the approach that if, as Shaw argues, games contain preferred readings where certain options or actions are encouraged or incentivized, then analyzing and critiquing games based on those elements is a valid and productive approach.

Krezner claims gaze theory is not valid for use in analyzing video game because of the fact that the player frequently has control of the camera in game and therefore, the camera behaviors associated with the male gaze in films do not exist unless the player chooses to create them. However, this reasoning is flawed as female characters in games can be designed, clothed and animated specifically to appeal to a male gaze regardless of where the camera is pointing and, in addition, games will frequently limit or remove player control of the camera during some or all of the game or, conversely, provide incentives for players to use the camera in certain ways. The most obvious example of this, is the use of cut scenes, where the player loses all control over the camera, as well as their character and a scripted scene plays out with no player input, just as it would in a movie. In addition, even in regular game play situations, there are frequently limits on the player's control of the camera, as many games have built in programming that instructs the camera to zoom in or out a preset points as they player directs it to pan around the screen or, more significantly to this topic, in a circle around their character. Finally, even when a player does control the camera, the game can still incentivize them to use that control in a way

that creates a male gaze.

The other theory Krezner discusses, gender performance theory, comes from Judith Butler's 1990 publication *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. The basic idea of this theory is that categories of gender identities are not something determined by nature, but are constructed by society, which ties it in very closely to Hall's theory of cultural myths. In addition, Butler argues that a person's individual gender is determined by their choosing to take on, act out, or otherwise “perform” aspects of a given gender. Thus, what makes a person male is their decision, conscious or otherwise, to behave in a way that society defines as male. However, none of this means that Butler intends to downplay the very real influence that gender wields as there is no “real” gender, gender performance is the reality and, further, that while cultural ideal about gender are artificial constructions, they still have real world consequences and, therefore, so do people's decisions about how to perform what gender a fact that Butler does not hesitate to acknowledge in her writing. Thus, from its inception, gender performance theory has embedded in it the idea that, although gender is a cultural construction created by performance, even when society does not acknowledge this fact, performance can be forced, and compelled to follow sanctioned binary lines by social pressure and consequences.

In addition to the fact that presenting gender performance theory as a-political, not only disregards Butler's original intent, and is literally impossible based on her idea that the mere act of performance undercuts cultural myths about gender, there is also the very relevant question of how much gender performance is actually happening in video games. Remember that even the least restrictive of open world or sandbox games are still vastly more restrictive than the real world or even a table-top RPG, where a person can literally make any choice they can imagine about how they want to conceive of or present their gender. Even if choices about gender are limited by social pressures, it is still physically possible for a person to make choices outside of those constraints, even if there would be serious consequences for doing so. In a video game, on the other hand, where certain choices about gender are literally impossible in the context of the game world it is a fair question to ask if actions taken in that world actually count as gender performance.

Even if, despite the limits of player agency in gender related issues in games, we still view games as a site of gender performance, the claim that gender in games is devoid of political significance and not a statement on the worth of certain genders does not hold up. Given that an overwhelming number of game protagonists are heterosexual males who adhere to traditional cultural values about masculinity, it seems clear that certain iterations of gender *are* privileged over others in



the gaming community. Krezner's argument that it is a kind of artistic experience, rather than a political statement to play the role of a man in a video game is undercut by the fact that, while women and gay men are routinely asked take on an in-game role contrary to their gender and/or sexual orientation, heterosexual men are very rarely asked to do so. Further, it is not simply the fact that the majority of game characters happen to be heterosexual men. This is a deliberate choice by game publishers who resist creating protagonists of any other type. Game publishers are going to great lengths to avoid asking players to take on the role of either a woman or a gay man as they feel their consumer base, rather than seeing this as an opportunity for artistic performance, as Krezner describes, would see it as in some way undercutting their real world identity and feel “awkward” as a result. The fact that efforts are being made to avoid asking heterosexual men to do something that is routinely required of women and gays shows that the portrayal of gender in games is certainly not devoid of value judgment.

## Methodology and Research Plan

The remainder of the work going forward explores the hypothesis that **representations of and attitudes towards gender in the gaming community are shaped by the fact that gaming is socially perceived as an outsider subculture, particularly one where the participants do not meet the mainstream standards of masculinity. This causes the subculture to push back by defining its own brand of masculinity with the result that the subculture resists incursion by external forces that import outside values and jeopardize the internal culture that has been created.** Because this idea is so complicated and multifaceted, spanning many aspects of a rich subculture the most effective approach in attempting to establish the validity of such a hypothesis may be to break it down into smaller parts and look at each part individually. If evidence exists for the validity of each of the smaller parts, this can be used to interpolate the validity of the larger hypothesis. For this reason, the second part of the work will approach the topic via three supplemental hypothesis that will look at the role of gender in the gaming community on the inter-player level, the intra-player level, and via large scale community practices, in an attempt to show how each of these serves to reinforce gender binaries and enable the empowerment of traditional masculinity.

Chapter II-1 presents the supplemental hypothesis that **games have, historically and into the present day, been defined by mainstream culture as a whole as un-masculine and gaming culture attempts to resist this by defining gamer identity in a way that involves the performance of hyper-masculinity. In particular, gaming representations and gaming practices facilitate players**

**performance of masculinity through the attraction to approved objects of desire and the rejection of disallowed objects of desire, allowing them to more effectively define themselves against the Other of female and gay.** In chapter II-2 evidence is presented regarding the supplemental hypothesis that **video games fulfill an important role as tools of fantasy and empowerment. However, games are frequently designed so that they only allow the player to fulfill fantasies of gender normativity, reinforce a strong binary and glorify traditional masculinity.** Finally, chapter II-3 addresses the supplemental hypothesis that **society is currently in the process of breaking down gender binaries which has led to a perception among traditional gamers that game space needs to be protected as one of the few arenas left where one is free to perform hyper-masculinity. However, this breakdown of gender binaries has also lead to an increasing influx of individuals into game space who do not identify as straight cis males, with the result that traditional gamers have resorted to measures such as compartmentalizing these new comers, regendering them, or even subjecting them to harassment to drive them away, in order to preserve game space as an arena for the sole performance and celebration of traditional hyper-masculinity.** By looking at each of these supplemental hypotheses individually, it is possible to gain a fuller understanding of the main hypothesis regarding the role of gender in the gaming sub-culture. Showing that this perceptions of gender exists inside the fantasies available to players, in the behavior between or among individuals or small groups of players, and in community wide movements, is an important step towards confirming gender binaries and masculinity play in gaming.

II-1 Geek Cred, Masculine Cred: Gaming, Identity, and Objectification As a subculture, gaming does not exist in a vacuum, but must contend with the attitudes and perceptions regarding it in the larger culture. While it is true that many subcultures are marginalized, at least to some extent, gaming certainly has a long history of marginalization. In addition, the marginalization of gaming by mainstream culture is particularly relevant to this work as the specific way in which gamers are marginalized is heavily gendered. The mainstream social idea of gamers is closely tied into the stereotype of the nerd or geek This sums up many of the common social perceptions of gamers, their obsession with machines, specifically computers, their social awkwardness, their disassociation from sex and physical activity, and their male gender. The interesting thing is that none of these qualities, except maybe the social awkwardness, are inherently negative but are heavily coded as such by society . Since nerds are specifically defined as male, the contempt displayed towards them can be seen as directly tied into their failure to be “appropriately” masculine, especially their lack of

physicality shown by their lack of interest in or success at “manly” activities like sex and athletics which is further compounded by the fact that, instead of trying to get better at these things, they waste their time on non-physical activities like academics or video games.

Equally important to the perception of nerds as masculine failure is their perceived inability to attract women. All of the above serve to firmly establish the connection in popular imagination between the nerd, and related identities, including gamers, and being feminine or gay, which is also firmly established in the popular imagination as not appropriate for “real men.” Since one is expected to “grow out of” gaming, this suggests another way that gamers are not “real men”--because they are juvenile, boys, not men, an idea echoed in the confessions of former nerds. This ambiguity gamers feel towards themselves also manifests as ambivalence or even outright hostility towards other gamers. The fact that gamers themselves draw on these stereotypes to one-up and attack each other serves as a powerful testament to the extent to which they have internalized them and how deeply they are effected by them.

Perhaps because of the social perception of gamers as examples of “failed masculinity,” the gaming community seems to feel the need to inscribe its own set of exacting standards that in many ways, echoes traditional standards of masculinity, as if to reassure members of the community, if no one else, that these stereotypes are false. One of the ways it attempts to do this is through the linking of gaming with the traditional masculine activities of warfare and sports. Not surprisingly, these form two highly popular themes for video game content. Statistics for 2019 report sports and first person shooter as the fifth and fourth most popular genres of games respectively. In addition, the third most popular genre is battle royale which frequently contains sports and/or military themes as well (Jones, 2019). But the connection extends far beyond the material inside games so that sport and war become metaphors for the practice of gaming itself. Kocurek makes the connection between sports and gaming more explicit through the prevalence of competition and score-keeping. This rubric for “quantifiable gaming success” also provides an important component of gamer identity as it provides a measurable way to establish whether or not one is “sufficiently skilled” to qualify as a gamer.

One of the ways gamers resist the social marginalization society thrusts upon them, is by creating an exclusionary, elitist community, access to which is strictly controlled by those on the inside. This gives gamers a sense of worth because, despite their broader social ostracism, they get the ego boost of belonging to what they have, essentially, framed as an exclusive club, and they get the sense of power that comes from the ability to deny others access to that club. This, naturally, has profound repercussions on the concept of gamer identity as members of the gaming community attempt to police

access to the club and establish the grounds on which someone may be accepted or denied. These last qualities related directly to the performative aspect of identity which Shaw mentions and to what in the gaming community is commonly referred to as “geek cred.” Put simply, geek cred is one's ability to prove one's seriousness about the medium and the community to others. This can take the form of displaying actual feats of prowess during game play in a public setting (either in person or online) but more often is shown through verbal or written displays of knowledge of the type Shaw's interviewees describe. Both methods point to the importance of the social aspect of gaming. Without an audience of community members to judge one's performance, the establishment of geek cred and hence the validity of one's membership in the community is impossible.

As has already been expressed in this work and will be explored in greater detail later, coding traits such as an enthusiasm for violence or the will to power as specifically male carries its own set of problems. However, it is also the case that society does code these traits as masculine and as such, creates a gender bias in concepts of gamer identity and the ability to perform geek cred. Another place where gender plays a role in gamer identity is through the concept of hardcoreness, which denotes seriousness and intensity. However, this encompasses more than simply playing games well or being knowledgeable about them, but also involves playing the right games and playing them in the right way. Just as players can be designated as hardcore, games and gaming practices can also be hardcore or not. A player who devotes a significant amount of time to a game that is not considered hardcore is, by extension, also not hardcore, even if they can display a high level of mastery in every aspect of that game. While not every fighting game includes the fountains of blood and graphic fatalities for which the *Mortal Kombat* games are famous, even the most mild of these games depict characters punching and kicking each other, picking up their opponents and slamming them to the ground. These kinds of actions are seen as more visceral and intense and, therefore, more hardcore, than maneuvering troops on the battlefield from a safe distance.

Another aspect of games being hardcore is actually not related to the games themselves but to the communities that grow up around them. Communities that demand a higher level of mastery in game play or which engage in a high level of verbal violence (though the two things may be connected) are perceived as more hardcore than those that do not. This has the effect of actually encouraging gaming communities to engage in harassment and verbal violence as this provides a way for them to increase their hardcore status. The first-person shooter genre, frequently viewed as the “most hardcore” of game genres relies on a similar blend of graphic violence and harsh verbal interactions between players to maintain its status. Some have even gone so far as to claim that people who do not

play shooters cannot be real gamers (Kubik, 2010, p 58). It is worth noting that, despite the greater numerical gender equality these days among people who play games, players of first-person shooter are still overwhelmingly male at 93% (Yee, 2016).

Naturally, playing a game on a lower difficulty setting is seen as less hardcore, a fact that is written into the games themselves through the titles given to various difficulty settings. Additional insight can be gained by examining the MMO genre which, intentionally provide options for different play styles. In her study on EverQuest, Taylor discusses the Bartle taxonomy of player types, which posits for major ways players can engage with games: achievers, explorers, socializes, and killers. Achievers and killers are both focused on exercising mastery, over the game world and other players respectively while explorers are generally described as wanting to learn about the game world though this can also include an element of mastery as the learning may be used to bend, break, or otherwise exploit the programmed limitations of the game world or intended structures of game play (Taylor, 2006, p 69). All games are designed to meet one or more of these expectations to a greater or lesser degree. What makes MMOs particularly interesting is that most attempt to engage all four. However, this does not mean that all are treated equally by players or by game designers. Typically, achievers and killers are seen as the most hardcore, while explorers receive some respect in that their discoveries can be used to enhance game mastery as explained above, and those who play to socialize are often viewed as “casual” even if they invest a great deal of time in playing the game.

Even if a player displays a sufficient time investment and master of game skills, how they choose to use those resources is a factor in how hardcore they are. Beyond the type of activities a player engages in, another factor that influences play style in many games but especially in MMOs is how they design their character, what they make the character good at, and what role the character fills in the game world. A character's class (job or role) usually fits along a continuum in terms of the degree of combat/aggression required, ranging from those who engage in hand to hand combat, to those who deal damage from a distance, those who hinder the enemy in non-damaging ways, those who support their teammates by “buffing” them (enhancing their abilities), and those who heal damage suffered by their teammates. Based on the discussion in the chapter I-3 regarding gender myths about male aggression and female nurturing one might assume that men would gravitate more towards jobs near the beginning of the list and women towards jobs nearer the end. Thus playing a healer is *perceived* to require less mastery and is therefore less hardcore while also being seen as appropriate for women due to gender ideologies. Combining these two ideas shows how women can viewed to be

*naturally* less hardcore and therefore deserving of less status in gaming culture.

Casual is the opposite of hardcore in the gamer lexicon, representing a lack of seriousness and intensity in one's gaming practices. The expression almost always has negative connotations and is often a full blown-insult. Indeed, the use of the term “filthy casual” in gaming culture has become so ubiquitous that it has been classified as a meme and spawned parody and humorous appropriations (Filthy Casual, Know your Meme, 2013). This can be seen in regards to play style choices within individual games such as the differentiation between hardcore and casual raiders in *World of Warcraft*. However, it is at least as common to classify whole games or even genres of games and, by extension, the people who play them, as “casual.” The fact that casual gamers are despised in the gaming community and the fact that many of them are women create an interlocked chicken and egg problem. However, both aspects are directly related to the fragile masculinity of gamer culture that strives to define itself against the negative stereotypes of society at large. The greater presence of women in gaming would make it seem like a less masculine activity as would the reduction of skill and time commitment required to play games as well as of thematic content relating to violence and aggression, all of which tend to be traits of casual games. In another chicken and egg cycle, some argue that these traits are present in casual games because they are designed to appeal to women and others that women like them because they lack the qualities of traditional games described above.

As has already been shown, it is difficult for women to establish geek cred due to the fact that many of the things associated with it are seen as stereotypically masculine but even more because, by extension, things directly opposed to gamer identity, such as the playing of casual games, are coded as feminine. For this reason, females in the gaming community are frequently viewed as the type of “fake nerds” . For this reason, women who claim membership in the gaming community are frequently subjected to exacting tests of their geek cred, dismissed, or simply ignored by male gamers. A further way in which the idea of fake gamer girls is gendered is that they are sometimes portrayed as engaging in their false performance of gamer identity as a ploy for male attention. The argument goes that, because gamers are perceived as sex-deprived males, women who are considered less desirable, can enter gaming spaces and receive a degree of sexual attention they would not be accorded in mainstream society where many men are not coded as masculine failures. Expected conduct in the gaming sub-culture involves participants being confident, aggressive, in-your-face, and talking trash about games and people they see as inferior. These behaviors are also part of other traditionally masculine arenas as well, such as sports, and are considered part of masculine performance by mainstream culture. However, as explained in the chapter I-3, they are not considered culturally acceptable

behaviors for women and thus present a lose-lose situation for women who want to participate in gaming culture. If they do not engage in such behaviors, they will lose geek cred for not acting hardcore enough as gamers but, if they do, they will be viewed negatively for not behaving appropriately as women.

The gendering of geek cred shown above relates directly to the concept of the other, as discussed in chapter I-3, which is here shown to play a key part in gamer identity in the form of the casual versus hardcore binary with the hardcore players being the accepted insiders and the casuals the ostracized “other” against which they define themselves. Further this dichotomy is grafted onto the binary of gender, marking women as the unskilled, uncommitted outsiders, even though casual versus hardcore lacks any obvious connection to physical aspects of gender. This is because on a more fundamental level, the concept of the other plays a central role in the construction of mainstream masculine and, by extension, gamer identity. Male is defined against the other of female, heterosexual against the other of homosexual, and cisgender against the other of transgender, gender non-binary, and gender non-conformity.

Thus, an important role in players establishing that they fit into the proper masculine identity is proving that they are not the other as defined here. They must conform to masculine appearances and behaviors to show they are men and not women but in addition, they must establish that they desire women and not men to show they are not female and not gay. Beyond this, they must show that they desire women who conform to socially sanctioned models of femininity because of the idea, explained before, that the more masculine one is, the more one desires feminine qualities in a partner. Thus, it can be argued that female representations in video games operate in a very similar way. Through their hyper-sexualized and hyper feminized presentation they “become the phallus” for male gamers who, according to popular stereotype, are denied access to living women and, by provoking the desire of those gamers, they help bolster a sense of masculinity under threat from mainstream society's views of gamers.

Women in video games often have similarities to the perfect filmic woman described by Mulvey. While the implications for the idea of a male gaze vis a vis the interactive aspect of video games has already been explored previously, there are also ways, independent of camera angle, that female figures in video games can be constructed to represent the socially sanctioned ideal of female desirability, including body type, clothing, postures, behaviors, and language. This argument that the vast majority of female characters in video games are designed to provoke male desire is based on the intersection of two basic points of consideration. First, it is not necessary for the female body, even a

sparingly clothed or nude female body, to be presented in a sexually desirable way. Second, bodies of many shapes and sizes can be presented as sexually desirable. Thus, it is not necessary for every woman in media who is slender and/or has large breasts to be presented as sexually desirable, nor is it necessary for women who do not possess these traits to not be presented as desirable. However, this is what is overwhelmingly happening in games, thus indicating that one of the primary roles of female representation in games is to shore up socially approved masculine desire.

Kerzner rigorously defends the character of Ivy Valentine from the *Soul Caliber* series and, to a lesser extent *Tomb Raider's* Lara Croft, at least prior to the reboot which will be discussed in later chapters, as being more than just a “huge rack”(Kerzner, 2015). But this statement is true in more ways than one as it is not bust size alone that renders these characters hypersexualized. Both characters also have narrow waists and long legs, which combined with their large breasts give them the socially ideal figure. They both possess flawless skin and facial features and appear to be impeccably made up even in the heat of the action and both wear minimal clothing that draws attention to their ideal figure. It is not that a single aspect of these characters just happened to be conventionally sexually appealing or even was designed that way intentionally. It is that many aspects of their design interlock together to construct this image. There is also the fact that, if Ivy and Lara were the only two women in gaming to fit this image it is less likely they would receive so much attention for it. However, they are only two of the best known of an incredibly large pool of characters who portray an exaggerated ideal of socially sanctioned female attractiveness, in contrast to the very small number of female characters for whom sexual appeal is not a factor in their character design or who are designed to be sexually appealing in a non-socially sanctioned way.

While being attracted to the correct objects of desire is essential to proving one's manhood, it is equally important that one not be attracted to the wrong objects of desire. However, the primary goal in avoiding inappropriate objects of desire is proving one is not gay. Indeed, this particular element is so central to establishing socially sanctioned masculinity that C.J. Pascoe titled her study on gender relations in high school *Dude, You're a Fag* and the work repeatedly stresses the repudiation of a fag identity as central to establishing masculinity. Thus, the real threat to masculinity is not homosexuality alone but gender deviance in general, though, of course, homosexuality is socially coded as an aspect of gender deviance. Also, note that gender deviant women are also stigmatized as they also threaten masculinity by not being fit objects of desire. The male homosexual, however, is still more threatening. Because the repudiation of “fag identity” is so central to social constructs of masculinity, the media plays an important role in shoring up men's sense of masculinity and helping them to stay on the



correct side of the gay/not gay binary. For this reason, just as much of media makes easy the path of acceptable desire by exaggerating approved feminine sexual characteristics and drawing attention to them, it also frequently makes more difficult the path of inappropriate desire by portraying men in a non-sexual way.

In some ways, this is a fine line to walk as what is considered the masculine ideal is also what society has coded as sexually attractive in men. Thus, men in video games frequently have chiseled faces and extremely developed muscles, sometimes going shirtless to make this more apparent and they behave in the tough, commanding way that is considered appropriate for men. This is necessary in order for these characters to be presented as ideals of manhood for the player to identify with as will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. But, it has the side effect of also making them sexually appealing to those who are attracted to traditional masculinity. However, the important point here is that this is a side effect. In contemporary society, the qualities considered attractive in a man frequently also have practical functions. Being muscular means he can perform heavy physical labor or excel in athletics. Being decisive and commanding means that he can fulfill important leadership roles. Thus, a man can obtain the markers of attractiveness without making a special effort to do as they also serve other functions. He can work out and build muscle without being a sex object because he is doing it to make himself strong, not to make himself attractive. The social markers of female attractiveness, on the other hand, do not serve this function. Having overly large breasts and wearing heels serve no purpose other than to make a woman attractive. In fact, they may even make other activities more difficult. Thus, the vast majority of the time, when a woman displays these characteristics it is specifically to make her attractive or so that she can reap to social benefits of being considered attractive. A majority of male characters are designed to be powerful, strong, and tough which also makes them attractive, whereas female character who are meant to be powerful, strong and tough, like Ivy and Lara, have attractiveness grafted over the top of this as, according to cultural myths, the two things are not equivalent for women.

But the important thing is that, despite being idealized examples of masculinity, male characters lack the behaviors, poses, and camera angles prevalent with female characters that would mark them as objects of desire. However, there are situations in which male characters are depicted with poses, behaviors, and camera angles similar to those used to portray women but any homosexual tension is dissipated via the lack of sincerity in the portrayal. In a similar manner to the unattractive women mentioned earlier, these men are depicted as gross or humorous, marking them as inappropriate objects of desire. Indeed, the general impression given is that the very idea of finding men sexually desirable

is utterly laughable. Dante Douglas takes this one step further in “The Three Modes of Male Sexuality in Videogames,” pointing out that the very idea of a male sex object is an oxymoron as our society has coded the mere state of being a sex object as feminine. Therefore, men who act or are portrayed in objectifying ways are, by definition, “gay” and ridiculous. Males who take on the role of sexual object cross to the other side of the masculine/feminine binary and are now the other which a “proper” man will identify himself against, rather than with. Thus, the standard portrayal of both men and women in games serve to reinforce socially sanctioned gender binaries by signaling both appropriate paths of desire and appropriate forms of gender expression and by portraying violators of those norms as gross and ridiculous.

Therefore, male gamers must perform their masculinity in a way that is recognized and acknowledged by their peers. In terms of the concepts presented in this chapter, this means making it clear to those around them that they are responding properly to the game design elements previously described: desire towards the sexualized female figures and disgust or amusement towards the others. Indifference or non-sexual admiration is the expected reaction to non-objectified male figures but this concept will be explored further in the next chapter. Players perform these appropriate reactions through various public displays including choices they make about how to portray or present their character, and through comments they make in game space/during play as well as comments they make outside of game space such as on online forums. This becomes especially important in regards to gamer identity because of the stereotype of gamers as sex deprived. For this reason posters in gaming forums will sometimes make strong statements affirming that they have had sexual encounters with women or, at least, that they are attracted women who match the social ideal of attractiveness.

It is worth noting that the need to perform masculinity will go up when a man takes an action that can be seen as a transgression of gender norms. One of the most common such actions in the gaming community is the decision to play a female character, especially in situations like MMOs where there is little to no mechanical advantage to choosing a female character. In such situations, players frequently justify the choice by saying that they enjoy looking at the female character, especially her backside, which is frequently positioned in the center of the screen. This codes their action as appropriately masculine because they are acting on approved desire, rather than a transgressive act of cross-gender identification. Perhaps the most common manifestation of this masculine performance by men playing (or claiming they play as) female characters involves not simply their obvious display of enjoyment of looking at the women but their emphasis that the purpose is also to avoid the alternative of looking at a man. This has the two-pronged reinforcement of showing that they not only gravitate to

acceptable objects of desire but shun unacceptable objects of desire.

The other way for male to perform repudiation of fag identity is by forcing that identity onto others, as in the examples above that imply or state that men who do not enjoy looking at female characters are gay. This desire to force other men into the fag position can be seen in gaming through cultural practices that are not an inherent part of game content but which have become common behaviors in many gaming genres. These include the use of rape as a term for defeat and the practice of teabagging which is a visual representation of the same thing. . What makes these practices significant is why they are considered so humiliating. In both cases, the victor is claiming the active and therefore culturally masculine role for themselves. The fictitious sex act is not something they do with the other player, but something they perform on them against their will, meaning the other is not strong and skillful enough to prevent them from doing so. This makes the opponent weak and passive, culturally feminized, thus forcing them to the wrong side of the not female and not gay binary, allowing the player to perform their own masculinity by denying it to their opponents.

## II-2 Gaming as Fantasy and Empowerment: What are we Allowed to Imagine

The element that is central to the perception of games as “not serious” both inside and outside the gaming community is that they are primarily fantasy. This ability to separate fantasy from reality is often used in defense of game content, such as the sexualization of women discussed the last chapter, implying that anyone who is upset by representations of women in gaming is at fault for not being able to distinguish the two. However, as Shaw's comments make clear, the issue at stake is not the ability to tell fantasy from reality but the meanings and possibilities attached to in-game fantasies. However, identities that are not present in media representations or that are portrayed negatively are less likely to be seen as possible or desirable ways of being for oneself or others, even in one's imagination, whereas those identities that are represented positively, have a greater chance of being adopted as a fantasy ideal for one's self and/or others. Thus, the claim that video games are largely a form of escapist fantasy may be correct but this in no way renders them unfit as objects of serious study or social critique, rather the reverse. Instead, a cultural studies perspective would advocate looking at what fantasies are endorsed by games, which ones are discouraged, and which are presented as simply inconceivable by not being mentioned at all.

If games only provide a narrow range of ways to express masculinity and femininity then the process becomes a rehearsal of a pre-set script, rather than an exploration. As discussed in chapter I-3, video games are seen as straddling a line between active play and passive media consumption but that

this relationship is far more complicated than is frequently acknowledged and this has important ramifications on gaming as a tool to explore gender identities. To outsiders this is frequently seen as a negative fantasy of violent juvenile machismo, while many gamers view it as an empowering reaffirmation of a masculinity they are denied in the outside world. However, regardless of whether they see it as good or bad, both groups are in basic agreement on what the fantasy entails and the base assumption is that it is specifically a male fantasy. Up to the present time, video games have tended to assign certain roles, character traits, and ways of being to characters based on gender, and to do so in a way that follows a very traditional polarity between masculine and feminine. However, such traditional gender biases also play a role in critique of games. Why should a woman not want to test her prowess, achieve dominance, or overcome the enemy? Why should a game be coded as male *specifically because* it contains such elements? The short answer is that these assumptions are part of the western cultural myth of gender. By looking at both conventional, “male oriented” video game content and the proposals of feminists and queer theorists for making games more inclusive, it is possible to see that both attitudes are deeply rooted in cultural myths about gender and because of this serve to re-inscribe what fantasies are possible or, at least, socially permissible in game space along conventional gender lines.

That video games frequently serve as power fantasies is rarely questioned. As the previous chapter discussed, those labeled as nerds and geeks have faced social ostracization and disempowerment. Therefore, it is not surprising that they would embrace activities that would allow them to feel accepted, able to exercise agency, or even to feel powerful, within the limits of their subculture. However, the cultural script that is written into many video games, and is frequently assumed by players and outside observers even when it is not explicitly present, is that this power fantasy is not simply a form of validation for the socially ostracized in general but is, specifically, validation for those whose masculinity is in question. Note how, despite the fact that the content of the original *Sim City* is almost entirely non-violent and completely gender neutral, Jenkins contextualizes the power it offers specifically in masculine terms. Of course, in games with violent and/or gendered content, this link is even stronger. Thus, violence and rage become, simultaneously, a way of proving (or at least playing at proving) one's masculinity and, of processing and defusing the emotions caused by failure to do so.

It is part of the western cultural myth that women are not moved by righteous anger to single-handedly halt an alien invasion. They do not long for the power, literal or symbolic, of an assault weapon that never runs out of ammo. Girls may dream of vengeance on those who wronged them but

not by blowing things up. And yet women can be socially ostracized and disempowered for failing to meet gender norms, just as men can. They can feel isolated, put down, like they're always “taking it on the chin.” This is particularly relevant in gaming culture because it is so heavily coded as masculine. A man who plays video games may be looked down on socially but, on some minimum level there is a measure of acknowledgment that he is at least *trying* to live up to his cultural gender script, albeit in a juvenile and misguided way. However, a woman in the same situation is directly flying in the face of her cultural gender script, marking herself off as even more deviant and yet the fantasies of rage, violence, and power, that are supposed to help males in gaming culture cope with their social marginalization are, officially, denied to her. In her article defending video games, including their violent and sexual content Liana Kerzner says “ Fear, sadness, helplessness, love, despair... and yes, even lust... in video games, these are all things that the player is allowed to feel without rejection. Perhaps we need to stop thinking of games as male power fantasy and see them as male acceptance fantasy” (Kerzner, 2015). However, this is still a fantasy that is firmly and exclusively about men. The player is only allowed to feel these things and be accepted if they are male. A girl who embraces the aggressiveness of gaming culture too fully or who denies her cultural script as sex object will still experience rejection. There is no acceptance fantasy for her. Game space may be a culture of empowerment but it is an extremely gendered empowerment where a woman is given small scope to “pump her fist in defiance” even in fantasy.

Certainly, women are not absent from the fantasy worlds of video games. However, the role they play is most often to enhance the power fantasy of straight male players, rather than to serve as a power fantasy for women in their own right. As has been discussed, the practice of “getting girls” plays a major role in the perception of one's masculinity and therefore one's place in the male dominance hierarchy. Here, as in society at large, successful sexual conquest depends on the exercise of masculine prowess and the humiliation of failure represents the lack of said prowess. However, in the fantasy world the appropriate measure of masculine prowess has been re-coded from something that the gamer probably lacks (strength, good-looks etc.) to something he can excel at, namely skill in video games.

Throughout its history, gaming culture has contained many such attempts to link sexual success to gaming skill, providing male gamers with a fantasy of achievable masculinity. The establishment of this link can be seen as early as 1982 when a famous photo was released in *Life* magazine's “Year in Pictures” issue showing the high score holders on several popular arcade games surrounded by cheerleaders. Probably, the most famous example of this design element is Samus Aran,

protagonist of the *Metroid* series of games, which included a consistent mechanic in which, at the end of the game, the player would be shown a full body image of Samus in a state of undress contingent on the player's final score, with higher scores resulting in less clothing being worn (Nintendo R&D 1, 1986). This clearly links access to the female body to gaming skill and, therefore, positions gaming, at least in fantasy, as a signifier of successful masculinity.

If video games are meant to serve as fantasy fulfillment, there is nothing inherently wrong with enabling the player to vicariously feel sexually successful via a larger-than-life protagonist. However, what is being explored here is that, in the majority of games, like the *God of War* series described above, this fantasy is specifically gendered. A thought exercise on this topic can be provided by considering the credibility or social acceptability of some of the *God of War* mini games, if they were gender reversed, for example, a scene where eight men rush to climb into bed with the female protagonist at the same time or where a man coquettishly solicits the same protagonist for sex and then his two male servants become so aroused from watching them that they start to have sex with each other. This means that video games do not provide mechanics for either heterosexual women or homosexual men to be the sexual aggressor, a topic that will be explored more fully later in this chapter. Nor does it provide scope for men of any sexual orientation to act passively or play the role of sex object. Therefore, video games are not simply a vehicle for fantasy fulfillment, but instead only serve as a vehicle for fulfilling, and thus as a reinforcer of, specific, culturally sanctioned fantasies about sexuality and gender roles.

The material in the last section about women serving as support to male fantasies of sexual power is part of a larger consideration, namely that the majority of video game story lines are told from the point of view of or center around straight cis male characters. Thus, when games provide power fantasies, they most often do so by depicting straight cis men in the position of power. It is true that members of marginalized groups could still play these games and get the experience of feeling powerful, through taking on the role of the male protagonist. It is also true that in some situations, in which the protagonist's gender or sexual orientation are left ambiguous, the player may be able to suspend disbelief and imagine the protagonist does share their gender or sexuality, even when it is clear this is not what was intended by the game creators. However, as explained in chapter I-2, this may have been easy to do with the relatively simplistic early games but has become increasingly difficult as games have moved towards ever more detailed graphics and well-defined characters.

This is particularly relevant because of Adrienne Shaw's comments already discussed about how fantasy represents what might be possible. A person who is able to play out a video game power

fantasy as a protagonist of a given gender or sexuality, is being provided with a tool that facilitates their ability to imagine people of that gender or sexuality actually having the ability to be powerful in the real world. When they are able to do so as a protagonist that matches their own gender or sexuality, they are being encouraged to imagine the possibility of their own power. This is particularly significant if the person's identity strips them of power in real life, as fantasies of power will then run counter to the cultural ideologies in operation. Equally important to what fantasies games portray as possible, are those that they code as less possible by not depicting them. This situation relates directly to one of the common defenses against critique of the gender content in games, that players should simply avoid games with content they do not like. This, however, ignores the possibility that there may be no, or almost no, games that do contain the content the person in question is seeking. Further, the discussion is not really about fantasy versus reality as being a heroic transperson or a strong woman not defined by her sex appeal are empowering fantasies as much as being a space marine able to single-handedly mow down hordes of attacking aliens. The difference is that the latter is a fantasy which conforms to cultural gender ideologies and is therefore permitted and encouraged while the former are not and are, therefore, not included in game narratives.

In other words, *because* video games are perceived as and frequently do serve as power fantasies, they do not fit the cultural myth of femininity. Therefore, women who do enjoy the aggression and violence in video games are, by definition, “not real women” and, thus can be discounted from studies of what women want, leaving the cultural myth of gender intact. The invisibility and disenfranchisement of women in gaming culture makes it difficult for them to participate in the power fantasies offered by games and, given that, it is worth exploring the potential effects of this difficulty. While the girl game's movement might seem like a historical artifact, an outdated relic of the previous century, the ideas it generated are still very much alive and well in contemporary game design and marketing choices, as can be seen in the coding of many casual games as “for women.” In addition, the genre of MMOs has a 36 % female player base (Yee, 2016), despite the fact that these games contain elements of violence, mastery, fanaticism, and other elements commonly codes as “masculine.” However, this is frequently justified by noting that these games also contain elements culturally codes as “for women.” This is in addition to the ideas discussed elsewhere in this work, about women primarily liking MMOs for the social element. In many ways, cultural myths about gender still exert a strong influence on ideas of what men and women do and should want from video games and, thus, what kinds of content and fantasies are available in gaming media.

Of all the gender related controversies surrounding video games, the most prevalent and

divisive is probably the topic of aggression, which is also the aspect most closely related to the idea of gaming as power fantasy. This topic also covers related concepts such as approaches and attitudes towards competition and violence in games. In relation to aggression, the ideas and attitudes covered in the previous section continue to apply, with some game designers and scholars arguing that aggression is particularly uninteresting to or inappropriate for girls, and others seeing it as universally negative in game content but, ubiquitous nonetheless because of the coding of both aggression and gaming as masculine. While some of the proponents of this movement may have frowned on violence for its own sake, the primary concern was to create game *for* girls, though this was also assumed to involve the elimination of aggressive elements from such games. The assumption was that aggression-based games would continue to be sold to boys, simply with the addition of new, alternative games available for girls.

Again, this assumes a fundamental difference based on gender, that radically divergent attitudes towards aggression are part of that difference, and that, therefore, attempts to code games with aggressive components as also being for girls (via female characters or pink tanks) is not only an incorrect approach, but the most incorrect approach possible. Ideas of early creators in the girl games movement like Laurel continue to exert a powerful influence on ideas about designing games along gender lines. In the early 2010s, ten years after the initial girl games movement, articles were still being published advocating very similar principles in gender-based game creation.

In addition to being gendered, these considerations directly tie into the idea of games as power fantasy, shown here in overcoming a hostile force (shooting the sea monster) and a competitive drive for mastery (getting a higher score), the base assumption of Heeter and Winn being that power fantasy is not something girls would desire. However, some scholars and designers will go further, while continuing to code aggression as male, and argue that the very idea of aggression and power fantasy in games is unnecessary, or even bad, regardless of the gender of the player. Here, culturally coded feminine values are seen as superior to masculine values and so there is no need to work for women's inclusion in “male” games, though, possibly, the reverse. Some of these thinkers, like the parents and teachers discussed in Sims's article, may grudgingly accept male aggression as necessary because of its role in gender ideologies, and see video games as a comparatively harmless means for its expression. However, according to this line of reasoning, there is no excuse for female aggression, as it lies outside the cultural script that sanctions male aggression.

The ability to violate social norms without consequence is an essential component of power fantasy and, as such, it is worth looking at how games engage with this aspect along gender



lines. Certainly, being able to behave in an over the top aggressive and violent way with no consequences is a social violation regardless of gender. However, the gender of the individual in question determines the extent of that violation. While it may be a social violation for males to actually fully act out such a fantasy, it is at least somewhat acceptable for them to entertain such a fantasy and there exist socially sanctioned ways for them to indulge it in toned down ways, such as some forms of sport. The very acceptance of violent video games, even if it is a grudging acceptance as observed in Sims's article, shows that this kind of power fantasy has some degree of permissiveness for men. On the other hand, in many ways, even entertaining such a fantasy is a social violation for women.

Taken together, the evidence creates a powerful statement that female aggression is not only undesirable but essentially unthinkable. This is a core aspect of cultural myth, rendering that which is outside the sanction of the myth as so unnatural as to be virtually inconceivable. This also ties back into Shaw's statements about how fantasy determines what might be possible. Denying women an opportunity to participate in the power fantasies offered by games, serves to mark off female aggression as a way of being that is neither possible, plausible, nor livable. Despite the above discussion of how female aggression and power is branded by cultural ideology as Other and unacceptable, there are certain situations where it receives a form of social acceptance, specifically in scenarios where a woman does not exercise power in her own right but does so *through* men, by influencing them, most commonly by using her attractiveness or sex appeal. While it is true that this is still branded as negative, especially if the woman does it too openly or aggressively, it still receives more cultural approval than a woman exercising dominance through physical power or violence, as men are frequently depicted doing. Simply put, serving as an object of male desire is an accepted and expected social role for women and, therefore, she can be seen as conforming to appropriate gender ideologies on at least some level, regardless of what else she does.

This is particularly relevant in terms of gaming in that, as game designers have gradually included more female characters who partake in the aggression and power of the game worlds, they have also designed these characters with exaggerated feminine and sexual attributes as discussed in the previous chapter. This has the result, intended or not, of embedding these women back into the conventional gendered social structure as the gender deviance of their aggression is balanced out by their gender conformity in regards to their role as objects of male desire. In particular, sex appeal can be seen and the price of entry for females into the masculine sphere of gaming and related media. Probably, the most famous example of powerful but sexualized women as game protagonist is Lara Croft of the Tomb Raider games. Debate about whether she represents female empowerment or

objectification have been ongoing since the original *Tomb Raider* was released in 1996. First, it reproduces the traditional female-body male-mind dichotomy. But, beyond that, by anchoring Lara's femaleness in her body, this line of thinking represents it as something inherent and inescapable. Lara may behave in an aggressive and adventurous way, according to Butler's theory, she may perform masculinity, but her physical reality, due to her body shape, remains undeniably and unalterably female. This line of reasoning suggests that gender performance is not “real” gender, which is, instead, rooted in basic biology as per cultural myth.

Although, the character of Lara Croft was created in the 1990s the questions and concerns she raised regarding the interplay and tensions between female bodies, sexuality, gender, and power, remain highly relevant in debates regarding the portrayal of women in gaming. Virtually every major female game character has to wrestle with this “Lara question” in some way or another, a specific example of which will be explored in detail in the upcoming case study. Particularly significant is the understanding that Lara Croft's sexual appeal is part of a necessary trade off, that it is, specifically, the price she pays for her power.

A woman who is sexy but powerful still has her physical appeal to anchor her femininity. This continues to reinforce that, even in what is supposed to be one's fantasy, some signifier of gender conformity is still expected to be part of one's presentation. This ties back into the idea of cultural myth in the assumption that, since gender roles are natural and good, as per the myth, people would *want* to make them part of their identity at least on some level. This is reflected in the statements of game scholars and designers that making the most sexually appealing character model possible is part of women's idealization of their best self, that being “sexy” is, in fact, part of women's power fantasy. Although the two are portrayed as separate reasons, this comment makes it clear that they are conceived as aiming at the same end goal in terms of female appearance, in other words, what women dream of looking like is also what men want them to look like, thus strongly linking ideal female fantasy with being sexually attractive to men.

Shaw mentions players wanting to create characters who are attractive *or* aspirational versions of themselves, indicating that these two things are not always synonymous. However, prevailing cultural gender myths assume that the desire for attractiveness is (or should be) an inherent part of female aspiration and women's idealized fantasy self and comments by industry professionals, such as those shown in this section, as well as in game options for female representation reflect this. None of the above, is meant to invalidate women whose fantasy does include the desire to be attractive, whether culturally induced or not. Rather, the intent is to show that representational options in games cannot be

defended based on the argument that their purpose is to serve as a form of fantasy fulfillment because they only fulfill a limited set of specific fantasies, the vast majority of which conform, at least on some level, to cultural scripts about gender roles. When women's options for representation in gaming are overwhelmingly sexualized, especially if that sexualization follows conventionally approved lines, the ability to choose such representations no longer represents freedom, empowerment, or choice, as the ability to *not* select it is not a viable option. Rather, in such situations, it serves as a re-inscribing of cultural values regarding approved feminine behaviors and ways of being.

However, while it is true that most video game characters are larger than life in at least some aspects it is not the case that these aspects are the same or that they signify the same thing in terms of cultural values. The specific ways that video game characters are exaggerated, or, as some prefer to say, idealized, regularly varies based on gender and the differences are directly keyed in to cultural expectations as well as to acceptable forms of power for men and women. There is a certain amount of validity in such a claim and it ties back strongly to the idea explored earlier in this chapter that the role of women in gaming is primarily to enhance the power fantasies of men rather than to serve as power fantasies for women. However, this is not the whole story. Despite the claims by Sterling and Goulet about games being designed for men, comments above by Cosgrove, Garner Ray, and Kerzner show that game design choices are not completely divorced from relevance to female desires. These writers claim that women in gaming are, in fact, idealized in the way Sterling describes, that they serve as the goals and aspirations of what female players want to be. However, this is where the dichotomy of objectification and idealization turns back on itself and self-cannibalizes, since cultural ideology defines the appropriate ideal and path to power for women as being desirable, blurring the line between idealization and objectification for women.

It can be argued that men are also portrayed in gaming, and other media as sexually desirable, but this does not lead to an equivalent representation across gender lines as what cultural myth codes as signifying desirability differs markedly for males and females. Furthermore, particularly relevant to games as power fantasies, this difference is strongly tied into how the relationship between desirability and power is split along gender lines. Sterling points out that male “idealization involves traits that are generally considered pretty good to have, physical strength, nobility, bravery” (Escapist, 2013 b). This statement is a bit overly simplistic as the traits that signify a culturally ideal woman would also be considered good to have within the context of that culture. Thus, being slender or having large breasts could be considered good traits to have because the culture places positive value on them. The difference comes in the consideration of what the traits in question signify *besides* a representation of

an ideal man or woman.

More specifically, the traits Sterling lists signify power and capability where as those associated with the ideal woman usually do not. Thus, men are able to express power independently from their desirability, whereas women are not. On a fundamental level, in the western cultural myth of gender men are desirable because they are powerful whereas women are powerful because they are desirable, a concept that is deeply encoded in the design of games as power fantasy. However, while Garner Ray asserts that players desire both male and female characters to be heroes, she lists different traits that make them heroes. While she describes heroes of all genders having slim waists and long thick hair (a questionable assertion given that many male gaming protagonists are military men with buzz cuts or shaved bald) she also makes the distinction between big shoulder, arms, and legs on men and large breasts and buttocks on women. The traits listed for men make them physically powerful, able to meet the “illustrious warrior” definition of hero while the traits listed for women bestow no such ability. Rather the only functions these traits serve are to render women sexually desirable and signify their ability to bear children, functions which it could be argued are closely intertwined in any case.

This explains perfectly the depictions of men in video games, with exaggerated muscles and other markers of physical strength. However, it is not clear how huge breasts, tiny waists, or round backsides on women in any way indicate fearlessness, aggression, or primal fierceness, or a greater capacity to kill or defend themselves. Many of the famous “sexy” female video game characters are conspicuous in their lack of muscle development, which would indicate a higher functionality in battle on a woman, just as it would on a man. Lara Croft and Bayonetta show almost no muscle development, while Ivy Valentine and the women from the Mortal Kombat games may show a bit more, depending on the specific game in question but still nothing near the level of that shown by many male game characters, indicating that, for female characters, design choices are being made based on a social defined aesthetic ideal, rather than for fighting fitness.

The difficulty with Alexander's argument is that for men, aesthetic ideal and fighting fitness overlap significantly while for women they do not. The only kind of Darwinian fitness indicated by the exaggerated secondary sex characteristics of female characters in video games is fitness for bearing children, which puts Alexander's argument back on the same ground as Garner Ray's above. Alexander herself exposes this logic hole when she says “It seems we don't really *mean* it when we, as gamers, say we want 'realism' – what we really want is an appealing fantasy so vivid we can really believe in it. A world where the women are titillating and the men are fierce” (Alexander, 2008) again defining the fantasy roles of men and women based on different traits where only the male traits are related to

heroism and power. This statement further attempts to universalize this single fantasy to what “we, as gamers” want, implying that no gamer could ever entertain a fantasy of women who are not titillating or men who are. Thus, ultimately, the issue is not that one gender is objectified while another is idealized but that both objectifying and idealizing representations for all genders reinforce cultural myths about gender roles.

The Bayonetta franchise is a series of games (two to date), produced in Japan but popular in the United States where the first game reached sales figures of over a million within six months of its release (Sega Sammy Group, 2010, p 5) and the second of 700,000 (Reseigh-Lincoln, 2018). This franchise makes an ideal object for an in-depth case as it serves as an intersection point for many of the topics covered in this chapter. Specifically, the games feature a very violent and powerful female protagonist who is also heavily sexualized, a combination which, as the chapter has shown is not uncommon in gaming, nor is the resulting debate about whether the character in question is objectified and constitutes a sexist representation or whether it is a positive example of female empowerment. As the preceding material has shown, this is a debate going all the way back to the release of *Tomb Raider* in the 1990s. However, the Bayonetta franchise is a particularly appropriate subject for an in depth look at the issues surrounding female representation in gaming and how it interacts with cultural myths about aggression, power, and sexuality, both because of its timeliness and because the degree and explicitness of the connections it expresses not only make analysis of the game content particularly fruitful but also have generated lively debate on the matter in all parts of the gaming community, allowing all levels of the multi-dimensional methodology outlined at the beginning of this work to be brought to bear. Thus, this case study focuses on an in-depth textual analysis of the content of the two games in the series, especially focusing on the degree to which the character of Bayonetta is represented as having or lacking agency both in terms of her sexuality and her depiction to the viewer, through elements such as story line, camera angles, game mechanics, aesthetics, and dialogue and how these elements do or do not reinscribe cultural ideologies about gender. This analysis is supplemented by commentary from game scholars and reviewers as well as ordinary members of the gaming community to show how these diverse elements of the community both contribute and react to the cultural meanings in the content of the Bayonetta games.

In addition to implications regarding reinforcement of cultural gender myths, the game content itself refutes the argument that the character is a sexual subject rather than an object, that Bayonetta is “owning” her own sexuality. While, as will be discussed further, Bayonetta does not provide actual sex, she provides a great deal of sexualized pleasure to other characters and, especially,

the player, while the game provides very little evidence for her own pleasure. At no point in either of the *Bayonetta* games to date, is the lead character shown engaging in actual sexual activity, nor is there any implication that she seeks out such activity. In fact, there are virtually no depictions of Bayonetta enjoying physical contact. such occurrences are rare and definitely in the minority compared to the number of times Bayonetta is depicted as the recipient of desire, discussed in more detail below. In neither game does Bayonetta even share a kiss with Luka.

In addition, Bayonetta is not alone in being an aggressive, conventionally desirable female protagonist who is never shown or even discussed having sex. This particular set of circumstances also applies to the one of the most iconic female game characters, Lara Croft. Although Sterling argues that female protagonists are not allowed to engage in sex in games to prevent the threat to the player's masculinity of having them play the role of a character who has sex with a man, as opposed to Hurber's theory that it is to allow the female protagonist to remain "available" as an object of desire for the player, both explanations have the same end result of not having female characters presented as sexual agents in games in order to enable to player to more effectively perform his masculinity in accordance with social expectations. All of this further suggests that the sexuality of, not only Bayonetta, but of many female video game characters, exists not for their own pleasure, or to fulfill the fantasies of female players (except when those fantasies follow acceptable cultural parameters), but to provide pleasure and power to male players, strongly undercutting the idea of these characters as representations of agency and empowerment.

The majority of examples of Bayonetta "owning her sexuality" seems to involve her soliciting sexualized looking from others, rather than initiating actions for her own enjoyment. Another major example of this is how the camera is used during cut scenes. Assuming that Bayonetta does get her primary sexual satisfaction from exhibitionism and given that Bayonetta is the protagonist of the game, the best way to convey her as a sexual subject would be to put the player in the position of Bayonetta or at least a close over the shoulder view, to allow the player direct witness of the person looking at Bayonetta and to identify with her by also being a recipient of the desire, admiration, etc. that she enjoys in the looks. However, in reality, the game consistently puts the player in the position of the one looking, rather than the one receiving the look, thus causing them to identify with the pleasure of looking at Bayonetta, rather than with Bayonetta's pleasure in being looked at. A good example of this is the scene where Luka attempts to flirt with Bayonetta while they are flying in a helicopter. Here the camera switches to Luka's point of view so the player is made a partner with him in looking at Bayonetta's breasts, rather than with Bayonetta and her response to him doing so. Significantly, in this

scene, Bayonetta doesn't seem to particularly enjoy Luka's attention, being largely focused on the mission. She remains facing straight ahead, not turning to meet his gaze or otherwise doing anything to show she is enjoying or encouraging his looking, and chides him for being distracted by his attempts at flirtation, rather than responding in kind (Platinum Games, 2009).

By and large, games can be considered hyper normative in terms of gendered representations. Even depictions of powerful and aggressive women which could be considered non-normative are rendered non-threatening to gender hegemony by using exaggerated feminine signifiers in other aspects of their representation, asserting the fundamental nature of their femininity and desirability and linking their ability to exercise power to the same. This limited scope of representation results in games only serving as fantasy fulfillment for a narrow range of socially approved fantasies, a particularly significant subject of study because of the material documenting the important role controlled power fantasies, such as those provided by video games, can play in the development of identity, agency, and the coming-of-age process. In light of this, some elements in gaming have begun to advocate for a wider range of options in terms of representations and play styles both within and across gender boundaries that would allow games to serve as tools of empowerment and fantasy fulfillment for a wider range of individuals. However, this movement in the gaming community has not gone unchallenged and the next chapter will explore the ways in which other elements of the community have pushed back against this loosening of gender roles, seeing it as a threat to traditional hegemony of masculinity in game space.

### II-3 A Safe Male Space: Gender Evolution and Gaming

There is some evidence that society as a whole is making moves towards a broader scope of gender expressions, which begs the question of how, if at all, this has impacted the gaming community. The answer to this question, is that once again, the gaming community is a unique variation in microcosmic form, of similar trends in the larger world, specifically, while, as will be seen in the example of BioWare, some forces push for more diverse gender expression, other elements in the community work to stall this advance or even work to reverse gender expression back into more traditional modes. And, as will be shown, both in the gaming community and in society as whole, this push back is driven by anxieties that these changes inhibit individuals' ability to perform traditional masculinity or even that they render traditional masculinity invalid or no longer valuable. As stated in the introduction, statistics of those who play video games no longer support the stereotype of the gamer as straight, white, cis male, which raises the question of how the gaming industry and gaming culture

have, or have not, responded to this shift. traditional gaming culture is hostile to the trend of expanding gender roles, which places game developers and journalists in a bit of a bind, as they desire to attract business from the new influx of diverse gamers while, simultaneously not alienating their existing fans and have tried various means to walk this line with limited success, as will be shown.

As a response to the kinds of inroads described above, certain portions of the gaming community have expressed the idea that gaming should be marked off as a “safe male space” (Reddit, 2013a, Reddit, 2013b, Reddit, 2014) where “Others” like women, gays, and trans people should not be permitted, or at least, should not be permitted to advocate for alterations to the existing structure or culture of gaming. A deeper investigation of why some find this possibility so threatening points to the rapidly decreasing number of such safe male spaces in society in general. One of the reasons the loss of exclusively male spaces is seen as a problem is because it is seen as inhibiting the performance of masculinity, which makes sense if masculinity is defined as not female and not gay, since speaking out against and putting down the Other is necessary to define oneself as not Other.

For all of the above reasons, many male gamers are deeply invested in the preservation of gaming as a male space or, at the very least, the preservation of traditional gender roles in game space. However, as women increasingly push for access to and equal treatment in game space, this becomes more and more difficult. Three main strategies can be observed for maintaining the gender boundaries in game space, borderwork, re-gendering, and harassment, which attempt to either drive women from game space or code their presence and actions there within a traditional heteronormative gender binary. A fuller understanding of the contemporary cultural climate in game space can be gained by looking at each of these practices in more detail, as well the reactions of female gamers to them. However, it is important to keep in mind that these practices are not entirely discreet entities. They overlap and shade into one another but each provides a valuable angle for exploring the tension over changing gender roles in gaming, a tension which influences and is influenced by similar tensions in society as a whole.

Further, anxieties about gender and social status play a role in hostility towards female gamers in other ways as well. For males, being perceived as more masculine usually equates to a higher position in the dominance hierarchy and, as explained in chapter II-2, one of the main ways to establish masculinity is by being attracted to the appropriate objects of desire, while avoiding the inappropriate ones. However, in the case of female gamers, this presents a bit of a catch 22. As has been discussed, there is great pressure on men to perform their desire for women in order to stay on the correct side of the not female, not gay binary and since female gamers are, according to the stereotype, virtually the



only women male gamers have contact with, the pressure to position them as objects of desire is very great. However, according to the fake gamer girl and the fat, ugly, or slutty paradigms, doing so has serious pitfalls as female gamers are perceived as either being conventionally ugly and thus not fit objects of desire or attractive enough that they can get a “better man” and so will undermine the masculinity of the desiring gamer by rejecting him. Further, regardless of what the female gamer actually looks like, because gaming itself is coded as masculine, merely by participating in gaming culture, especially if she displays the aggressive tendencies discussed in the previous chapter, she is rendering herself less feminine, at least on some level, and therefore less of an appropriate object of desire for someone who is truly masculine. Therefore, female gamers represent an uncomfortable dilemma for male gamers, regarding appropriate performance of masculinity where they are damned if they do but damned if they don't. To a certain degree, this also applies to female characters in games who are designed to be sexually appealing but also powerful and aggressive or who are placed in positions of authority in the game world. For this reason, there is a growing tendency towards re-feminization in gaming culture, both from players themselves and from some game developers.

In the gaming community, things that were once coded as signifiers of masculinity, such as playing the “right” kind of games or achieving a certain level of “hardcoreness” are increasingly undertaken by women and others who do not subscribe to heteronormative masculinity, thus rendering them obsolete as masculine signifiers. Further, when women become competitors in formerly masculine fields, they rob men of the support (practical and emotional) that bolsters masculinity. Condis describes the attempts to re-cast female gamers into the role of healer and support so that they become aids to male gamers instead of competitors against them while, at the same time, bringing them more in line with the gender ideology of femininity as nurturing and non-violent.

However, there is more going on here than simply wanting to confirm the gender of fellow players as a picture of their face or, at most, their whole body fully clothed, should be sufficient to provide this. The persistent focus on breasts and nudity shows a desire not only to prove femaleness beyond a shadow of a doubt but, at the same time, to channel the woman into a “proper” gender role: that of sex object. In addition, it also creates an opening to use the social stigmas and pressures around female sexuality as a tool of control as described in the borderwork section above. The term “fat, ugly, or slutty” is used as a catchall for the offensive behaviors towards women in game space as it represents three of the most common accusations directed against them and it is worth noting that all three terms indicated that the woman is not displaying an appropriate level of sexualization. She is showing either too much or not enough. The phrase comes from the name of a blog that ran from

January 2011 to June 2015 where three female gamers collected and posted screen captures of written messages and audio capture of voice messages women had received while playing games online. An analysis of the content of these messages shows a consistent trend of re-feminization.

This tendency to re-feminize powerful or masculine women can also be seen in some recent examples of game design, where previously strong, aggressive, or capable female characters are re-imagined in ways that being them more in line with traditional standards of femininity. A fairly common example of this can be seen in the use of alternative costumes in games. These are graphics options that allow a player to change the look of a character, as opposed to armor, which also changes the game mechanics. Alternative costumes may be included in the base game, unlockable if player completes certain preset tasks, available as part of a special promotion, purchasable with in game currency, or purchasable outside the game with real money. The fact that the alternative costumes for women are frequently sexualized should not, in and of itself, be surprising, given the material already covered in this work. However, it is worth noting that they are often even more sexualized than the character's default clothing and, even more significant to the current argument, are often sexualized in ways specifically related to traditional ideas of femininity. Altogether, the various elements introduced or emphasized in *Other M*, serve to code Samus with socially approved feminine qualities such as nurturing, desirability, and obedience. The fact that other female characters have received similar treatment in games released in the early to mid 2010s, including the other extremely famous female protagonist, Lara Croft, provides strong support for the theory that game designers and players are attempting to play up the importance of traditional feminine qualities as a way to push back against the increasing presence of women in game space, coded as masculine, and their calls for less stereotyped, usually less sexualized, representations and play options. As a final resort, harassment is used to drive away or silence women who cannot be induced to conform and thus maintain control of the perceived male space of gaming. While it might be possible to dismiss a single incident of gender-based harassment, the repeated occurrence of such incidents and the similarities between them means they have a strong impact on gender ideologies in gaming culture and, as Consalvo points out, the evidence strongly indicates this is a deliberate aim to resist challenges to the hegemony of gamer as straight cis male.

Depicting women in positions of power can be avoided on the basis of realism as there have historically been few such women. However, depicting women in ways that unrealistically exaggerate their sexual characteristics is fine because it is part of the fantasy the game is selling. The use of the world selling ties directly into another method of defending the hegemonic ideology behind gender

representation in games, specifically that it is what sells. The basic premise of this argument is that game developers cannot be expected to provide more diverse gender representations because doing so would cut into their bottom line. In addition to the fact that such a line of reasoning renders hegemonic ideology a closed system that is impossible to break out of, it also disregards real world evidence. As has been shown, in recent years women, gays, and other traditionally marginalized groups have experienced an increase in economic, social, and political influence as well as an increasing interest in video games. Thus, it could conversely be argued that making games that appeal to this growing audience would actually increase game creators' revenues rather than the reverse. The logic at work here becomes even more strained when claims that games with diverse gender representations would not sell when efforts are simultaneously being made to preserve gaming as a safe male space by excluding those who would wish to purchase such games.

Game company BioWare regularly boasts high sales numbers and receives glowing praise for the quality of its games. For example, BioWare's Mass Effect series has sold over fourteen million copies (Stonecipher, 2015) and *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the company's most gender inclusive game to date, is also its bestselling. The game is also extremely popular with fans, studies showing, they have logged over 113 million hours of play time, (Sun, 2014) and with critics, having won the game of the year for award from numerous organizations including IGN, Game Informer, Polygon, EGM, and The Escapist (Tassi, 2015). However, the company is also known for including same-sex relationships in those games. BioWare's games have been the subject of hostility because of their same-sex relationship options, even, or especially, from people who otherwise enjoy and praise their games. Clearly the motive for this hostility is not, as often stated, the fear that including such content will lead to diminished sales, as BioWare's record shows it does not suffer from this. A strong example of this attitude can be seen in the comments of an online personality known by the alias Bastel, who posted multiple times on the BioWare forums to express his negative views on *Dragon Age II*. Bastel's complaints specifically center around the romance options offered by the game. More precisely, he claims that the two male romance options in the game were designed specifically to appeal to gays, thus leaving insufficient options designed to appeal to straight men. This claim ignores the fact these characters also can be romanced by female characters, meaning they are not exclusively "for gays." Further, since they are the only male romance options in the base game, if they were, that would mean there were no romance options designed for straight women, a possibility not at all concerning to Bastel. What this argument essentially says is, first of all, that the straight male gamer is, or should be, still assumed as the default so that the game will be assumed to be marketed to that

audience unless it specifically indicates otherwise and, second, that, it is not possible for a game to actually be inclusive. If it is not designed exclusively or at least overwhelmingly for straight male gamers then it is designed as *not* for them and needs to mark itself off as such.

*Further counter arguments against gaming as a politics free zone can be found in the ways some members of the gaming community respond to attempts to broaden diversity in game content, such as the random gender assignments in Rust or the same-sex relationship content in BioWare games. Although many are quick to argue that what really matters is the quality of the game and of the character one plays, rather than the identity of that character and thus, there is no need to alter game content, when game creators stray too far from the assumption of the player as straight cis male, as has been shown, objections are raised on the basis that such changes are preventing these players from fulfilling their personal fantasy, regardless of the fact that they enable others to fulfill theirs.*

## Summary and Conclusion

The hypothesis that gaming culture embraces a hegemonic ideology of traditional gender myths with the aim to shore up and facilitate the performance of the masculinity of its members in order to combat the stereotype of gamers as “un-manly” does appear to be consistent across all areas and facets of the culture studied here. This can be seen in **supporting hypothesis one**, namely the specific design decisions game creators make regarding male and female characters, including their physical appearance, clothing, language and behaviors, and game play roles, as well as the very limited and often humorous way that homosexual and gender non-conforming characters are depicted. All of this serves to provide straight cis men with socially approved objects of desire and to confirm their masculinity by establishing themselves against the other as not female and not gay as well as providing an opportunity to engage in the aggression and mastery that is part of the western cultural construction of masculinity. It can also be seen in the cultural interactions between gamers, how they perform masculinity through their objectification of women and display of aggression in public gaming spaces such as forums and online games as well as in the insular culture of “hardcoreness” by which gamers must prove their worth for inclusion in the subculture through the substitution of gaming ability for more conventional measures of masculine prowess. Finally, it can be seen in the language and choice of topics displayed in media created for gamers such as game reviews and news articles.

Leading on from the concept that games and gaming culture as specifically designed to enable the performance of masculinity, **supporting hypothesis two** explores the concept that, while games are specifically designed to provide empowerment fantasies to their players and fulfill an important

social role in doing so, they largely cater only to fantasies and ideals that uphold traditional, strongly binary gender ideologies, that primarily serve to empower those who identify as straight cis males. This can be seen in the fact that the majority of game protagonists are, in fact, straight cis males and that players who identify as such often become resentful when expected to play characters who do not match their demographic, as in the case of *Rust*, while dismissing the desire of those who are not straight cis male to have characters with which they can identify. It is also shown in the fact that, in many games, female characters primarily function to fulfill fantasies of masculinity by serving as cheerleaders and objects of desire for the protagonist/player, especially the tendency in many games to have female NPCs display overwhelming desire for the player/protagonist to unrealistic and even ridiculous levels. Conversely, female protagonists are not portrayed as sexual aggressors, who could serve as a fantasy self for female players but as passive objects of sexual desire for male players. On a broader scope, the study also shows how games are designed to include sexual desirability as a necessary component of empowered and idealized female characters, ensuring that these characters conform to cultural gender expectations on at least some level. The study shows how both these factors regarding the acceptable portrayal of women in gaming fantasy apply to many famous and popular female characters such as Lara Croft and Bayonetta. Additional evidence that supports the gendered perception of gaming fantasy in human actions as opposed to simply in game content include statistics and comments showing the relationship between character class and gender selection, cultural myths about approved gender roles, as well as the, sometimes unconsciously gendered rhetoric used by game scholars and designers regarding what players *should* want from their games, all of which serve to demonstrate how, even the realm of fantasy, is not devoid of gender ideologies, rather the reverse.

The study has further shown in **supporting hypothesis three** that, while this perception of gamer demographics has always been, to some extent, a stereotype, it has become increasingly so in the past two decades as the audience for games has expanded along with conceptions about gender in the society at large. This has led to diversification in game content and representation and calls for even greater diversification as well as hostile reactions from some of the more traditional segments of gaming culture, as this may impede their use of gaming as a way to perform masculinity. This can be seen in the hostility directed towards women, gays, and other gender non-conforming individuals who attempt to enter game space, especially on equal terms with straight cis men. In addition, this hostility frequently takes a specifically gendered form, such as targeting a woman's sexuality or telling her to return to the kitchen. Similar trends can also be seen in game design where games in recent years have an increase in the prevalence of gender signifiers even with regards to characters and story lines where

they were previously far less common. The ultimate example of this resistance is the use of harassment and threats of physical harm by movements such as Gamer Gate to silence calls for more diverse representation in games.

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