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**GAMES AND PLAY AT THE MARGINS:
BETWEEN VISIBILITIES AND
INVISIBILITIES**

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Guest Editor's Introduction**INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE OF *HUMAN TECHNOLOGY*: GAMES AND PLAY AT THE MARGINS: BETWEEN VISIBILITIES AND INVISIBILITIES**

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How does one code for silence? In which ways, subtle and otherwise, are voices present and accounted for, yet not in certain spaces? Sometimes, the important work is indeed being done, but the means of communicating that contribution faces substantial barriers to its conveyance. This is the everyday reality of scholarship, and one goal of this special issue of *Human Technology* has been to focus on the publication of research that provides insight into the niches and nuances of online game communities. Academic researchers and media scholars stand to be bridges, rather than barriers, in this process. Among members of the media, their multitudinous audiences, stakeholders in a game industry in convulsions, and decision-makers at every level of education and training has been frustration at the lack of progress, and sometimes regression, when it comes to opportunities to create and participate.

As in the very theme of inquiry of this issue—Games and Play at the Margins: Between Visibilities and Invisibilities—the handful of manuscripts and, importantly, their authors, consistently research and navigate spaces of tension, ambivalence, and conflict in bringing these issues to light within a system that often presents much of a headwind toward doing so. Too often, systemic barriers and the very sociotechnical systems of the research and publication process itself present consistent challenges that themselves are a process of enculturation favoring established systems of dominance.

Despite the oft-lauded emancipatory possibilities cyberspace affords, the study of people and these environments continues to uncover vastly understudied populations, deep-seated systems of oppression, and unsung heroes. This thematic issue of *Human Technology* was an opportunity to explore a bit of the unconventional in games and play, particularly in the ways that game spaces serve as hosts to everyday acts of resistance to stereotypical or hegemonic means of understanding cultural forms of communication and recreation. In this sense, this collection of works highlights gameplay as it winds in and out of institutions, social relations,

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and media platforms. Games are just one example of how communities, their practices, and culture manifest through mediated environments.

There is power in what exactly gets a platform and is read and cited as part of collective knowledge. This is especially important in a relatively new and international field such as games. Games and game studies are in no way exempt from the tendency to play into hegemony (Fron et al., 2007) and, to its own detriment as a field of study, exhibit its own complicity in the process of silencing marginalized subjects, including scholars and resultant scholarship. The opportunity to serve in ameliorating this situation with the creation of this special issue was extremely compelling from an editorial standpoint.

Forging new paths in scholarship has always taken courage. However, the level of risk and exposure demanded of contemporary knowledge creators, especially those who advocate and agitate for the marginalized, continues to increase. One may see the critical work herein that endeavors to inform, enlighten, and most of all, help others make decisions about the kind of world they envision individually and collectively through policy. Because creation does not occur in a vacuum to produce isolated artifacts (Winner, 1986), the common thread throughout the research herein is the link to broader social forces and meaning-making practices to the critical study of games and play. For every microcosm representing an online community, there is personhood, nuance, and a range of complexities that lend themselves to deeper understandings.

In researching the liminal spaces that illustrate the richness and diversities of practice, this collection contributes to a body of scholarship that draws attention to the gray zones, silences, and work behind the scenes that present their own particular challenges in elucidation. Nevertheless, the papers in this collection draw attention to the importance of interrogating the processes of production, distribution, publication, and audience reception. Rather than an afterthought, everyone involved in the creative process must pay attention to diversity, inclusivity, corporate responsibility (Busch et al., 2016) and find creative ways to work towards more ethical and just solutions in the everyday.

In the first article of this thematic issue, “EVE Online Is Not for Everyone: Exceptionalism in Online Gaming Cultures,” **Kelly Bergstrom** foregrounds the ways that play is shaped and constrained by forces beyond the game itself. Through an analysis of how a particular game, EVE Online, is marketed, its coverage in enthusiast gaming press, and player interviews, she weaves together a critique of the premise—and indeed promise—of an archetypal and folkloric EVE player. Through this systematic mapping out the forces that lead to disengagement, she highlights how these forces serve as a barrier to the inclusion of potential players. The work to be done implicates the industry and its adjacent communities in fostering more inclusive and welcoming communities that ultimately better the collective experience of play.

In “Toward a Formal Sociology of Online Harassment,” **Katherine Cross** identifies cross-contextual similarities in social practices that encompass forms of online harassment that transcend boundaries of gender, race, class, or political affiliation. She uses Simmel’s (1908/1959) formal sociological method to frame the insights of contemporary gaming and technology scholars in order to better understand how harassment occurs online and offline. Through the provision of a predictable macro-order of events, her article makes sense of an otherwise chaotic presentation of toxicity and structural abuse often aimed toward those most marginalized online or advocating for the marginalized. In addition to individual bad behavior of those who garner a disproportionate amount of attention, the platforms that game communities use to foster increased social cohesion may be weaponized through a multitude of public and private organizations. In order to deal with

these multitudes, she illustrates what collective action work toward better design and problem-solving may look like.

The third article, “Growing the Otome Game Market: Fan Labor and Otome Game Communities Online,” provides insights into the practices surrounding otome games, Japanese-originated games specifically marketed to women that typically feature topics related to romance and dating simulations. Of primary importance in what author **Sarah Ganzon** highlights is the processual and agentic motivations of this amorphous fan blogging community. Resonant with Radway’s (1984) foundational work that drew attention to emancipatory practices associated with reading of romance novels that could be dismissed as sexist, Ganzon presents how the growth of otome game communities worldwide represent a complex set of motivations and circumstances.

The final article, “(Re-)Balancing the Triforce: Gender Representation and Androgynous Masculinity in The Legend Of Zelda Series,” provides research into the globally renowned, critically acclaimed, and financially successful video game series The Legend of Zelda in order to demonstrate how traditional stances on what the hero/protagonist may look like in terms of gender and sexuality are dynamic. **Sarah Stang** engages the nuances of gender representation in a male-dominant industry, while drawing attention to the dynamic between an ever-diversifying and visible fanbase, with a reluctance to decentralize maleness in corporate structures and practices. The illuminating theoretical contribution to how gender is cast in games indeed derives from corporate culture and practices that replicate and perpetuate established and powerful gender roles, that, though tropes unto themselves, require persistent effort to engage and critique.

Collectively, the articles in this issue peek behind the curtain regarding how who is at the games tables and also at the boardroom tables are interrelated and codependent. Systemic barriers to women in the game industry extend well beyond mere STEM education and training and into access and retention in the workforce (Chee, 2016). One might see similar, though less obvious, manifestations of circumstances that precipitate attrition of minoritized and racialized individuals in the industry as a whole. This special issue specifically focuses upon and showcases work with the express purpose of lending particular insights into the typically marginal or invisible aspects of games and play. Given that original scholarship is rare toward this goal and sometimes faces barriers to seeing the light of day through publication, this collection is all the more valuable in its mission. Ultimately, the work here comes from a deep-seated desire for games and game communities to be better understood, better for play, and better for more of humanity.

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EVE ONLINE IS NOT FOR EVERYONE: EXCEPTIONALISM IN ONLINE GAMING CULTURES

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Abstract: EVE Online is a space-themed massively multiplayer online game that has developed a reputation for being difficult and unwelcoming to new players. In this article, I explore how an emphasis on exceptionalism is present throughout discussions about EVE by its developer, the enthusiast gaming press, and survey responses of current players (N = 647). Taken together, information from these sources reinforces a public perception that EVE is a game that is of interest only to a very specific kind of player. In turn, these findings add further evidence to the long-argued position of feminist game scholars: Not all gaming communities are open to all players. Rather, who plays, what they play, when they play, and/or how often they play is shaped by the larger social context in which play occurs.

Keywords: *EVE Online, MMOGs, players, exceptionalism.*

INTRODUCTION

Massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) represent a genre of digital games in which thousands of players participate simultaneously in a shared, persistent online world. Research to date has remained overwhelmingly focused on the activities, decision making, in-game behaviors, and interactions among players while they participate in the gameworld of a MMOG. Still underexplored are how players come to play particular games, and even less is known about why they leave. Although at any time hundreds of MMOGs are available to pick from, players tend to focus their attention on only one or two games, most typically following the pattern of quitting one game before moving on to a new title (Pearce & Artemsia, 2009). Due to the affordances and structures of most MMOGs, this makes sense: This genre of gaming tends to require a significant time investment by its players. Because of this time investment, participation in these gameworlds is not always continuous or consistent. Players also might stop and start playing the same MMOG multiple times, depending on external factors that constrain their available leisure time (Bergstrom, 2019b; Debeauvais, Nardi, Schiano, Ducheneaut, & Yee, 2011). In other circumstances, players may not want to stop playing but are forced to relocate to a different gameworld because the game is being shuttered by its developer, as was the case for the *Faunasphere* (Consalvo & Begy, 2015) and *Uru* (Pearce & Artemsia, 2009) communities.

In this article, I add to the growing body of research being conducted to better understand why players leave MMOGs. I also add support to arguments made by feminist game scholars that the choice of whether or not to play a game is never truly unfettered. Specifically, I contribute evidence that the larger discourse surrounding a game, combined with how existing community members frame the game to outsiders, can serve as a barrier for some potential players becoming long-term participants in a particular gameworld. Using the space-themed MMOG *EVE Online* (*EVE*) as a case study, I demonstrate how an emphasis on exceptionalism is present in how this game is marketed, the type of coverage offered by the enthusiast gaming press, and how its existing player base describes the game to outsiders. Taken together, information from these sources reinforces a public perception that *EVE* is a game that is of interest only to a very particular kind of player. This in turn adds to the folklore that *EVE* is exceptionally difficult and/or unforgiving in its gameplay, which is indeed an attractive quality to some players (e.g., Bergstrom, Carter, Woodford, & Paul, 2013; Carter, 2015b) but may result also in potential players—who might otherwise enjoy the game—opting out before ever trying it for themselves.

BARRIERS TO DIGITAL GAMEPLAY

In order for an activity to be considered play, it must be entered into voluntarily. Yet this does not necessarily mean that all games are open to all potential players. In the case of a MMOG, certain conditions must be met before a potential player can enter the gameworld. These conditions typically include access to a computer capable of running the game's software, access to high-speed Internet, and a credit card or other means to pay the game's monthly subscription fee. Some games are geographically limited, meaning that computers located in certain regions of the world are unable to connect to a game's server. These examples are some, but not all of the obstacles that must be overcome before a player can connect to a MMOG. Less easy to pinpoint are the more subtle social forces that may steer potential players toward some games

and not others, or away from games entirely. To address the gap whereby the barriers to gameplay remain underexplored, I draw on the history of feminist game scholarship that has long illustrated that, although games are frequently marketed in a way that assumes they are of more interest to young boys (Burrill, 2008; Chess, 2017; Cote, 2018), in reality girls often are socialized away from gaming from a young age (de Castell & Bryson, 1998; Harvey, 2015). Interventionist feminist research has shown that when the entry conditions are changed (e.g., the creation of groups where girls can learn to play games in a girls-only environment or in women-led community groups focusing on mentoring other women through designing their own game), girls and women become active players and/or create their own games (Fisher & Harvey, 2013; Fisher, Jenson, & de Castell, 2015; Harvey, 2014; Harvey & Shepherd, 2017; Jenson & de Castell, 2011; Kafai, 2008). Beyond intentional feminist interventions, games directly marketed toward girls and women tend to be collaborative as opposed to competitive (Cunningham, 2018; Flanagan, 2005; Juul, 2010) or productive in nature (e.g., cognitive improvement games such as BrainAge) rather than play for play's sake (Chess, 2009, 2010, 2017).

In this article, I continue my previous research that disrupts biological deterministic arguments surrounding who plays what games and for what reasons (Bergstrom, 2019a, 2019c). Throughout my work, I have argued that gendered assumptions about who plays digital games, what games they play, and for what reasons they play are complicated when feminist games scholarship is put into conversation with leisure scholarship. By turning to literature from leisure studies that investigate how the combination of intrapersonal (e.g., a personal belief about whether or not something is an appropriate leisure activity to undertake), interpersonal (e.g., family commitments that reduce one's leisure time), or structural (e.g., a lack of disposable income) barriers can work to reduce an individual's access to particular activities (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991), I have argued that feminist game scholarship can better articulate the barriers that can prevent access to gameplay (Bergstrom, 2019c). Games, broadly conceived, suffer from a common-sense understanding that ignores the larger social context in which they are undertaken. Traditionally, the assumption has been that such activities are freely chosen (Stebbins, 2017, p. 11). However, unobstructed access to leisure activities is more myth than reality: Leisure scholars have long argued that "leisure activities are socially structured and shaped by the inequalities of society" (Juniu & Henderson, 2001, p. 8). Moreover, such inequalities are correspondingly present among digital gaming cultures, as evidenced by the work of Kishonna Gray (2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2014, 2018), who has painstakingly documented the racism and misogyny faced by black women who participate in online gaming communities. Rather than barriers being limited to a few specific games, feminist researchers have documented how games-related forums and websites also are less than welcoming to participants who fall outside the gamer stereotype. To be clear, the stereotype is not necessarily reflective of the reality of the diverse demographics that can be found playing digital games; rather, the stereotype that games are the domain of socially awkward teenage boys remains exceptionally sticky (Bergstrom, Fisher, & Jenson, 2016; Kowert, Griffiths, & Oldmeadow, 2012). Players who do not self-identify as being straight and/or white and/or male are generally made to feel unwelcome or less-deserving to identify as part of a specific gaming community (Beyer, 2012; Braithwaite, 2014; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Kubrik, 2012; Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Vanderhoef, 2013).

These studies of barriers to leisure and/or gaming communities serve as my framework to examine how a developer and/or existing player community can signal to potential players

whether or not a particular game is for them. EVE's player population is exceptionally homogeneous, almost exclusively men. In my previous research about this MMOG, I discussed how players use the male-dominated EVE player community (Leray, 2013) as evidence that women are somehow inherently disinterested in space-themed games, such as EVE (Bergstrom, 2016). In this article, I continue to build on this work to illustrate how the ways a specific game is positioned in the larger MMOG landscape can act as a form of gatekeeping, which in turn works to maintain the homogenous demographic of its player community. To highlight evidence of this gatekeeping, I will begin by discussing some examples of how EVE is framed by its developer (CCP Games) and the enthusiast gaming press. Subsequently, I examine responses from a survey in which current players of EVE were asked to describe the game to someone who had never played it before. EVE is a sandbox-style game, meaning players are reasonably free to forge their own path and participate in activities that best suit their preferred play style and interests. Yet, these examples of how EVE is framed by its developer, the enthusiast press, and the existing player community will illustrate how a particular version of EVE has become the norm. Such framing inadvertently hails¹ some players while pre-emptively excluding other potential players, which in turn works to complicate the idea that playing or not playing EVE is an activity that somehow is inherently more attractive to certain demographics over others.

EVE ONLINE, BRIEFLY

EVE, a space-themed MMOG released in 2003 by CCP Games, has wavered in popularity over the course of its lifespan. Peak subscriber numbers are estimated to be around 500,000, but this number has since decreased (Royce, 2016). Originally, a subscription was required to play, but the game has since moved to a free-to-play model. EVE breaks from conventions typically present in other popular MMOGs (e.g., World of Warcraft, EverQuest) in that it is not a fantasy-themed game, player-to-player interaction does not happen via humanoid avatars, and CCP Games rarely intervenes to regulate play (Bergstrom & Carter, 2016). Instead, EVE players are free to undertake what CCP Games has described as forging their own path in the sandbox, that is, in the gameworld known as New Eden. EVE is played on a single-shard server, which means that players from almost everywhere in the world access the same game server. Exceptions to this single-shard community are the players with Chinese Internet Protocol addresses who must play on a separate server due to government regulations.²

Research about EVE was scant in the years immediately following the game's release, but it has increased in popularity among researchers in recent years. Early investigations about the game include a collaboration by Wu-Chang Feng, David Brandt, and Debanjan Saha (2007), who examined the rate at which new players joined and existing players quit EVE. By tracking patterns of how often players connected to the game server, Feng et al. found that 70% of new players quit about a year after creating an account (p. 22). Other research about EVE published around this time used prominent in-game events as part of larger investigations about player interaction in virtual worlds. In large part due to EVE's reputation as a lawless virtual world, in-game events sensational enough to warrant coverage in the gaming and/or popular press have served as a case study in articles that focused on morality (Craft, 2007), fraud (White, 2008), and virtual world governance (Blodgett, 2009; de Zwart, 2009; de Zwart & Humphreys, 2014).

In 2013, a noticeable shift in the academic games literature about EVE occurred. Rather than looking from the outside in, ethnographic investigations, such as Harald Warmelink's (2014) landmark book *Online Gaming and Playful Organizations*, began to offer new interpretations of this gameworld. Despite Darryl Woodford (2013) cataloging the difficulties of conducting ethnographic work in a nonavatar environment such as EVE, articles and conference papers drawing on interviews with current players and/or participant observation of the EVE gameworld began to appear at this time. In some cases, such as publications stemming from Marcus Carter's (2015c) dissertation research, this literature remained focused on the more ruthless elements of EVE play. Carter collected his data via in-game observation and by interviewing active players of the game (Carter, 2015b; Carter & Gibbs, 2013; Carter, Gibbs, & Harrop, 2012), rather than building an argument based on coverage of a notorious event in the popular press. Oskar Milik (2017) and Nick Webber and Milik (2018) added to this conversation by analyzing how the speeches made by leaders of in-game corporations (EVE's name for guilds or other similar player organizations) were used to maintain order in a chaotic online world but also reinforced a culture of ruthlessness among the corporation's membership. Catherine Goodfellow (2015) documented the xenophobia against Russian (or those perceive to be Russian) players. Goodfellow's ability to conduct fieldwork in both Russian and English allowed for her cross-cultural comparison of this player community, adding a thick description of EVE to the game-specific literature while further serving as an important addition to the broader game studies literature that overwhelmingly focuses on English-speaking game communities. This new approach to EVE was most readily apparent in *Internet Spaceships are Serious Business* (Carter, Bergstrom, & Woodford, 2016), an edited collection about the game that featured empirical research as well as essays written by prominent and long-term players, adding nuance and complexity to the studies of this gameworld.

Earlier academic work on this game seemed to rely heavily on third-party descriptions of controversial in-game events. This second wave of research, drawing on empirical research, complicates the perception that EVE play consisted entirely of lying, cheating, scamming, and assassinating other players. And yet, as my investigation will demonstrate, this continues to be one of the primary (and sometimes the sole) depictions of EVE by the enthusiast press and one of the major themes current players will draw upon when describing this game to someone who has not previously played it. Before moving on to this discussion of EVE in the enthusiast press, I now provide additional context for the game by providing a brief description of how EVE is marketed by its developer, CCP Games.

FRAMING EVE ONLINE

As part of a larger dissertation about EVE, I conducted two analyses of major sources of information that a potential player might turn to in learning more about this MMOG: the official EVE website and reporting on EVE by the enthusiast gaming press. I briefly summarize here the findings of both studies with the caveat that, due to the nature of the Internet that allows for continually updated content, these studies are now historical examples. I posit however that these examples are still useful because they capture how EVE was talked about online in the time leading up to when I conducted the survey detailed later in this article.

EVE Online's Official Website

A visitor to the official EVE website in September 2018 was greeted with a realistic rendering of space and spaceships, reflective of the game's animation style. Written in bold, white text at the center of the screen is the message

RECORD-BREAKING SPACE MMO³
JOIN GAMING'S GREATEST BATTLES

Near the bottom of the page is a quote attributed to *The OP*⁴ that reads, "Best Open-World MMORPG⁵: EVE Online." In June 2019, this message was updated to say

THE #1 SPACE MMO
NEW EXPANSION OUT NOW

The quote attributed to *The OP* was later changed to one by *Game Revolution*⁶ that states, "EVE Online is the biggest game you could possibly hope to play." In 2018 and now into 2019, the landing page indicates this is a website for a space-themed MMOG that has received praise. But this was not always the case.

In May 2014, a visitor to the EVE landing page would have been greeted by a very different message (Figure 1). Clicking the text "one universe" loaded a star map of New Eden, the virtual universe of EVE. This map was not annotated in any meaningful way nor did it include an explanation of how gameplay on a single server adds to a unique gaming experience. In March 2015, the link to the star map was replaced with a new link that said "the universe." Clicking on this link led to a page that detailed the backstory or lore of the game. In a larger exploration of

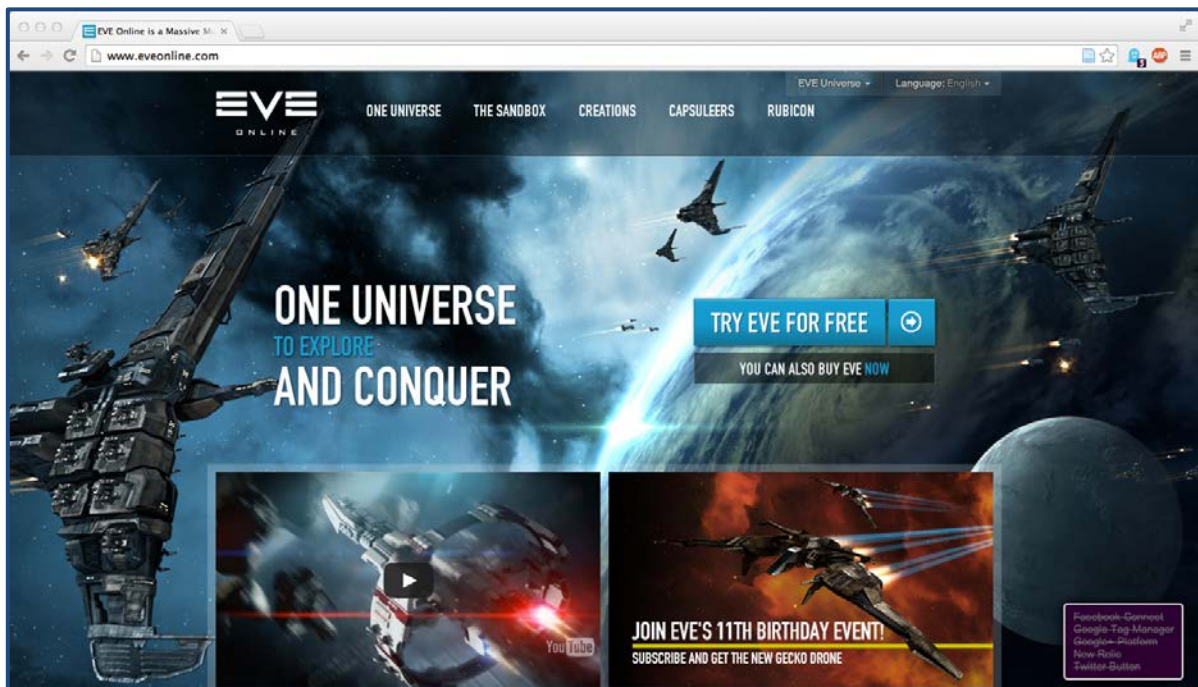


Figure 1. Screenshot taken by author on May 16, 2014. This was the landing page of the official EVE Online website.

EVE's marketing conducted as part of my dissertation research (Bergstrom, 2015), I argued that, when compared with official websites of other popular MMOGs (e.g., World of Warcraft), the official EVE website was and is presented in a way that assumes viewer familiarity with the game and its genre. To briefly summarize, my findings were that, although the World of Warcraft website included a comprehensive introduction to both the game and the MMOG genre generally, such information was missing from the EVE website. The 2014 World of Warcraft website included a link to a game guide on the main landing page. Clicking this link led to a comprehensive introduction to the game that began with an answer to "What is World of Warcraft?" The material not only explained the specifics of the game but also served as a general introduction to the typical features of the MMOG genre (Figure 2). I argue that having information presented in an accessible manner, especially when displayed alongside the EVE site, illustrates that the World of Warcraft website is far more accessible to potential new players.

The World of Warcraft website has been designed to easily acclimatize a player unfamiliar with this particular game and/or with MMOGs. In contrast, the official EVE website assumes a degree of familiarity with both the game and genre. Instead of a game guide, the May 2014 version of the EVE website featured a prominent offer of a free trial. This would indeed offer new players a first-hand introduction to the game, but previous research has found that the EVE new-player tutorial was and remains incomplete (Paul, 2011, 2016). Only those who are able to find assistance (usually in the form of guidance from existing players) to help overcome the steep learning curve are likely to become long-term players of this game. Christopher Paul argued that this approach to learning the game enculturates and solidifies a tight-knit community of players. Extensions to this research contends the imagined EVE player is assumed similar in subcultural

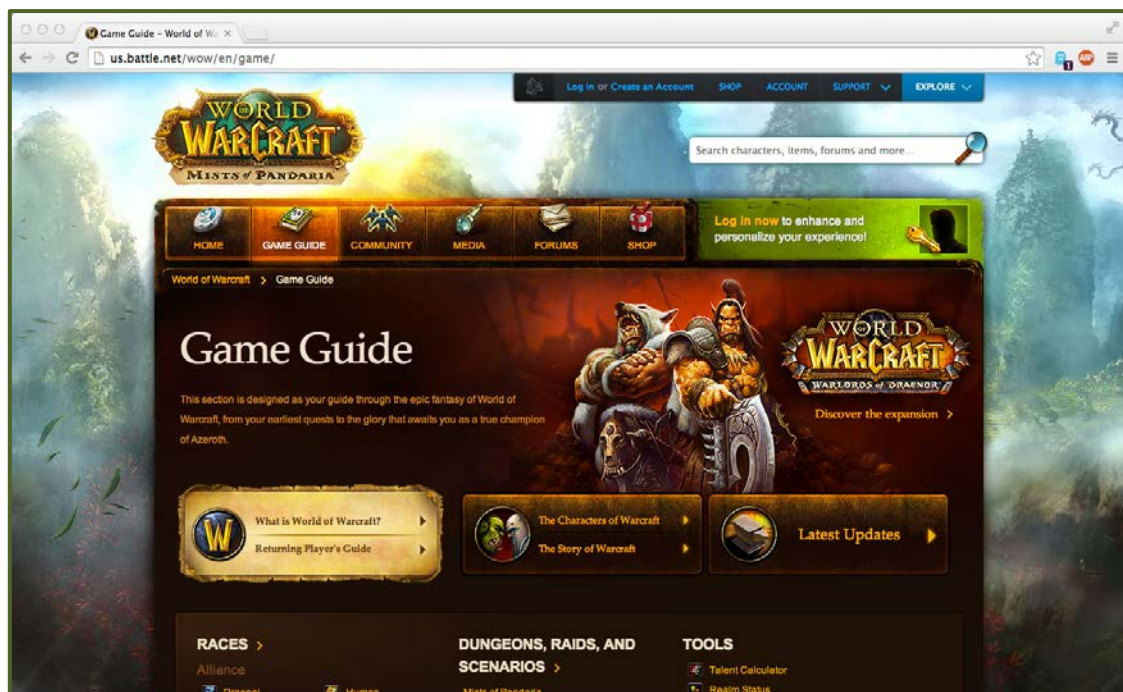


Figure 2. Screenshot taken by author on June 13, 2014, showing the Game Guide accessed via a link from the main World of Warcraft landing page. This page contained basic information about the game and also an introduction to MMOGs more generally.

knowledge and humor to that of existing players, as evidenced in an examination of player-created newbie guides (Bergstrom, 2013), player-made propaganda (Carter, 2015a), and fieldwork conducted at fan conventions (Chia, 2018). My research adds further empirical evidence that the existing player base may not always be particularly apt at offering assistance to a diversity of new players. I will return to the existing player community in a subsequent section of this article, after I detail how the enthusiast gaming press reported on EVE during this study.

EVE Online in the Enthusiast Press

Unlike mainstream journalism, which has a history of being less than friendly in their coverage of gaming (Bergstrom et al., 2016; Dutton, Consalvo, & Harper, 2011), an enthusiast press “produces consumer-oriented publications that focus on publicizing specific categories of goods, often high-end technological products (such as video games, computers, or cars)” (Carlson, 2009, para. 4.1). For example, *World of Warcraft* was rarely covered by mainstream publications—except for large clusters of sensationalized coverage in the wake of two mass shootings (Bergstrom et al., 2016). The gaming enthusiast press is much more likely to offer both consistent and/or positive coverage of games. Knowing this, I posited in previous research (Bergstrom, 2015; Bergstrom et al., 2013) that potential players might be more likely to learn about EVE through these venues. Therefore, over a 1-year period, I captured all mentions of EVE in three online publications that would be considered part of the gaming enthusiast press, each representing a slightly different focal point to ensure a variety of coverage about the game. These online publications were as follows: a general gaming website that provides coverage of a wide variety of genres (*Kotaku*), a niche website that only covers MMOGs (*Ten Ton Hammer*), and the nested MMOG-specific site belonging to a more general games or technology network (*Massively*, part of the *Joystiq* network).⁷ Using the NCapture extension of Nvivo for Windows, I archived all articles tagged with the keyword *EVE Online* appearing on each of the three sites between May 2013 and May 2014, resulting in a dataset of 267 articles. Thematic coding (Saldaña, 2013) was used to generate a list of each article’s primary topic. The most frequently appearing topics, representing 75.6% of the articles captured for this dataset, are presented here.

1. Replication of CCP Games’ Press Releases ($n = 93$; 34.8%). These articles presented content that replicated information shared via press releases on the official EVE website and/or blog posts made by CCP Games’ employees, known colloquially as *dev blogs*.
2. Articles not actually about EVE Online ($n = 37$; 13.8%). These articles mentioned EVE Online as a keyword tag in the header of the article but did not actually mention EVE anywhere in the body of the article. EVE was likely included as a keyword to assist with search engine optimization.
3. Articles that were actually about other games produced by CCP Games ($n = 28$; 10.5%). These articles used EVE Online as a keyword tag but the primary subject was another game previously, currently, or projected to be developed by CCP Games. These games were EVE Valkyrie ($n = 16$), Dust 514 ($n = 9$), *World of Darkness* ($n = 2$), and Project Legion ($n = 1$).

4. Articles focused on the player versus player (PVP) elements of EVE Online ($n = 26$; 9.7%). These articles actually covered EVE-related content, but focused solely on one element of gameplay (i.e., large-scale PVP battles).
5. Articles focused on player conventions and meetups ($n = 18$; 6.7%). CCP Games hosts two annual EVE-themed player conventions, Fanfest in Reykjavik, Iceland, and EVE Vegas in Las Vegas, USA. The articles in this category ranged from informational announcements that the events were occurring to more editorial-style pieces that relayed the authors' experiences at one or both events.

This coverage of EVE—discussed in detail in Bergstrom (2015)—is relevant to my current investigation in that it paints a picture of EVE that is limited at best. Missing from the year's worth of coverage were any discussions of the less visible parts of the game that might be of interest to potential players, specifically the game's robust player versus environment (PVE) mode, the mining and manufacturing activities to amass in-game wealth, and the rich role-play communities found within New Eden (Taylor, Bergstrom, Jenson, & de Castell, 2015) or the decidedly less ruthless play observed on the Chinese EVE server (Page, 2018). By relying heavily on the press releases or dev blogs released via official CCP Games' channels, much of the actual enthusiast press coverage of this game focused on announcing new expansions or forthcoming in-game changes. These topics would likely be of little interest to nonplayers and may be inaccessible to those unfamiliar with the game's mechanics and/or structure.

In addition to coding the articles by topic, I also made note of particular characterizations of EVE by the enthusiast press, including specific descriptions of the game being hard, boring, or different from other games. In some cases, the headline helped reinforce the ruthlessness of EVE, such as Jason Schreier's (2014) "A look at the insane history of EVE Online" that appeared on *Kotaku* and detailed Andrew Groen's (a freelance reporter who had written previously about EVE) Kickstarter campaign to fund his research and subsequent book about the oral history of the game. The text of Schreier's article mentioned giant space battles, virtual warfare, and politicking but made no mention of any of the PVE activities that one can undertake in EVE (e.g., mining, manufacturing). Similarly, the headline for another article on *Kotaku*—covering the release of the Darkhorse Comics and CCP Games' collaborative project based on actual events that have happened within the EVE universe—invoked a similar sentiment about people who play this game: "A comic that perfectly captures the evil genius of EVE Online players" (Narcisse, 2014).

The coverage on *Kotaku* between May 2013 and May 2014 tended to focus on the more sensational aspects of EVE, which I have argued previously is the most easily understood and accessible for non- or novice players (Bergstrom et al., 2013). EVE players doing horrible things to each other makes for exciting headlines, and such coverage requires little knowledge of the in-game affordances or rule structures other than a loose grasp of the idea that EVE is a lawless space. By consistently presenting EVE in such a manner, *Kotaku* maintained the idea that EVE is a game for players who are interested in ruthless play and thus encourages such players to investigate this game further. Potential players who would prefer a more collaborative gameplay experience will likely self-select out of EVE long before they would consider downloading the free trial and playing through the EVE tutorial. Despite EVE being marketed as a sandbox game offering an immersive and self-directed play experience, the coverage on *Kotaku* did not present it as such.

In contrast to what I observed at *Kotaku*, *Ten Ton Hammer* and *Massively* provided coverage of EVE that tended to replicate the official press releases and words written by CCP Games' employees. By relying on the jargon familiar to current EVE players, this sort of coverage also worked to create the impression that EVE is a game likely of interest to some people more than others. Much like the official EVE website described above, such coverage offered little foothold for new players to learn about the variety of play available within this MMOG's gameworld. Based on this analysis of reporting about EVE over that 1-year period, it seems that coverage in the enthusiast press has very little middle ground and instead clustered around two extremes: (a) shallow sensationalist coverage of ruthless play that does little to contextualize the diversity of experiences that a sandbox game purports to offer, and (b) highly technical and jargon-filled coverage seemingly written with the imagined audience of a current EVE player in mind, often replicated directly from EVE or CCP Games' own websites.

Through this review of enthusiast press coverage about EVE, I established that public-facing descriptions of EVE, from both the perspective of the game's developer and the gaming enthusiast press, help to frame EVE as a very particular type of game of interest only to a particular type of player. These conclusions provide a foundation for my current study where current EVE players were queried about the game to uncover any evidence for my argument that not all potential players would be equally welcomed into New Eden.

EVE ONLINE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CURRENT PLAYERS

The responses from current players discussed in this section were collected in an online survey seeking to understand who does or does not play EVE and their reason(s) why. The survey, which ran from November 2013 to February 2014, queried current players, former players, and nonplayers, including those who had not previously encountered EVE. Although 2,061 were received, incomplete surveys and surveys completed by participants who indicated they were under the age of 18 were discarded. Thus 981 completed surveys remained and these responses were included in the overall analysis. Participants were recruited from a variety of venues including recruitment posts made to a variety of online gaming forums, mailing lists, social media, and word of mouth. The survey was framed as a more general survey about MMOG experiences and was open to English speakers over the age of 18. A full description of the methods for this study is provided in Bergstrom (2015).

Here I narrow my focus to the responses of 647 participants who indicated they were current EVE players at the time the survey was conducted. I note that this is not a representative sample. Although recruitment posts were distributed across a variety of venues, participants ultimately self-selected.

Participants who indicated they were a current EVE player were funneled into a branch of the survey that asked a series of questions about whether they have introduced their friends to the game and, if so, how they introduced the game to these potential players, as well as asking them to describe the game to someone who had never played it. I note that, due to the snapshot nature of survey-based research, I was unable to clarify respondents' comments or probe for further details. What follows is my interpretation and analysis of their responses as generated through thematic coding of data from open-ended survey questions.

Participants who indicated they currently play EVE were asked “How would you describe EVE to someone who has never played it before?” Six hundred (92.7%) of the current players responding to the survey provided an answer to this question. The length of responses varied widely. Some chose to answer with a single word, such as “*Complicated*,” “*Brutal*,” or “*Real*.” At the other end of the spectrum, I received multiparagraph responses; the longest answer was 658 words. Overall, the average length for respondents’ answers to this question was 25.7 words.

The most common way to describe EVE focused on it being a space-themed game: 306 respondents provided an answer that indicated EVE is about space and/or spaceships. This is perhaps unsurprising in that images of stars, planets, and spaceships figure prominently in CCP Games’ advertising campaigns, and the in-game play focuses heavily on traveling through star systems via spaceships. Rather than using terminology such as *science fiction* ($n = 26$), respondents were far more likely to use the term *sandbox* ($n = 255$) to describe EVE. The heavy use of the term *sandbox* in player descriptions of EVE likely stems from CCP Games’ own reliance on the term to advertise its game.⁸ However, I found that the majority of current players who used *sandbox* in their answer did so with very few (or in many cases, no) qualifiers to explain what the term means. I argue that this is further evidence that the current users’ expectations that the imagined novice EVE player has already encountered the game—or the concept of a *sandbox* environment—somewhere else. These answers also assume that this imagined novice player has been introduced previously to the slang, memes, and highly specialized jargon pervading this community. Very few answers to this survey question provided a description that would offer a clear foothold to a player who previously had not encountered this game and its surrounding community. One way this is readily apparent is in the heavy reliance on EVE-specific jargon. I argue that this acts as a form of gatekeeping in that many of the responses I received from current players contained references to very specific elements of EVE that would seem meaningless to someone unfamiliar with this particular MMOG.

The use of memes and catchphrases in the survey responses provides another example of wording that speaks to an insider audience. The design and structure of the official EVE website, in 2014 and still at the time of writing this article, targets an imagined user who is already familiar with the game. A similar theme emerged from the responses to my query for current players about how they would describe EVE to someone who has never played it before. Just as the official website provided very little in terms of a foothold for a visitor who had never heard of EVE (e.g., no EVE 101 or Frequently Asked Questions), many of the current players’ survey responses did not make an effort to make EVE any less opaque to those not already familiar with this MMOG and its surrounding community. Nowhere is this more evident than from the respondents who answered the question with one word. I now move on to an investigation of the frequency of which current players relied on specialist or insider knowledge, even when explicitly asked to describe it to someone not previously familiar with this game.

Emphasizing Jargon

Responses provided by the current players seemed to be undergirded with an assumption that an imagined recipient of this information may not have played EVE before, but they have heard of it. Similar to the official CCP Games’ websites and much of the coverage in the enthusiast press, I take this as evidence of an imagined audience who is already familiar with EVE. The assumed nature of the imagined audience would also explain why so many responses from current players drew heavily on memes, jargon, and/or catchphrases that are popular in this community and

frequently used by players. Consider how meaningless the five following descriptions, directly quoted from participants' answers, might seem to someone without any prior introduction to this game: "*Spreadsheets in space that let you scam*" (Resp. 230),⁹ "*Spreadsheets online. Death has consequence, don't die. Day traders, rejoice*" (Resp. 504), "*Space ships, lasers, pew pew, 'splosions*" (Resp. 658), "*It's not about making a sandcastle, it's about destroying another's*" (Resp. 247), and "*Spaceship sandbox about building metaphorical castles while knocking other people's castles over and throwing sand in their face*" (Resp. 812).

To be clear, these are not excerpts. These are the full responses provided by five current players describing EVE to someone who has never played it before. These represent just a few examples of answers that relied heavily on jargon that, on the surface, seem like short, pithy responses. On first glance, this might appear that the participants are not taking the question seriously. However, these responses actually contain a large amount of information about the game. The first example makes reference to "*spreadsheets in space*," a nickname given to EVE (i.e., Excel Online) due to its math-heavy gameplay. This response also makes reference to the lawlessness of EVE, specifically that CCP Games will not intervene when players cheat or scam each other. The second example also makes reference to the math involved in playing EVE, but this time instead of making reference to the hands-off nature of the developer, the respondent draws attention to the fact that EVE features "permanent death," more colloquially known as "permadeath." This term refers to how, when an avatar dies in EVE, that specific avatar is permanently removed from the game and can no longer be used for play. To continue, a player must activate a clone being stored elsewhere in the gameworld. The most jargon-heavy comment is from Respondent 658: Here the participant makes reference to the space-themed nature of the game, combat ("*lasers, pew pew*"; a type of weapon in the game and a slang term that represents the sound lasers make when they are fired), and the permanence of death ("*'splosions*"; exploding ships). The use of *pew pew* is, of course, not unique to EVE but still requires familiarity with broader Internet slang to decode what this description might mean.

Answers from Respondents 247 and 812 can be read as a more pleasant way to describe *griefing*, that is, creating one's own fun at the expense of another player's experience and/or the ability to move about the gameworld (Bartle, 1996). The references made in these examples also indirectly reference the philosophy of certain pockets of the EVE community that view nonconsensual PVP interaction an essential part of EVE's gameplay (Bergstrom, 2016). Indeed, the emphasis on destruction of in-game items is often positioned as a core component of what makes EVE *EVE* (Taylor et al., 2015). Marcus Carter (2015c) also investigated the pervasiveness of another variation of this sort of play style, that is, the scamming and antisocial behavior exhibited in EVE, what he refers to as "treacherous play." Carter's explorations of antisocial play subsequently have been extended by Ian Gregory Brooks (2018) in his investigation into whether or not such betrayal is actually unethical. Similar themes were relayed by Aleena Chia (2018) and Mark Johnson and Robert Mejia (2018), who explored the explicitly neoliberal undertones of this gameworld in the time since the research in this article was conducted.

Using EVE-Specific Memes to Describe the Game

The heavy use of jargon throughout current player responses sometimes took the form of making direct reference to EVE-specific memes. Richard Dawkins (1976) originally used the term *meme* to describe the way an idea or piece of information can travel through society while mutating—

much like a gene. This attempt to apply biological evolutionary theory to the evolving aspects of a culture has since been taken up by scholars interested in the study of digital culture. Internet memes can take the form of images, videos, short pieces of text, or a website that are shared via computer-mediated communication and, like Dawkins' memes, begin to be modified as they are shared (Shifman, 2013). Previous research on Internet memes has shown that they have become a key part of online political dialogue and discussions (Milner, 2012) and are a way to demonstrate one's cultural literacy and reaffirm one's belongingness to a particular online community (Phillips, 2012). Two EVE-specific memes in particular—Excel Online and Internet Spaceships—have become intimately tied with the game. Unlike Shifman's (2013) finding that memes change as they are shared, these two specific phrases have undergone very little variation over time in this community. These memes, however, appear to be mobilized by participants in a way that supports Phillips' (2012) argument that such invocation by current players reaffirms belongingness to EVE's community. To those "in the know," each phrase also serves as a general reminder that, despite the high stakes play in a gameworld where one misstep can lead to permadeath, it is indeed a feature that for many players is part of the fun. Ultimately the game is about buying, trading, and destroying immaterial goods, and for many players the game is just about Internet spaceships and is not all that serious after all.

Above I made reference to the EVE-related meme of Excel Online appearing in the responses of a current player describing EVE. This was not an isolated incident: 55 responses made specific reference to spreadsheets and/or Excel Online. Other examples in the data include "*Excel, in space, that makes your heart thump*" (Resp. 556), "*Awesome multiplayer sandbox space strategy trade action excel sheets*" (Resp. 1330), and "*Spreadsheets with pretty pictures*" (Resp. 1377).

I note that current players who invoked spreadsheet and/or Excel references included in their descriptions elements that seem positive, for example, that EVE is an action-filled game ("*...makes your heart thump*") or that the game is visually appealing ("*pretty*" or "*attractive*") appeared multiple times in this dataset. As was the case with the descriptions in the previous section, Respondent 556's comment demonstrates the risk of the comment being read by someone not familiar with EVE as seemingly random words strung together. Another participant attempted to summarize the game as follows, "*EVE Online is all about space, spreadsheets, and shooting things*" (Respondent 1355). This respondent does not provide a value judgement in describing the game, but the answer contains three major elements of EVE (i.e., that it is set in space, involves math, and has a combat component). In most other cases in this dataset, the terms spreadsheets and Excel were used without making explicit reference to why a player might need them for gameplay. In my coding, I made note of responses that specifically described EVE as being a math-heavy game, but this was mentioned in only two responses. Once again, I stress that I interpret such responses as demonstrating that the more frequently used terms are loaded with meaning for someone with some degree of familiarity with EVE, but exactly what spreadsheets or Excel means in this context would likely be lost on outsiders.

The clearest evidence that current players assume their audience have had a prior introduction to EVE is provided by the extensive use of the phrase *Internet spaceships*, a term referring both to the fact that EVE players fly ships through space and, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, to serving as reminder to themselves that it is "only a game" and that hostile actions taken in EVE against other players are not ones to be taken seriously. This phrase appears 61 times in the responses of current players. Internet spaceships is loaded with (sub)cultural value for someone who has prior exposure to the game, and yet the meaning of this phrase (or even that it is an EVE-specific meme) may be

lost on a nonplayer. To someone invested in this community, Internet spaceships is a ubiquitous phrase, so much so that it is the name of the first edited volume about EVE (*Internet Spaceships are Serious Business: An EVE Online Reader*; Carter et al., 2016). Another use of the phrase is *A Tale of Internet Spaceships* (Mårtensson, Raivander, & Thedin, 2014), the title of a documentary about EVE players and their relationship with the MMOG's developers. This phrase also has become part of the company philosophy of CCP Games. For example, this wording was used in the keynote address by CCP Games' CEO Hilmar Pétursson after announcing the cancellation of the developer's other MMOG, *World of Darkness*: "If Internet spaceships were ever serious business at CCP, that is now the case, and will continue to be so," as quoted in Kuchera (2014, para. 11). The phrase is instantly recognizable to most players who have spent some time in and around the EVE community, but would likely be lost on someone who had never encountered the game before. It is compelling that so many participants decided to include it in their response to a query asking them to describe EVE to someone who had not previously played the game. The presumption seemed to be that an imagined audience may not have played EVE, but they knew enough about the game to be aware of the importance this phrase holds for the community.

In some instances in this survey data, Internet spaceships was coupled also with EVE's other notoriety, that learning to play EVE requires an extensive and difficult learning curve:

INTERNET. SPACESHIPS.

Probably the hardest, most unforgiving game you'll ever play. The learning curve is like teaching a five-year-old nuclear physics. (Resp. 228)

Comments such as these use hyperbole, but also seem to have an underlying element of self-congratulation for surviving the process of learning how to play EVE. Others presented learning to play EVE as some sort of higher calling or noble cause, and that by successfully defeating the learning curve, one would somehow better understand human relationships. Take for example, this response provided by a survey participant:

I wouldn't recommend this game unless you are willing to learn and seriously commit yourself with time, money and mental state. It is a game that calls for you to be open-minded, and how to treat the world. I say that because the world is you, the players. And you have to consider everything, and I mean everything, that a human can and will do to another human. (Resp.147)

Both these quotes, the entirety of two current players' responses, referenced the extreme amount of commitment required to learn this game, with an undertone of exceptionalism that EVE players are somehow different than players of other MMOGs. Below I highlight further examples where EVE was presented as not intended for and/or not of interest to most people.

EVE is a game of meticulous craftsmanship and is not enjoyed by the common person because most of EVE is very cut and dry. This game gets its value from its "meta-gaming" aspects where more than the game is considered. i.e. sifting email and account of traitors, diplomatic relations, and how to lead people into staying with you and doing things a certain way. (Resp. 404)

EVE is an MMO set in space. It has a very steep learning curve, and it is not meant for most gamers in the sense that it has a very different play style than typical video games. (Resp. 526)

Complex, brutal, extremely rewarding, but not for everyone. (Resp. 612)

A massive online game where you can potentially interact with anyone else currently playing. Definitely not for everyone though, because it takes a lot of work to get to a point where you actually understand what's going on. Ability to multitask is almost a necessity. (Resp. 958)

In my interactions with players to date, beyond those surveyed here, the widely held belief is that EVE is not universally accessible. For some current players, EVE's difficulty (and by extension, their mastering its learning curve) is touted as a point of pride. I also have been told in prior conversations with players that EVE is the game that you graduate to when you become so skilled at other games (e.g., World of Warcraft) that they no longer provide any challenge. These sorts of conversations add to the sense of exclusivity and accomplishment of being a long-term EVE player. Here I stress that difficulty or complexity is not the issue—games like Dwarf Fortress have an equally high, if not higher, barrier to entry.

What is important to remember when considering the responses of these current users is that the characterizations of the game were prompted by a request for the players to describe the game to someone who had never played it before. Based on these survey responses, it may appear that these respondents had already decided that this imagined novice would not be interested in the game, rather than giving potential players the opportunity to decide for themselves if EVE is indeed for them. Future research is necessary to see if similar response patterns hold in other settings, such as an interview or a lab-based study where a current EVE player is tasked with ushering in a novice to this gameworld.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: SHOULD EVE ONLINE EVER BE FOR EVERYONE?

The pervasiveness of exceptionalism in current player responses begins to provide an explanation for the skewed demographics present in this gameworld. If EVE players assume this game is of interest only to a certain personality type, it follows that players might assume EVE is only attractive to particular demographics: young males who are assumed to be playing hardcore games, broadly conceived. In this article's Introduction, I provided a brief overview of the feminist game studies literature that critiques the assumption that the audiences most interested in playing games—any games—are straight, male, and white. In an article by Joseph Leray (2013) about the lack of women playing EVE, CCP Games' employees explained it was their belief that EVE is not attractive to women because of gender-based stereotypes about play preferences and/or a dislike of science fiction. CCP Games' statements, combined with the sense of exceptionalism that either explicitly or implicitly runs through the responses from current players that EVE is not for everyone raises further questions about who current players imagine as the ideal potential recruit to this game. Based on my findings from this survey and existing research about homophily in online spaces, where people with similar interests and/or demographics clump together (boyd, 2012; Yardi & boyd, 2010), future research is necessary to investigate whether the focus of EVE players on recruiting players who mirror themselves actually leads to the continued homogeneity of this MMOG community.

The goal of this specific article and my research more generally has never been to offer up a method or set of best practices that would make EVE more welcoming to a greater diversity of audiences. By attempting to make clear the multiple barriers and constraints a potential player must overcome before becoming a participant in a particular gameworld, I have argued that gameplay never occurs in a vacuum and a variety of internal and external factors continually

influence who plays, what they play, how often they play, and when they play. This serves as a reminder that extremely large datasets collected from MMOGs are not actually representative of a larger population. For a deeper discussion of this implication, I would like to draw the reader's attention to Eszter Hargittai's (2015) important argument that datasets drawn from a single MMOG player population, from a particular social networking site, or from a single site of any kind, is limited in its generalizability, no matter how big the dataset. Rather than advocating for increased diversity among EVE players, my goal has been to provide further evidence to the long-argued position of feminist game scholars: Not all gaming communities are open to all players. The realities of who plays, what they play, when they play, and how often they play it is shaped by the larger social context in which play occurs.

MMOGs offer the opportunity to meet new people from all over the world, increasing a player's exposure to new cultures and potentially leading to increased empathy among players. These games also provide space to collaborate with friends and strangers by means of coordinating and completing complex tasks in both small and large groups. MMOGs (and other digital games) also offer up an environment where failure to complete a particular task is not necessarily a disaster. Rather than actual lives or currency being on the line, the stakes are much lower in a virtual world. Game scholars have long argued that MMOGs can serve as a space where both bonding and bridging social capital can be cultivated; playing together can strengthen existing ties and also lead to new connections. In sum, there are many benefits to playing a game like EVE beyond enjoying one's leisure time.

In conclusion, I must emphasize that the argument of feminist game scholarship has never been that every game should be all things to all people. EVE is never going to be a game that appeals to all players; very few games ever occupy a universally beloved position. Rather, my aim in this article has been to foreground the ways that play is shaped and constrained by outside forces. Using EVE Online as an exemplar, I provide evidence that an overemphasis on exceptionalism by its developer, the enthusiast press, and the existing player community may have locked out potential players who fall outside the assumed demographic of EVE. As a result, potential and novice players are not given the opportunity to participate on their own terms and make their own decision about whether or not they would like to stay.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, APPLICATION, OR POLICY

MMOGs offer a compelling site for certain types of research in that they offer up large populations through which to study computer-mediated communication. However, they cannot be viewed as a proxy for society writ large as they do not act as an actual mirror of offline populations. By examining how the ways journalists, the game's developer, and current players describe EVE, I have provided evidence to explain why this particular game has a reputation for exceptionalism and how gatekeeping occurs on multiple levels. When this research is put into conversation with other work about former and non-players, it demonstrates that how a game is publically discussed is just as important as the gameplay mechanics when seeking to understand who will play it (and who is much less likely to do so). By starting with a game that has a reputation of being at the very edge of its genre, this article highlights both the need for future research about barriers to MMOGs, but also provides a point of comparison for how games with a more welcoming reputation (e.g., *World of Warcraft*) are discussed by journalists, developers, and players.

Game designers will be able to apply this research to their own gameworlds to cultivate a sense of accessibility or exclusivity, depending on their desired outcome. Public discussions about their game (by players and/or journalists) can be harnessed to create deep engagement with a narrow population, or to foster a reputation for welcoming and inclusiveness. Company promotional materials can either supplement or disavow the reputation of their game—but only if they are aware of this reputation.

ENDNOTES

1. For the information of readers from other fields who may not be familiar with the use of *hail* in this manner, I draw on Louis Althusser's (1971) concept of interpellation. Hailing in this case is used like a call, specifically where ideology calls to an individual to conform to a certain subject position and its associated assumptions, beliefs, and worldviews.
2. For a detailed discussion about the Chinese server and its very different play style than the server utilized by the rest of the world, see Richard J. Page's (2018) contribution to the *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*'s special issue about EVE.
3. MMO is typically understood as an alternative way to shorten Massively Multiplayer Online Game.
4. During the time of writing this article, the quote attributed to *The OP* appeared on the page where premium EVE accounts could be purchased (<https://secure.eveonline.com/buy/>). However, that placement did not provide link to a specific website or review; my subsequent attempts to find the review were unsuccessful.
5. A MMORPG, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, is a type of MMO. The use of MMORPG has fallen out of fashion in recent years, with MMOG being used to refer to Massively Multiplayer Online Games, whether or not they contain a role-play element.
6. *Game Revolution* (<https://www.gamerevolution.com>) is a website devoted to gaming related news and reviews of recent games.
7. After data collection was completed, *Joystiq* and its nested sites (including *Massively*) were shuttered as part of downsizing by AOL, its parent company (Wawro, 2015). Since that time, the site has returned as *Massively Overpowered*, a Patreon-funded website.
8. This heavy reliance on the term sandbox to describe EVE is present in commercials or trailers produced by CCP Games to advertise this MMOG. An example of the heavy use of sandbox can be seen in *The Butterfly Effect* (CCP Games, 2009) a trailer that uses chaos theory to explain how the actions of a single EVE player can have far reaching consequences in a single-shard gameworld.
9. The respondent numbers here were assigned in chronological order as unique anonymized identifiers by the survey software used (LimeSurvey). Although every participant who completed at least one question was assigned a unique identifier, only the 981 completed surveys formed the overall dataset. For this paper, just the 647 respondents who identified as current players were analyzed. All comments are presented exactly as the respondent wrote.

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TOWARD A FORMAL SOCIOLOGY OF ONLINE HARASSMENT

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Abstract: Online harassment and various subcategories of it, like doxing and swatting, have attracted enormous interest for several years now—and particular interest in the world of game studies in the wake of 2014’s GamerGate harassment campaign. Such protracted, crowdsourced campaigns remain undertheorized, however. Using contemporary research to modify Georg Simmel’s formal sociological method, I provide researchers and the wider public with an easily visualized structure that most harassment campaigns follow: the form of an inverted pyramid bearing down on an individual target, stratified into three orders of harassment, each defined by level of severity and invasiveness. With this form, the public can more clearly visualize online harassment as a structural rather than individual phenomenon. This form makes a significant contribution to social media research by providing an approachable theoretical framework for future studies and can also frame design interventions on harassment.

Keywords: *online harassment, formal sociology, game studies, GamerGate, Internet studies.*



INTRODUCTION

Online harassment—purposefully abusive, unwanted, often repeated interactions with another person online—has come of age. Although it has existed since the earliest days of the Internet, it has now come to dominate in many societies, reaching the highest levels of mainstream politics. From debates in the U. K. House of Commons about whether the Prime Minister’s rhetoric inspires online threats against his opponents to the U.S. President’s penchant for tweeting bilious comments at or about anyone who displeases him, examples of online harassment’s commonplace banality abound. But this newfound normality is not online harassment’s only novel feature. With the dawn of the 2010s, a phase-change in online abuse occurred that shifted it from a largely episodic, individual phenomenon to an indefinite, campaign-based affair. Historically, online harassment depended on crowdsourcing—the use of the Internet to gather attention and incite action from a distributed group of users—but, by the 2010s, two new features became increasingly common in episodes of online harassment: organization and longevity.

By 2014, with the onset of the GamerGate harassment campaign (see Table 1 for description of the events and organizations mentioned in this paper), the evolution from individual harassment to long-term, collectivized abuse was complete. The GamerGate campaign, which began with the harassment of game developer Zoe Quinn over false allegations that they¹ had traded sex with journalists for positive reviews² (Perreault & Vos, 2018), quickly metastasized into a reactionary movement against any hint of feminist or progressive activism in the world of video gaming (Mortensen, 2018). GamerGate, a movement made up of a small but enthusiastic group of video gamers and fans, targeted women, queer people, and people of color in gaming with protracted campaigns of online harassment that included a great deal of bigotry. From engineering boycotts of news outlets whose female writers essayed against GamerGate to driving developers and critics from their homes and issuing bomb threats against feminist speakers, GamerGate sustained an assault against many targets for a protracted period of time (Frank, 2014; Wingfield, 2014). It was organized from platforms such as Reddit and the 4chan imageboard, where targets were monitored and rationales developed for strategically targeting them, their families, and their workplaces with harassing behavior.

Video gaming’s seasonal storms of harassment—which, in the past, had targeted figures like former BioWare writer Jennifer Hepler or Ubisoft producer Jade Raymond³—had consolidated into a whole new climate of abuse. Harassment neither begins nor ends with gaming, of course, but it fell largely to gaming fans, journalists, critics, and academics to analyze this sudden shift toward campaign-based harassment and its significance. How can scholars take the hard lessons learned in the world of video gaming over the last 5 years and synthesize it into useful knowledge that has general applicability?

In previous work about the causes of online harassment, I focused on how the Internet’s cultural conceit of unreality—the popular idea that the Internet is unreal and distinct from “real life”—licenses this behavior by making it easy to ignore the humanity of one’s interlocutors (Cross, 2014). In the wake of GamerGate, and with the aid of much of the academic work that has been done on online harassment since, it is now possible to extend this analysis through identifying a formal structure of behavior common to most online harassment campaigns.

The formal sociological method pioneered by Georg Simmel (1917/1950a, 1908/1959) provides researchers with a way of seeing a general social pattern in online harassment, and more recent research on specific cases of campaign-based harassment sheds even more light on the matter.

Table 1. Definitions of Terms, Groups, and Events Involved in Online Harassment or Abuse Discussed in this Research.

4chan and 8chan	4 chan is an anonymous imageboard (i.e., a forum in which users post images that can then be commented on) infamous for its loosely moderated and freewheeling subforums. It is also well-known for producing memes that have influenced popular culture and for directing harassment against individuals. 8chan is an especially virulent offshoot, populated by people who find even 4chan's loose moderation to be too restrictive. Multiple mass shooters have posted about their plans on 8chan.
Anonymous	An activist group that grew out of 4chan, using anonymous in-person protests and online hacktivism to pursue political goals. It was born out of an anti-Scientology protest in 2008.
ComicsGate	A recent movement in the world of comic book fandom that sought to oppose the presence of women in the comics industry and the promotion of diversity in comic book storylines.
Doxing	The practice of publishing an individual's private information online before an audience hostile to that individual; usually a "dox" will include a home address, place of employment, telephone numbers, and, in some cases, social insurance numbers. The practice is sometimes described as "dropping dox" on or about someone.
GamerGate	An online harassment campaign directed at feminists and progressives in game development and games journalism. Their targets of harassment were loosely defined but primarily women, LGBT people, and people of color. It began in 2014 and continued until mid-2015, though remnants still congregate in online forums like Reddit.
KiwiFarms	A forum devoted to stalking and harassing people from groups despised by the site's denizens. Their targets are chiefly transgender people, people with disabilities (especially neuroatypical people), furies, and Otherkin. ⁴
QAnon	A sprawling online conspiracy theory that emerged in the wake of Donald Trump's election to the U.S. presidency. Named for "QAnon," supposedly an American intelligence operative with Q-level clearance who has gained a following of conspiracy theorists through sites like 4chan and Twitter, the participants believe, among other things, that Donald Trump is secretly breaking up an international pedophile ring run by the world's elite liberals.
Sad and Rabid Puppies	A right-wing movement within science fiction literary fandom that sought to oppose the diversification of the medium and to elevate the work of likeminded reactionary authors, while reacting against the literary awards won by authors like N.K. Jemesin and Ann Leckie.
Swatting	The practice of making a false report to an emergency hotline (such as 911 in the US/Canada or 000 in Australia) that precipitates an armed police response against a target's home. For instance, using information revealed in a dox, a harasser may call the police alleging that the target has taken hostages or is running an illegal drug laboratory. The purpose is to allege something so egregious that a SWAT team or its local equivalent will barge into the target's home, potentially injuring or even killing the target.

A formal sociological approach, with its emphasis on finding "patterns that transcend their specific instantiations" (Zerubavel, 2007, p. 133), reveals that most online harassment campaigns converge upon a single target through employing three different modalities that can be categorized as distinct types of harassment. I call these modalities the *three orders of online harassment* and describe each in detail using illustrative case studies drawn from across the Internet. The orders form a useful model of online harassment that can improve both public and academic understanding of the phenomenon. Although GamerGate was a clear case of a

harassment campaign, I show how other less well-known incidents of online abuse illustrate the emergence of a form for harassment that unites these disparate cases.

Of note is the fact that this method of harassment is employed by diverse groups of people: from Anonymous, to 4chan, to faceless mobs of sexual harassers, to progressive activists, and to older social conservatives. The argument here, however, is not intended to suggest that there is a broad equity in who gets harassed or that the harassment always has the same sociostructural impact. Rather, I mean to highlight in this paper the fact that many of the people who are harassed are often antagonized online through a process that is so rote as to nearly be scripted. Thus, I argue that this script is best understood as a form in the Simmelian sense.

There is, for instance, isomorphism in how Internet users will “call targets,” how a sense of outraged injustice lends moral fire to the attacks, and how the use of methods such as DDOS (distributed-denial-of-service) attacks or swatting can inspire less committed participants to continue with low-investment, individuated harassment on sites like Twitter or Facebook. I will address these issues and explain, in detail, the practices that make up the form of online harassment I have identified.

To quickly sketch the form, it can be best understood as an inverted pyramid with an individual deemed to be an acceptable target of harassment at its nadir (see Figure 1). The pyramid is stratified into three broad categories of harassing behavior, or what I term *orders*, that constitute both the harassment itself and that which fuels the behaviors.

Starting from the nadir and moving up the pyramid is first-order harassment, which involves the most severe attacks against the target’s Web presence and physical life, like doxing, swatting, DDOS attacks, and stalking; here, the harassers do something to the target. Second-order harassment is the most commonly known variety: person-to-person online abuse through social media or email; here, harassers say something to the target. Third-order harassment sees the crowd

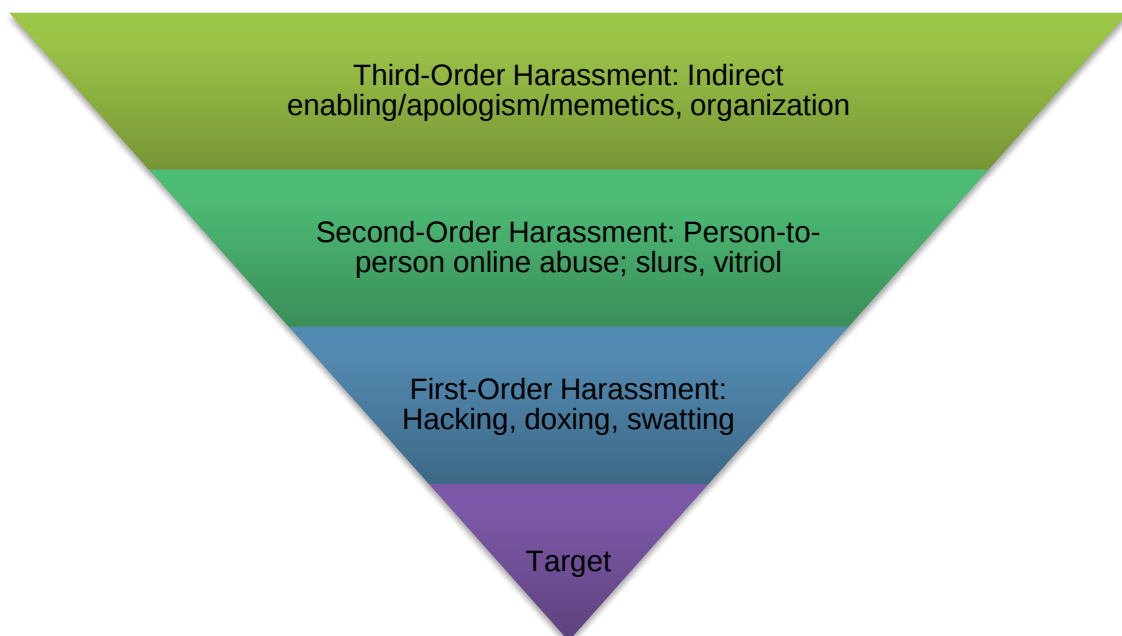


Figure 1. The Sociological Form of Online Harassment. The inverted pyramid depicts the distance, relationship, and activities of the abusers from most distant toward the target of the abuse.

talking to each other about the target, justifying, excusing, or minimizing the harassment and creating a social climate that makes abuse more likely.

I begin with a review of the relevant literature on online harassment and the culture of structural prejudice that often surrounds it. From there I explain my methodology, briefly introducing the case studies I examined, before reviewing some literature on the formal sociological method itself. I then elaborate the form of online harassment, explain its constituent parts, and explore the case studies that show the diversity of applications for the sociological form of harassment that I identify here. I conclude with brief thoughts on research and policy implications.

ONLINE HARASSMENT, IDENTITY, AND PREJUDICE: A REVIEW

The corpus of literature related to the myriad issues involved in online harassment reflects a wide variety of disciplines and approaches. However, feminist scholarship in the social sciences and humanities has shone perhaps the brightest and most consistent light on online harassment. Such scholars have advanced useful theories exploring the gendered and racist dimensions of online vituperation. Their work demonstrates online harassment's remarkable parallelism with patterns of patriarchy and white supremacy in the physical world—whether it be Orientalist racism in online games showing how race remains a powerful touchstone for Internet users (Nakamura, 1995, 2000) or how antiBlack racism on Xbox Live shapes player experiences in a space where whiteness and masculinity are unmarked norms (Gray, 2012, 2014). These scholars have ensured that structural prejudice is a part of the discussion when these cases are brought into forums of academic and public opinion. They emphasize the sexist, racist, and homo/transphobic nature common to much online harassment, arguing that the dehumanizing effects of the Internet are sharply amplified by the latent othering of women and minorities in the physical world (Ballard & Lineberger, 1999; Jenkins, 1998; Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013; Meyer & Cukier, 2006; Nardi, 2010; Norris, 2004). In different ways, this body of work shows how online abuse, fueled by a culture of prejudice, has a disparate impact on certain groups. In Nardi's ethnography of *World of Warcraft*, for instance, she observed that women, including herself, were subject to harassing sexual inquiries over voice chat that men did not face (Nardi, 2010, p. 153); Kuznekoff and Rose's study (2013), with experimental controls, empirically demonstrated that Nardi was correct.

The online harassment research that has emerged in response to GamerGate has extended many of the conversations that were begun by this earlier work, which had correctly identified race and gender as particularly vexed sites of online abuse. Sexism, racism, and homo/transphobia remain especially common avenues of online attack, both in video gaming and elsewhere. But beyond merely identifying the existence of prejudice, more recent scholarship led by women and people of color has explored how harassment works in greater detail. Gray (2012, 2014), Chess and Shaw (2015), Gray, Buyukozturk, and Hill (2017), Massanari (2017), and Vossen (2018), among others, had been crucial figures in identifying the unique features of GamerGate early on. Vossen (2018) explored how movements such as GamerGate make online spaces culturally inaccessible for marginalized people. In Massanari's (2017) term, it became a "toxic technoculture" aided by the gamified systems in place on social media platforms that incentivize harassment, allowing it to make the leap from individual to structural. Expanding on this, the research curated by Grey and Leonard (2018) demonstrated what that structure's effects can be:

It is regarded as a system and thus must be met by systemic solutions that grapple with the collectivized nature of prejudice, be it through community management (Cote, 2018), building queer spaces (Skardzius, 2018), or confronting the reality of systemic prejudice in the gaming industry itself (Vysotsky & Allaway, 2018). Meanwhile, Mortensen (2018) dubbed GamerGate a “long event,” capturing one of the critical dimensions of the campaign form: its longevity. This work pointed to an understanding of a structural phenomenon that is defined in large measure by that longevity, as well as crowdsourcing and organization.

Though writing before GamerGate’s advent, Nardi (2010) also illustrated how abusive behavior in games is often encouraged by the game’s ruleset and code, whereby a competitive online game had “rules...in place to promote a certain style of play,” a “world encoded into the rules” (2010, p. 71), underscoring the “power of designers to shape activity” (p. 70). This dovetails with later research like Massanari’s (2017), which demonstrated how the design of social media platforms give rise to harassing practices.

Although anonymity is heavily emphasized as a cause of harassment in popular culture (e.g., Holkins, 2004), as well as journalistic and academic investigations of the matter (see Fost, 2007; Levmore, 2010; Nussbaum, 2010), I proposed an alternate theory in past work (Cross, 2014). My theory draws on scholarship in sociology and psychology and focuses on what John Suler (2004) called the “dissociative imagination” that allows online users to distance themselves from the consequences and implications of their behavior on the Internet. I argued that a “mobius strip of reality and unreality” prevails online, where Internet users behave as if their actions are not real and lack consequences while justifying their behavior through appeals to concrete causes and moralities (Cross, 2014, p. 4). I extend that argument here by elaborating on the shape of the behavior this entails, for nearly all the harassment I describe here is defended by people who suggest that it is not real or, at least, not consequential in any meaningful way.

METHODS

To illustrate the relevance of a modernized formal sociological approach, I examine several recent online controversies that resulted in online harassment of one or more targets. They were chosen because of their relative popularity, each reaching the critical mass of virality required for a true harassment campaign to begin. As I explain each order of harassment in detail, I will illustrate that order’s existence and relevance through these cases, which include viral controversies, specific harassment campaigns, and a sample of YouTube comments. Although GamerGate provided a point of departure for this paper, it will be instructive to explore less-well-known incidents to see how GamerGate’s structure, albeit novel in its particulars, nevertheless has much in common with other forms of harassment. The formal sociological method, modified by the insights explicated in the literature review, will illustrate these similarities.

Formal Sociology

Simmel’s (1907/1971a, 1908/1971b) formal sociological method is, in brief, a sociology of recurrent patterns or relationships that exist across a wide variety of social contexts; it seeks to find the patterns endemic to social organization. Simmel argued that “detach[ing] by analysis the forms of interaction or sociation from their contents” formed the foundation “of a special science of society as such”

(1908/1959, p. 316), in short, sociology itself. “There remains for a sociology in the strictest sense ... nothing but the treatment of [those] forms [of interaction or sociation]” (p. 319). It is in this sense that the word *form* is used throughout the paper to describe a form, a shape, or a model of a type of social interaction, in this case, online harassment.

Simmel’s approach similarly identified common types of social interaction, such as “exchange” or “domination,” that demonstrate what each phenomenon had in common. Eviatar Zerubavel described formal sociology as a “research strategy that guides... sociologists in their efforts to distill generic social patterns from their specific cultural, situational, and historical contexts” (Zerubavel, 2007, p. 131). Formal sociology constitutes a kind of social geometry that represented Simmel’s (1907/1971a, 1908/1971b) attempt at rationalizing the then-young discipline of sociology into a discipline that could stand on an equal footing with the physical sciences. As Zerubavel noted, formal sociology in Simmel’s conception “almost resembles physics in its quest for transhistorical as well as transcultural *generality*” (2007, p. 132; emphasis in original). The method seeks the common pattern to a class of phenomena that transcends particular manifestations of the phenomenon.

Simmel’s (1907/1971a, 1908/1971b) arguments about formal sociology were sometimes contradictory but can be reduced to a few key points. First and foremost, he was not attributing essences to social interaction but rather recognizing that there were patterns of social behavior that were common to groups across obvious superficial boundaries. In short, similarities matter as much as differences (Simmel, 1917/1950a). In “The Stranger,” Simmel illustrated this through the eponymous figure, defined by a social location relative to larger collectives that were “near and far *at the same time*” (Simmel, 1908/1950b, p. 407, emphasis in original). What he called “the sociological form” of this figure was determined by a commonality that transcended several distinct social classes and phenomena, drawing links between the social characteristics of nomads, traders, and European Jewry. While some research would emphasize the differences between these groups, formal sociology looks for their commonalities, what Zerubavel called their “cross-contextual similarity” (2007, p. 136).

Formal sociology does not render context irrelevant or unimportant, but it instead emphasizes the value of understanding how and why similar patterns of behavior may develop across distinct fields of interaction. Far from being essentializing, it renders another dimension of social interaction visible and amenable to study. The formal sociological method suggests that commonality within difference is identifiable and that this commonality matters because it can furnish answers to specific inquiries that either particularism or a grand theory might miss (Mills, 1959; Zerubavel, 2007).

This balance is best illustrated by the contemporary uses of formal sociology. Arlie Russell Hochschild’s *The Managed Heart* (1983) was a pathbreaking study that identified the concept of “emotion work” as a potential site of alienation in labor. Her study focused extensively on the gendered dimensions of women’s emotion work, particularly through analyzing the experience of flight attendants. But she also used the formal method to compare their experience to that of men in male-dominated professions intensive in emotion work such as bill collection. Similarly, Lynn Chancer’s *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life* (1992) analogized workplace relations and heterosexual partnerships using her formal frame of sadomasochistic relationships as a metaphor. Zerubavel (2003) himself examined concepts like time and memory, while sociologist Thomas DeGloma explored the formal similarities among personal awakenings, such as religious conversions and coming out as queer (DeGloma, 2014). None of these studies erase particularity,

nor deny its importance, but each also uses the forms they identify to generalize across a variety of subjective frontiers. These studies inform how the formal method will be employed here.

Formal Sociology in the Present Study

The analysis set forth in this paper provides a useful example with which to explore the merits of the formal sociological method. In the case of online harassment, it is important to understand that harassment is not distributed evenly across the population of Internet users, nor does it have identical effects on those who are targeted. In other words, people belonging to groups underrepresented or subject to discrimination in certain virtual spaces will be hurt more severely—and in more directly material ways—than those belonging to majority or privileged groups. Such harassment is terroristic; the disproportionate vituperation of some women online (Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013) has often had a chilling effect on the speech or participation of other women (Yee, 2008, pp. 93–95; see also Citron, 2009, 2014; Nardi, 2010; Shaw, 2014). Although this overview is brief, it raises the very real and important differences between episodes of harassment directed at men and women, to say nothing of the myriad distinctions brought forward by antiqueer and antitrans harassment, where antagonism toward the existence of trans- and nonbinary people is increasingly becoming a theme in online abuse. These distinctions matter and have important implications for gender equality in tech spaces, to name but one example.

Nevertheless, based on the cases of online harassment episodes explored later in this paper, it becomes clear that, when people online organize or coalesce into groups that antagonize a single target, they do so in broadly similar ways. The method employed in this paper, therefore, will deliberately avoid dwelling on the contextual differences between the different episodes of harassment described in favor of finding a pattern common to them all. As Zerubavel put it, “Social pattern analysts are... purposefully oblivious to the idiosyncratic features of the communities, events, or situations they study, looking for general patterns that transcend their specific instantiations” (Zerubavel, 2007, p. 133).

A social pattern manifesting in different contexts of online harassment, then, is useful data, and formal sociology can help researchers see it. In this paper, I embrace some aspects of Simmel’s (1917/1950a) “social geometry” while leaving others aside. For instance, I do not share Simmel’s belief that this method is purely objective or that it constitutes a purer form of sociology, with the details of context best left to other disciplines (Simmel 1917/1950a, pp. 21–22). But social geometry is valued as both metaphor and visualization in sociology. Sociological subject matter, after all, often assumes a shape. Hierarchy conjures images of pyramids or skyscrapers, social networks engender webs, and geographic sociologies depend on understanding the role of space in making or breaking social phenomena—the way a public park’s design may encourage or discourage certain behaviors.

The preeminent shape in the analysis of harassment I advance here will be the inverted pyramid. True to the formal method, the shape is determined by the phenomenon it describes. The inversion of the pyramid attempts to illustrate the way that harassment converges, like a titanic spearpoint, onto a single target. The method of harassment described here is, at heart, an individualist phenomenon. Whatever “problem” justifies the harassment, the harassers see the assault of one individual—often representing the embodiment of some larger idea, social

problem, or undesirable group—as the solution. The harassers then become a wave of individuals revenging themselves upon a lone target.

THE FORM ITSELF

The method of harassment described here is distinguished by its convergence on a single target (see Figure 1). The term *convergence*, used throughout this paper, is a considered one. It suggests, at a stroke, both process and shape. As one moves down the pyramid, one gets closer to the target—moving from indirect chatter about the target down to performing physical actions against the target’s person and/or property. Each level of harassment is distinguished by distance from the target. Relation to and distance from the single target of the harassment is what orders the scale in the form depicted in Figure 1. In the case of GamerGate, the target would be a single person, with each order of harassment describing a layer of the campaign against them. An individual becomes an effigy, a symbol for everything opposed by the harassers. This meant rigorous ideological policing of targets who did not conform to GamerGate’s reactionary, corporatist ideals (Gray & Leonard, 2018; Quinn, 2017). Some popular commentators have already noted that GamerGate presaged larger harassment campaigns with similar modes of operation (e.g., Marcotte, 2016), but the form I have identified makes the structure of those similarities easier to see.

The Lone Target

Online harassment is, invariably, directed at an individual person. The reasons for this may vary. Perhaps that person did something the harasser disapproved of, or belongs to a minority group despised by the harasser, or was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. But harassment falls upon a specific target, whether the harassment consists of a hostile meme, hacking someone’s website, swatting their home address, or sending them a death threat via email.

What of situations where the target is attacked as a representative of a larger group? In this case, the logic of the form still applies. If the person is targeted because of, say, their religious affiliation or work for a specific news outlet, the result is the same. A lone target must bear the psychic (and occasionally physical) burden of being harassed through the Internet. In particular, the impact is the same when one is describing a campaign like GamerGate that attacks multiple targets simultaneously because they share broad characteristics. An abridged list of GamerGate targets would include Zoe Quinn, journalist Leigh Alexander, Anita Sarkeesian, game developer Brianna Wu, sociologist Adrienne Shaw, among others; all are individuals who dealt with all three forms of harassment bearing down on them at once.

The use of a lone target as a focal point should not be seen to deny the sociostructural reality of online harassment, especially those varieties inspired by structural prejudice. Instead, my model uses targets’ personal experiences as a focal point for understanding the personal impact caused by each of the three orders of harassment. In addition, an individual can often become a symbol for something that harassers perceive as a wider problem. Consider the commonplace *cri de coeur*, “You are everything wrong with ‘X’!” That mentality, in turn, invokes a punishment imperative, a way of revenging one’s self against a much larger problem.

In the case of Zoe Quinn, the acts were meant as punishment toward Quinn for being a representative of a supposed bias towards feminism in the video gaming industry. This imperative to punish, along with the design of social media, dictates the shape of online harassment. Social media corrals a mass of people, but the constraints of online communication focus their words, causing them to converge upon a single target. The Internet at large also foments a dissociative imagination that distances people from the consequences of their behavior; bearing down on a single target therefore becomes the path of least resistance online. One cannot yell at a system or an abstract idea, but one can yell at individual people or send them bomb threats.

The punishment imperative, which impels attacking lone targets who must be punished for their sins, is vital to nearly all harassment campaigns. Those who use the methods of Anonymous, for instance, pride themselves on bringing justice to those that the so-called elite appear to have forgotten. As anthropologist Gabriella Coleman observed, “Anonymous’s activities, however disparate and paradoxical on their surface, have tapped into a deep disenchantment with the political status quo, without positing a utopian vision...in response” (2012, paragraph 10).

Coleman (2012) argued that Anonymous’ excesses represent a “primitive rebellion,” à la Hobsbawm (1965), that is still finding its political footing but will one day mature into a powerful political bloc. That optimistic vision has not been borne out to date. The progeny of Anonymous, like GamerGate and QAnon, have had overarching political agendas, but they were broadly reactionary and premised less on hope than on fear. Moreover, members of these movements see themselves as vigilantes who punish the guilty, invariably an individual who can be readily researched and targeted using online tools.

First-Order Harassment

First-order harassment involves attacks that go beyond the virtual and try to physically hurt or ruin, both online and off, the target. Some types of first-order harassment assail a person’s Web presence, including hacking, DDOS attacks on a blog or website, or making malicious edits to the target’s Wikipedia page if he/she is a notable enough figure to have one. Such attacks can affect a person’s reputation or income and are carried out with the intent to do just that. A unique variant on this kind of attack is the way in which Anita Sarkeesian’s⁵ harassers, en masse, have reported as terrorism every YouTube video she uploads. This special reporting mechanism, intended as a response to the posting of grotesque executions by terrorist groups on YouTube, automatically removes a video from being viewed publicly, at least temporarily.

Other attacks are more overt still, reaching into the physical world to inflict bodily harm or visceral terror upon the target. Such attacks include swatting or stalking (as happened to Anita Sarkeesian, where harassers took candid photos of her in public in an attempt to intimidate her), or even leaving dead animals in the target’s mailbox (as happened to Zoe Quinn). Meanwhile, developer Brianna Wu found that photographs of her house were put online, and a YouTube video shot by a man who claimed to be driving there to kill her was soon posted (Merlan, 2015). Sarkeesian also faced bomb threats and was driven from her home by credible threats of violence against her and her family (U. S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2017). These kinds of attacks are classed as first-order because they represent the greatest possible intrusion into the life of the target.

Still other forms of similarly intrusive first-order harassment include doxing and swatting (defined in Table 1). Swatting can be deadly, especially in the United States, where police are more likely to use deadly force (Lartey, 2015; Lopez, 2018). A case from December 2017 made

this clear, where a man was shot and killed by a Kansas SWAT team that had been sent to his house by an irate Call of Duty player, Tyler Barriss, who wanted to swat another gamer he had been arguing with. Barriss attempted to dox this other player but found an incorrect address, which he sent to the police. It was there that the victim, Andrew Finch, an innocent bystander in every sense, was slain by police (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2019).

Instigating these acts requires a higher level of investment—both emotionally and temporally. In the case of Anita Sarkeesian, for instance, one must not only disagree vehemently with her, but also have enough antipathy toward her and her project to attempt to sabotage it and her in every way possible. Such antagonism also requires time; crashing her website or researching her personal information and history, as some have done, takes considerably more effort than simply sending her a nasty comment on Twitter. Such invasive and deadly harassment is often what targets of massive harassment campaigns fear. But as the tragedy of Andrew Finch shows, it can occur absent any campaign or even involvement. He was, instead, collateral damage inflicted by an abusive practice that remains common in gaming communities, where harassment is used as a tool to punish people one disagrees with or otherwise dislikes. It remains comparatively rare, but it is the product of other forms of abuse that, as already implied here, are so commonplace as to constitute a culture unto themselves.

Second-Order Harassment

If first-order harassment *does* something to the target, second-order harassment is a degree less invasive in that it merely *says* something to the target. This can take the form of an abusive tweet sent to the target or a rape threat emailed to the target. Such harassment is the most common and popularly understood variety, and what most people tend to think of when they hear the term online harassment. The following are examples of tweets sent to several targets, including myself, that might be classed as second-order harassment:

“good go get raped you cunt, get fucking lynched you deserve it.”

“Please kill yourself. I hope you die of breast cancer and AIDS combined, you chink.”

“I hope u get raped and then hit by a bus.”

“You’re a Bolshevik feminist jewess that hates white people... and you expect to be taken seriously when you’re ‘critique-ing’ video games? Fucking ovendodger.”

ohgod you don’t even pass you look like a man in drag, god I’d rather put my dick in a blender than you.”⁶

Such comments are certainly startling and qualify as abusive. They are also, invariably, unwanted. In a harassment campaign, a tweet like any of the above is but one of many that a target will receive and thus constitutes repetitive abuse. For instance, the “ovendodger” comment was part of a wave of harassment directed at feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian. Thousands of similar comments were made against her, often tagging her in social media.⁷

The case of Elan Gale (2013), a film producer whose fraudulent tweets about a cruel airline passenger went viral in 2013, is equally instructive here. Gale claimed that a woman named Diane, a fellow passenger on his flight, was acidly rude to the flight attendants, prompting him to live-tweet the episode to his followers. He claimed to have sent lewd notes on napkins to the mystery woman, including one signed “Eat my dick. Love, Elan,” a theme repeated in future

notes (D’Addario, 2013). It would later be revealed that the whole affair was a hoax, and that Diane never existed (Dewey, 2013).⁸

One woman, Liz Dwyer (2013), who wrote a blog post suggesting that Elan’s in-flight behavior would not have been celebrated if he were nonwhite or Muslim, received the following response from a commenter:

Anonymous (2013): *To the writer of this article. You are a joke. The problem with society as a whole is that there are not enough Elans out here being honest. ... Freedom of speech? ‘Eat my dick’. If this comment + Elan being a white male made this somehow more offensive... do the world a favor and go kill yourself please. #TeamElan.*

This comment is a prime example of second-order harassment, remarkable chiefly because it was inspired entirely by a hoax, even imitating Gale’s language. Gale’s pantomime abuse against a figment of his imagination inspired actual abuse against real people. The harassers spawned by Gale’s viral thread took it upon themselves to punish those who they believed were “problems” in society because such people enabled the “Dianes of the world,” who needed to “shut up” (Gale, 2013).

Third-Order Harassment

Third-order harassment is the least direct but the most social. It is best described as the crowd talking to each other *about* the target, rather than saying or doing anything *to* the target. It is also the most structural part of the harassment campaign form because it involves the highest level of social organization (as opposed to individual initiative). A harassment campaign requires both crowdsourcing and organization, and both occur at the third-order of harassment. The target is at his/her most abstract here: a thing to be talked about, debated, and picked-over like so much carrion. Nothing that occurs at the third-order is explicitly meant to be viewed by the target. Instead, what is said and done here inspires the more direct behaviors of the first and second orders. It is the base of the inverted-pyramid, the thing that presses the other two orders down with unbearable weight.

The best examples of this order of harassment are the forums most commonly associated with online abuse: 4chan, 8chan, Reddit, and KiwiFarms. Harassment can, of course, target individual users of each site but the third-order of harassment focuses on how such forums can organize abuse. KiwiFarms, for example, maintains a forum where every thread is dedicated to a different target. Such threads can contain hundreds of posts, spanning months or even years, devoted to tracking the target’s every online move and coordinating attacks against him/her. One recent post in Zoe Quinn’s thread shows a KiwiFarms user saying that someone should “just get in a car with a weapon... drive out to where [Quinn] lives, kidnap her ass and either kill her or abandon her ass in the desert with no money or ID or hell even clothing.” Another user responds, “then go ahead and do it, pussy.”

None of this was being said to Quinn and, unless they were to follow the thread, they’d have no way of knowing what was being said. But it incites abuse against them that ultimately does appear in Quinn’s social media feeds; their tweets and professional enterprises are frequently linked on KiwiFarms to facilitate targeting. Any KiwiFarms user is then just one click away from being able to harass Quinn directly. The greater harm lies in exhortations like “do it, pussy,” a theme that appears in several KiwiFarms posts where users muse about committing violent

crimes against their targets. There is a formal similarity with “do it, faggot!” posts in 4chan and 8chan, where anonymous users sometimes discussed a chanter’s fervent wish to commit a mass shooting or murder their own parents or partners. As recent events in New Zealand, the United States, and Germany have shown, some people do, in fact, go out and “do it.”⁹

Most such threads on KiwiFarms begin with a post cataloguing the target’s perceived transgressions—justifying the forthcoming abuse—and linking the hostile audience directly to the target’s online presence. One such post, targeting a man who advocated for progressive causes, listed his website, Twitter, Google+, MySpace, and even archives of his defunct old blogs and Facebook accounts. The post also contained false allegations (in this case, that the man had called in a bomb threat) meant to enrage further KiwiFarms’ users. More prominent targets have entire subforums (containing multiple threads) dedicated to them.

This practice is a form of target calling; on sites like KiwiFarms, it is hidden from public view. But there are others who do such things far more openly. Such target callers, that is, people of some status within distributed communities (i.e., individuals with large followings or fan bases), may not directly harass an individual but nevertheless identify targets to their audiences, a certain percentage of whom will then go on to harass that individual. A target caller may move between the third and second orders, having a certain hybridity as a result. A notable example is Milo Yiannopoulos, a far right-wing celebrity with ties to white nationalism, whose time writing for Breitbart, a similarly-minded syndicated opinion website, won him admiration from much of the so-called alt-right. He was able to raise his profile by editorializing on behalf of GamerGate; he often identified individuals for targeting and sometimes participated in the harassment directly. Indeed, it was for doing the latter that he was finally banned from Twitter when he attacked actress Leslie Jones with a barrage of racist epithets. As such a hybrid case illustrates, third-order harassment provides the swamp out of which more direct kinds of attacks (i.e., second and first order) may originate and flourish.

When researcher Michael Salter concluded that GamerGate’s “lifeworld of geek masculinity and its correspondence with online technological architecture and administration ...formed the condition...for the abuse campaign that followed” (2018, p. 259), he might well have been speaking about GamerGate’s third-order harassment. The lifeworld or culture that nurtures such abuse consists of apologism, hatred, toxic masculinity, and the architecture of the Web itself. All are essential for sustaining a campaign that, by definition, has to last for a protracted period.

The third order of harassment is where a harassment campaign is most fully fused with cultural and societal concerns. It is here that a campaign loses the ability to hide behind individual indiscretions. One person’s abusive tweet can be dismissed as the product of a wicked personality, but third-order harassment requires collusion, culture, and collectivity. Everyone involved is complicit, and forces larger than any one person impel their actions. A site like 8chan could not have existed without collective action, nor as anything other than a culture.

DISCUSSION

So far as formal sociology is concerned, there are some who might argue that it is being used too conservatively here. Among many other such examples, Zerubavel argued for formal sociology by pointing out how it reveals “that setting statutes of limitations is actually not that

different from enacting bankruptcy laws or letting bygones be bygones” (2007, p. 142). The focus of the present study is narrower; the equivalent of examining only what unites, say, the various instances of “letting bygones be bygones.” But there is value in this nevertheless, for it lays groundwork for future research that might find formal similarities between, say, online harassment and Amish shunning or abusive uses of the telegraph. Or, perhaps more urgently, the similarities between harassment campaigns and online disinformation campaigns.

What is most sociologically critical about the form is the third order. In identifying the behavior of people who are not directly speaking to or acting upon the target as a type of harassment, I hope to reinforce an academic understanding of this phenomenon as something greater than the sum of individual pathologies. Online harassment is not simply the result of one antisocial individual deciding to leave cruel messages on another person’s social media profile. Rather, such behavior grows out of a social climate created by indirect abusive behavior; the processes of target identification, legitimation, and apologism all create a propitious climate for harassment.

The cases I examined in this paper all share those critical processes. Defending Elan Gale’s behavior was a moral crusade to some Internet users, justifying abusive rhetoric against anyone who questioned his actions. KiwiFarmers and GamerGaters both use moral justifications for abuse against their targets, conspiratorially accusing many of criminality—or of simply being “annoying.” A thread on KiwiFarms often begins with a thoroughgoing exercise in legitimation. The male KiwiFarms target I examined earlier was accused of phoning in a bomb threat to a convention and attacking a cancer victim, for instance. Despite a lack of evidence for these charges, the claims foreground a listing of the man’s social media and Web presences. Third-order harassment is the foundation of a campaign, then. It is the most truly collectivizing force in any harassment campaign; third-order harassment is a process of steeling the will of those joining a campaign through legitimizing the abuse. But third-order harassment also causes a campaign to grow.

Social media have allowed for harassment to be crowdsourced, drawing in an escalating number of people from across the Internet to bear down on a target. This is reflected in GamerGate being built upon 4chan’s culture of coordinated and sustained attacks to crowdsource and organize membership from well beyond the chan boards. This innovation, more than anything else, was what heralded the shift in harassment I described previously. GamerGate developed a wide base of third-order harassment, which in turn gave it the energy and motivation to sustain months and even years of attacks in some cases. In so doing, it intensified the second- and first-order harassment directed at specific targets, as the amplification of attacks on Anita Sarkeesian clearly demonstrated.

The orders I have identified can be read as discrete categories; they form a taxonomy of abuse. However, abuse against a target may not always follow a discrete path through the orders—in short, abuse does not always begin at the third order. Consider the following harassment campaign, led by a group of Islamophobic extremists, described in a recent report from the British government:

The protesters ...intimidated those who opposed them. One local Muslim resident told us about how his personal details were publicised as punishment for organising a counter protest. Photographs of him at the march and his personal information appeared on social media alongside unfounded allegations that he was a “paedo” and a “rape enabler”. He received numerous threats and his business was boycotted. (Khan, 2019, p. 71)

The abuse described here exploded in several directions at once. The man was doxed and experienced both financial and reputational damage (first order), was directly harassed through email and social media platforms (second order), and had all of this directed at him due to a crowd of strangers talking about him on social media (third order). But in which of the three orders did the campaign begin? That remains difficult to say. Publicizing a photo with incitable libel is something that could be categorized as first-order harassment because of its extreme invasiveness and likelihood of causing harm to a person's life. But it gained the power to do so because of discourse among online extremists who were enflaming each other's emotions about the man, and about Muslims in general, which might be considered third-order harassment.

Further, a single harasser can participate in every order of harassment. In this case, it is conceivable that the same person could have spread lies about the man to other Internet users, spread his picture around, published his personal information, and sent threats to his email address. The three orders categorize the abuse, not necessarily the abuser.

Many other productive avenues in this vein await exploration, such as the question of whether online harassment is becoming increasingly gamified, which is to ask whether it is taking on game-like incentive structures. After all, Twitter has been likened to a massively multiplayer online game (Brooker, 2013) and online interactions continue to be treated as playful unreality. This, I argue, makes the all-important third order of harassment that much wider and significant by making abuse easy to justify ("It's just a game"; "It's not real") and increasing its social support.

But was there anything specific to the world of video gaming that ensured it was the first place to see harassment so thoroughly transformed, that is, from episodic to campaign-based, from a seasonal storm to a wholly changed climate? I believe that had this transformation not occurred in the gaming world, it would have occurred elsewhere. But nevertheless, two key features set apart the world of video gaming. First, this mutation was likely to occur in fan communities, as they often are linked to the chan boards that had practiced small-scale organized harassment for years. Second, gaming communities are seen as bastions of play, and thus unreality. Their implicit lack of seriousness makes them easier for activists and policymakers to ignore, thus providing ample cover for the organization of harassment campaigns, as well as the use of gaming spaces for white nationalist and neo-Nazi recruitment. Gaming was just unlucky to be the first community from which this new mode of harassment burst forth, but it was replicated quickly in other fandoms. The 2014 Sad and Rabid Puppies campaigns in the world of literary science fiction and the ComicsGate campaign of 2018 (see Table 1) both took GamerGate as a model, the latter lacking even the fig leaf of ethics that garlanded the original 2014 campaign. ComicsGate, from the start, openly positioned itself opposed to diversity and to the presence of women in the world of comics writing and artistry.

Such cases make clear that even though the form is context-agnostic and can be reasonably said to describe a campaign of any motivation—be it fans of One Direction harassing Justin Bieber fans, or enthusiasts of U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders harassing supporters of his political opponents—it does not imply moral symmetry between any of these campaigns. Rather, it merely underscores that the decision to employ any of the methods entailed by the three orders is a moral choice in the sense of choosing between competing values (Ossowska, 1970). Determining the precise merits of those values is beyond the scope of this paper.

CONCLUSION

I have used Simmel's (1917/1950a; 1908/1950b) formal sociological method, modified by the insights of contemporary gaming and technology scholars, to identify cross-contextual similarities in social practices that encompass forms of online harassment that transcend boundaries of gender, race, class, or political affiliation. Common trends and behaviors link online harassment across these boundaries that determine the geometry an observer may ascribe to it. Much of this harassment converges on a single target, and the harassment behaviors then can be subdivided into three orders—these can be understood as forming layers of an inverted pyramid converging on the target. The first order involves invasive abuse, such as DDOS attacks or doxing, and can include direct attacks on the person in the physical world. The second order is direct, person-to-person harassment online (e.g., a harassing tweet or email). The third, foundational order is the communal apologism for the harassment from those not necessarily directly involved but which provides moral justifications for the actual attackers. The third order of harassment sees the crowd talking to each other about the target; the second order is where they say things to the target; the first is where they do things to the target. These key features are shared by most online harassment campaigns. Through understanding how they form an easily visualized social structure (Figure 1), researchers can better make sense of this new frontier in online social organization.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND POLICY

This formal sociological approach can frame research design and policy interventions on major social media platforms, online games, and websites. The pyramidal taxonomy described here makes abundantly clear that harassment campaigns are rarely the product of individual bad behavior; rather, they have cultural roots that must be addressed in order to properly engage and remedy the problem. Further, the emphasis on collective action here is useful for guiding design interventions at social media companies; it suggests that the most productive site for intervention is not necessarily the individual harasser, but those aspects of the platform that facilitate what I have called third-order harassment. Structures such as Twitter's threading function or its lack of granular control of responses (one can either lock his/her account or be open to the entire platform with minimal, heavy-handed filtering) or Facebook's unwillingness to moderate groups that promote ethnic or gender-based hatred facilitate third-order harassment. Such systems and such groups provide the foundation for harassment that targets individual users both online and in the physical world. In addition, this theory may guide interventions and collaborations in other spheres as well; there is ample scope for follow-up research, particularly using network analysis to shed more empirical light on this theory. The formal approach, in the meantime, clearly can identify and illustrate online harassment and gives those who must advocate for themselves a much-needed tool with which they can demonstrate the structural nature of the abuse they are facing.

ENDNOTES

1. In the soon-to-be-implemented 7th edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, the APA style states the use of *they* can be employed in instances where the gender of the person indicated as the sentence's antecedent is unknown or unclear (or as a gender-neutral alternative to *him/her*) or if the person to whom that pronoun refers prefers it as a pronoun.
2. This was the genesis of the phrase "Actually, it's about ethics in games journalism," which became the movement's (widely mocked) motto. GamerGate harassers alleged Quinn had benefitted from corrupt gaming journalism, and that this justified any ongoing harassment. In truth, the movement's members despised Quinn for making a widely praised and simple game about depression and were furious that it (which they regarded as "not a real game") was receiving praise. Meanwhile, Quinn's ex-boyfriend wrote a blog post falsely alleging that Quinn had traded sex for positive press. Thus a fig-leaf justification for GamerGate's actions was born, despite the fact that GamerGate largely ignored or downplayed genuinely serious issues in gaming journalism, such as major studios retaliating against publications that gave their games bad reviews. Indeed, GamerGate called for a studio to do that very thing to Polygon, a gaming news site, because their reviewer used feminist rhetoric in his review of *Bayonetta 2*.
3. Figures like Hepler and Raymond became targets due to specific, localized outrages—for instance, a 2006 interview with Hepler resurfaced in which she stated that she would like to see video games make combat sequences skippable for a player who wanted to experience only a game's story. When it resurfaced in 2012, it touched off a firestorm of outrage from some self-identified "hardcore" gamers who wanted her fired from BioWare. Meanwhile, Raymond's only "crime" was that some male gamers alleged that she "slept her way to the top" at Ubisoft because they found her physically attractive. These episodes of harassment have become periodic and expected in the world of video gaming. In Raymond's case, the abuse came in a torrent and then slowly subsided. GamerGate differed by becoming a campaign that attacked multiple targets while sustaining itself over a prolonged period.
4. It began life as an extension of a 4chan harassment campaign against Christine Chandler, an autistic artist and fan fiction writer who is more commonly known as Chris-chan. The site is named for how her harassers imagine Chandler, who has a speech impediment, would have pronounced "CWCKi forums," which was the original name of the site. That original name was drawn from Chandler's initials. The harassment against her began in 2007 and continues to this day. Her subforum on KiwiFarms has nearly 500,000 mostly negative posts.
5. Anita Sarkeesian is a feminist filmmaker who, for several years, hosted on YouTube the Feminist Frequency video series, which took a 101-level approach to feminist media criticism. After using Kickstarter to fundraise for a new miniseries that explored the use of sexist tropes in portraying female video game characters, she was subjected to waves of sustained harassment from mostly male gamers who were furious at her implication that their favorite games might have misogynistic content.
6. These tweets, and all other similar examples of harassment on social media, are exact. All errors and idiosyncrasies are in the original unless otherwise noted.
7. Sarkeesian kept a detailed record of her harassment, a good sampling of which can be found on her website: <http://www.feministfrequency.com/tag/harassment/> (the link will show all posts she has tagged as displaying harassment). She also posted one week's worth of Twitter abuse, sampled from the height of GamerGate: <https://femfreq.tumblr.com/post/109319269825/one-week-of-harassment-on-twitter>
8. The popularity of this episode is part of the reason I took it as a case study: It illustrates the sheer popularity of this sort of behavior. As Slate's Dave Weigel noted at the time, "The Internet loved it, especially *BuzzFeed*, whose Rachel Zarrell aggregated Gale's tweets and photos. Her post, on one of the year's slowest news cycles, got nearly 1.4 million reads" (Weigel, 2013, para. 1).
9. 8chan has been directly linked to three 2019 mass shootings: the Poway, California, synagogue shooting; the Christchurch, New Zealand, mosque massacre; and the Latino-targeted shooting at an El Paso, Texas, Wal-Mart. The Isla Vista, California, massacre (2014); the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, synagogue shooting (2018); the Parkland, Florida, school shooting (2018); and the recent killing of people outside a synagogue in Halle, Germany (2019) were all celebrated on similar websites where language and

postings like those found on KiwiFarms are quite common. It is, thus, reasonable to assume that any post like the one cited in this paper constitutes a credible threat. The formal sociological method shines here because it allows researchers to recognize the homology in posts—and their meanings and impacts—across several disparate sites within idiosyncratic subcultures.

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GROWING THE OTOME GAME MARKET: FAN LABOR AND OTOME GAME COMMUNITIES ONLINE

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Abstract: Otome games are a niche category of Japanese games marketed toward women. Outside its country of origin and the infrastructure of the anime media mix, its predominantly female player communities traditionally have defined these games as those that feature romance or dating simulation. In this paper, I look into how fan bloggers talk about their own work in marketing and distributing otome games beyond Japan. In the case of otome game fan blogging, the ability to shape discussions surrounding otome games also relies upon maintaining the image of players as good consumers. Although this work focuses on the practice of fan blogging, it is part of an ongoing study on otome games in English and otome game players outside Japan.

Keywords: *otome games, postfeminism, women and games, fan blogging, Japanese games.*



INTRODUCTION

Otome games are a niche category of games typically featuring topics related to romance and dating simulations that originated in Japan and are marketed specifically to women. Given its niche status and the very minimal commercial distribution of otome game titles, especially due to the lack of the media infrastructure that otome games have in their country of origin via the anime media mix (Steinberg, 2012), the distribution of otome games beyond Japan relies on its small but dedicated networked, predominantly female fanbase—calling themselves the Otome Armada—to promote existing localized titles via blogs, forums, and social networking sites.

Otome games have an interesting position in Japan's anime media mix as a category of games marketed specifically to women. Hyeshin Kim (2009) specified otome games as a categorical distinction more than a genre definition. Genres in otome games can vary from role-playing games to visual novels, with the latter being the most common, especially among titles made available to English language players. Although otome game genres do vary, they have a few features that make them similar to one another. Kim defined the features common to otome games: easy game controls, a connection to other media (particularly *shoujo*, or girls' manga), and systems that allow players to interact, flirt with, or date male characters in these games. This definition has its roots in the Japanese game industry and media mix industry whose history that remains unexplored, and players, such as my respondents, may have their own definitions of otome games.¹

Apart from Kim's (2009) piece on early otome games, other literature mostly presents analyses of individual games (Hasegawa, 2013; Lamerichs, 2014; Richards, 2015). Marc Steinberg and Edmond Ernest Dit Alban (2018) described *otaku* pedestrian practices in Japan. Leticia Andlauer (2018) described otome game culture as romantic fantasy in her examination of Uta no Prince Sama (Broccoli, 2010) and its young fans. Outside these, the literature on otome games is very scant and, in this particular study, I hope to address some of this gap in the literature.

Elsewhere (Ganzon, 2018a, 2018b), I described how systems in a number of otome game titles in the visual novel category hinge on the player's performance of emotional labor, mostly demonstrated through selecting empathetic responses toward the male character being romanced. Arlie Hochschild (1983) defined emotional labor as that act of managing feelings and certain expressions, pointing out how differences in social situation, gender, or race can vary the degrees in which individuals are socialized into performing emotional labor. While Hochschild specifically underscored that her definition excludes those outside a work context, others have expanded this to include invisible labor and emotion work that women are expected to do perform outside workspaces (Chess, 2017; Hartley, 2018). The performance of emotional labor in games is of course nothing new. Shira Chess (2017), in her study of time-management games, pointed out how games designed for women often highlight expectations for women to perform emotional labor. Otome games are no exception to this, and romance in a number of these games becomes the reason for the performance of emotional labor, especially given that "winning" or getting the best endings for these games entails demonstrating empathy for romanceable characters often via selecting correct dialogue options.

Although otome games enjoy a long-term niche status in Japan, it took a while for the category to migrate to North America and other anglophone regions. Many otome game players trace the history of otome games in English to Yo-Jin-Bo (Hirameki International, 2006), localized to the English title *The Bodyguards* that same year for the PC by Hirameki International. It is not known how much this particular game sold, but it took years for another

attempt at localizing the category. Aksys' localization of *Hakuoki: Demon of the Fleeting Blossom* (Aksys Games, 2012) for the Playstation Portable in 2012 is noted to be one of the first bestselling English titles that led to the localization of more otome game titles in English. In addition to *Hakuoki*, Aksys Games also released a number of titles in the following years, such as *Sweet Fuse: At Your Side* (2013), *Code: Realize—The Guardian of Rebirth* (2015), *Norn9* (2015), *Collar x Malice* (2017), *Bad Apple Wars* (2017), *Period Cube* (2017), *7scarlet* (2018), *Psychedelica of the Black Butterfly* (2018), and *Psychedelica of the Ashen Hawk* (2018). Companies such as Voltage and NTT Solmare also started to localize titles for mobile devices around the same time in 2011. Recently, other publishers, such as MangaGamer, 3DP, and Red Entertainment, localized titles for the PC. Idea Factory, Otomate's parent company, released *Amnesia: Memories* (2015) for the PS Vita and the Steam, as well as their own localized version of a two-part edition of *Hakuoki*. Furthermore, the increasing popularity of Steam has allowed global releases from established to independent companies. More recently, otome games have received more attention because of the mobile game, *Mystic Messenger* (2016) by the all-female South Korean developer Cheritz.

In anime media mix scholarship, the idea of fans taking charge of the circulation and cultural production around the texts that they love is nothing new. The positioning and activities of many otome game players outside Japan can best be described by Ian Condry's (2013) concept of dark energy and collaborative creativity. Drawing from Jenkins' (2006) idea of media convergence, Condry wrote about collaborative creativity, which "operates across media industries and connects official producers to unofficial fan production" (p. 2). In this light, he described dark energy as

a collection of social forces that enlivens the connections between content and desire, which in turn helps drive the circulation of media products ... More broadly, it provides a way to conceptualize fluid links among fans, media content, technology and producers. (Condry, 2013, p. 283).

Within this framework, fans are key to media success because they are keen to spread the love around their beloved texts.

Blogs and online communities have been indispensable in niche marketing (D. M. Scott, 2010), especially those that help circulate translations and walkthroughs and provide tools to unofficially distribute content among the Otome Armada. In most cases of informal marketing or global distribution, fans prove vital to creating markets for titles. Otome game fans are no exception. A number of independent sites and blogs are notable for educating nonJapanese reading audiences to the category. Although, on the surface, fan blogs have much in common with many other review blogs and gaming blogs, the key difference is that they also become vehicles through which fans as players and consumers can share materials with other players and sometimes to protect their own labor. This has become very apparent in the case of the English release by E2 Gaming of *Taisho Alice* (Primula, 2017). After the localization company bought the rights from Primula, fans called out E2 Gaming for reusing the translations of game information from the fan site *Otome-Jikan.net* for their own website. Following the release of the game, many fan blogs documented numerous errors in the translation and the various ways in which much of the content for E2 Gaming's localization may have been machine translated. As a result, many have called for a boycott of the localization while voicing fan support for the original game in Japanese. Arguably, it is this act of claiming ownership of the labor, the

discourse, as well as their own time and money, that make these actions comparable to Radway's (1984) book clubs, as is explained more fully below.

In this paper, I look into the practices of fan blogging of otome games outside of Japan. For this case study, I am interested specifically in understanding how female fans and players discuss their work and labor particularly which discourses arise during these conversations and postings. Examining the practice of fan blogging can offer insights into the complex negotiations taking place between fans and the game industry in allowing the entry of certain niche titles into global markets. In the case of otome game fan blogging, the ability to shape discourses surrounding the games that one loves also hinges upon being a good consumer. This article focuses on the practice of fan blogging, but the research presented here represents just a part of an ongoing study on otome games in English and otome game players living outside of Japan.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this work were collected from a combination of participant observation and interviews over a period of 2 years.² For my larger otome game project, I contacted bloggers, fan translators, and indie game makers. This paper presents the data from interviews with fan bloggers and involves autoethnographic elements as well. As an otome game player for more than 5 years and an occasional blogger about otome games on Tumblr, I observed and interacted with otome game players via online networks including my blog, Facebook groups, and Internet relay chats prior to beginning this project, as well as during. For the purpose of language convenience—as my primary languages are English and Filipino—I specifically focus on otome game players who play games in English and/or players who play in Japanese but create fan content in English.

Recruitment for interviews for my overall research, and specifically my concentration on bloggers, involved primarily a form of snowball sampling. I contacted most of my interviewees personally. Notably, some of my interviewees also helped find additional participants for the projects. Others, particularly those who worked in teams, encouraged their friends to participate. Some compiled a number of other bloggers for me to contact and helped spread the word about my project.³ I also conducted a wider call on Tumblr and Reddit, which earlier participants helped circulate via their own blogs. All these factors indicate how much the Otome Armada functions as a close-knit community.

The use of snowball sampling here is two-fold. Firstly, because otome game players comprise a niche section of the game culture, my sampling process mirrored ethnographic work on game players and populations on the margins (Browne, 2005; Krobová, Moravec, & Švelch, 2015; Shaw, 2013a). Secondly, it points to specific forms of knowledge construction, power relations, and forms of constructing social capital within otome game player communities (Noy, 2008). Understandably, as participants knew of my own position as an aca-fan (i.e., an academic who identifies as a fan) of otome games who will be writing about the larger player community, this notably shaped our interactions within these recorded interviews. I have been entrusted with this information because I too am a member of the wider fan community who they could share their favorite games with and raise their own concerns over how otome games are being discussed.⁴

The 14 participants range from ages 22 to 40. The majority of participants are in their 20s. Three identified themselves as nonbinary, 11 identified themselves as cisgender women, and one chose to not specify. Other information is listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic Demographic Information on Otome Games Blogger Participants.

Participant*	Country of Residence	Race Identification	Age	Occupation
Anne	Australia	White	31	Student
Pandora	Canada	White	27	Student
Claire	Canada	White	Not specified	Not specified
Giselle	Brazil	White	24	Student
Jane	Canada	White	25	Not specified
Tara	USA	White and Native American	21	Student
Charlee	Canada	White	37	Writing specialist (higher education)
Yona	USA	White	25	Fraud detection
Myxprint	USA	White	23	Cat groomer, baker, pet specialist
Zenri	the Philippines	Asian	24	Student
Two Happy Cats	Australia	White	23	Student
Cecilia	USA	White	27	Student
Alyssa	the Philippines	Asian	22	Student
Jill	Canada	White	40	Finance manager

Note. Participants were allowed to choose how they would be identified. Some used their actual names, others their online names, and the rest were assigned pseudonyms.

Although the larger study is racially and geographically much more diverse,⁵ most bloggers in this sample come from predominantly anglophone regions or areas where English is at least a strong second language. Moreover, the predominance of white women in this data set reflects how this demographic tends to be the most vocal in voicing issues about otome games and cultures around otome games outside Japan.

Four participated in live-recorded interviews—two live on-campus interviews and two recorded interviews via Skype. The rest elected email interviews, mostly because of their busy schedules alongside massive time zone differences. I allowed participants to determine their level of anonymity for this study. Among these, Anne, Pandora, and Jill elected to use their real first names to be used for this study. Myxprint, Zenri, and Two Happy Cats chose to use their online usernames. The rest of the participants elected to be anonymous and were assigned pseudonyms, especially because some participants indicated that their own friends and family do not know that they write about otome games and that they prefer to keep it that way.

Interviews involved two sections. Questions in the first part primarily addressed the interviewees as otome game players. Most questions dwelt on how they define and describe otome games, their game preferences, and how they play these games. The second set of questions dealt with how they define the practice of blogging and about creating material for their blog. More specifically, I asked them questions about how they started their blogs, what their favorite posts are like, who they think their readers are, and how they position themselves in the wider

otome game community. Although in live interviews I was able to immediately ask follow-up questions, written interviews relied on email correspondence for clarification and additional questions. Recorded interview data were transcribed and matched with my interview notes. I coded and classified patterns in all interview responses. Interestingly, answers to both sets of questions, as will be noted later in this article, were not mutually exclusive, as both player and blogger identities tended to blur the boundaries between work and play.

In regard to a theoretical framework, the literature demonstrates that both audience studies and fan studies have tackled ways of characterizing how readers collaboratively read texts in the form of interpretative communities (Ang, 1985; Bennet & Woollacott 1987; Fish, 1980; Radway, 1984). Janice Radway's (1984) *Reading the Romance* is the most pertinent to this study. Radway began with a critical feminist examination of the romance novel industry and romance literature. However, it was her interviews with a specific romance novel reading group that showed how these readers found multiple points to resist patriarchy, despite having more or less conservative beliefs about romance and relationships. Focusing on interpretative communities foregrounds the social aspect of interpretation and possible resistance, one that also is observed in ethnographic work mostly in player communities composed of nongamers (Shaw, 2013b) or predominantly female player communities (Consalvo & Begy, 2015). During this phase of my study, I continually noticed the similarities in otome game player communities' resemblance to Radway's book clubs, particularly in how the members of both groups participated in circulating these texts via recommendations and the way they attempted to shape discourses surrounding their beloved texts.

Literature in fan studies also points to the commercialization of fan spaces, describing "an emerging hybrid model of circulation, where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways" (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, p. 1). Studies on fan labor point out particular gendered hierarchies, especially as gift economies and fan labor are continually being co-opted (Busse, 2013; De Kosnik, 2009; Hellekson, 2009; S. Scott, 2015). In this way, fan labor can be framed as a feminist concern and should be tied to analyses of the gendering of digital labor (Banet-Weiser, 2011; Duffy, 2016; Jarrett, 2014).

Game studies also have long explored immaterial labor. Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2009), for example, included a generalized history of how gender plays into the professionalization of video game labor—not only by limiting the participation and representation of women within games and game industries, but also by rendering invisible certain forms of work, such as emotion work. Many other studies provide analyses of specific cases of gendered game labor in production, promotion, spectatorship, and cocreation (Harvey & Fisher, 2015; Huntemann, 2013; Taylor, Jenson, & de Castell, 2009). Echoing McRobbie's (2004) and Gill's (2007) critiques of the postfeminist media culture, which recenters women's agency toward heteronormativity and consumer culture, game scholars have pointed out the existence of postfeminist ethos in games designed with female players in mind (Anable, 2013; Chess, 2012, 2017; Harvey, 2018; Vanderhoef, 2013), as well as in digital game production (Harvey & Fisher, 2015). Moreover, studies have noted how player communities have shaped discourses around Japanese games (Pelletier-Gagnon, 2011) and how players themselves have contributed to bringing Japanese games to the West, at times through nonofficial channels (Consalvo, 2016).

For my contribution to these bodies of work, I seek to realign the work of predominantly female interpretative communities with studies on game labor and fan labor in order to think

about how players and fans position themselves. Taking an intersectional feminist lens (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991), I also consider how gender, race, nationality, and/or class may factor into how players talk about otome games and their work around otome games. If taken together in analyzing how fans talk about their own work, perhaps one could find ways of seeing forms of negotiated agency in the way female fans may talk about their own work.

KEY INTERVIEW RESULTS

The data analyzed for this article focus on the interview data. In the next few sections, I provide extracts of the interviews from otome game fan bloggers, looking specifically at how they discuss their roles in helping create the otome game market.

Sharing Otome Games to the World: Why Otome Game Players Start Blogs

The earliest known otome game-focused blogs date to the late 2000s. Even so, most bloggers interviewed for this project can trace the history of otome games to Japan in the 1990s, with a number being able to name Angelique (Ruby Party, 1994) as the very first otome game created. However, this is not too surprising considering that some of the first fan blogs were created for the specific purpose of telling the world about otome games.

Cecilia started her blog in 2008. She wrote English-language reviews of Japanese otome games. She narrated,

I wanted to talk about all the games that I was playing that no one else was playing, or I wanted to talk more, and I wanted to talk about the characters that I loved, which were often not the most popular. (Cecilia, USA)⁶

Notably, her compiled list of reviews and games on multiple platforms was one of the most comprehensive lists of otome games from 2000 to the mid-2010s. She is also one of the few reviewers to date who writes on games rated 18+.

Similarly, Pandora began EnglishOtomeGames.net around 2011, pointing out how little information about otome games in English existed online at that time. She started her site to help people know more about otome games. For this, she started compiling lists of otome games, as well as games that she thought were similar to otome games, including games with dating-sim elements, such as the Persona series and Dragon Age. As the list grew, she also started posting specifically about otome games, new otome game releases, as well as kick-starter campaigns to garner support for the groups creating otome games. Further, she began conducting surveys on her site, posing questions such as players' age groups, game preferences, preferred playing platform, and other questions related to otome games and player practices. This information is still available on her site and is accessible to player communities and developers alike. After some time, companies and otome game makers started contacting her to provide information about their games that she could post on her site. Eventually, her site became a revenue source for her.

Others respondents indicated they started blogs to write about otome games for specific reader communities. Charlee, for example, reported starting her blog for her friends who love reading about romance:

My friends were constantly asking me about these games: what do you play? How do I play? And I would also post jokes about them on my Facebook. And my friends were like: we would really like for you to start a blog...I was like: that sounds like a lot of effort and they were like, please? So I started a blog. ...My friends are like, what should I play? I'm into wizards. Right now I am working on an entry about guys with eye patches. And romanceable cats. Do you like cats? If you're interested in cats, I have a lot of cats. [Proceeds to name all the dateable cats in otome games.] A lot of the work I do in my blog is finding stuff for my friends. But also putting it out there that in some of these...there's most likely going to be a guy who's going to push you off the wall. And oh, pay attention to the parts that are rapey, so others can just pass that.... (Charlee, Canada)

From this comment, one could gather that Charlee primarily writes about otome games in the vein of other forms of romance reading. In comparison to many of the other blogs listed here, her blog notably has a smaller readership of friends of friends of friends, as she called it, in comparison to many other blogs described previously. Similar to Pandora's site, Charlee's blog maintains a community and, to a smaller extent, archives of humorous content from otome games. Because she is writing for her friends, she also posts content warnings on her blog to alert readers to content some may want to avoid. Such recommendations denote a sense of intimacy within this form of exchange.

Content in otome game blogs includes reviews, translated promotional material from Japanese game magazines with otome game content, drama CD content particularly related to otome gaming, walkthroughs, and individual reflections about otome games and industries around otome games. Although many of my respondents wrote about otome games that are localized to English or created originally in English, a number of bloggers also write about Japanese exclusives in the hope that those games they write about could be selected for future localization. Claire, who writes walkthroughs and translations on her site, argued how translations can work as promotional material for games:

Translations help [the] audience become aware of a game/drama CD and verify if they might want to support it by reading its content. My translations project in particular help my audience discover products that cater to tastes similar to my own. Since those tend to be less popular, I received messages thanking me for picking X project since they lost hope of ever knowing what it was about. (Claire, Canada)

She also translates this content and creates polls on translation projects.

Because very few game sites pick up otome games for review, the work of these respondent bloggers helps provide otome games visibility. Cecilia, for example, translates otome game news from Japan and writes reviews of otome games in both Japanese and English. In her interview, she argued that through her reviews and translations, *"I can get other people excited about games I'm interested."* While reviews definitely help promote otome games, some bloggers also tend to think about writing reviews as a way of keeping a personal record of the games they have played. Alyssa reflected, *"I started blogging about otome games so I can properly log my thoughts about the games I played."* Some interviewees indicated that they started their blogs to amplify other people's content. Claire, for example, writes blogs for this reason but also stated that she started her blog as a way of keeping track of otome game news.

Some sites focus on walkthroughs. Blah-Bidy-Blah, for example, is primarily a walkthrough site maintained by a team of bloggers. Zenri noted that she initially wrote walkthroughs for another site (Kokoro-café) until she started her own blog. Currently, Blah-

Bidy-Blah is maintained by a team of five members, with each member focusing on designated game titles or specific game categories.⁷ Regarding how walkthroughs help other otome game players, particularly those who play on mobile, she wrote,

It's really hard for some people to play these games on their own the first time and get a good ending, especially since most games these days require people to buy with real money and is very time consuming. So, I'd like to think that our site and all other sites similar to ours that post up walkthrough guides encourage viewers to play more of the otome games. Our walkthrough guide help people achieve a good play through without having to waste time re doing a character route again for the better ending and it helps save money for those that cannot afford to spend money on otome games. (Zenri, the Philippines)

Myxprint, who also writes for Blah-Bidy-Blah, similarly discussed how writing walkthroughs becomes a means of sharing with the wider community a means of information to help other players achieve satisfying endings. At the same time, she indicated how walkthroughs are ways of promoting games, pointing out how some gaming companies publish their own walkthroughs to help players. Notably, the majority those interviewed for this project indicated that they themselves use walkthroughs to varying degrees.

Some otome game blogs circulate fan fiction written around otome games as well as other fan work. Tara's and Giselle's blogs, for example, contain fan fiction on otome games. Tara narrated that one of the things that motivated her decision to post fan fiction on her blog is the notion of revising relationships in otome games, particularly those that she deemed problematic. As a result, she has rewritten heroines in otome games to give them more agency and occasionally adding lesbian relationships, which are often lacking in otome games. She argued, "*Fan fiction writers are here for the fantasy and I write something that I want to read.*" Although this notion of the fix fic (i.e., fan fiction wherein the fan writer changes something s/he/they is not happy with in the canonical story) is not new (Lee, 2011), what is notable about the way Tara spoke about her fan fiction and her readers is her desire for changing gendered discourses in otome games.

Not all otome game bloggers write exclusively about otome games, and not all their content on otome games is published on their own blogs and sites. Zenri, for example, also writes about yaoi games (i.e., games on boys' love or romances between male characters) on Blah-Bidy-Blah. Anne, who writes about otome games outside her blog, posts frequently about Japanese popular culture in general. Similarly, Two Happy Cats, maintains her site primarily for otome game reviews, walkthroughs, and news, but also blogs about other anime and manga categories. Yona, whose blog contains her own art, fan art, and fan fiction on otome games (mostly on the game Ikemen Sengoku), noted that the site is a good venue to discuss other things that matter to her.

On my main blog, I'll talk about whatever is pertinent to my life—especially Native rights. I think this fits along fine with otome gaming because there are real people playing these games, and they should also be informed. (Yona, USA)

The discussion of racial representations in otome games is exceedingly rare in otome games or even among otome game players. While many tend to point out problematic gendered representations within otome game communities and in these interviews, Yona is one of the few who brought race into the discussion.⁸

Some bloggers also indicated personal reasons for starting their blogs. Two Happy Cats recounted how she started her blog:

I started my blog on the 31 August 2015, I had just come back from a 6 months exchange to the UK and pretty much came back home to no friends, and nothing to do. I was feeling pretty miserable and one of my friends in the UK was talking about her own blog, so I figured I might as well make one. (Two Happy Cats, Australia)

Anne similarly indicated how moving geographically for her PhD studies factored into how the blog was started:

I started it in 2010 or 2011. Long ago. I can't remember. After I moved to Australia because I was a bit bored and lonely, and I thought that I could start writing about the things I like, and I can hopefully make some friends in the internet. I really like writing so I wanted an outlet. And I quickly decided that I didn't just want to write about whatever, because it was too broad, so I narrowed it to Japanese media, nerdy media basically, and now I like to think about it as a site, where I target a niche fan or niche media, and make it more welcoming to women in particular. So I want to talk about media that would appeal to women like me hopefully. (Anne, Australia)

In many ways, these stories indicate how fan communities allow intimate forms of connection, especially for people who migrate or relocate. This demonstrates not only how fandoms are cultural contact zones, as Morimoto and Chin (2017) described them, but also how these contact zones can create support for individuals. In the case of the otome game community, these spaces are where women can find other women—oftentimes outside their country of residence—who also play otome games. Although this is not always the case, as some players have noted some experiences where some of their discussions online turned toxic,⁹ the expectation exists that one can find safe spaces to discuss games in their own blogs with other women.

Issues Related to the Localization of Otome Games, Fans, and Communities

Contact with localization companies tend to vary among bloggers. Some bloggers operate independently; others discussed working with companies. Otome game companies tend to contact blogs with a large number of followers. For example, Pandora receives requests from companies to post their games on her site. Two Happy Cats indicated that one company contacted her once to correct information about its game. Others, such as the writers of Blah-Bidy-Blah, have contacted companies on their own, offering their support in promoting game titles. Noticeably, a number of bloggers, particularly those who work with otome game companies, tend to blur the dichotomies of work and play when discussing their own playing and the content writing for the blog. For example, Myxprint indicated how she often selects games and character routes to play, depending on walkthroughs that she will write and the availability of walkthroughs online for each game. Those activities also are related to forming relationships with developers.

I'll play games from any developer from any plotline, mainly because I want to be the first to write the walkthrough for it and I want to experience with the developer as they grow in community and have that opportunity to introduce it to those that I already speak to in my community, or our community as I probably should say. Because it's fun to grow with the company. (Myxprint, USA)

Similarly, Pandora described blogging as work, noting how her site provides a source of income for her.

In regard to fan following, the practices among these blogs tend to vary, with many interviewees agreeing on how their activities and their blogs are vital to the survival of otome games for English language players and the English language market. Claire argued,

Fan blogs contribute to the growth of the otome market the same way Gothic Lolita blogs contributed to the Japanese brands offering international shipping a few years ago. By blogging about it, you create awareness; more awareness brings more fans; more fans means more customers, and more customers means more money for the industry, enough that companies take notice (be it as localizations or indie teams trying their hands at it). If the demand is high enough, companies take fan's responses into account. (Claire Canada)

Some interviewees pointed out that they would not have played otome games if not for other otome game bloggers. Alyssa reflected,

I think fan blogs help people learn more about otome games and ultimately nudge them to try playing the genre. I myself wouldn't delve deeper into this hobby if not for Hinano's otome game reviews which I loved reading 7 or 6 years ago. (Alyssa, the Philippines)

Pandora discussed how fan blogs help create public opinion, “*I think fan blogs in general, particularly ones that are more personal or review oriented—definitely help create a particular atmosphere for the community, and help cultivate general opinion.*” Giselle noted that blogs also are useful in circulating warnings:

I think fan blogs, including mine, contribute in the market and culture in a kind of person-to-person advertising alongside with a feeling of ‘quality control’, warning people about trigger elements, and helping people keep track of new releases. (Giselle, Brazil)

These comments point to how otome game blogs tend create a form of circulation that relies on individual recommendations in a way similar to how Radway (1984) described romance reading benefited from book clubs.

What also is notable among these interviews is how many participants seemed to express their work as a way of sharing to the wider otome game community. Studies in fan cultures point to how fandoms are gift economies (see, e.g., see Hellekson, 2009; S. Scott, 2009; Turk, 2014). Gifting becomes a way of creating communities and defining status and distinction within these communities. Although much of the content discussed are paratexts around otome games, these texts are an important means of distributing gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007) among otome game players. Much of the literature on fandoms as gift economies tends to describe these as alternative regimes to capitalism. Yet a number of interviewees also noted that their activities also benefit game companies. Although much of the content, particularly translation work, tends to fall within the grey areas of copyrights, many interviewees did not frame their practices of sharing as mutually exclusive from capitalism.

When asked if they could identify certain issues within the communities they participate, a few respondents mentioned a level of tension between the players who play both Japanese and English games and the players who play otome games exclusively in English. Noticeably, the two Filipinas in this study expressed various ways that cultural politics of playing in English and blogging in English come to the fore. Zenri indicated that she stays away from writing about subjects other than what she writes about otome games, lamenting her English grammar. Alyssa mentioned certain tensions with some players who only play games in English:

I usually tend to stay away from a group of “English otoge¹⁰ only gamers” that think of people who can play Japanese otome games as elitists. My friends and I have had really bad experience with them talking bad about us just because we told some not so good things about a game that was just localized to English when we actually only wanted to help people decide whether to get that game or not. They say that not buying all localized otome games hurts the Western otome game market, but our argument is that we are only saying what we think about the games to help people on a limited budget decide which is the best otome game to play. In any case, I now tend to keep my circle only within trusted friends because otome gaming is a hobby that should help you enjoy and not make you be stressed out. (Alyssa, the Philippines)

Notably, Alyssa described one particular tension between some players who only play in English and players who can play in both English and Japanese. Although I have not encountered English-only players with such sentiments as Alyssa described among my interviewees, I have come across such discussions on Tumblr and in forums. What’s interesting in this is how Alyssa specifically calls the English otome game market “*the Western otome game market*,” thus implying certain hierarchies where English-language marketing is almost equated with Western marketing. Moreover, even though these two are not the only respondents to mention these particular issues (i.e., Pandora and Anne commented on this issue in passing), it is interesting that these discussions about English as a barrier to participation or English-only players tending to champion the “Western otome game market” are more pronounced in my interviews with Zenri and Alyssa. Mastery of a language—English or Japanese—in this context denotes power. Given that English language use in the Philippines has its own neocolonial moorings (Bolton & Bautista, 2004; Ruanni & Tupas, 2004), and given the history of both American and Japanese colonization in the Philippines, writing in English and playing in English or Japanese is a way of positioning one’s self as a subject within neocolonial gaming contexts. At times, such positioning becomes a form of subtle critique of media cultures that privilege the voices of white North American or European women. Consequently, the discussion regarding sharing and participation in the wider otome game community becomes even more complicated, especially given that many bloggers have strong views against piracy.

Arguments about Piracy and Censorship

Piracy is notably a sore subject among otome game players. Though what counts as piracy may vary from player to player—definitions could vary from illegal downloads to cheating in real-time-based otome games like *Mystic Messenger*—the majority of interviewees for this project tended to bring it up, principally because these discourses shape images of otome game players. Pandora observed, “*The otoge community is really strongly anti-piracy compared to other sectors of the visual novel community from what I’ve noticed, which was definitely started by a few bloggers.*” This perspective was noticeable in my interview data, as a number of interviewees commented on piracy even if the question was not on piracy. Two Happy Cats, for example, on a question about her general opinion about the wider otome game community responded,

Generally, I think the otome fan community is pretty fantastic, everyone is very friendly and we’re all fighting the good fight of bringing stuff over to the west. However, I know there are some major issues with piracy in the otome community, most recently I know backers for the Bell Chimes for Gold had issues accessing their rewards because one or two backers were

exploiting the download link. I believe I even read somewhere that one otome game company in Japan has refused for any of their games to be translated as they think that all Western fans pirate—so yeah it kinda sucks and it gives us all a bad name. (Two Happy Cats, Australia)

The opinions of some interviewees regarding freemium games appeared to be shaped by notions of piracy, especially if players find ways to keep playing these for free. Claire, for example, indicated she is not fond of the increased numbers of freemium games for this very reason:

I understand it is easier to reach a customer this way, it creates this sense of entitlement that otome games should always be free, which in turns feed the mindset of pirates and undermine promising games not subscribing to that format. (Claire, Canada)

Cecilia also commented on how she thinks some players in the community tend to have a sense of entitlement:

I say this as an old fogie who has a full-time job, but it's a little depressing to see how much people expect for free. Artists, actors, programmers, and writers spend their time on producing these games, and if it's good enough that you want to spend time playing it, I think it's good enough to spend some money on. (Cecilia, USA)

Not all participants in the study, however, felt this way about freemium games. Zenri, for example, called herself a “free player” and confessed to staying away from mobile games that she has to pay for. Pandora also remarked that while many in the community are “anti-free” otome games, she would not have been able to discover otome games for herself if not for Sakevisual’s free game RE: Alistair (2010).

Piracy in some ways affects how some people think about certain forms of cultural production. Cecilia remarked, “*I don't like when people post ‘Let's Play’ videos (where they upload video of themselves playing games) because in my opinion it's not that different from pirating the game.*” Thus, these notions of piracy assign regimes of value (Appadurai, 1996) in particular forms of cultural production within otome game player communities.

Although many bloggers seldom mention censorship, some bloggers in this study mentioned an instance where a company asked people to take down walkthroughs with certain elements. Myxprint recounted,

What really irks me about it all is that we cannot have written walkthroughs that say which point requirements give you the most on the love meter or affection meter for their games. So this means we can't write walkthroughs so you can get the best ending. We get around that a little bit. I keep my walkthroughs now on Google docs. I give them out privately. Because I don't want to replay a game 500 times just to get a good ending. (Myxprint, USA)

She does indicate that, when privately sharing content, she tends to warn people to not post it “so no one would get in trouble.” What these takedowns indicate, particularly as bloggers try to also form relationships with developers, is that often players must police themselves and self-censor to avoid getting into trouble.

From all these comments, one could observe how negative opinions about piracy are linked to the idea of showing otome game companies that English-language otome game players are good consumers. Piracy, as a result, is seen as a deterrent for Japanese titles to gain English-language localization. In relation to piracy, Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas (2015) discussed the existence of informal media economies, which they described as “a range of activities and processes

occurring outside the official, authorized processes of the economy” (p. 7). They specifically noted how, on occasion, informal media economies can be formalized. Arguably, this is the case of otome games, as more titles receive localizations into English. As otome games move toward official releases and as some practices around otome games become formalized and professionalized, copyright regimes tend to become stricter. Thus, the implication of these copyright regimes on female game players in this case is clear: Either become good consumers of these games or do not expect access to desired games and, by extension, their own predominantly female game spaces. In this way, copyright regimes can echo certain postfeminist ethos in disciplining its players.

DISCUSSION

An interesting aspect in exploring the content on many otome game blogs and forums and in the conversations on these matters in the current research is how many participants speak for the interests of companies that make otome games or the companies that localize them, so they could get more games from these companies. The responses from these interviewees appeared to take on a sense of public relations tasks and community management, and the respondents seem to try to shut down anything they deem as piracy. In some ways, these sentiments could indicate how the discourses of aspirational labor, which Duffy (2016, p. 6) described as “as a forward-looking, carefully orchestrated, and entrepreneurial form of creative cultural production ... individuals performing social roles through aspirational consumption.” Often, the kind of cultural and creative work that she characterized can be explained by the ethos of being able to do what one loves. Duffy also pointed out that, within these contexts of creative production, aspirational labor “ensures that female participants remain immersed in the highly feminized consumption of branded goods” (p. 3). Moreover, although aspirational labor, as Duffy described it, often works on the promise of future work, in the case of labor by otome game players, the promise hinges on the continued releases of the games they love. Thus, to encourage game companies to localize more otome games, bloggers have to do the work of reviewing, producing walkthroughs, and at times upholding copyright through self-censorship to show continued fan support.

Nonetheless, within these sites these women also help rewrite discourses on otome games. These are spaces where female and nonbinary game players connect with other female and nonbinary game players to talk about games that were supposedly created specifically for them. Elsewhere (Ganzon, 2018a, 2018b), I noted how many otome game communities are critical of gendered representations in their games. The participants of this study are no exception. Critiques I found on their sites and comments within these interviews occupy numerous pages of my notes and transcripts. While much of this criticism is not included in this study, this criticism can be found in participants’ review blogs as many of these blogs also point out some sexist tropes in certain game titles. It is evidenced in the way bloggers do the work to signpost content that could potentially be triggering. To some extent, this criticism is also evidenced in blogs that contain fix fics, since fix fics noticeably fix gendered tropes in otome games. These all indicate interventions on the part of these individuals to change gendered discourses within otome games. In this way, they function similarly to Radway’s (1984) book clubs in the way that they create publics and spaces of their own. Moreover, as seen in some of the interviews with participants outside North America, Europe, and Australia, the ability to participate in these discourses also depends on one’s ability to write well in English and engage with the politics of these postfeminist spaces where white “Western” women

are some of the loudest voices to be heard. Thus, it is important to acknowledge these as various demonstrations of agency. Yet many arguments for more diverse representations are contained within the logic of benefiting game markets rather than diversity for its own sake (Shaw, 2015).

Additionally, apart from circulating promotional content or humorous content around otome games, the respondents' statements also seemed to focus on keeping otome games as happy objects (Ahmed, 2010). A common theme in many of these interviews is about happiness. Some bloggers talk about playing otome games and starting blogs after feeling miserable after a big move. At times, it is to keep personal records of their feelings and experiences in these games whether good or bad. Walkthrough writers make walkthroughs so other players can get happy endings in these games with the least amount of money and effort. Some players make fix fics to rewrite unhappy experiences in these games. Others mention avoiding parts of the community altogether to keep themselves happy. In a lot of these accounts, these describe how bloggers find ways to keep otome games and their communities "happy." In her work on affect, Sara Ahmed (2010) pointed out how "affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (p. 29). Moreover, given how many respondents expressed various forms of dissatisfaction with representations in otome games or disappointment in some form with a part of the otome game community, much of the work—whether in reviewing games, making walkthroughs to help other players, or writing fan fiction to adapt the stories in these games—is about keeping otome games "happy" and thus valuable for circulation. These individual cases indicate how women must work to keep themselves and their own games happy. For some of the women of color in this study, the amount of work invested in keeping these games happy for themselves is sometimes doubled, especially in spaces where white women dominate the conversations on these games.

In this way, the practice of otome game fan blogging becomes imbricated with postfeminist sensibilities, which celebrate individual choice, independence, and self-expression mostly rooted in consumer cultures (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004). Gill (2007) pointed to how postfeminism envisions "individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating" (p. 436) within the context of neoliberal capitalism. In the case of otome game fan blogging, this is evidenced in the way these women continually have to show that they are good consumers. This is also shown in the study's demographics: Although otome game players come from various regions of the world and are much more ethnically diverse, it is predominantly white women from anglophone regions who do the front-facing work with otome game companies. Postfeminism ensures that white women's voices and interests—primarily those with money—are heard and addressed first before those of other marginalized women. Evidence of postfeminist sensibilities as shown echoes Dosekun's (2015) characterization of postfeminism as one that is "readily transnationalized ...because it is a fundamentally mediated and commodified discourse and a set of material practices" (p. 961). The existence of this form of gendered labor within this niche, predominantly female, game community hints how postfeminism mediates discourses within the community.

CONCLUSION: GAME CULTURES OF THEIR OWN

Much of the labor on otome games relies on the visibility of advocacy blogs and smaller game sites, yet ironically, many of these gendered forms of aspirational labor often are rendered unpaid and invisible. Notably, much of the labor that focuses on growing the English-language

otome game community is affective, particularly the emotional work associated with forming relationships with companies and the performance of being good consumers. It carries the notion that women have to work for their own games.

Nonetheless, it is also important to note how these blogs have provide spaces where women can discuss games supposedly created for them and about them, and where they could share issues with other women. In her book *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway (1984) described a community of women who reads sexist texts but, at the same time, insists on claiming agency of their own time in the act of novel reading. Results from both interviews and my wider ethnographic work indicate that many fan bloggers perceive their activities as key not only to promoting the games and creating larger audiences for otome games, but also as a way of contributing the discourses and circulation surrounding otome games. In the same manner as Radway's romance novels book clubs, otome game blogs allow women spaces of their own but via more contemporary contexts. As such, it is important to celebrate agency. But is also helps to see how postfeminist media culture influences how agency is uttered and negotiated.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, APPLICATION, OR POLICY

In my research, I sought to examine how agency is uttered in game communities that are predominantly female. The findings from this study open avenues for future research into how niche game communities utilize blogs to create game publics of their own that may be separate from the wider gaming public and wider gaming community. They also provide a foundation for exploring more broadly the role that female bloggers play in establishing spaces for discussing gender issues in gaming, in connecting game designers/producers and a specific community of players, and meeting the needs of their specific communities. These negotiations between individual players, communities, and game companies denote the existence of postfeminist sensibilities within these practices. Therefore, further research should consider how postfeminist sensibilities mediate discourses and create hierarchies in female-centered game communities. Further research on otome games could examine nonJapanese and nonanglophone players of otome games to shed light on the practices of these communities.

ENDNOTES

1. In my not yet published dissertation (Ganzon, 2020), I present a chapter on how players define otome games differently as an extension of Berlant's (2008) *Female Complaint*, which can be read as an act of resistance and containment to discuss individual experiences. See also Ganzon 2018a and 2018b.
2. The data were collected between April 2017 and May 2019. However, this article contains results only from those who were available to be interviewed or to complete an email questionnaire during that time frame. Additional responses remain outstanding and will be pursued in the future.
3. Some of my interviewees also recommended contacts of some otome game creators they know, understanding that I am researching game creators outside of Japan as part of my wider thesis project. Another interviewee also helped me find a contact for a localization company whose game I was writing about for my thesis project.

4. Particularly in the live interviews, participants brought some of their favorite games and walked me through some titles with which I was unfamiliar. Some have also signposted examples that I could use from these games, though admittedly I was unable to use them for this particular study.
5. The larger study was the foundation for my doctoral dissertation. Interviews for that study investigated otome game makers and translators; the blogger interviews were not part of that study. Noticeably, the wider data set is much more geographically and ethnically diverse, with more nonwhite participants and participants from countries such as Vietnam, Singapore, Russia, Bangladesh, and South Africa.
6. All responses, no matter what the geographic location of the respondents, were provided in English and are presented verbatim in the extracts provided.
7. Zenri, for example, is the Blah-Bidy-Blah's designated *yaoi* writer in addition to creating the walkthroughs on specific games.
8. Interestingly, the two nonwhite women did not mention race during the interview, but some tension was noticed when they discussed the politics of playing games and writing in English.
9. For instance, some participants noted that the easiest ways for conversations to turn toxic is to bring up piracy or the game *Diabolic Lovers*, which tended to trigger reactions from fans and antifans alike.
10. In the otome game community, the term *otoge* is used as shorthand to refer to "otome games"

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(RE-)BALANCING THE TRIFORCE: GENDER REPRESENTATION AND ANDROGYNOUS MASCULINITY IN THE LEGEND OF ZELDA SERIES

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Abstract: The Legend of Zelda series is one of the most beloved and acclaimed Japanese video game franchises in the world. The series' protagonist is an androgynous male character, though recent conversations between Nintendo and players have focused on gender representation in the newest title in the series, Breath of the Wild. Considering these discussions, this article provides an analysis of Link, the protagonist and player character of The Legend of Zelda series. This analysis includes a discussion of the character's androgynous design, its historical context, official Nintendo paratextual material, developer interviews, and commentary from fans and critics of the series. As an iconic androgynous character in an incredibly successful and popular video game series, Link is an important case study for gender-based game scholarship, and the controversies surrounding his design highlight a cultural moment in which gender representation in the series became a central topic of discussion among players and developers.

Keywords: video games, feminism, gender, Legend of Zelda, Nintendo, androgyny.



INTRODUCTION

Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda* (TLOZ) series (1986–ongoing) is one of the most beloved and iconic Japanese video game franchises in the world. In all (currently) 19 installments in this action-adventure series, spread across Nintendo's many consoles, the player-character has always been Link, and his purpose has almost always been to rescue the titular Princess Zelda from forces of evil, generally in the form of the villainous Ganon or his human form, Ganondorf. The series has several transmedia tie-ins, including television shows and comics, and has been the inspiration for countless fan-produced films, fiction, art, as well as cosplay and even themed escape games. As one of the longest and most recognized, critically acclaimed, and commercially successful video game franchises, several aspects of this series make it noteworthy for game scholarship. For researchers focused on issues of gender representation in games—what David Leonard (2006) referred to as gender-based game studies—the fact that the series' protagonist, Link, has often been designed as an androgynous character is particularly important. Indeed, Link's somewhat ambiguous gender presentation has sparked several debates among fans and prompted responses from the series' developers. These discourses highlight the importance of gender representation for many players and have kindled conversations about gender performance, nonnormative gender identities, identification with Link as a player-character, and the broader issue of representation in mainstream games. These conversations, combined with Nintendo's responses and relatively open design processes, make the series a fruitful object of study for gender-based game scholarship. However, much of the existing academic gender-based research on TLOZ series has focused on Princess Zelda, either as an example of the damsel-in-distress trope (Gailey, 1993; Sarkeesian, 2013) or an example of a female character that subverts said trope as the incarnation of a goddess (Navarro-Remesal, 2018) or when she disguises herself as Sheik (Lawrence, 2018), a gender ambiguous character who will be discussed later in this article. Link's androgynous design, on the other hand, has received less academic attention.

In order to contribute to this growing gender-based game scholarship on TLOZ series, this article uses textual analysis methods developed in game studies (Carr, 2017) to examine the gendered character design of Link throughout the series, placing his design within a Japanese cultural context and studying it alongside fan and developer discussions about his gender identity. The focus on a single character throughout a long-running series allows for a thorough analysis of that series' development and what that character has meant to players and developers. This is particularly important for gender-based game scholarship because Link is one of the few examples of a popular and iconic androgynous protagonist. Because of his androgynous design, Link's identity and appeal is not tied necessarily to his masculinity. As Mizuko Ito (2008) pointed out, TLOZ series has always appealed to female players (p. 97), and it is therefore unsurprising that many fans called for a female version of Link for the series' newest installment. While Nintendo considered the idea, they ultimately chose the more conservative route. However, fans and critics demanded that they explain why they made that decision, and the entire episode revealed Nintendo's unwillingness to change the gender of the series' protagonist.

Despite the diversity of the player demographic, there remains a hegemonic hold on gender representation in the mainstream games industry and an unwillingness to allow for even modest change if it hints at the possibility of backlash. However, the conversations around the atypical

gender presentation of Link in TLOZ series are deserving of careful scholarship because they highlight a cultural moment in which gender representation in a specific game series became a central topic of discussion among players and developers. Normative gender roles are shifting and, as that shift enters public discourse, popular culture will reflect and influence how the multiple meanings and sites of gender roles and gender performance are understood and navigated. Examining and drawing connections between the TLOZ series' popularity, the developers' design choices, and the way fans have related to Link provides an important case study for androgynous gender representation in popular culture.

Although several critics have recognized that Link is an androgynous character (e.g., Peckham, 2016), academic discussions about Link's gender presentation are rare. Meghan Blythe Adams (2018) included Link's androgynous design as one of several examples in an analysis of heroic androgyny and villainous gender-variance. Emma Vossen (2018) noted in her doctoral dissertation the importance of Link's androgyny for her own identification with the hero, while Tison Pugh (2018) discussed certain iterations of Link as examples of a queer child protagonist. Though Pugh does not address androgyny directly, as I will discuss in this article, Link's child-like appearance is an important component of his purposefully androgynous design. Despite no prior academic study dedicated toward Link's design and what players have said about it, the precedent exists. In several studies, researchers have analyzed the gendered design of specific main characters in popular series, such as the iconic Lara Croft from the Tomb Raider¹ games (Kennedy, 2002; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014; Mikula, 2003; Schleiner, 2001). This attention to gendered character design, especially for popular characters and series, is important given the game industry's historically problematic approach to gender representation.

As Peter Buse (1996) observed, "Video game narratives are predictable and depressing when it comes to sexual politics: with a few notable exceptions, like *Tetris* and other nongendered games, they rather crudely reproduce the worst-case scenario of patriarchal gender relations" (p. 166, italicization in original). Gender-based game research has demonstrated that women have always been severely underrepresented in video games (Glaubke, Miller, Parker, & Espejo, 2001; Ivory, 2006; Scharrer, 2004), and even when they are present in the game, they rarely are playable characters (Ivory, 2006). Provenzo's (1991) study showed that only 8% of Nintendo game covers depicted women, and Dietz's (1998) study revealed that only 15% of Nintendo and Genesis games portrayed women as heroic, and 40% of the games analyzed did not include female characters at all. In general, female characters more often are designed to appear sexy, with sexualized poses and revealing clothing (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Ivory, 2006; Lynch, Tompkins, van Driel, & Fritz, 2016; Scharrer, 2004). This applies also to advertising, as M. Miller and Summers (2007) found that, in video game magazines, women are more often portrayed as supplemental, sexy, and innocent, while men are far more likely to be portrayed as heroic, powerful, muscular, and violent. In Downs and Smith's (2010) sample of 60 best-selling console video games, only about 16% of characters depicted were women, and those women were far more likely to be depicted partially nude, with unrealistic bodily proportions, and wearing revealing clothing. Similarly, Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory (2009) found in a sample of 150 games that male characters were systematically overrepresented: Only 14% of the characters were female, and just 10% of games featured female protagonists.

This context of lacking, stereotypical, and offensive female representation in games is vital also for understanding why TLOZ provides such an important case study for how these issues are articulated and understood by players and developers. TLOZ's large fan base is vocal and

passionate: Players are not afraid to voice their opinions directly to Nintendo, which in turn engages with fans through interviews and Nintendo Direct announcements. This allows for a relatively close dialogue between fans and developers—a rare occurrence in the video game industry. Recent conversations between Nintendo and players focused on the newest title in the series, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017). During the 2014 Electronic Entertainment Expo—an important trade event for the video game industry commonly referred to as E3—Nintendo showed a brief trailer for this latest installment. This trailer featured a version of Link who appeared to many fans to be female—a first for the series. This sparked a widespread debate about the possibility of a female protagonist: either a “gender-swapped” Link or an empowered Princess Zelda.

LINK: THE BLANK SLATE HERO OF TIME

According to the lore of TLOZ series, in every age a hero arises to combat evil. This hero is always named Link because, according to TLOZ creator Shigeru Miyamoto (2013), the character serves as a “link” to connect the player with the game world (p. 2). *The Legend of Zelda: Hyrule Historia*, Nintendo’s official guide to the series, states,

The heroes of these chronicles all share the name Link. These Links might have been the same person, a series of familial descendants, or a number of heroes with different names entirely. The Links of certain eras may also have been named after the legendary hero. (“A Chronology of Hyrule, Land of the Gods,” 2013, p. 68)

However, while the default name is Link, players almost always can give the protagonist a custom name at the beginning of each game. While the chronology of the games is somewhat convoluted, Link has always been a male hero—referred to using masculine pronouns—though designed to be as blank and relatable as possible to encourage the player to identify with him. According to one of Link’s lead designers, Ryuji Kobayashi (2013, p. 8), even Link’s face and facial expressions are designed to be “relatable.” He is also a silent protagonist, never speaking but simply grunting or shouting while combatting enemies. Silent protagonists are relatively common in Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs), from SNES classics such as *Chrono Trigger* through to more recent releases such as *Xenoblade Chronicles X* for the Wii U.² Other than his rather minimal history as a reincarnation or descendant of the legendary hero, Link never has a detailed backstory within each game. By never speaking, having no personality, and having little backstory, these protagonists serve as a *tabula rasa* (i.e., blank slate) for the player to use and potentially merge with during the game.

Taken together, all these factors render the protagonist’s identity as “Link” almost nonexistent. Link is, however, an extremely recognizable, iconic figure solely because of the visual cues that inform the player that the hero is indeed another Link. In terms of physical representation, Link is portrayed in a similar fashion in every game: a child or young adult, slim, with blonde or light brown hair, elvish features including pointed ears (often with an earring or sometimes two), large eyes (blue or black in the more cartoony design), and high cheekbones with no facial hair (see Figures 1–5). Link wears high boots and a tunic, usually green, which comes down to about mid-thigh. His outfit also features a pointed green cap and a belt cinching

his slim waist. Although the graphical capabilities and art style changed for each game, Link's highly recognizable design remained mostly consistent until Breath of the Wild.



Figure 1. Screenshot of Link as an adult from Ocarina of Time (Nintendo, 1998).



Figure 2. In this screenshot from Wind Waker (Nintendo, 2002), Link is depicted in a more cartoonish way.



Figure 3. Child Link screenshot from the 3DS port of Ocarina of Time (Nintendo, 2011).



Figure 4. Link screenshot from Skyward Sword (Nintendo, 2011).



Figure 5. Screenshot of Link from Hyrule Warriors (Omega Force & Team Ninja, 2014).

NO LINK TO THE PAST

Given that Link's identity is tied to his physical representation, it is no surprise that the character's slightly altered appearance (see Figure 6) during Nintendo's brief 2014 E3 teaser trailer for the upcoming TLOZ title sparked heated debate among fans of the series. The character shown during the trailer had Link's blonde hair, big blue eyes, and elvish features, but wore blue instead of green, had no hat, was fighting with a bow rather than a sword, appeared to be riding a different horse than usual, had longer hair pulled back into a ponytail, was slimmer, and had what many perceived as distinctly feminine facial features. *Venture Beat*'s Mike Minotti (2014) asked TLOZ producer Eiji Aonuma in an interview about the altered appearance of the character; Aonuma cryptically replied by smiling and saying, "No one explicitly said that that was Link" (para. 2). This remark enflamed a widespread discussion among fans, some of whom proceeded to break down the trailer frame by frame to assess whether the character was male or female. There was certainly a virulent backlash against the idea of a female protagonist, which is perhaps unsurprising given that the violently antifeminist GamerGate movement took center stage in the gaming world later that summer (for more on GamerGate and its aftermath, see Chess & Shaw, 2015; Jenson & de Castell, 2016).

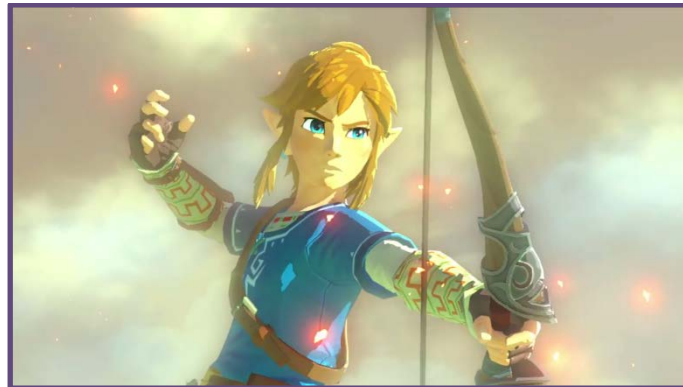


Figure 6. Screenshot of Link in the 2014 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) teaser trailer for *Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017).

However, the fact that many commenters seemed to accept or even applaud the move demonstrates that there is both space and a need for more diverse and nuanced representation within gaming culture (Ore, 2016). Indeed, whether this character was actually the titular Princess Zelda finally being allowed to star in her own legend, or a child of Link and Zelda, or even a female incarnation of the legendary hero, many fans seemed supportive of the bold move. As *Kotaku*'s Patricia Hernandez (2014) pointed out,

On some level I think the discussions are happening because people would genuinely love to play as a female character. There's a definite tinge of "wouldn't this be cool for Nintendo to do?" that trails most of the discussions I've seen, and it's often followed by a slightly defeatist "naw, Nintendo wouldn't actually do that...right?" (Hernandez, 2014, para. 8)³

Some fans justified their support or acceptance of a female Link by pointing out that nothing in the game's canon or the gameplay experience precludes a female incarnation of the hero:

Jagans: I wouldn't mind. There would be a lot of controversy, but the gender of the Hero has never really mattered in my mind. (cited in Hernandez, 2014)

Plus5defense (2014): I'd be all for it, I mean it's pretty dumb to think that the Hero of Hyrule descendants have all been males. surely there has been a girl in there at some stage. or maybe instead of the Twilight World it's some kind of Gender Bending Universe? who knows, and who cares. I just want to play this game!

TetraGenesis (2014): Why does the Hero of Time have to be male? There's no reason. Other than tradition. Which Aonuma has made explicitly clear he's trying to throw out the window.

Mononoke (2014): Honestly, at this point I don't see why Link couldn't be female. For me, the idea behind Link has always been that the hero always rises in every generation. It's not the same person every time (obviously it can't be). Given how the game has played out using Link over the years, why couldn't one generation be a female?

This openness to a female hero might be because gender-swapping Link is not a new idea: As the organizer of the 2015 Female Link Jam pointed out, "Female Link is something fans have always had floating amongst their collective super-brain" (cited in Hemmann, 2018, p. 226). For example, in 2012, Mike Hoyer gained some fame for hacking *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* (Nintendo, 2002) to edit the text, swapping all the gendered pronouns in the

game. As reported in an interview with *Ars Technica*, “Hoye was bothered by the fact that even players who change the protagonist’s name to something other than ‘Link’—which the game allows—always get addressed as though they are male” (Johnston, 2012, para. 2). Hoye did this for his young daughter’s playthrough of *Wind Waker*, which begins with Link having to rescue his little sister Aryll, because, as he wrote on his blog, “I’m not having my daughter growing up thinking girls don’t get to be the hero and rescue their little brothers” (Hoye, 2012, para. 4). While Hoye has been criticized by some commenters for “lying to his daughter about Link’s gender” (Joseph_Joestar, 2012) and “changing others’ intellectual property to suit [his] needs” (Rapscaillon, 2012), most websites reporting the story have hailed him as a heroic father. Similarly, Kathryn Hemmann (2018) highlighted several fan-produced comics that retell TLOZ’s stories in order to give more agency to the female characters in the series, thereby subtly critiquing its highly gendered tropes. In other words, at this point, there was clearly room for acceptance and even enthusiasm regarding a female Link; yet Nintendo responded instead with a female imitation of the hero.

LINKLE: THE FAILED ATTEMPT

In 2014, Nintendo released *Hyrule Warriors* (Omega Force & Team Ninja), a hack-and-slash spinoff of the *Zelda* series—basically *Dynasty Warriors* with a *Zelda* overlay—which became the best-selling game for the Wii U console and featured a wide selection of characters for the player to choose from. Amid fan speculation regarding the possibility of a female Link, Aonuma was interviewed by *Kotaku*’s Jason Schreier, who suggested to Aonuma that allowing female players to play as a character of their own gender would be more inclusive. In response, Aonuma stated,

So there are actually many female characters you can play as in *Hyrule Warriors*. We’ve introduced Midna, we’ve introduced Princess Zelda, and Impa as well ... let’s see what happens with *Hyrule Warriors*, if as a result of there being more female protagonists, more women pick up the game, I’m all for it, so I’ve decided to see what happens with this title. (Schreier, 2014, para. 14, italics in original)

Clearly this experiment with female characters was somewhat successful: During their November 2015 Nintendo Direct announcement, the company revealed an “original character” named Linkle for the updated port of the game for the 3DS, called *Hyrule Warriors Legends* (Omega Force & Team Ninja, 2016).

In many ways, Linkle is simply a female imitation of Link: Apart from the similar name, Linkle also has blonde hair, pointed ears, an elvish appearance, and wears green (see Figure 7). She is, however, less androgynous, referred to using female pronouns, and wears a short skirt over tight-fitting shorts. She also is presented as a silly character: clumsy, scatterbrained, and unable to follow directions or navigate. More importantly, rather than being a hero of any story, she is marginalized to a ported handheld version of a spinoff game. Unfortunately, playable female characters are often relegated to spinoffs and downloadable content (DLC). As media critic Veve Jaffa (2016) observed, “Isolating marginalized representation to DLC demonstrates the industry’s conditional interest in portraying diversity” (para. 5). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that while gender-swapped Link has been a prominent figure in much fan art and fan fiction,



Figure 7. Screenshot of Linkle from Hyrule Warriors Legends (Omega Force & Team Ninja, 2015).

critical reaction to the announcement of Linkle was mixed. Jess Joho (2015), writing for *KillScreen*, articulated her frustration and disappointment at the reveal of Linkle:

Here's the bottom line that Nintendo refuses to see: when people ask "why can't Link be a girl," they're not asking for the option to maybe play as a girl who looks like Link in a game with a Zelda-related title. They're not asking for girls to be kept to the side, marginalized to a lesser product ... Instead, they're asking why—amidst an otherwise very female-centric mythology about three goddesses and a badass princess—must the "Hero" character always be a boy? Why is it okay to ask female players to identify with Link despite their gender differences, but at the same time have it be inconceivable to ask male players to do the same? (Joho, 2015, para. 12)

Thus, Linkle is a poor substitute for Link. Moreover, Joho's point about Zelda being "a badass princess" highlights the question of why gender-swap a male character when there is already an established female protagonist in the series?

Indeed, for many fans, the most appealing option would be to make Zelda the main character because it is technically her legend. In fact, because of the title of the series, it is common for children to think mistakenly that the main character *is* Zelda. In 1993, Christine Gailey reported that one girl in her study "saw herself sometimes as Link and sometimes as the princess" and that regardless of which character she identified with, she understood that "the object of the game was 'to get rid of the bad guys and get my kingdom back'" (p. 89). Similarly, in their study of Grade 6 children playing *Wind Waker*, Jenson, de Castell, Bergstrom, and Flynn-Jones (2017) observed that "even after playing for eight weeks, the majority of participants mislabeled the protagonist as 'Zelda' on their character identification sheets" (p. 6). Serrels (2014) identified various online commenters admitting to the same misidentification:

Jane (2014): Fun fact; when I was a kid and first played *The Legend of Zelda* on NES, I thought I was playing as Zelda, because I was too young to really understand the text that was on screen (I think I was about four or five), the sprites on screen didn't do much to suggest gender one way or the other, and it just made sense—it was Zelda's legend!

Shane (2014) [in response]: When I was a kid, I thought the same, and actually entered the character name as 'ZELDA' on the new game setup screen, little realising that doing so unlocked the hard mode NG+.

This long-standing and common confusion suggests that Link's identity—and his maleness—is not vital to the series, and that perhaps it would make sense for Zelda to be the protagonist instead. However, while offering more heroic female representation is a laudable feminist goal, given the notable shortage of positive nonbinary gender representation in mainstream games, it may be more progressive for Nintendo to embrace Link as fully androgynous and gender-neutral.

ANDROGYNOUS HEROES

While many fans insisted that the character in the *Breath of the Wild* trailer must be Zelda, particularly because the character's face was perceived as more feminine than Link's usually is, others pointed out the lack of breasts and hips in their arguments against the character being female (see Figure 6). Attempting to analyze the body of a digitally-rendered character in this way suggests that these fans continue to conceptualize gender in association with specific biological markers and to believe that a character's gender can be uncovered by closely analyzing these physical characteristics. As argued by Michel Foucault (1976/1978), associating gender with physiology, as well as the assumption that the body can be read to uncover its sex or gender, is a function of medical and political discursive power exercised on the body. This assumption also does not recognize the nature of gender performativity—which does not necessarily relate to physical appearance—and the fluidity of gender, as elaborated by scholars such as Judith Butler (1990, 1993) and Jack Halberstam (1998). To some, however, Link's ambiguous or androgynous character design was a positive, potentially empowering development, and fit in with the series' style:

The Cranberry Cap'n (2014): What it says to me is a female character design whose femaleness isn't emphasized. That alone would be refreshing and awesome, regardless of who the character actually is ... It's certainly a more androgynous character, but that wouldn't be Nintendo or the Zelda series' first time toeing the gender line.

Indeed *TLOZ* has always been filled with androgynous characters, most notably Link himself. Androgyny in this case can be understood as either a gendered performance tied to what Butler (1990, p. 416) described as the “surface politics of the body,” which includes a mixing of gender signifiers, such as cosmetics, clothing, gestures, speech, and so on, or physicality, such as the lack or mixing of secondary sex characteristics, or a combination of both. In Link's case, his slim body, elvish features, and his appearance in several titles as a cartoonish child all render him androgynous by design. It is important to note that conceptualizations of masculinity, femininity, and androgyny are culturally contextual, and discussing how mostly North American audiences perceived the gendered design of a Japanese game character risks repeating Orientalist ideas of more “feminized” Asian male gender presentation (for more on this, see Atkins, 2005). I therefore turn to the developers' own discussions of their design processes, as well as a look at the context of Japanese androgynous aesthetic traditions, in order to provide a nuanced and critical understanding of Link's design.

Designing Link within a Japanese Cultural Context

TLOZ creator Shigeru Miyamoto stated that Disney's Peter Pan was the inspiration for Link's character design (Audureau, 2012). It is unsurprising, then, that Link is portrayed often as a

cartoonish child, a design choice that adds to his androgyny. It is also interesting to note that in stage productions of *Peter Pan*, the title role traditionally has been played by a female actor (Hanson, 2011). This design choice, combined with Link's silence and minimal backstory, was intended to allow players of any gender to identify with him. As Aonuma stated in an interview with *Time*'s Matt Peckham,

Back during the *Ocarina of Time* days, I wanted Link to be gender neutral. I wanted the player to think "Maybe Link is a boy or a girl." If you saw Link as a guy, he'd have more of a feminine touch. Or vice versa, if you related to Link as a girl, it was with more of a masculine aspect. I really wanted the designer to encompass more of a gender-neutral figure. So I've always thought that for either female or male players, I wanted them to be able to relate to Link. (Peckham, 2016, para. 4, italics in original)

Although designing a gender-neutral character is a potentially inclusive artistic choice, the fact remains that Link is established officially as a male character and is addressed using masculine pronouns in the English translations of every game in the series.⁴ In addition, Link's childish androgyny does not detract from his apparent sexual appeal in the games: As Pugh (2018) noted, despite his "innocent and presexual" portrayal, he is nevertheless the subject of "female characters' libidinous investment ... due to his heroic status" (p. 227). Link's maleness also has been an important plot device in several games, particularly when he must either use stealth or cross-dressing to enter the territory of the all-female Gerudo tribe in both *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998) and *Breath of the Wild* (see Figure 8). Link can pass as female when he wears female-coded clothing but is recognizably male when he does not. Therefore, while he is androgynous by design, he is not presented as gender-neutral.

Androgynous men, whose aesthetic I will call "masculine-skewed androgyny" in reference to Adams' (2018) work, have been popular in Japanese culture for centuries, perhaps influenced by the *yarō-kabuki*, or young man kabuki, theatrical traditions. *Kabuki* was a common form of entertainment in the 17th century, although female *kabuki*, called *onna-kabuki*, was banned by the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1629 for being too erotic and because the performers were available for prostitution (Shively, 2002). After this ban, men and adolescent boys took over the female roles. These cross-dressing actors, called *onnagata* or *oyama* (female-role) were chosen for their beauty and higher-pitched voices; they were often presented in an erotic context and available for prostitution as well (Shively, 2002, p. 34–41).



Figure 6. Link wearing female Gerudo clothing in a screenshot from *Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017).

Masculine-skewed androgyny continues to be extremely popular in Japanese artwork, comics (*manga*), and animation (*anime*); as well as among Japanese musicians (a movement called visual *kei*, with *kei* meaning style) and models (a trend called genderless *kei*; McLeod, 2013; L. Miller, 2006; Robertson, 1992).

Similarly, masculine-skewed androgynous protagonists are not uncommon in JRPGs: Many male characters exhibit relatively few secondary sex characteristics or fall into the *bishōnen*, or beautiful boy, aesthetic category, with slender bodies, feminine features, and long hair. The popular Final Fantasy series, for example, is known for its androgynous protagonists, especially those drawn by Yoshitaka Amano.⁵ Within the Japanese cultural context, Link's androgynous design is therefore not particularly unusual; however, the series' popularity in the West is notable given that Western video games tend to feature more macho or hypermasculine male characters (Burrill, 2008; Kirkland, 2009). It is important to note that while these video game characters are androgynous by design, they are not gender-neutral; rather, they are almost all unambiguously male, as well as being slim, light-skinned, and able-bodied. Adams (2018) noted that the slim, white, and masculine-skewed androgyny of video game characters like Link reflects Lorenzo-Cioldi's (1996) concept of "transcendent androgyny," which is presented as minimal, ideal, and neutral. Of course, framing slim, masculine whiteness as neutral is really a way of presenting it as ideal, natural, and correct (Adams, 2018). Similarly, the kind of androgyny that these idealized protagonists can embody is highly policed: Androgynous JRPG protagonists are rarely gender variant in that they rarely wear feminine clothing or cosmetics and are never effeminate in their speech or gestures. JRPG villains, on the other hand, are often portrayed as gender variant, suggesting that while masculine-skewed androgyny is considered ideal, gender variance is viewed as excessive and therefore evil (Adams, 2018). Some famous examples of villains designed this way are Flea from Chrono Trigger, Kuja from Final Fantasy IX, and Ghirahim from The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword (Nintendo, 2011).

Other Androgynous Heroes: Zelda as Sheik and Tetra

Even though this article is primarily about Link, it is important to note that Princess Zelda also has appeared as an androgynous hero. The eponymous princess of TLOZ series is portrayed almost always as a damsel-in-distress who needs Link to save her. Her distress always comes from some form of physical disempowerment: She has been kidnapped, imprisoned, put to sleep, cursed, turned to stone, possessed, has become a bodiless spirit, and so on. Zelda sometimes has magical powers and occasionally fights with a bow, although these abilities are only ever used to assist Link in his battle against evil, usually at the very end of the game. In *Breath of the Wild*, Zelda is relegated to a disembodied voice encouraging and guiding Link. She also appears in Link's flashbacks as he gradually regains his memory throughout his adventure; however, obtaining these memories is not required for players to finish the game. Although her character is arguably more fully developed in *Breath of the Wild* than in other games in this series—the player can see her struggle to unlock her own magical abilities and live up to her destiny as an incarnation of the goddess—the fact that she exists only in memories and as a disembodied voice means she functions merely as motivation for Link. This is particularly troublesome given the more empowered versions of Princess Zelda featured in previous installments in the series. While Zelda is generally a damsel-in-distress, two versions of her character have managed to overcome, at least temporarily, her inevitable powerlessness by challenging her assigned gender role: Sheik and Tetra.

Sheik

In *Ocarina of Time*, one of the series' most successful installments, Princess Zelda spends a large portion of the game disguised as Sheik, a seemingly male survivor of the Sheikah tribe, to hide from the villainous Ganondorf. Although this mysterious figure has a partially covered face, Sheik—with red eyes, tanned skin, and a slender-yet-masculine body—is unrecognizable as Zelda (see Figure 9). Sheik aids Link during his quest by giving him advice and teaching him powerful teleportation songs. Late in the game, Sheik is revealed to be Princess Zelda, who then changes back into the familiar blonde-haired, blue-eyed princess, complete with pink dress and golden tiara (see Figure 10). Unsurprisingly, almost as soon as Zelda reveals herself, she is captured by Ganondorf, imprisoned in a crystal, and must be rescued by Link. While in disguise as a man, however, Zelda/Sheik is a capable ninja-like warrior who actually adopts the role of hero by saving Princess Ruto of the Zora tribe.

Almost immediately after the release of *Ocarina of Time*, fan debate heated up regarding Sheik's gender. While in disguise, Sheik has a very masculine appearance, is given male pronouns, and is referred to as a young man by Princess Ruto. Some fans argued that this meant Sheik really is physically male, and the noncanon *manga* adaptation of *Ocarina of Time*, released in 1998, confirmed this. In the *manga*, Zelda actually magically transformed herself into a biological male



Figure 7. Princess Zelda disguised as Sheik in a screenshot from *Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998).



Figure 8. Screenshot after Sheik is revealed to be Princess Zelda in *Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998).

for the 7 years she was in disguise (Himekawa, 1998/2016). Other fans, however, argued that since it was Zelda in disguise, Sheik must be biologically female. This fan theory suggested that Zelda used magic to disguise her features and bound her breasts, comparing her to historical women who disguised themselves as men to gain agency in a patriarchal society, such as Hua Mulan and Joan of Arc. However, as Chris Lawrence (2018, p. 99) pointed out, the character's gender is purposely left ambiguous as "Sheik never self-identifies with a specific set of pronouns" and is voiced by the same actress who voices Zelda, but with a lower-pitched recording. Although Sheik has appeared in only one TLOZ title, this gender-ambiguous hero has been a playable fighter in the Super Smash Bros.⁶ fighting game series and in Hyrule Warriors. However, the character design for Sheik in both of these titles is considerably more feminine than the original character, and in the Super Smash Bros. series, Sheik is described as female. Shortly before Hyrule Warriors was released in August of 2014, Bill Trinen, senior product marketing manager at Nintendo of America, attempted to end the debate by stating in an interview that "the definitive answer is that Sheik is a woman—simply Zelda in a different outfit" (Riendeau, 2014, para. 11). Although this is Nintendo's official stance, Bill Trinen did not create the character and so fans still debate the topic, both because of the related *manga* and because some fans prefer to see Sheik/Zelda as a gender fluid character (e.g., see Lawrence, 2018; Meehan, 2014; Watson, 2017).

Tetra

Tetra debuted in *Wind Waker* as a rambunctious, tomboyish pirate captain with tanned skin and blonde hair (see Figure 11). Although a child, she is the fearless leader of a gang of pirates who respect her and obey her orders. She grudgingly assists Link to rescue his sister, albeit for her own reasons, but in doing so, Ganondorf discovers her true identity as Princess Zelda. Tetra and Link flee to the ruins of Hyrule castle, where the king of Hyrule tells Tetra of the fate she was born into and she is physically transformed into Zelda. Her skin gets lighter, her hair gets longer, her pirate clothing becomes a pink dress, and she is wearing make-up and jewelry (see Figure 12). Unsurprisingly, Tetra seems horrified and saddened by her fate, particularly because the power and freedom she enjoyed as Tetra is taken from her. She is forced to remain hidden in the ruins instead of journeying alongside Link because, as the king says to her, "It is far too dangerous for you to



Figure 9. Tetra (left) is a confident, rambunctious pirate leader, shown in a screenshot from *Wind Waker* (Nintendo, 2002).



Figure 10. In this screenshot from *Wind Waker* (Nintendo, 2002), Tetra has been transformed into Princess Zelda, who sadly waves goodbye to Link and warns him to “Be careful” because she can no longer adventure alongside him.

join us in this task.” She waves sadly at Link as he goes off to save the day after apologizing to him for being the source of his troubles. The brave and adventurous Tetra is completely gone, replaced by a sad, apologetic, helpless, and distinctly more feminine princess. Zelda is captured later by Ganondorf and rendered unconscious, for which *she* apologizes, saying she “overslept.” During the final battle, Zelda helps Link fight Ganondorf with arrows of light that she shoots from her bow; of course, it is Link who strikes the final blow.

In her more masculine or androgynous forms as Sheik and Tetra, Zelda proves herself capable and brave, but in both cases, when she returns to her “true” form, she is almost instantly incapacitated and in need of rescue. Her personality also seems to change completely: She becomes more dainty, graceful, docile, and apologetic. The key takeaway here is that although TLOZ series primarily features a masculine-skewed androgynous character, it has also provided space for feminine-skewed androgyny and for a female character to “gender-bend” her way into a more active role. In this sense, nonnormative gender roles are fully established in this series, even though Nintendo’s responses regarding the details of these characters’ gender identities remains very conservative.

NINTENDO’S CONSERVATISM

As a company, Nintendo has always preferred to stay away from anything that could be construed as controversial. As Dan Adelman, who headed Nintendo of America’s independent games program for 9 years, revealed,

They’re very traditional, and very focused on hierarchy and group decision making. Unfortunately, that creates a culture where everyone is an advisor and no one is a decision maker, but almost everyone has veto power ... if someone flat out says no, the proposal is as good as dead. So in general, bolder ideas don’t get through the process unless they originate at the top. (cited in Campbell, 2015, para. 13–16)

Bolder ideas are unlikely to originate at the top, however, as according to Adelman Nintendo is run by a network of managers who dislike taking risks. As Adelman stated, “Risk taking is generally not really rewarded. Long-term loyalty is ultimately what gets rewarded, so

the easiest path is simply to stay the course” (cited in Campbell, 2015, para. 24). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that regardless of how enthusiastic many fans were about the idea of a female protagonist, and despite Aonuma’s claims of wanting to “shake up” the traditional conventions of the series (Makuch, 2013), during the official unveiling of *Breath of the Wild* at E3 2016, the main character was definitively established as another male Link. Aonuma attempted to explain why this version of Link appeared to be female:

After *Twilight Princess* I went back to the drawing board and decided Link should be a more gender-neutral character. Hence I created the version of Link that you see in *Breath of the Wild*. As far as gender goes, Link is definitely a male, but I wanted to create a character where anybody would be able to relate to the character ... So that’s why I think the rumor went around that Link could be a female. Because maybe the users were able to relate in that way. (cited in Peckham, 2016, para. 5, italicization in original)

This reveal was met with widespread fan disappointment, especially given Aonuma’s vague hinting 2 years prior (Ore, 2016). In explanation for this, Aonuma claimed that it was intended as a joke and that he “in no way had intention of leading people into believing Link was female” (cited in Totilo, 2016, para. 2).

After the disappointing reveal, Aonuma was asked by many reporters why his team decided not to make Link female. To *Kotaku* he explained that because “the Triforce is made up of Princess Zelda, Ganon and Link,” and since “Princess Zelda is obviously female,” they felt that if they made Link a female, it would “mess with the balance of the Triforce” (cited in Totilo, 2016, para. 3). This explanation is nonsensical, particularly because the Triforce, being three-fold, is already unbalanced, with two men and one woman. The Triforce, which is a sacred relic embodying the power of the three goddesses who created the realm of Hyrule, is made up of Courage (represented by Link), Wisdom (represented by Zelda), and Power (represented by Ganon). By claiming that making Link female would unbalance the Triforce, Aonuma is implying that courage cannot be represented by a woman. Beyond this problematic implication, Aonuma gave a very unsatisfying response to why his team did not choose to have Zelda as the main character in *Breath of the Wild*. In an interview with *GameSpot* during E3, Aonuma explained that his team considered having Princess Zelda as the main character because it would have been “simpler” than making a female Link, but the idea was rejected: “If we have princess Zelda as the main character who fights, then what is Link going to do? Taking into account that, and also the idea of the balance of the Triforce, we thought it best to come back to this [original] makeup” (cited in Brown, 2016, para. 2–3). The idea of letting the Princess rescue Link for once was completely dismissed for fear of leaving Link with nothing to do—or worse, being disempowered or imprisoned as Zelda is in every single game.

CONCLUSIONS

By conducting a close analysis of Link’s gender presentation alongside player and critical discourse, this research has shown that gender representation has become a central, though often heated, topic of conversation within gaming culture. While this conversation inevitably involves a backlash from certain groups within that culture, clearly space and demand for more diverse gender representation exists within mainstream games. In this sense, this research has exposed

how one-sided that hegemonic hold on representation in mainstream games really is: Critics want change, many fans want or accept the possibility of change, but mainstream developers—even if the series already leans towards alternative gender performance—will do almost anything to avoid backlash from the male gamers they continue to perceive as their main demographic. Indeed, while Nintendo’s response is disappointing for fans who were hoping for a female protagonist in the newest installment, it is not overly surprising. TLOZ series was designed for a primarily male audience base. In 1994, Nintendo spokesperson Sally Reavis confirmed that “Boys are the market. Nintendo has always taken their core consumers very seriously” (cited in Pugh, 2018, p. 226). This bias is demonstrated clearly by the marketing campaigns used to promote the games. As Vossen (2018) observed, “Even games that had wide appeal amongst a variety of genders and ages were promoted through highly gendered advertisements” (p. 11). She cited the example of a televised advertisement for *Ocarina of Time* in which the text reads, “Willst thou get the girl? Or play like one?” (Vossen, 2018, p. 11). The idea of “getting the girl” is indeed common to each installment in the series, and critics like Anita Sarkeesian (2013) have pointed out that Link must rescue an incapacitated and victimized Princess Zelda in every game. This is the basic narrative set-up of each game, and the predictable hero-rescues-princess trope is as closely associated with TLOZ series as the iconic protagonist’s green tunic and pointed ears. In addition, this advertisement suggests that playing like a girl means not having the necessary skills to win the game, thereby implying that only male players can succeed.

The debates that heated up over the trailers for the newest installment, *Breath of the Wild*, revealed an awareness among the series’ fans that TLOZ’s producers could have pushed the boundaries and taken some risks regarding gender roles and representation, but chose not to. However, it is important to note that Nintendo is a Japanese company while many of the debates, controversies, and conversations regarding gender diversity and representation have taken place on North American, Australian, and European websites and forums and within Western academia. Although beyond the scope of this article, it would be worthwhile to investigate the fan and critic response to the series and to *Breath of the Wild* in Japan and in other regions of the world. It would also be valuable to examine how Japanese cultural norms and practices impact corporate decision making, especially regarding gender representation in games. While it originates in Japan, TLOZ series is a global cultural icon and one of the most recognizable video game franchises in the medium’s history. This is undoubtedly because the series is full of noteworthy characters, including an androgynous hero, designed to be a gender-neutral blank slate to foster the player’s identification with him. His androgynous design combined with the fact he is simply a reincarnation of the legendary hero has caused many fans to wonder why Link has never been female. However, rather than gender-swapping a male character, perhaps it would be more interesting for Nintendo to embrace Link’s androgyny and make him a truly gender-neutral character.

TLOZ series is remarkable in many ways and is therefore certainly worthy of academic attention. Although it has many problematic character portrayals and has commonly presented villains that embody fears of gender variance and excess, by featuring a young, androgynous protagonist, Nintendo could potentially challenge stereotypical gender roles in video games. However, Nintendo’s decision regarding the protagonist’s gender in *Breath of the Wild* does suggest that they still believe that heroism needs to be tied to masculinity, even if that masculinity is androgynous. Although Nintendo appears to value close dialogue with fans and critics, the company does not seem to be really listening to their demands or is being very selective about which demands they address. This is particularly surprising given Nintendo’s recent boasting regarding their apparently high

number of female developers, especially as compared to Western companies. During a recent Q&A session, Nintendo's Director and Senior Managing Executive Officer Shinya Takahashi claimed, "There are many female developers in the software development departments ... and very high number of females among our designers" (cited in Doolan, 2019). Shigeru Miyamoto, the creator of The Legend of Zelda series and one of Nintendo's representative directors, added,

There are also many females actively involved in development ... When I had chances to look at other development companies in Europe and the US, they give the impression that they're overwhelmingly male-dominated. Compared to companies like that, Nintendo has a lot of female developers energetically working. (cited in Doolan, 2019)

While this is certainly a positive step, it does not appear to be resulting in more female representation in Nintendo's games. And because there is no mention at all of developers who identify as gender nonbinary, it does not bode well for fans and critics who are hoping for more diverse gender representation in games.

In addition, although featuring an androgynous protagonist can be viewed as progressive in a Western context, Link's design fits in with Japanese cultural preferences and was therefore not an overly risky choice for Nintendo. Although conservatism still has a hold on the mainstream game industry, fan and critical discourses on this specific design choice reveal a strong desire for more centralized female representation in TLOZ series. While more nuanced and heroic female representation is important, Link's androgyny could also pave the way for the normalization of gender-neutral or nonconforming protagonists in mainstream games. The fact that a video game series as globally renowned, critically acclaimed, and financially successful as TLOZ has successfully provided space for centralized and heroic androgynous representation is already remarkable.

Although Nintendo's rationale for continuing to feature a male protagonist in the series and marginalize other gender identities was rather flimsy and contradictory, it is important to underscore that the company was compelled to explain the choice to fans and critics. This suggests that it is no longer widely assumed (or desired) that mainstream video game protagonists are necessarily going to remain male by default. This can therefore be interpreted as a key moment for future research on game content and gaming culture, especially regarding accessibility and visibility for nonmale gender identities. This is also important for future research on—and interventions into—industry practices, as the reluctance to decentralize maleness in games is undoubtedly a direct result of Nintendo's hierarchical corporate structure, its fixation on tradition, and the assumption that, regardless of the diversity of its player demographic, male protagonists are the "bankable" choice. If Nintendo wants to be at the forefront of innovation, especially amid the reality that mainstream games still exist within a largely conservative and antifeminist sphere, they will need to provide more space for nuanced representations of diverse gender identities in their games.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND APPLICATION

As a contribution to the theoretical aspects of gameplay and games culture, this research demonstrates that traditional stances on who is allowed to be the hero and what a hero can or should look like are open topics for investigation and discussion. Importantly, because culture and gender perspectives are dynamic, such research could be ongoing and should always seek

to consider player and developer discourse. Moreover, research into the corporate cultures of game companies is also a ripe topic for exploration, particularly regarding their processes of engaging fan and critic support. This research provides a launching point for future scholarship on Nintendo's corporate and design practices, future developments in TLOZ series, and gender representation in JRPGs—especially regarding gender deviance and villainy, exaggerated masculinity, and cross-dressing, which are topics only briefly addressed here. In addition, given the continued global popularity of Japanese games, further research seeking to understand these gendered representations within specific cultural contexts of production and reception is vital.

Regarding application, gender-based game scholarship is a vibrant and growing area of research, especially given the continued global demographic shifts as nonmale players become more vocal about their play experiences. As game developers and executives of game companies seek to support their profit and marketing goals, ongoing research into how these companies balance the desires and needs of disparate subgroups of players regarding representation and other issues will become ever more important. This article provides a basis for concrete suggestions to shape policy and practice regarding gender inclusivity in game design and could therefore contribute to the development of new ideas for gameplay that welcomes and engages all players.

ENDNOTES

1. Tomb Raider is a multititle series (1996–2018) developed by Core Design, Crystal Dynamics, Nixxes Software, Ubisoft Milan, and Eidos Montreal.
2. Chrono Trigger is a Japanese RPG developed by Square and released in 1995 and Xenoblade Chronicles X is a 2015 Japanese RPG developed by Monolith Soft.
3. This paper makes extensive use of blog posts and comments, so I will be presenting these texts exactly as the original authors have written them.
4. I specify that Link has masculine pronouns in the English translation here because it should be noted that Japanese does not use pronouns as often as English does and has mixed-gendered and gender-neutral pronouns, which can sometimes leave the gender of the character ambiguous in the text of the games. Often, Link is referred to by his name, as “the player,” or as “you” in the Japanese versions, while his gender is only explicitly revealed at certain points in the games or in the game manuals. However, even if the character is not explicitly gendered as often in the Japanese versions, Nintendo made the decision to use masculine pronouns for Link in the translations to other languages.
5. Final Fantasy is a multititle series of Japanese RPGs produced by Square-Enix and released between the years of 1987–2018
6. Super Smash Bros. is a multititle series (2001–2018) of fighting games developed by HAL Laboratory, Game Arts, Sora Ltd., and Bandai Namco Studios.

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