Female Power Fantasy: Women and Resistance in Games and Gamer Culture

Tarnia Mears

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School of Art, Media, and American Studies

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Abstract

This thesis investigates digital gaming as a resistive act for female players. It argues that the ludic choices of women who play video games often work to push back against limiting expectations about their participation in gaming spaces. Their engagement with the gaming assemblage (encompassing the hobby, the community, the industry, and other aspects relating to 'games culture') offers many the opportunity to push back against restrictive hegemonic structures, both within the gaming assemblage itself, and in wider society. This is done through their play practices, their participation within the culture, and creations spawned from their own unique subject-positions, enabling them to resist conservative ideologies as well as tackle biological essentialism in games. Using multiple ethnographic approaches including a survey of 359 respondents and gaming interviews based on methods used by Schott & Horrell (2000), Shaw (2014), and Harvey (2015), this research centralises voices that often are pushed to the periphery of gaming spaces, to interrogate how female-identifying individuals situate their ludic practices within wider gamer culture.

Beginning with a contextualising literature review detailing the various barriers to play that women face within the gaming assemblage, this work moves on to analyse survey data in which respondents are asked to consider what a Female Power Fantasy within video games might look like. Respondents overwhelmingly cite their desire for more female video game characters that actively resist and counteract patriarchal practices within the gaming assemblage. This research then examines gaming interviews to identify how women utilise video games to practice identity fluidity – masking, altering, or broadcasting their identities either willingly or unwillingly – and in doing so either resist gendered identity categories, or utilise them to their advantage. Finally, it concludes with a look at ludic violence, asking participants about their violent practices within a medium well-known for its problematic depictions of violence against women and minorities.

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Introduction: A Lifetime of Resistance

As tweens, my best friend and I played a lot of *The Sims* (2000). The uncanny life simulation game sees players act as omnipresent influencers of the lives and destinies of human-like Sims, who players design, house, and direct as they go about their lives in SimNation. Sims can have personal interests, careers, relationships, life goals, and while each Sim possesses a degree of autonomy and will act of their own free will unless otherwise commanded, part of the fun lies in the large amount of control the game offers players over the lives of its inhabitants, something that, as slightly weird 12-year-old girls growing up in the early-00s, my friend and I did not otherwise feel we possessed. My gaming practices were largely console-based growing up – my PC was not powerful enough to run games, and *The Sims* would not see a console release until 2003, this coupled with the fact that my friend had all seven *Sims* expansion packs for the PC version of the game meant we typically played at her house. The Sims we created were largely influenced by our own personal interests – we made Sims based on ourselves, friends, members of bands we liked, characters from media we enjoyed, and with that invariably came conflict. Each Sim's life was at the mercy of our fleeting and ever-changing enthusiasms, marking *The Sims* as not just a game for my friend and I, but an early tool for emergent fanfiction, a way to create stories, explore meaning-making, and feel a sense of agency in one's ludic and life choices.

Memories of my time playing *The Sims* growing up were an early influencer on this research for several reasons, not least because both are fuelled by stubborn attempts to defy expectation and rectify slights. The game acted as an outlet for creativity and a tool for autonomy in an otherwise mundane childhood environment; the research acts as a way to record my frustrations with the gaming assemblage and areas of games academia. In both instances, my own subjective experiences contradict commonly held beliefs about identity categories (specifically, those who identify as women or girls) associated with gaming, and as such, my own formative experiences as a young girl playing video games were, in turn, formative when initially planning this thesis. Early on in my research I latched onto the term *resistance*, and began to interrogate how my own ontological experiences with gaming could be interpreted as resistive, investigate how ~~other~~ women and girls resisted arbitrary categorisation within the gaming assemblage, and question how the very practice of gaming

itself could be utilised as a resistive act. From here, I revisited the pre-teen ludic activities of my best friend and I, and realised that in some ways, even back then, we were resisting what was expected of us.

Much of the writing on the topic of gender and video games through the years – whether academic, journalistic, or fan-created – begins by addressing the perceived disparate ratio of visible men and visible women within the gaming assemblage. "Much empirical research – as well as market research – finds that boys and girls like different things, act in different ways, have differential success at various tasks," write Cassell and Jenkins in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, an early gender and games studies text (1998, p. 6). In the 2016 follow-up *Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat*, editors Kafai, Richard, and Tynes recall that "two decades ago, many people believed that girls and women were not interested in games and computers, though perspectives varied as to why" (2016, p. 1). Some attribute this imbalance to social constructions and cultural pressures that keep many women out; others credit biological differences that keep many women disinterested; the truly ignorant claim women in games are a myth. It has only been in recent years – since the initiation of this research – that I have begun to see more and more academic and journalistic texts that do not take the notion that women have no history in video games as objective fact (Shaw, 2014; Harvey, 2015; Chess, 2017; Ruberg, 2019; Phillips 2020). Until this point, I felt othered, ignored, rendered invisible by what I read. My best friend and I making up stories in *The Sims*; my sister and I arguing over who got to play Sonic in *Sonic the Hedgehog 2* (1992); seeing how far into a PlayStation port of hack-and-slash *Gauntlet* (1985) my childhood neighbours and I could get before losing all our lives; all resisted the commonly touted, self-fulfilling misogynistic statement that 'girls don't game'. Sometimes, simply existing in a space you are told you should not belong is resistive enough, but as I grew older, I remember making myself as visible as possible within such spaces – a perceivable and tangible example of the falsehoods inherent in statements that frustrated me.

Jesper Juul's work on casual gaming highlights how perceptions and perpetuations of the casual/hardcore dichotomy in games fall into gendered categories that class men as true, proper, real gamers and women as low skilled, incorrect, fake fans (as usual, non-binary identities are rendered invisible). In *A Casual Revolution*, Juul argues the cultural importance of casual gaming, as well as interrogates and debunks stereotypes of play:

"when studies were carried out, they showed that more than a third of the players of downloadable casual games played nine two-hour game sessions a week. Effectively, it seemed that casual players were not playing in casual ways at all. This raised a question: do casual players even exist?" (2010, pp. 8-9). Reading Juul's work, I was once again reminded of mine and my friends' adventures in *The Sims*. The game's lack of overarching narrative or scripted conflict, the degree to which it resembles "playing dollhouse" (Gee & Hayes, 2010), and its status as a game that draws in an unusually large proportion of female players (Loguidice & Barton, 2009; Marken, 2009) means *The Sims* is often classed as a 'casual' franchise. Yet my friend and I spent hours designing each Sim and curating perfect homes for them, even before we began controlling their lives and actions. We used cheat codes to alter our gameplay – giving our Sims unlimited currency, or disabling movement restriction on objects, allowing for near-limitless (sometimes game-breaking) furniture placement possibilities. We installed mods to reskin furniture, add in new objects, or bolster the game's somewhat limited character creation settings. Despite *The Sims*' characterisation – often derogatorily – as a casual game, our gameplay was anything but. Gee & Hayes highlight ludic choices around *The Sims* as an example of fan media mixing, commenting that it "has motivated many players to spend less time playing the game (albeit often after hundreds of hours of play) and more time on designing game content," citing examples such as mods, photo album tools, graphic novels, and challenge runs, many of which were created by the franchise's largely-female player base (2010, p. 3). These playstyles not only combat the casual/hardcore female/male dichotomy, but also act as important examples of how non-primary (extra-ludic?) game content can enhance enjoyment, create communities, and bolster interest in ways that are definitely play, but not in the standard, industry-accepted way. As such, they highlight how through differing engagements with the medium, players can resist and alter limiting notions of what play is.

Finally, an early influence on this work was my interest in the topic of violence in games. Despite the ever-diversifying genres within the medium and the popularity of a number of non-violent titles, the association of violence and games (as well as violent games and real-world violence) remains prevalent. As recently as 2019, then-U.S. President Donald Trump blamed video games for the mass shootings that occurred in Dayton, Ohio and El Paso, Texas earlier that year (Griffin, 2019), despite numerous studies that find no link between the medium and mass violence (Markey, Markey, & French, 2015; Zendle, Cairns,

& Kudenko 2017; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2019). As such, it is difficult to ignore the topic. My interests in it more precisely lie in preconceived notions of female play – the stereotype that women are supposedly biologically conflict averse is one of the many explanations for their perceived lack of engagement with the gaming assemblage. Not only are such explanations ignorant of the masses of non-violent video games available, but they are also ignorant of the ludic choices of women and girls. To demonstrate: my friend and I killed a *lot* of Sims. Sometimes by accident – the least competent of Sims can somehow set the kitchen on fire simply by making a bowl of cereal. Sometimes however, it was intentional, and it was brutal. Several Sims drowned when ladders mysteriously disappeared after they hopped in the pool for a swim (a *Sims* classic); one Sim based on a girl from school burned to death after a falling out with my best friend; and a Sim based on my friend's ex-crush was placed in a room with no doors and windows filled only with portraits of sad clowns, until he inevitably died of either sadness or starvation, I do not recall which. *The Sims*, for all its stereotyping as a quaint dollhouse simulator, is also an elaborate torture device, and demonstrably macabre if played in a certain way – which a lot of people do. That player-led violence is so common in a female-dominated, sandbox video game fuelled my interests in modes of play that resist, deviate, or actively alter expectations.

This research is primarily concerned with exploring the ludic activity of women; how they game, what they want from video games, and what they enjoy about the medium. T. L. Taylor writes that "the population of women that does play games is frequently seen as an anomaly rather than taken as a prime informant for understanding how play works," (2008, p. 54) critiquing both the games industry and games academia for sidelining female players as atypical. This research centres the voices of women who game through a heavy focus on a critical analysis of their own ludic experiences, styles, and preferences. Instead of casting female players as "oddities," this research instead considers the abnormalities of the gaming assemblage, and asks how women's ludic styles can and do manipulate, challenge, and resist its hegemonies. By inverting expectations, this research places emphasis on female play and its potential as a bedrock for change within the gaming assemblage. Similarly, it looks at alternate styles of play and ludic desire as resistive to not only practices within the gaming assemblage, but wider culture as a whole. Atypical modes of play can alter interpretations of video game content (Brown & Marklund, 2015), and as such, this

research also investigates the importance of player contexts and subject-positions when engaging in play.

Since beginning this research, a number of impactful texts on the topic of women in games have been published in quick succession, all contributing to the ever-expanding field and working to combat the notion that academic research of women and girls "cannot give us any real insight into the complex vertices of gender and play" (Taylor, 2008, p. 55). As such, my research does not stand alone, but joins a "renaissance of queer, feminist, and critical race scholarship in games studies" (Phillips, 2020). It builds upon ethnographic examinations of the contexts of play by Harvey (2015), Gray (2013), and Chess (2020) in order to examine how gameplay can be used resistively by players. Research by Shaw (2014), Phillips (2020), and Ruberg (2019) has also been crucial in informing this work's interrogation of the nuanced intersections of identity, particularly how engagement with the gaming assemblage can render identity categorisations malleable. In addition, Chess' research into designed identities (2017), Vossen's interrogation of the cultural inaccessibility of the gaming assemblage (2018), and Sarkeesian's highlighting of the industry's use of problematic tropes has influenced the way this research interrogates the connections between player, industry, game, and how each can be utilised to change the other (2013-2017). This work is indebted to the research on women in games published in recent years, and builds upon it to further foreground the experiences, desires, and playstyles of women who game.

In order to better contextualise its findings on the gaming assemblage, this research cites journalistic articles, Youtube videos, thinkpieces, magazines, and blog posts alongside more traditionally academic texts. Thoughtful, intelligent, and insightful critiques of the gaming assemblage are regularly produced outside of academic spaces by participants within the culture itself, offering additional critical perspectives and contextualisation for this research's findings. I selected sources that both support my research, and provide additional insight into my findings that indicate how the results from my relatively small sample size could be indicative of wider trends within the gaming assemblage. By supporting my use of academic texts with examples from the wider games community, I hope to bridge the ideological gap between use of academic and non-academic texts as primary and secondary sources. Often academia can be a slow process – book publications can take years to produce, and the process involved in applying to journals is multifaceted

and time-consuming; in addition, games studies remains a relatively new field, which only recently appears to have developed beyond the ludologist/narratologist civil war that occupied many of its formative years. As such, it can be difficult to find sources on particular contemporary events and discourses in the gaming assemblage – at these times, it is relevant and pertinent to consult and cite from a wider array of sources. Academic texts that provide insightful and thorough findings on the gaming assemblage are, of course valuable resources, but non-academic texts that can provide evidence of public thought on events within the gaming assemblage are key to contextualising research findings. In addition, the ever-growing prevalence of the 'acafan' in academic circles invariably results in an exposure of the researcher to more assemblage-based, extracurricular critical opinions (Jenkins, 2011). As an academic and researcher whose personal interests are very much a part of the gaming assemblage, citing sources from it makes empirical sense due to my own immersion within the culture. It also helps to break down barriers to entry for individuals interested in games studies with no academic background knowledge. Fans are often wary of critiques, analyses, and commentary on their hobbies and lifestyles by those they consider to be in a position of authority, particularly those whose findings they disagree with (Chess & Shaw, 2015). Citing outside of academia begins to bridge the gap between the 'objective' researcher and a 'closed-off' inaccessible assemblage. While I dislike the term 'acafan' – its use seems designed to appeal to cultural gatekeepers who I criticise within this thesis, in similar ways to the 'gamer' identity – it is important to note the continued erosion of walls between fan and academic spaces (Chess & Shaw, 2015). Through my choice to cite from a wide variety of sources, I intend to be mindful of this, and utilise it to aid the illustration of my research findings.

Situating the Researcher

An early plan for this research involved a combination of surveys, interviews, and autoethnographic material. Video games have been a primary interest of mine for my entire life, and I have always considered myself to have a stake in representations of women in video games, women's platforms within the gaming assemblage, and women's treatment within the games industry. As such, this work is of personal importance to me, because it pertains to not only my own academic tastes, but also my personal hobbies and history.

Until recently, it also pertained to my identity, but in a twist of fate, since beginning this research in 2015 I have come to realise that I am not a queer, cisgender woman, but a queer, genderqueer person. As such I now view my past engagement with video games in duality, as both a young girl and a young non-binary person. Still, girlhood had such an impact on my interactions with video games growing up, it remains relevant to me to view my past ludic activity, at times, through a gendered lens. As such, anecdotes such as those used earlier in this chapter remain pertinent, but I prefer to centre the voices, activities, and experiences of those who do identify as female. This research remains qualitative in nature, however an autoethnographic research method was ultimately cast aside in favour of a higher focus on qualitative survey data and ethnographic gaming interviews.

While I may not identify as a woman, my positionality as a genderqueer researcher remains heavily influential on this research. It posits that experiences of play differ based on epistemological positions and cultural biases – as such, the experiences of those who belong to marginalised identity categories will differ to those who represent the status quo. More specifically, this research – through considerations of barriers to play and cultural contexts – suggests that women experience the gaming assemblage differently to men due to their differential treatment within a space that often prioritises masculine subjects, and their varying experiences with patriarchy and hegemony before entering such spaces. This thesis proves the necessity of academic research into gender and games through a focus on empirical evidence that highlights the subjectivity of experiences within the gaming assemblage, thereby working to "break down singular, hegemonic notions of knowledge creation […] and the notion of objective truth" (Leavy & Harris, 2019). While this bears some similarities to feminist standpoint theory, it differs in that it does not take an essentialising stance on the experience of women in games. In this respect, this thesis takes a postmodern approach – it does not suggest a universality to women's experiences with the gaming assemblage because it does not accept a single universal, objective way to be a woman. In this respect is it influenced by the work of Judith Butler (1990) and Kimberle Crenshaw (1991). This research regularly reminds readers that survey respondents' and interviewee's responses are uniquely positional, and while it takes empirical findings as evidence for how women can be treated within the gaming assemblage, it does not attempt to use these findings to speak for all women, to do so would be contrary to postmodern and intersectional feminisms in which I as a genderqueer researcher position myself. As such,

when this thesis refers to a group, it typically uses terms such as 'respondents' or 'interviewees', as well as counters positivist definitions of identity by considering it fluid, malleable, and contextual. Similarly, this thesis avoids prescribing overarching, unconditional definitions of key terms brought up within its pages, so as not to risk overruling or undermining the testimony of its research participants. Examples of how important (but ultimately subjective) terms such as empowerment, power, and violence are approached by this work are explained in more depth in later chapters.

Methodology

To reach the research objectives of identifying resistant practices in the ludic activities of women, this thesis primarily utilises two methodologies – a large-scale survey of female video game players, and a select number of in-depth ethnographic gaming interviews with volunteers from the survey. The decision to use multiple methodologies was twofold: while the subject of this research and its conception from my own lived experiences makes it personally impactful, I was keen to gather testimony from as numerous and diverse a group as possible in order to ensure my awareness of experiences from women with different ontological backgrounds to my own. In addition, the survey acted as an opportunity to guide my early research objectives. Gobo and Molle write that "in the majority of cases, the research topic is constructed during the research" (2017, p. 99), this is somewhat true for this thesis, and intentionally so. The survey responses influenced later gaming interviews, which went on to influence chapter titles and topics.

The survey consists of six questions, deliberately broad and far-reaching to allow respondents to express themselves and to better elicit unexpected and nuanced responses. The first three questions ask respondents about their views of representation within the medium of video games and the wider gaming assemblage; while questions four, five, and six more specifically allow respondents space to give examples from their own gameplay, allowing insight into how respondents play, and the kind of stories they craft/experiences they have when they do. From here came an important change: an early draft of this research project intended to focus on interrogations of how female video game players engage with and enact violence in games, however, the survey responses drew attention to the huge variances in respondent's ludic activity, which, while not always violent, often

contained a palpable sense of defiance. From there, the project opened up to focus more on acts of resistance within the gaming assemblage, rather than solely on acts of in-game violence.

The survey was distributed in-person at two events – the Eurogamer Expo (EGX) held on 23rd September 2016 at the NEC in Birmingham, UK, and a gaming and media social held at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, UK in late 2016. It was also distributed online, circulated mostly via Twitter and Facebook, for a period of three weeks between the dates of 7th and 28th November 2016. In total, the survey received 359 responses and two troll responses, which were excluded from the analysis due to their hostility towards the researcher/the research itself. The survey was completely qualitative and customisable, and respondents were made aware that every question was optional. Each one featured a large text box for respondents to write as much or as little as they liked. Even the more quantifiable categories –gender, race, age, sexuality, and nationality – were accompanied by freeform text boxes in the online survey rather than drop-down boxes or tick boxes. This allowed respondents the freedom to self-identify, and the comfort to provide as much or as little information as they wanted.

From here, qualitative research analysis software Nvivo was used to organise the 359 survey responses. Nvivo allowed me to sort responses into various categories (nodes), and while it was time-consuming as each entry had to be manually sorted, it made later analysis far simpler by enabling the creation of groupings of responses with synonymic qualities, as well as the ability to categorise single responses under multiple nodes. For example, one response to the question asking respondents for characteristics they associate with strong female representation in video games could fit into the node for 'independence' but also 'strong' or 'intelligent', due to the multifaceted responses that the open questions induced. Similarly, one person may describe their ideal Female Power Fantasy as 'independent', whereas another might say 'not reliant on anyone else' or 'has free will'; Nvivo allowed for these similar descriptors to be grouped together for analysis.

While the survey data acted as an early influence on the form this research would ultimately take, it was important to me that I was able to build upon the findings of the survey with more in-depth, ethnographic analysis. As such, I elected to recruit interviewees from a pool of survey respondents who volunteered their contact information, and asked them to participate in a further study that consisted of part-interview, part-gameplay

analysis. Survey respondents were contacted based on a combination of their responses – if they contributed answers that I found interesting and wanted to explore further, for example – and on their submitted demographical information. Initially, I wanted to take the opportunity to talk to women whose experiences based on gender, race, class, and nationality differ from my own to explore a wider range of ontologies. I also reached out to respondents whose approaches to the gaming assemblage differ from my own – for example, two individuals were contacted for interviews because I was curious about how their job roles as both a prominent Youtuber and a developer at an indie games studio impact their ludic perspectives. Beyond this, I also reached out to survey respondents whose answers were particularly passionate, evocative, or funny; for example, one survey respondent was contacted because of the enthusiastic worldbuilding they demonstrated around their *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) character, Orcberry, who "would run headlong into danger without a second thought, looted gravesites because she had no regard for the dead, and killed anyone who got in her way," but also "had this odd obsession of collecting every cabbage she could find to turn her bedroom into a cabbage ball pit."

Through a combination of the above criteria, sixteen survey respondents were initially contacted, with four eventually selected to interview. Upon completion of two gaming interviews with each interviewee, I deduced that I had an abundance of data and decided to cease pursuing additional interviewees. The purpose of the interviews was to delve deeper into survey responses, ask individuals further questions about their experiences of common themes identified from the survey data, and gather opinions from people with different intersectional identities to my own. As such, the relatively low number of interviewees did not matter, as there was never an intent to represent the findings as indicative of all of one particular identity group.

The interview technique utilised is an adaptation of the gaming interview methodology used by Gareth Schott and Kirsty Horrell (2000), and later by Adrienne Shaw (2014) and Alison Harvey (2015) in their own investigations into gaming spaces and gender. In gaming interviews, the researcher interviews participants while accompanied by observations of their gameplay practices. The methodology's intention is to "facilitate a more 'play like' atmosphere and generate questions about female playing experiences as they occur" (Schott & Horrell, 2000, p. 39). By interviewing participants while they play, the interviewer is able to build rapport with participants, as well as witness their ludic activities

first-hand and generate spontaneous questions as a result of their observations. "In the tradition of ethnographic research, the interviews were closer in character to conversations," albeit with a structure and a clear objective (ibid).

The four interviewees for this thesis were interviewed twice over the space of multiple months between November 2017 and April 2018. The gaming interviews utilised in this research differ from those conducted by Schott and Horrell, Shaw, and Harvey in that interviews took place after, rather than during, a gaming session. Participants were asked to play at least thirty minutes of a video game of their choice, record the gameplay footage, and send it to the researcher who, upon reviewing the footage, would write down thoughts, observations, and questions, before interviewing participants over Skype. Due to the geographical location of the participants – three of whom were American – and the researcher – based in the UK – this research was conducted entirely online. Three participants used video capture software on their PCs and uploaded footage to Youtube or Google Drive; one participant captured footage using built-in features on the Xbox One console and uploaded them to Twitter. Out of the eight pieces of gameplay footage provided, seven were accompanied by audio commentary from the participant, who would vocalise their reasoning for the in-game choices they were making, or express their opinions about goings on in the game.

The art of recording gameplay footage and releasing it online to the public is not a new or niche hobby, players have been doing so since at least the mid-to-late 2000s, when 'Let's Plays' first rose to prominence on the comedy forum Something Awful. These often took the form of screenshots of gameplay accompanied by written commentary, until Michael 'slowbeef' Sawyer began a Let's Play of *The Immortal* (1990) in 2007. "I always tried to add some little extra thing to the Let's Plays that I did," he comments in an interview with Kotaku. In this case, the 'little extra' was one of the earliest examples of the gaming content that dominates contemporary platforms such as Youtube and Twitch – a short video recording of gameplay footage accompanied with an audio commentary. "I called it Player's Commentary, like a DVD—like a director's commentary type thing," he says (Klepek, 2015). The popularity of the format snowballed, and nowadays gaming videos and livestreams are so popular that many players have successfully turned gaming content creation into a full-time job. Platforms such as Twitch, Youtube, and Facebook Gaming provide creators with an online space to upload video content and stream live, each of which come equipped with in-

built monetisation options so that content creators can financially support themselves through fan donations and ad revenue. As an example, *Fortnite* (2017) streamer Ninja has over 16.8 million followers on Twitch – the most on the platform – and has an estimated net worth of $25 million USD (Fitch, 2021). Pokimane, the highest-earning female Twitch streamer, has over 7.5 million followers and earned over $550 thousand USD in 2020, with an estimated net worth of over $2 million USD (Fitch, 2021). For perspective, I – a part-time Twitch streamer with over 800 followers – earn roughly £100 GBP on the platform monthly.

With this context in mind, the differences between the methodological strategy utilised in this research and those used previously by other academic analyses of gender and video games becomes clearer. In asking participants to record their gameplay footage for analysis, this research asked participants to create a text, something identical to the content that thousands of players upload to online platforms such as Twitch and Youtube daily. In this sense it differs from the gaming interview methodology – in which both interview and gaming occur simultaneously – and ethnographic study – in which the researcher "gives priority to the observation of actions performed in concrete settings as its primary source of information" (Gobo & Molle, 2017, p. 7) – and instead shares elements with a more traditional textual analysis. That being said, an important difference is that in many textual analysis examples, texts precede research – that is, research often spawns from questions generated by a text – but here, the research question necessitates and subsequently creates the texts that it then analyses. In this way, the texts are somewhat complex, and within this research they are first summarised alongside research arguments to highlight the nuances of each participant's ludic style, and then analysed alongside quotes from subsequent interviews for contextualisation.

This research embraces the oddities of its methodological choices by seeing the gameplay footage that interviewees created and submitted as both a text to be analysed, and as a space to be studied ethnographically. Much of contemporary research into women and video games is concerned with the politics of space; one of the primary focuses of this research involves investigating how women resist gendered hierarchies in gaming spaces. Alison Harvey's work on gaming in the domestic sphere highlights how even young girls with supposedly unrestricted access to ludic technologies in familial spaces are pressured and othered by the subtle gender binaries of the contemporary neoliberal household (2015). Emma Vossen's research into gaming circles draws attention to the concept of cultural

inaccessibility – the invisible barriers to play for women who wish to participate in gaming spaces (2018). Even though in recording their gameplay footage – often with accompanying audio commentary – participants in this research created a text that can be analysed as such, they also gave the researcher insight into the space where they game, the spaces they frequent within the gaming assemblage, and the space they take up within it.

Each participant engaged with the research question differently – one chose to highlight their competitive playstyle, one played two story-heavy action-adventure games, and two framed their gameplay through their storytelling and world-building interests. The vast differences in games played by interviewees (a first-person shooter; a stealth-based action-adventure game; a psychological horror action-adventure game; an open-world roleplaying game; and a life simulator) is a testament to the research outline, as it suggests that interviewees did not feel pressured to perform their gameplay or identities in certain ways to fit a brief. Instead, they engaged with their chosen texts comfortably (with one exception – see below), allowing insight into their identification with the games they played in a space that suited them. Issues of space remain a key cornerstone to this research, which is foregrounded methodologically and analytically throughout.

Differentiating the gaming interviews utilised in this research from those used before has advantages and disadvantages. The interviews that Schott and Horrell conducted were likely less structured, contained more impromptu questions, and were more conversation-like than a typical research interview because of the interviews and gaming occurring simultaneously. Arguably, this can help the researcher better develop rapport with the research participants, however, the spontaneity lost in conducting the interview after reviewing the participants' gameplay footage is not necessarily a bad thing. Allowing the participant to have full control over their in-game actions without being unconsciously influenced by either the knowledge that a stranger is watching them, or by questions posed to them that ask them to explain and justify in-game actions, produces a more authentic representation of the participants' ludic activities. While this research believes that a truly objective interview is impossible – as Ann Oakley states, "the goal of perfection is actually unattainable. […] The pretence of neutrality on the interviewer's part is counterproductive: participation demands alignment" (1981, p. 51) – one of its primary concerns was with the comfort of its interviewees, and how interviewees altered their in-game choices based on how comfortable they were with the thought of being observed and, possibly, judged.

Adrienne Shaw notes in *Gaming at the Edge* that as her researched progressed, she became aware of how her presence in the private spaces of her research participants could be altering her findings – "as I watched interviewees play, I knew that I was changing the experience of playing the game, because most people are not used to having a stranger watch them play, outside of [professional gaming]" (2004, p. 51). As such, I chose to separate the gaming session and interview in this research as a conscious attempt to mitigate these concerns and help participants feel more comfortable. It also allowed participants more control over how they were represented – while a traditional gaming interview may capture more spontaneous moments, offering participants the chance to produce a text gave them the opportunity to submit footage more akin to how they wanted to be perceived. Simple editing software available on most PCs and mobile devices could easily splice footage and delete/re-record audio commentary to ensure participants liked what they ultimately produced. In a gaming assemblage often so keen on speaking for or over women, it was very important to me as a feminist researcher to ensure that the voices, experiences, and interests of my interviewees were centralised within this methodology. Pre-recorded gameplay in which they decided what to play, focus on, and discuss without outside influences was thus deemed more appropriate than traditional gaming interviews during which gameplay activity may be more impulsive, but perhaps less authentic to how interviewees wanted their participation in the gaming assemblage to be perceived.

This decision appeared largely successful; three of the interviewees expressed no visible discomfort with the knowledge that their gameplay would be observed afterwards by the researcher – a stranger who they had only spoken to by email correspondence – and each chatted to me in their audio commentary, sometimes as if I were in the room with them. One in particular – a part-time streamer – seemed especially at-ease, referring to me by name repeatedly throughout the interview, demonstrating her experience with having gameplay observed by strangers. However, another participant noted in her first of two follow-up interviews that "I think I was aware that it was being watched, so I felt a little bit, like, perhaps that's not normally how I would play." This participant felt uncomfortable even without having someone watching them play live; it is also not a coincidence that this was the only gameplay footage submitted to not feature an audio commentary by the interviewee. It is worth noting, however, that the second gameplay recording that the interviewee submitted was, according to them in their second interview, a more 'authentic'

example of how they typically play their chosen game, indicating that their discomfort was mitigated somewhat by the researcher in the first interview, which took place between gaming sessions.

The gameplay provided by interviewees was observed and followed up with one-on-one interviews with the researcher. These interviews were important for contextualising the gameplay footage they had made, because while most participants accompanied their videos with audio commentary, the interviews provided the opportunity for them to clarify and delve further into the reasoning behind their ludic choices. The gameplay footage, as stated above, is both an ethnographic piece of work but also a text created by the research and the participants, and so the interview helped avoid simply analysing it in isolation as a text. Interview questions were based off the footage provided and the interviewee's responses to the preceding survey. Given that one of the overarching goals of this research is to amplify the voices and experiences of women who play video games, it was important to me that the interviews adhered to a feminist methodological framework. A long-standing feminist critique of academic research is that methodologies tend to treat participants more as numbers than as people – something that jars with many of the goals of feminist academia. In this respect, Ann Oakley's work on interviewing women was of importance (1981, 2016). It was important to me that the participants felt comfortable with me, I approached each interview as a conversation rather than as an attempt to extract data. Like Oakley, I was also open to answering questions that interviewees asked me. This ended up producing more interesting data than the typical advice that Oakley's articles critique due to their promotion of 'objective' distance between the researcher and participant. Interestingly, perhaps the most closed-off participant was one with whom I am friends; the other three participants were much more eager to offer insight into their gaming tendencies, but also their real-life situations, and, importantly, how one fed into the other. Questions were long and broad, I generally stayed quiet until the participant had finished the point they were making, at which point I would either move on to a further question, press for more information, or offer some insight of my own into the conversation.

Respondents & Interviewees

Each survey respondent was asked to accompany their answers with their age, gender, sexuality, race, and nationality. Respondents could self-identify and fill in the boxes or leave blank whichever they wished; as such the combined demographical data of the full pool of survey respondents may be slightly inaccurate, or not fully add up to the total 359 responses received. However, in this instance, respondents' comfort and ability to self-identify was prioritised over researcher ease of analysis as this seemed the best way to ensure the autonomy and agency of respondents was not overlooked. The nature of the survey distribution technique – partially in-person at two UK gaming events, and partially on Twitter – resulted in some demographics being more heavily represented than others. The demographical breakdowns are as follows:

Age is an example of results skewing more heavily in one direction. For example, the youngest survey respondent was 16 years old at the time they completed the survey, while the oldest was 62 years old, but overall, most survey respondents identified themselves as between the ages of 25-29 (127). When looking at solely online responses received through Twitter, the amount of survey respondents in the 20-24 and 30-34 age categories was roughly equal; however, when also taking into account respondents who filled in paper surveys in-person, the 20-24 age category swelled. This is most likely because one of the places I solicited responses was in a university environment, and as such, had a populace that skewed younger. Of the survey respondents, 18 were between the ages of 15-19; 81 were between the ages of 20-24; 127 were between the ages of 25-29; 68 were between the ages of 30-34; 31 were between the ages of 35-39; 15 were between the ages of 40-44; three between the ages of 45-49; seven between the ages of 50-54; one between the ages of 55-59; one above 60 years old; and seven were unspecified.

Multiracial Survey Respondents	
White and Native American	6
Unspecified	6
White and Asian	5
White and Hispanic	3
Multiracial Black	2
Lebanese and Other	1
Hispanic and Lebanese	1
Black and White	1
Asian and Hispanic	1

Respondents' answers when asked to disclose their racial identity reveal that most respondents identified as white. 240 respondents (67%) identified as white, while 46 (13%)

identified as Caucasian. In total, 26 (7%) identified as multiracial. 14 respondents (4%) did not disclose their racial identity. Seven (2%) identified as Latina, six (2%) identified as Black, five identified as Chinese, three as Asian-American, three as Anglo-Saxon/Anglo-Celtic, two as Indian, two as Asian, one as an Arab, one as white Jewish, one as a Pacific Islander, one as South Asian, and one as a white New Zealander. The survey for this research was distributed in person at EGX 2016 and on campus at a gaming event at the University of East Anglia, as well as retweeted 162 times on Twitter. These results, however, show that the survey was not efficiently distributed as it did not reach the social circles of women of colour. This is disappointing as the experiences of women of colour within the gaming assemblage is affected by the dual hegemonies of racism and misogyny that I, as a white person, have only witnessed second-hand. Without testimony from women of colour, this research lacks voices from a number of unique subject-positions whose experience of the gaming assemblage differs largely from my own. While respondents of colour were contacted for follow-up interviews in order to better platform and interrogate those experiences (three of the four interviewees identified as people of colour), the survey's lack of representation when it comes to gamers of colour must be remembered when the responses are being analysed.

With regards to sexuality, it appears the survey was far better circulated in queer gaming circles than it was to people of colour. In total 137 respondents identified as heterosexual and 12 identified as 'mostly heterosexual' or 'heteroflexible'. 27 did not specify their sexuality and five were uncertain about their sexual identity. The remaining 178 respondents identified as a mix of queer sexualities, including bisexual (92); pansexual (25); lesbian (25); queer (9); asexual (9); grey asexual (1); sapiosexual (1); demisexual (1); polysexual (1); and biromantic (1); as well as some who identified as multiple sexualities (12).

The survey also reached a number of different countries, with individuals identifying themselves as one of 35 nationalities within the responses. However, nearly half of respondents (171) were from the United States, roughly a quarter (94) were from Britain, so the survey results likely represent a heavily westernised perspective on the gaming assemblage. The additional nationalities represented were Australian (18); Canadian (15); Unspecified (11); German (7); New Zealander (3); Irish (3); Multi-National (3); Dutch (2); Norwegian (2); Portuguese (2); Dual Nationality – British-American (2); Finnish (2); Dual

Nationality – Brazilian-American (2); Mexican (2); Italian (1); Venezuelan (1); Swedish (1); French (1); Dual Nationality – British-Canadian (1); Polish (1); European (1); Singaporean (1); Romanian (1); Serbian (1); Dual Nationality – German-Australian (1); Austrian (1); Jewish (1); Spanish (1); Dual Nationality – British-Australian (1); Belgian (1); Chinese (1); Dual Nationality – British-Irish (1); Czech (1); and Pakistani (1).

While this research at no point implies that its findings are indicative of the experiences, desires, and interests of all women, upon reflection I wish I had redistributed this survey a second time, with a focus on attempting to reach more diverse audiences. In particular, the experiences of women of colour, transgender women, older women, and women from the global south would have been valuable as they are currently underrepresented within these survey demographics.

Four respondents (of sixteen originally contacted) were asked to participate in further gaming interviews to expand upon the survey's findings. Information on them is listed here to provide an overview of their gaming interviews, but will be further analysed in later chapters. Interviewee #1, Jane, identified themselves as a 29-year-old, cis-female, bisexual, white/Hispanic, American. They played *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) for both gaming interviews and spoke at length about the links between their ludic interests/activities and their involvement in local politics. In their survey they said "I have to be a law abiding, polite, functional citizen every day. I can't just go up and punch the jerks legislating against my rights as a citizen or denigrating others. I have to go the route of legal activism and civil disobedience, but smashing digital skulls to save the day is very satisfying."

Interviewee #2, Georgia, identified themselves as a 29-year-old, female, heterosexual, Hispanic, Mexican living in the United States. They played *Overwatch* (2016) for both gaming interviews, and strongly identified with the damage-based hacker character, Sombra, "I find her a perfect example of my power fantasy. Mexican, incredibly intelligent, ambitious, focused, not easily intimated, a sense of humour, and more importantly, she's a bit self-serving." In their interviews, they discussed their work as a Twitch streamer and their involvement with the EA (Electronic Arts) Game Changer program, as well as how gaming acted as a formative experience for them growing up.

Interviewee #3, Opal, identified themselves as a 24-year-old, female, heterosexual, black/mixed, American Muslim. They played *Alice: Madness Returns* (2011) for their first gaming interview and *Dishonoured 2* (2016) for their second. In their interviews, they

discussed their academic qualifications in Psychology, and how much they enjoyed viewing video game narratives through a psychologically analytical lens: "a few years ago I had a great time writing an essay about [*Alice: Madness Returns*] in comparison to Freud's case-study of Dora, there were lots of cool comparisons between the two, so it's very psychoanalytic in nature." They also discussed their experiences of the gaming assemblage as a Muslim player.

Interviewee #4, Rachel, identified themselves as a 27-year-old, bisexual, white, British woman, and is an acquaintance of the researcher who initially participating in the testing phase of survey distribution. They played *The Sims 4* (2014) for both gaming interviews. Rachel is a computer scientist and a board game developer, and considers their experience with the *Sims* franchise as formative to their interests in game development: "I remember there were mods – or rather, tools – made for *The Sims 1* where you could see the properties of objects and change them around, and I think that was probably some of the earliest exposure I had to some of the stuff underneath what you see in games."

Ethics

Survey respondents were given a thesis abstract before being asked to participate. They were told that the purpose of the survey was threefold: to collect data on characteristics associated with a Female Power Fantasy; to identify female gamers' use of and responses to in-game violence; and to recruit participants for a future focus group (this later became gaming interviews). Surveys were also accompanied by a consent notice that informed participants that all questions were optional, and that promised anonymised answers for their comfort and safety. Similarly, interviewees were promised anonymity, and provided with a consent form that went into further detail of researcher motivations, as well as summarised a few early findings from the survey data. Interviewees were informed that "the primary goal of this focus group is to uncover the potential for empowerment, transgression, and/or gender binary troubling in women's engagement with the medium of video games." This was not considered problematically over-informative – it was important to me to attempt to remove hierarchies of data retrieval emblematic to so-called 'objective' methodologies, and in being as open and reciprocal with interviewees as possible, I hoped to build rapport and make the interview process more collaborative. In doing so, I align

myself with efforts to make ethnographic research methods more demonstrably feminist. I also intend for my deliberate prioritisation of collaborative female voices in this thesis to be a statement of active resistance against the practices of a gaming assemblage that traditionally divides and silences dissenters.

Assemblage

In T.L. Taylor's work on becoming a player, she writes that "play should be thought of as an assemblage in which content is only one component in dialogue with everything from very local social context to marketing, technical competency, and even broader understandings about the role of entertainment devices in our lives" (2008, p. 58). The complex and intertwined nature of video games fandom, the games industry, games journalism, game development and other modes of involvement with the medium necessitates that they be examined relationally due to the degree of overlap between various aspects of participation within gaming communities. Independent game developers often begin as fans using increasingly-accessible development software; games companies regularly work with content creators as official cosplayers (such as at promotional events), sponsors (on platforms such as Twitch or Youtube), or through partnership programs (such as EA's Game Changers); and often games journalists have been employed by the industry itself (through officially licensed magazine publications, such as *Official PlayStation Magazine* (1995-2021), *Official Xbox Magazine* (2001-2020), and *Official Nintendo Magazine* (2006-2014)). This research uses the term assemblage, as developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1980) to link each overlapping section of the video games industry, community, fandom, and suchlike for analysis. In doing so it highlights the entrenched nature of practices within the gaming assemblage, and how the influence of one area invariably shapes and changes others. "Assemblages emerge from the interactions between their parts, but once an assemblage is in place it immediately starts acting as a source of limitations and opportunities for its components," writes DeLanda (2016, p. 21). In this way, considering the gaming assemblage as an entity constructed from various components with individual motives but a collective set of norms, regulations, and memory allows this research to better examine modes of control and resistance within gaming spaces and ludic encounters.

Chapters

This thesis is split into four chapters, bookended by an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter tackles pertinent findings from both the survey responses and follow-up gaming interviews, with a critical focus on women and resistance in the gaming assemblage. With this in mind, Chapter One acts as a contextualising literature review – providing evidence of the barriers to play that women and girls face within the gaming assemblage. It cites academic, journalistic, and industry sources to highlight the long-standing "cultural inaccessibility" of many gaming spaces (Vossen, 2018). It begins by identifying the gamer as an archetype, outlining how industry practices and assumptions have cemented it as an inherently "white, cis, heterosexual, young, abled, and middle-class male" identity (Chess, 2017, p. 7), and how gatekeeping works to keep it that way. It delves into the misogynistic inception of the archetype, and highlights how its history directly involves the ostracising of women from STEM industries in the 1960s, and exclusionary post-crash games industry marketing tactics from the mid-1980s onwards. The chapter moves on to examine contemporary gaming practices, and highlights how the very act of play itself is gendered, with modes of female play often traditionally cast as frivolous, vapid, and wasteful. Further, it explores the problematic 'girl games' genre of video games, and highlights how in attempting to 'make space' for women and girls in the gaming assemblage, developers only succeed in further ostracization and undermining of women's ludic practices. It then moves on to discuss the treatment of visible women in the gaming assemblage, highlighting the impact of harassment, bullying, and hate movements like Gamergate on female video game players. The goal of this chapter is to contextualise female ludic engagement with the gaming assemblage against the many barriers to play that they face – an important factor in highlighting resistance in games and gamer culture is to first indicate *who* and *what* the participants in this research are resisting.

Chapter Two engages with findings of the survey distributed for this research. Through an audience study, it works to identify representational issues within video games by asking survey respondents to consider the common Male Power Fantasy trope, before identifying traits they would associate with a Female Power Fantasy. In doing so, this chapter centralises respondents' critiques of current representations of women within the gaming assemblage, while also offering space for respondents to suggest resolutions. It

ultimately identifies five clusters of traits that correlate across a large number of survey responses, and focuses on each of them in turn to highlight what a Female Power Fantasy in a video game might look like. In doing so, it also unearths feelings of dissatisfaction, frustration, and resentment from respondents about the treatment of representations of women in video games, ultimately discovering that the ideal Female Power Fantasy would resist and/or overcome patriarchal, hegemonic tropes within the industry that often class women as peripheral characters in a male-led story. It concludes that a truly empowering Female Power Fantasy works to dismantle patriarchal structures both within video games, and the wider gaming assemblage through their influence as a representational tool.

One of the key findings of Chapter Two is that audiences identify more with the affective qualities of a video game character rather than how much their identities overlap. Chapter Three builds upon these findings and widens the scope out to consider identity within the wider gaming assemblage. By utilising Adrienne Shaw's work on identity vs identification (2014), Chapter Three argues that women's actions within the gaming assemblage render their identity malleable through processes of willing or unwilling politicisation. Depending on how they react to hostilities within gaming spaces, women either become invisible or hyper-visible, and are able to explore facets of identity and identification through the identities that are either unwillingly forced upon them by members of the gaming assemblage, or that they willingly encapsulate based upon the way they choose to present themselves in a traditionally patriarchal space. Women either practice avoidance/self-invisibling; what I call 'lean-in' gaming engagement; or fully reject tropes through hyper-visibility. In this way, women resist categorisation by navigating the gaming assemblage in ways that work for them. This chapter partially utilises examples from the gaming interviews with Jane, Rachel, Opal, and Georgia to underpin its findings, while also drawing in examples from the wider gaming assemblage to illustrate its points.

Chapter Four examines the topic of women's engagement with in-game violence. Several survey questions asked respondents their opinions and experiences with violent video game content, with the purpose of ultimately interrogating and challenging the traditional notion that 'women do not play violent games'. The chapter finds that violence is a common practice in women's ludic activity, and uses survey respondent testimony to examine the nuances involved in their violent video game play. It finds that while respondents largely have positive or accepting attitudes towards violence in games, there

are caveats and complexities to their engagement that impacts their utilisation and enjoyment of such mechanics. As with respondent's other interactions with both the medium of video games and the wider gaming assemblage, contexts and agency are key to their navigation of such content, with heroism, choice, and resistive acts prioritised in responses. The chapter contextualises the survey's findings against a brief analysis of video games as products of a systemically violent industry, replete with misogyny, racism, and poor labour practices in an attempt to reconcile the potential contradictions of performing violent resistance in an assemblage heavily impacted by systemic violences. While it ultimately cautiously concludes that violent acts performed in a traditionally conservative medium can potentially be resistive, it does so while centralising and re-emphasising Shira Chess's call for more "playful (and play-filled!) feminisms" (2020, p. 66).

The thesis then ends with a summary of its findings, a critical look at the key successes and shortcomings of the research, as well as a reflection upon the implications it has upon future research in the field of gender and games studies.

Chapter One: Barriers to Play – A Contextualising Literature Review

Before analysing the ludic activities of female video game players, it is important to understand the contexts within which they game. The history of women's representation within video games as a medium, the treatment of women as participants and consumers within the video games industry and community, and the way women's ludic activities are treated in general society are all key factors that impact women's participation and contributions to the gaming assemblage. This is largely because, while it is common knowledge that women have always played video games in large numbers – approaching an even distribution with male game players, according to some studies (The ESA, 2020) – and in spite of a multitude of academic research and a rise in fan and content creator visibility that proves the contrary (Gee & Hayes, 2010; Juul, 2010; Anthropy 2012; Gray, 2014; Shaw, 2014; Chess, 2017; Gray, Voorhees, & Vossen, 2018; Ruberg, 2019; Phillips, 2020), the imagined 'true gamer' remains "a white, middle-class, heterosexual, technologically competent, socially isolated, and violence-oriented masculine subject" (Harvey, 2014, p. 30). As such, pressures are often forced upon women who do participate in the gaming assemblage – and particularly upon those who fall into socially marginalised groups such as women of colour, working class women, queer women, and disabled women – in the forms of both inadvertent and intentional prejudices, microaggressions, and gatekeeping. What this means is that, while women and girls play video games for just as varied an amount of reasons as men and boys play video games, they do so in a space that has been historically and consistently coded as *not for them*, and that time and again has cast their presence within that space as alien.

Even as contemporary video games slowly diversify, and gaming spaces are shown to not be as homogenous as historically presumed (Gray, 2014; Ruberg, 2019), so too, has resistance manifested; Salter and Blodgett write that "this process of recuperation has inevitably spawned resistance, which is particularly found in the drawing of stricter boundaries around geek identity and geek-coded spaces to keep outsiders out" (2017, p. 11). These resistances manifest in a variety of ways, from misogynistic bullying and sexual

harassment at a local, player-to-player level, to the poor representation of women, the perpetuation of limiting tropes, and the reluctance to hire (or active attempts to disenfranchise) female employees at a systemic level. Individually, these examples at worst explicitly attempt to exclude women, and at best work to enhance the experience of male players *at the expense* of women; combined, however, these examples provide insight into the multiple barriers to play that women and girls must navigate if they want to engage with video games as a medium.

With the above in mind, this chapter acts as part literature review, part contextualisation, and works to unpack the backdrop against which women and girls today play video games by examining the many barriers that come with being a female game player in a space historically known as being "for the enactment and performance of hegemonic masculinities" (Harvey, 2015, p. 14). The chapter is split into multiple sections, but each of them broadly relate to three areas of study: how women are treated in video games, how women are treated in the video games community, and how women are treated in culture and society as a whole. This latter point is particularly important; video games, as any other medium, are influenced by the settings within which they are created, distributed, and played, and as Adrienne Shaw writes, "treating gaming as an isolated realm makes [its] misogyny a spectacle at the same time it normalises the oppressive behaviour within mainstream gamer cultures" (2014, p. 2). In addition, classifying video games as intrinsically, extraordinarily misogynistic risks exonerating the culture within which those games are produced and consumed from blame.

While the focus of this chapter is to contextualise contemporary female video game play by highlighting the ways in which video games as a medium, community, and industry have historically devalued and ostracised women, it is important to remember that innumerable amounts of women and girls have always played, made, modded, reviewed, and created fan content of video games (Ensmenger, 2010; Gee & Hayes, 2010; Lien, 2013; Ruberg, 2019). While the barriers to play detailed here can make gaming difficult for women – from having limited access to ludic technology, to actively being made to feel unsafe while playing – they continue to play, regardless (The ESA, 2020; Harper, 2020). Some may be unaware of the fences set up seemingly to keep them out, others may proceed in spite of them. By highlighting these fences, this chapter aims not to imply that women who game are trespassing in a 'male' realm, but to contextualise the ludic engagement of women who

find escapism, fantasies of power, and ludic pleasures in a gaming assemblage that has historically catered to male fans *at the expense* of female fans. By identifying these barriers to play and highlighting women in games not in isolation, but as part of a larger medium and culture, this study can better understand its key focuses; namely: the role that video games play in the resistive practices of female video game players.

The Contemporary Gamer

Contemporary consumer culture has spawned multiple social identities bound to hobbies, interests, and consumption habits in recent years; fans of movies, music, anime, sports, and suchlike must all navigate social identities constructed around their activities, and the gamer is one of the most pervasive and enduring of all of these contemporary identities. While a person who plays video games regularly may not actively identify as a gamer – and in fact, many fans of video games in recent years have actively rejected identifying as such (Shaw, 2011; Alexander, 2014; Golding, 2014; Harvey, 2015) – the gamer as a social identity and stereotype has played and continues to play a pivotal role in shaping video games as a medium, industry, and community, for better or worse.

The truth is that issues of identity have long troubled the gaming assemblage, with perceptions of video game players often differing from the actual lived experience of many within it. Some self-identifying gamers consider their hobby niche, misunderstood, and marginalised, even as reports suggest 65% of American adults play video games, 75% of American households contain at least one video game fan, and video games sales topped $43.4 billion in 2018 (The ESA, 2019). Certain aspects of the gamer identity have changed over the years – for example, as video games have shifted from a fringe to mainstream hobby, so too has the gamer been recast from a socially maladjusted individual to a trendsetter – yet overall, the archetypal gamer remains overwhelmingly straight, white, cisgender, and male. Jesper Juul considers this to be based on "that small historical anomaly of the 1980s and 1990s when video games were played by only a small part of the population" (2010, p. 20), if, indeed, that is accurate at all. This research and plenty of other academic works and anecdotal evidence before it clearly shows that just because those of a differing identity to the commonly-assumed norm are othered and marginalised within the

community, does not mean they are newcomers to it (Juul, 2010; Anthropy, 2012; Ruberg, 2019).

In spite of this inaccuracy, the cultural construction of the 'gamer' identity is heavily policed by some who use it, who consider the label to "represent much more than a simple title one adopts to easily identify oneself as a person who enjoys playing video games" (Kowert, 2014). Social identities built upon cultural consumption are both subjective and open to interpretation; anyone can identify as a gamer regardless of how often they play video games, how much time and money they spend on video games, or how good they are at video games, and of course, regardless of their personal identity. However, to some, to be a gamer is a core aspect of how they self-identify, indistinct from other common identity markers such as gender, race, or sexuality. The importance that some place upon 'gamer' as an identifier, along with the cultural and societal insistence that the identity is most prominent among those with certain normatively gendered, racial, and sexual signifiers, has populated the belief that these identities are thus inherently, exclusively, intersectionally intertwined. In spite of this, these intersections are rarely pointed out by those who fit the criteria, "the construction of geek masculinity has often gone as unremarked as female geek identity has been policed and delineated," write Salter and Blodgett (2017, p. 11). In fact, when it comes to the gamer identity, often both the naming of normative identities and the existence of othered ones associated with it is seen as an attack; indeed, the "geek identity is a battleground, its territories demarcated by borders both real and rhetorical" (ibid).

Evidence of this 'identity battleground' can be seen throughout the gaming assemblage; however, even without intricate knowledge of the video games community, gendered lines are plainly visible throughout the video games industry and video games as a medium themselves. Since the early 1980s, video games have been consistently marketed under the assumption that the heterosexual masculine gamer identity is inextricable fact; male bodies and minds are hypermasculinised to be physically fit and/or mentally hyperintelligent and logical, while female bodies are often used as sexual tools marketed, kidnapped, killed, or otherwise utilised as necessary to motivate the presumed-male player into action (Sarkeesian, 2013). It is worth noting here that until very recently, queer and gender non-conforming bodies have historically been rendered largely invisible when they are not actively vilified or cast as sexually deviant foils, and remain underrepresented within the medium. "Hypermasculine underpinning within the media positions women into

background roles in a man's heroic quest," write Salter and Blodgett. "They exist to admire and define the degree of the main hero's masculinity and act as the reward for the hero's actions, either as a damsel to be rescued or simply an admiring audience for the hero's actions" (2017, p. 26).

Women have historically rarely been considered a target audience for the mainstream gaming market, and as such, are regularly expected to identify with characters of differing identities to their own. Chapter Two details the finding of a large-scale survey conducted for this research in 2016, which found that women were far more likely to find empowerment through affective similarities, shared experiences, and similar goals, rather than through shared physical or societal identity markers. Adrienne Shaw posits that this is "not because race, gender, and age do not matter but because they are not *all that matters*"; a video game character's identity may act as a starting point of identification for female players, but is often ultimately trumped by other qualities because "in much the same way that identity categories cannot encompass all of the people who possess the identifiers associated with those identities, individuals encompass multifaceted ways of identifying with characters" (2014, p. 73-74). This is of course, not surprising – of course individuals are able to identify, empathise, and sympathise with others who do not look, sound, or act like them. However, the influence that the gamer identity has on the rest of the gaming assemblage is such that the industry is inundated with protagonists who share these identity markers – meaning anyone who identifies outside of normative identity signifiers is expected to find identification within the realm of the status quo, when the same is not expected of straight, white, male gamers in return.

Examples of this are plentiful. In 2012, the executive producer of *Tomb Raider* (2013), Ron Rosenberg, told reporters at E3 that "when people play Lara [Croft], they don't really project themselves into the character, […] they're more like 'I want to protect her,'" (Schreier, 2012) reframing Croft as a damsel that the player must keep safe rather than a protagonist who the player can experience the game world through. The 2013 release of *Tomb Raider* is a reboot of the 1990's franchise of the same name, helmed by perhaps the most well-known female video game protagonist of all time. Rosenberg called upon the archaic and binary-enforcing stereotype of male saviour and female victim to describe the relationship between Croft and the player, highlighting not only that even in successful, long-running video game franchises that centralise women, the audience is still largely

presumed to be straight and male, but also that male video game players are assumed to be incapable of relating to female video game characters.

Shortly after the action role-playing game *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) was announced in 2015, the president of Sony Interactive Entertainment Worldwide Studios, Shuhei Yoshida, revealed that the company was nervous about publishing a game centring the adventure of a female protagonist – "is it risky to do a female character?" he asked (Crecente, 2015). This example highlights how the gamer archetype not only influences how female video games characters are framed and treated, but also sometimes whether they should get made at all. Even when video game developers acknowledge the female market, they can be limited by other factors that prioritise the voices of male fans over all else; in 2013 it was revealed that game developers Naughty Dog had to specifically request female playtesters for action-adventure game *The Last of Us* (2013), because the marketing group they hired had made no plans to include any women in their research (Polygon, 2013).

Outside of game development studios themselves, the heaviness with which the gamer archetype is entrenched into the gaming assemblage is visible in microaggressions, disparaging comments, and outright anger directed towards women and minorities within the games community. Archaic examples of this can be seen in old gaming magazines such as Electronic Gaming Monthly, in which female fans who write in are told by the editors that "your dad or boyfriend can teach you how to play, so you don't mess up your hair in frustration," (EGM #185, 2004) or told "woah! Slow down now, hun. Aren't you overreacting a little?" (EGM #137, 2000) when they complain. Similarly, back in 2011 a viral forum post proclaimed that BioWare, the developers of roleplaying game *Dragon Age II* (2011), had neglected their "main demographic" – the straight male gamer. "That's not to say there isn't a significant number of women who play *Dragon Age* and that BioWare should forego the option of playing as a women altogether, but there should have been much more focus in on making sure us male gamers were happy," the post read (NeoGaf, 2011).

More recently, an individual was asked to leave while playtesting action-adventure game *Uncharted 4* (2016) because of his misogynistic outburst after discovering that in the epilogue, the game's protagonist – dashing professional treasure-hunter Nathan Drake – was revealed to have had a daughter instead of a son (Kotaku, 2016). One interviewee for this research recalled the anger generated when *Battlefield 1* (2016) introduced female snipers into the game. "Holy crap were the boys upset about that!" She said in her first

interview, "and in *Battlefield 1* the only thing that would denote that she was female would be her calling out like 'oh I see a sniper', just her voice, you know? […] It was such a small part of the game […] but the boys hated it." Similarly, turn-based strategy game *BattleTech* (2018) and creature-collecting game *Temtem* (2020) were review-bombed at their respective launches over the inclusion of they/them pronoun options for player characters.

Of course, one of the most prominent and notorious examples of this is Gamergate, an aggressive backlash movement that formed in 2014 in response to the increased visibility of women and minorities within the video games assemblage. This movement will be covered in more detail later in this chapter, but it typifies the extreme reactions that some bear witness to when they are perceived to be 'challenging' the traditional gamer archetype. Adrienne Shaw writes that media representation matters because "media texts provide us with source material for what might be possible, how identities might be constructed, and what worlds we might live in" (2014, p. 4). With that in mind, it becomes clear why groups intent on keeping the gaming assemblage exclusive react with such vitriol at any indication that the video games industry is catering to anyone other than those within their imagined community (Anderson, 1983).

The Construction of an Identity

The archetypal gamer – heterosexual, cisgender, white, and male – is historically intertwined with the gaming assemblage as a whole. Just as the presumed identities and interests of video game players influences video game development decisions as evidenced above, so too is this archetype reinforced and reified by the video games industry and community. In spite of its inaccuracies, it remains a pervasive assumption, the origins of which can be traced back over 80 years.

The conception of video games as a predominantly and intrinsically masculine hobby is often considered to have begun with two coinciding events: the video game crash of 1983, and the rise of the personal computer in the mid-1980s. The crash occurred at the height of the second generation of home consoles, and was not caused by waning interest in the medium – as of writing, the Atari 2600 (first released in 1977) is still the eleventh best-selling home console of all time, and the era leading up to the crash was and is considered the 'golden age of arcade video games' – its downfall was due to market

oversaturation. Cheaply made, poor quality titles were being produced at an exponential rate in the early 1980s by unverifiable developers and players, unable to differentiate the bad from the good, ultimately gave up on video games entirely. As a result, both the profits and the credibility of the video games industry were destroyed; multiple games developers filed for bankruptcy, millions of dollars of revenue was lost, and many considered video games as a medium, an industry, and a hobby, effectively dead (Wolf, 2008).

It is clear today that the industry not only recovered but became more popular than ever, however, doing so necessitated a significant change in development and marketing strategies by video game companies. Technology journalist Tracey Lien explains the post-crash tactics of the Japanese video game company Nintendo as one example of this: Nintendo slowly reinvigorated the industry "with the launch of its Nintendo Entertainment System, […] its stringent regulations on what games could be released on its consoles," and by "presenting its Nintendo Entertainment System as more of a toy and less as a game" (2013). From 1985 onwards, U.S. Nintendo products – and later those made in Europe, Australia, and Japan, too – were stamped with a 'Nintendo Seal of Quality', which worked to win back the trust of consumers by reassuring them that cheap cash-in titles were a thing of the past. Advertising the Nintendo Entertainment System (known colloquially as the NES in western countries, and the Famicom in Japan) as a toy rather than as a video games console was another way of doing this, distancing Nintendo and its current products from both the video game crash and the influx of poor-quality titles that were partially responsible for it.

Most importantly, Lien notes, in their efforts to rejuvenate the video games industry and find success post-crash, Nintendo began to research who, exactly, was playing the video games they were selling. The devastation caused by the video game crash was still fresh, with U.S. revenues having fallen by 97 percent, from "3.2 billion dollars in 1983" to "approximately $100 million" in 1985 (2013). As a result of this, Nintendo was not as eager to take risks as developers such as Atari, Activision, and Mattel were before the recession, choosing instead to focus their attention on a single demographic. "It began publishing its own video game magazine, *Nintendo Power*," writes Lien, "which had enormous outreach and allowed the company to communicate with its customers. Publishers travelled to cities, held tournaments and got to see first-hand who was playing their games" (2013). Video games magazines were intrinsic to early games culture, Graeme Kirkpatrick writes that "magazines of the late 1980s and early '90s [were] centrally concerned with the

construction of a sense of community among gamers" (2012) – and given many were first-party publications looked-over by games companies themselves, they also worked effectively as PR for their own products under the guise of critical assessment. As such, magazines were an effective aspect of pre-internet video games culture, allowing video games fans a sense of belonging to an imagined community and the feeling that they were 'closer' to the developing studios for their favourite titles, while simultaneously granting companies the power to investigate, influence, and – ultimately – construct aspects of the market around them (Cote, 2015). Nintendo's research from *Nintendo Power* outreach found that young boys made up a significant proportion of the video games market, so that was where they focused their advertising efforts. Before long, other video games developers and publishers followed, targeting their products at boys and men in order to maximise their profits in an uncertain market.

Around the same time, personal computers began to become smaller and more affordable, and found their way into the homes of many families for the first time. However, as a result of the new and pervasive notion that video games and gaming technology was largely the domain of boys and men, parents began to buy personal computers for their sons, but not for their daughters. This meant that many girls and women in the 1980s – and later decades, as well (Margolis & Fisher, 2002; Harvey, 2015) – were never granted equal access to ludic technologies. A 1985 survey confirms this disparity, finding that "55 percent of adult women reported not using the computer at all in a typical week, compared to 27 percent of men" (Larson, 2014). While this is not true for all women and girls, it is no surprise that for many, limited access to computers and video games also meant limited interest in computers and video games. Until 1984, women made up 37 percent of computer science undergraduate students (NCES, 2012), but following the gendering of ludic technology by the video games industry, this number fell annually to lows of 17 percent, and has yet to recover (NSF, NPR, 2014). In aggressively marketing video games to men and boys, companies made many feel as if the medium was *solely* for men and boys; they had succeeded in revitalising the video games industry, but had done so at the expense of the ludic pastimes and technological curiosity of many women and girls.

Even before the early 1980s, however, men were often more commonly associated with technology than women. Carol Shaw, one of the first female video game developers, "never got the sense that the games she made were for one gender or another" when she

was hired by Atari in 1978, but still knew that "video game studios were predominantly male" (Lien, 2013). This confirms that video game marketing in the post-crash era of the 1980s was not the initiator of the male gamer archetype so much as the enforcer of it. In fact, the 'computer nerd' stereotype of today – "scruffy, bearded, long-haired, […] he is usually curt, antisocial, and more concerned with maintaining the integrity of the 'system' than in being truly helpful to the end user" (Ensmenger, 2010, p. 2) – originated in the 1960s as a description of the 'ideal' computer programmer.

Only just over a decade before the inception of this stereotype, however, computer programming was a job entirely dominated by women. The first computer programmers – hired in 1945 and put in charge of one of the earliest computers, the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer (ENIAC) – were all women, not because companies at the time felt that women were best suited to tackling the complexities of computer software, but because computer programming was considered easy, inconsequential, and not worth the efforts of men. The physical construction of the machines was considered much more intricate and essential, and as such, building hardware was considered a valuable job for completion by men. Meanwhile, there was an assumption that computer programming required no specialist skills or knowledge and was akin to clerical work. As a result, software became associated with women, and further devalued (Hicks, 2010). The skill required in computer programming was not recognised in the 1940s or early 1950s, and many early female computer programmers were either disdained, devalued, or uncredited for the work they performed, so much so that contemporary historians who found images of the ENIAC girls – the name given to the group of women tasked with programming the ENIAC – assumed they were hired models (Sheppard, 2013). This is hardly surprising given the deliberate efforts to erase women's contributions to STEM in the mid-20th century: a U.S. Army magazine advert published in 1946 featured an image of the ENIAC laboratory with its female programmers purposefully cropped out, and other examples of women's work in the sciences either being uncredited or credited to male colleagues instead were routine and commonplace in media publications of the 1940s and '50s (Light, 1999).

After a few years, the complexity of computer programming was realised, and in the late 1950s and early 1960s attempts were made to professionalise the job. This did not, however, result in a greater respect for the women who worked with computer software. Instead it involved distancing computer programming from women entirely; because

women were primarily associated with inferior, undervalued, and low-paid jobs, the professionalisation of computer programming inherently involved forcing women out of it, thereby shifting the image of the stereotypical computer programmer from unskilled female to cerebral male. "Over the course of the 1960s, developments in the computing professions were creating new barriers to female participation," writes Nathan Ensmenger. "An activity originally intended to be performed by low-status, clerical — and more often than not, female — computer programming was gradually and deliberately transformed into a high-status, scientific, and masculine discipline" (2010, p. 238).

The professionalisation and masculinisation of computer programming that took place in the late 1950s and 1960s was accomplished in several ways, many of which either deliberately or inadvertently disadvantaged potential female employees. Microaggressions, such as language use that prioritised men, were common; government documents were released discussing how best to professionalise computer programming "and elevate a new breed of career 'computer men' into the executive structure" (Hicks, 2010, pp. 5-6), meanwhile advertisements for new computer programming jobs used masculine pronouns such as "he," "fellow," and "are you the man…" nearly exclusively (Ensmenger, 2010). Employers and professional societies began to set requirements that prioritised male applicants over female applicants – "In 1965, for example, the Association for Computing Machinery imposed a four-year degree requirement for membership that, in an era when there were almost twice as many male as there were female college undergraduates, excluded significantly more women than men" (Ensmenger, 2010, p. 239). Tests also became a large factor in hiring practices for new computer programmers, which deliberately prioritised "the ideal of the 'detached' (read male) programmer." Perhaps most overtly, women became associated with incompetence, adverts joked about how expensive and prone to mistakes female staff members were, while the belief began to spread that "female programmers were incapable of leading a group or supervising their male colleagues" (ibid). The strategies employed to distance computer programming as a profession from its feminine roots were a success, and before the end of the 1960s, the 'ideal' computer programmer was an intelligent but antisocial man.

The gamer archetype, then, came to prominence in the 1980s with the video game crash and the rise of the personal computer, but its roots lie in the shifting image of computer programmers in the 1950s and 1960s. These three cultural events have invariably

shaped the gamer archetype of the present day, but knowledge of their historical influence on the gamer as a social identity reveals three other truths. Firstly, that while video games are not inherently sexist – although as already stated, they often utilise sexist tropes – the gamer as an archetype is rooted in misogyny. From ejecting women from a profession which they pioneered, to targeted marketing strategies that appealed to boys at the expense of girls, to the generation of women and girls who were never granted access to ludic technologies as a result of the archetype's creation, the gamer as a social identity is built upon a history of female exclusion. Secondly, this exclusion as a result of the gamer archetype continues to manifest in the contemporary video gaming assemblage; as this chapter has already shown, the pervasiveness of the gamer archetype can be seen in industry decisions, communal hierarchies, and in the actions of individuals, all of which cumulate in creating an environment that works to other women and girls and exclude them from video gaming spaces. Sarah Banet-Weiser writes "misogyny is reified in institutional structures," but that it also is now expressed more openly by individuals "via the connection, circulation, publicness, networks, and communication" afforded by digital networks (2018, p. 5). Contemporary gatekeeping of the gamer archetype is a key example of this, in which decades-old industry and marketing decisions are upheld and protected to this day by individuals invested in their preservation. Even women and girls who remain unexposed to such practices may still be put off from engaging with video games due to the pervasive notion of the video game player as a "a white, middle-class, heterosexual, technologically competent, socially isolated, and violence-oriented masculine subject" (Harvey, 2015, p. 30). The very existence of the gamer archetype is a barrier to play for many women and girls, a deliberate attempt to further gatekeep an already heavily guarded imagined community.

In spite of this, the most important truth revealed by knowledge of the historical events that shaped the gamer archetype is that despite its pervasiveness and the power it holds over the medium, it is above all else: a social construct. Business decisions, marketing strategies, and media erasure at industry-level help to design an identity and imagined community that, when critiqued or contradicted, invites backlash from individuals who place heavy emphasis on that identity and community as a core aspect of their being. In spite of this, the gamer archetype is not absolute, but malleable; with enough influence, it can be changed, edited, or broken down entirely.

Gendering Play

When contextualising barriers to play, focus must not solely be given to the place of women and girls within the video gaming assemblage itself, but also how their ludic activities are viewed within wider cultural and social contexts. The gendering of video games is not the only barrier to play that women face when engaging with the hobby – the very act of play itself is similarly heavily categorised and policed.

The gendering of play and leisure casts the ludic activities of men and boys as adventurous, acceptably violent ('boys will be boys'), and public sphere-oriented, and the ludic activities of women and girls as shallow, domesticated, and rooted in the private sphere. Shira Chess writes that "authorised forms of feminine play are often marginalising, and at the same time often decoded as 'frivolity'," highlighting the fact that women's play "is often taken less seriously" (2009, p. 5). The basis for these binary categorisations is built upon the notion that play-styles are finite and intrinsically linked to biological sex; Alison Harvey's research into digital play in domestic contexts finds that game play within the home "plays an important role in the maintenance of normative performances of gender identity," (2015, p. 4) and by regulating the ludic activities of men, women, boys, and girls as biologically distinct, the belief in such binaries continues perpetually, with those not adhering cast as deviant, invaders, or Others. Harvey notes that these regulatory practices "not only order human activities through references to inherent difference, but entrench and reify the idea that oppression and systematic exclusion are by-products of a natural order rather than a socially and culturally constructed structure privileging the voices and interests of some over others" (ibid). The notion of innate binary gendered play practices does not hold up under scrutiny – as Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins point out, not only are gender differences socially constructed, but they are also "a construct that is conceived of differently in different cultures, historical periods, and contexts" (1998, p. 6). In spite of this, gendered categorisation of play within western society persists, often limiting the activities of boys/men and girls/women, while simultaneously alienating intersex, non-binary, and transgender people completely.

From an early age, the play styles of children are guided and policed by adults whose encouragement or chastisement perpetuates these arbitrary gender stereotypes. Harvey

writes that is it "precisely through the regulation of digital play in the home that adults, teenagers, and children enacted gender," highlighting the significance of domestic environments and familial support structures in reifying gendered hierarchies (2015, p. 8). The phrase 'boys will be boys' is often used to explain particularly active, rambunctious, or aggressive styles of male play; as well as sometimes being used to excuse rowdy behaviour, bullying, and harassment performed by both children and adult men. Meanwhile, girls whose play styles are similarly active or aggressive are often referred to negatively as being 'unladylike' or 'bossy', or othered from active play styles altogether through phrases such as 'being one of the boys'. Harvey's research findings confirm this – interviewees with daughters who regularly play video games cast them as exceptional (2015) – while Chess notes that traditionally, women's play "never becomes fully immersive, and is about wasting time and filling time, not necessarily about having real and full leisure time" (2009, p. 5). The dichotomy between how male and female ludic activity is gendered disempowers and delegitimises the leisure time of women and girls, working to encourage the activity of one gender while simultaneously encouraging the passivity of another. As such, the play time of women and girls is limited and regulated.

This creates a barrier to play for women that is both very real, but also nebulous. The combined "entanglement of rhetorical strategies […] and regulatory tactics" work to create the conditions they claim are innate (Harvey, 2015, p. 9). For example, women and girls who engage in ludic activities that coincide with cultural assumptions about femininity – such as frivolity, vanity, and consumerism – are observed to be biologically drawn to such activities, when in fact often these are the only forms of play available to them due to gendered regulatory practices. In this way, "cultural assumptions about feminine styles of play naturally become enfolded into expectations of how women are expected to play" (Chess, 2009, p. 2), thereby casting a culturally constructed status quo as inherent and science based.

The gendering of play creates trouble for women who play video games and games studies academics alike; as Harvey notes, "barriers to entry for female players are often misunderstood by researchers and in the broader culture of game players as an absence of desire to play games" (2015, p. 13). Cassell and Jenkins appear to take gendered play differences as a given, even as they detail the numerous barriers to play that women and girls face (1998), while Schott and Horrell's research on girl gamers admits "the authors

were particularly interested to discover whether adult females gamed at all, or whether it is primarily the province of younger children" (2000, pp. 38-39). While this practice is less commonplace in contemporary studies, the gendering of play has managed to "inadvertently lead us to mistake the how for the why" (Yee, 2008, p. 88) numerous times, even at a critical academic level.

What this means in action is that the ludic activities of women and girls in the gaming assemblage typically have their gameplay assessed and critiqued through a lens of traditional femininity. James Paul Gee and Elisabeth R. Hayes note that "it is odd, perhaps, that when males play a military game like *Call of Duty*, we do not say they are playing with toy soldiers. But when women play *The Sims*, we say they are playing with a dollhouse" (2010, p. 2). Not only does this highlight the afore-mentioned tendency to devalue and delegitimise women's leisure and play, but also it indicates how discourses regarding women's digital play styles are often adapted from wider cultural commentary on the innate biological nature of attitudes and actions. Examples of this can be seen throughout the history of examinations of the gaming assemblage. The interest of women in the Konami arcade game *Frogger* (1981), for instance, was explained by one writer as being because it is "a curiously non-confrontational game" in which "it is impossible to be aggressive." Similarly, the appeal of *Tetris* (1984) to women was justified because "it's not about blowing things up. It's about cleaning things up" (Herz, 1997, p. 172). Brunner, Bennett, and Honey's research into 'girl games' and technological desire frames women as more cautious about technology than men, and far more likely to view technology as a "household helper," than as a tool for power or transcendence (1998, p. 75). As such, they stress that "girls need games in which they can rehearse and express the ambiguities and contradictions of femininity," arguing that this is because "navigating the shoals of femininity is the stuff girls think about," without critically examining the cultural and social conditions that may have influenced such findings (p. 87). Arguments that take biological differences in technological and ludic desire as a given have been critiqued as reductionist and problematic by Adrienne L. Massanari and T.L. Taylor, and while they appear to be decreasing academically – as evidenced by the work of Chess (2009, 2017, 2020), Shaw (2014), Harvey (2015), Gray & Leonard (2018), Phillips (2020), and others – there remains a tendency within the gaming assemblage to view female players as anomalous, thereby framing women and girls as "outsiders to gaming, and men and boys as central components, significantly impacting the

medium overall" (Cote, 2015, p. 481). Men's interests in ludic technologies are considered an extension of their innate masculinity, whereas women's participation in the gaming assemblage is instead explained through the appeal of individual game titles to feminine desires. Examples include the afore-mentioned *Frogger* (1981) and *Tetris* (1984), as well as *Ms. Pac-Man* (1982), *Myst* (1993), *The Sims* franchise (2000-present), the *Animal Crossing* series (2001-2020), and the *Dragon Age* franchise (2009-2014), to name a few. These games manage to attract a large female audience despite women's supposed lack of interest in the medium, and as such are often framed as exceptions to the rule that video games are primarily the domain of men, as opposed to examples that *disprove* the rule entirely.

In this way, the barriers to play that many women and girls face when traversing the gaming assemblage are multitudinous; not only is the gamer identity itself heavily policed and historically steeped in misogynistic ostracisation, so too is the very act of play itself unhelpfully categorised and limited. In spite of this, many persist – carving out space within the gaming assemblage in the face of further resistance.

Prejudiced Play

Returning to the video gaming assemblage, it is important to highlight how the barriers to play detailed above impact the lived experiences of women and girls who play video games. The gendering of ludic activities and the gatekeeping rampant within the gaming assemblage are deliberate strategies to deny and devalue women's leisure, which in turn have resulted in women and girls being pushed to the margins of video games culture, "outliers," Chess notes, "in a space not originally intended for them" (2017, p. 4). The persistent perception of gaming spaces as bastions of masculinity casts the majority of women as intruders regardless of the time spent, money invested, or skill apparent (Cote, 2015). Increasingly in recent years, the visibility of women within gaming spaces has been met with rising hostility, with their presence and perceived influence seen by some as an affront to the integrity of the gamer identity, and as "a potential assault on male gaming spaces" (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 87).

The identity war fought on this battlefield has been raging for a long time, but has never been more keenly felt than during the height of Gamergate. Gamergate was a hate movement that impacted all corners of the gaming assemblage, beginning in August 2014

with a breakup "so crazy that it [became] a horror story" (Quinn, 2017). An abusive ex-partner of independent game developer Zoe Quinn published a lengthy blog post accusing her of, among other things, using sexual favours in exchange for positive reviews for her game *Depression Quest* (2013). The accusations were unfounded, but by circulating the post on websites such as 4chan – notorious as a bastion for right-wing reactionaries – Quinn's ex was able to drum up hatred for not just Quinn, but also for a variety of individuals who fell afoul of the angry mob – largely those who did not adhere to the culturally constructed stereotype of the 'gamer', the Player One, the "white, cis, heterosexual, young, abled, and middle-class male" (Chess, 2017, p. 7). The allegations against Quinn were easily mappable to other perceived slights against the male gamer identity that the presence of marginalised identity groups supposedly wrought, thereby leading to the hatred for Quinn to snowball into a widespread hate campaign. Uniting under the disingenuous claim to be fighting for 'ethics in games journalism,' Gamergaters harassed, threatened, and doxxed women and minorities in the games industry and games community to an unprecedented extent, the repercussions of which are still apparent today, as this section will show.

For many, the blog post about Quinn was a catalyst for a tension that had been building for some time; Quinn became a scapegoat that a vocal subcategory of fans overprotective of the gamer identity utilised to justify their discomfort at what they perceived to be an influx of Others – namely women and minorities – into a space they perceived as solely theirs. Video game players often approach gaming spaces as 'imagined communities', in which a group of like-minded individuals feel a sense of kinship over their shared common interest (and, in this case, identity), and in which many members "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). With this in mind, the heavy defences, exclusionary tactics, and hostilities exhibited by some inhabitants of various gaming spaces is akin to nationalism – a need to defend something based on an imagined, intangible sense of self and belonging. Gamergate was a particularly extreme example of what Salter and Blodgett refer to as "a culture war over the turf of geek identity," utilising similar terminology, making an imagined space physical, to highlight the charged push-and-pull of identity within gaming (2017, p. 11). By using the allegations against Quinn as a prominent example of the 'negative impact' of allowing women and minorities to participate in their imagined community and share their identity, Gamergaters

were able to justify their harassment of her, as well as anyone else who posed a threat to gaming as a bastion of heterosexual, white, cisgender masculinity. In painting Quinn as a threat, the movement was also able to appear more reasonable to some onlookers, who joined the cause to protect something they were concerned was under attack. Katherine Cross notes how Gamergaters gamified their harassment, making it into "a game with bosses and NPCs, and overarching win-conditions that determine the ethical framework in which the movement operates" (2016, p. 23). In this way they were able to cast themselves as heroes, and their victims as dehumanised enemies to be brought to justice. While links between in-game and real-world physical violence are commonly disputed by both the games industry and games academia, the influences of video game structures on the organisational practices of Gamergate are apparent, particularly given, as Gray, Voorhees, and Vossen note, games typically "offer spaces of white male play and pleasures, and create a virtual and lived reality where white maleness is empowered to police and criminalise the Other" (2018, p. 3).

Gamergate is one particularly prominent example of attempts to "[draw] stricter boundaries around geek identity and geek-coded spaces to keep outsiders out" (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 11), that range from large-scale harassment (see also the 2012 harassment campaign against media critic Anita Sarkeesian following the launch of a Kickstarter campaign for her *Tropes vs Women in Games* Youtube series) to more insidious microaggressions intended to codify and enforce boundaries at intersections of the gamer identity. Issues of space restriction and prejudiced play did not begin (and will not end) with Gamergate; as this chapter shows, the barriers to play for women and girls are plentiful and often oppressive, codified into the fabric of the gamer identity, encouraged by alienating video game content, and exacerbated by supplementary mediums that exist within the gaming assemblage, such as magazines, advertisements, and merchandising (Consalvo, 2007; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Cote, 2015). These tactics work to limit access, devalue accomplishments and contributions, and place women and girls on the periphery of the gaming assemblage – often literally. In 2002, Margolis and Fisher's research on women in computing found that physical access to a dedicated personal computer was unlikely for female interviewees, and that their interests in technology were discouraged, commenting that "just 17 percent of the women, compared to 40 percent of the men, report being given a computer early on" (2002, p. 23). They also note the frequency with which girls' access to

computers within the home is controlled and limited by male family members, such as older brothers or fathers, who are far less likely to encourage their daughters' ludic technological prowess compared to their sons' (2002, p. 25). These findings are reinforced by Harvey's 2015 research on gaming in domestic contexts, which finds that digital games are "often seen as belonging to the males of the household, where they claim expertise and dominion that in turn may undermine feminine ability" (2015, p. 133). Similarly, Schott and Horrell cite examples from interviews where mothers and daughters were only permitted to watch male family members play with household games consoles, rather than engage with the medium themselves (2000, pp. 40-42).

These regulatory behaviours are extensions of prejudiced play practices that work to limit women and girls' access to ludic technologies. Women's ludic activity, if not erased – as mentioned above, even efforts to increase the number of women in the games industry often approach from the problematic angle of assuming that the field of women's gaming expertise is wholly barren (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998) – has long been policed, with strict parameters in place within which women are occasionally (and not without criticism) allowed to participate. While it is of course true that, as T.L. Taylor notes, "in many ways, women play in spite of barriers to entry," and that "women players are finding fascinating and complicated pleasure in online games" (2006, p. 123), their efforts – whether they be to change the face of gaming, carve out space, or to simply exist – often necessitate butting heads with gatekeeping, regulatory practices that push the idea that either women should not exist within the gaming assemblage at all, or that they should only do so in very specific ways.

As an example of this, a 2004 issue of *Electronic Gaming Monthly* magazine featured a double-page spread on the Frag Dolls – an Ubisoft-sponsored, all-female esports group active from 2004-2015 – in which readers were informed how they would best impress each of these "tough chicas" that were "out to prove themselves," with a promise of more photos of the group on *EGM*'s website (*EGM* #186, 2004). It is not uncommon in features like this for women's gaming prowess to be simultaneously positioned in opposition to the abilities of male gamers, but also framed through their heterosexual appeal. This is one of the limited ways that access to gaming spaces has sometimes been granted to women. While some women have found success navigating gaming spaces under these terms – as discussed further in Chapter Three – it is important to note that they are fraught with

double standards. Female Twitch streamers who wear revealing clothing – either deliberately to draw in the eye, or just for comfort – are regularly harassed by viewers as "titty streamers" or "Twitch thots" (Alexander, 2018), the latest in decades-old attempts to police the gamer identity, female sexuality, and "defend the terrain from those […] who have never suffered from their geekdom" (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 11). Other female streamers deemed to be dressed more 'appropriately' for the task of playing video games on the internet are not spared harassment, but are occasionally thrown scraps of acceptance; in 2020 a clip by Twitch streamer Jambo made headlines after she chastised a viewer who thanked her for "not being basically naked to speak your mind." In the clip she responded "saying 'DEM TIDDIES ARE PUT AWAY SO WHAT YOU SAY HAS MORE VALUE' is really fucking rude, so please get out of my chat" (PlayWithJambo, 2020). Streaming sites such as Twitch, Youtube, and Facebook Gaming offer content creators a platform, reach, and – sometimes – influence over parts of the gaming assemblage, but for female streamers, this often comes with increased risk of harassment and unwanted sexualisation. Academic research studying the Twitch chat content of popular male and female streamers found heavily gendered disparities, in which "game-related words are clearly overrepresented in male channels while words that signal objectification are strongly associated with female channels" (Nakandala, Ciampaglia, Su, & Ahn, 2016, p. 7). In addition, the study found that a large number of commenters on Twitch channels subscribe to either exclusively male or exclusively female streams, and that "the messages posted by users who comment only in female channels tend to have semantic similarity with objectifying cues while those who comment only in male channels tend to have semantic similarity with more game-related terms" (2016, p. 17). This implies that there are commenters who specifically seek out female-led Twitch streams to post objectifying comments. Visible women within the gaming assemblage often find their sexuality centralised thusly – either as objects of heterosexual desire, or as intruders exploiting their heterosexual desire in order to build a platform.

The visibility of streaming platforms provides insight into the barriers to play many women face in the form of harassment from gamer identity gatekeepers, but the extent to which this impacts female video game players is often difficult to detect, because when harassment campaigns are successful, they result in victims logging off, silencing themselves, and becoming undocumentable. A 2015 study on teens and online friendships

found a significant divide when comparing teen boys' and girls' use of voice chat when gaming online – 22 percent of boys interviewed said they talked daily with friends while playing video games, compared to just 3 percent of girls (Lenhart, 2015, p. 28). Additionally, of all the girls who play video games, only 9 percent use voice chat at all. "Not even ten percent of teenage girls open their mouths and speak in public video game spaces," writes Chris Suellentrop in *Kotaku*, "that's how you go from a world where 59 percent of all girls between 13 and 17 play video games to a world where teenage girls are assumed not to exist in public video game spaces" (2015). There are multiple possibilities to explain this disparity – access to adequate technology, as already seen, is a common issue for female video game players – but this study correlates with anecdotal evidence that suggests women log off, silence themselves, or retreat to small, pre-established, vetted communities to avoid misogynistic harassment (Mulkerin, 2017).

Misogynistic value judgements from strangers are exacerbated for video game fans with intersecting marginalised identities. Kishonna L. Gray's study of black lesbian identity development in Xbox Live communities features testimonies from queer women of colour detailing their responses to racist, sexist in-game harassment received while playing *Gears of War* (2016) (Gray, 2018). Similarly, streamer and speedrunner Narcissa Wright's public transition in 2015 is one particularly visible example of the prevalence of transmisogyny in gaming spaces – "I feel like I can't be myself without getting shit on constantly" she wrote in 2016, before temporarily deleting her Youtube and Twitch accounts as a result of the harassment she received (Campbell, 2016). These examples show that what little space afforded to women in video games is often done with their use to heterosexual male gratification in mind, and often with an expectation that harassment will be commonplace and multifaceted depending on each woman's identity, attitude, and practices.

The impact of decades of reinforced gendered binaries in digital leisure and ludic activity is apparent, resulting in prejudiced play strategies that cast women and minorities as outsiders, intruders, and threats to the gamer identity and the wider gaming assemblage. Othering techniques ranging from misogynistic microaggressions to large-scale hate campaigns like Gamergate often entail women's engagement with video games is rife with conflict. Additionally, often their involvement with the gaming assemblage is either permitted or further chastised based upon their perceived usefulness to heterosexual male desire, highlighting that when women *are* afforded space within the video games

community, it is often not done so on their own terms. The next section of this chapter explores another area of the gaming assemblage where this is true – the 'girl games' genre.

Girl Games

While the gendering of video games, the gamer identity, and play more generally as masculine have resulted largely in ostracision from the gaming assemblage for women and girls, there *is* a small space set aside, supposedly specifically for them. The progression of game developer's numerous attempts to market video games to women and girls over the years can be traced through the history of the problematic 'girl game' subgenre, which developed when creators realised that, despite the numerous barriers to play, a huge number of women were engrossed by the medium. Jesper Juul points out the reaction of game publishers at the "surprising" popularity of Namco's *Pac-Man* (1980) among women. He explains that *Ms. Pac-Man*, a spin-off starring Pac-Man's love interest, was released in America in 1981 in an attempt to capitalise on the original game's female following. Juul includes a quote from a marketing executive, who details that "to woo the potential female video addict, Ms. Pac-Man is outfitted with more fashion wrinkles than a new Halston. Pac-Man is a homely little yellow critter on a screen, but his female video counterpart is resplendent in red lips and eyelashes, with a bow above her brow" (Juul, 2010, p. 27).

This quote inadvertently highlights many of the issues that have plagued the 'girl games' subcategory of video games throughout the years. Just as a woman's gender is often assumed to innately influence their play preferences, so too are video games marketed towards them often inundated with the same assumptions and stereotypes. Shira Chess argues that the gendered lines separating gaming practices are far from arbitrary, "they illustrate strange and compelling patterns and draw a very specific picture of what an idealised woman gamer might look like and how that woman should play" (2017, p. 5). 'Girl games' tend to be oversaturated in pink hues, contain simple and limited gameplay, and focus primarily on domesticity, nurturing, romance, and beauty, among other stereotypically feminine interests. Female characters in these games are often endowed with symbols of traditional femininity, such as beauty accessories, big eyelashes, and a pink colour scheme. Sometimes female protagonists are simply female versions of pre-established male characters, as with Ms. Pac-Man and the *Mario* franchise's Toadette.

Examples of 'girl games' are plentiful but forgettable, and include cheaply made tie-ins with wider franchises – such as those based off *Barbie*, *Bratz*, or *Monster High* dolls – or gamified versions of traditionally non-ludic media genres, such as music videos or weight-loss DVDs. Ubisoft's *Imagine* series (2007-2013) for the Nintendo DS and 3DS is one of few female-targeted game franchises to have found commercial success; marketed specifically at girls between the ages of six and fourteen years old, the *Imagine* series has sold over 21 million copies over the course of its forty-six titles. Each *Imagine* game places the player in a different job, asking them to 'imagine' what it would be like to have such a career. While some appear to encourage jobs traditionally considered masculine domains within western society – *Imagine: Master Chef* (2007), *Imagine: Soccer Captain* (2009), and *Imagine: Detective* (2009) – the majority of games in the series focus on interests and jobs traditionally considered as feminine in nature: *Imagine: Babies* (2007), *Imagine: Dream Weddings* (2008), *Imagine: Fashion Party* (2009), and *Imagine: Fashion World 3D* (2013) being but a few examples. Chess argues that 'girl games' such as these are rarely designed with real female players in mind, instead catering to an industry-constructed, idealised audience that she refers to as a "designed identity" (2017, p. 5). She positions the designed identity of the idealised woman player – Player Two – as the female equivalent of the stereotypical 'Player One', who is white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class, and male. However, as Chess points out, these identities are based upon "a fiction, an amalgamation of many hybridised images of who should play, how they should play, and what that play looks like," and therefore do not map to the real, lived experiences of women who play (2017, p. 6). As such, not only are women who do not fit into these identity categories – women of colour, queer women, disabled women, working class women – invariably excluded from the discussions on what female ludic activity looks like, women who *do* fit those identity categories are not satisfied, either.

'Girl games', then, are often cheaply made products that, in their attempts to appeal to and draw profits from girls and women who play video games, instead reinforce gender stereotypes and alienate female game players within the gaming assemblage. With this in mind, it is important to note that the term 'girl games' is not only used to describe video games marketed specifically to girls and women by creators and publishers in the games industry, but also colloquially in the games community to refer to video games that, while not specifically aimed at the female market, contain elements stereotypically considered

appealing to women. Often it is used as a pejorative term by (predominantly male) subsections of the games community who are frustrated at the increasing presence and inclusion of women and girls in what they perceive to be their space. Some examples of games often dubbed 'girl games' include domestic simulators such as *Harvest Moon* (1996-present), *The Sims* (2000-present), and *Animal Crossing* (2001-present); story-heavy games with little-to-no violence such as *Gone Home* (2013) and *Life is Strange* (2015); as well as mobile and social network-based games such as *Bejeweled* (2001), *Farmville* (2009), and *Candy Crush* (2012). Similarly, contemporary games marketed towards 'casual' gamers and families have also received the classification of 'girl games' by some game players, because of the assumption that women are not a part of the core game-playing demographic. While many of these games and franchises have met with critical and commercial success, their focus on domestic settings, inter-character relationships, story-driven plots, their relative lack of combat and violence, or their presence on mobile platforms or social media cause them to be labelled by some – typically with scorn – as 'girl games'.

Games with such themes, character portrayals, and play styles as those described above are, of course, not intrinsically problematic. In fact, the presence and success of video games with non-violent themes have expanded the medium in the public eye, helping to alleviate popular concerns that video games "foster a culture which sees violence, especially violence directed at women, as acceptable" (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998, p. 10). In addition, games released on mobile platforms, games that are flexible with players' time commitments, and games that do not alienate 'casual' players can be seen as a "reinvention" of both games and players. "Casual game design is a genuine innovation in game design and a return to lessons long forgotten," writes Juul, "while the idea of the less-dedicated, less-obsessed casual player helps us to move beyond the prejudice that video game players are nerdy and socially inept. This lets developers reconsider who will be playing their games, when and why" (Juul, 2010, p. 63).

In this way, the ever-widening field of genres, themes, and settings for video games is to be celebrated for having "opened up spaces and contexts of play to more diverse audiences" (Harvey, 2015, p. 33-34). Problems arise, however, when certain types of games are associated primarily with and exclusively marketed towards one particular gender of player. John Vanderhoef argues that the "cultural feminisation" of casual video games have resulted "in the recreation of a traditional, gendered cultural hierarchy in the medium of

video games" that valorises masculinity and denigrates femininity (2013). The categorisation of 'girl games' as being shallow, vapid, and simple in nature; focusing on domesticity, beauty, or romance in content; or being boring, unchallenging, and 'casual' in the way they are played works to alienate women and girls from the world of video games, not only by defining games made specifically with them in mind in such narrow terms, but also by the association within the gaming assemblage of femaleness with negative traits. Alison Harvey writes that "such games may disenfranchise young girls by relegating them to narrow spaces of identification with hegemonic values [...] and perpetuate notions of their playful desires and ludic preferences as inherently linked to their sex" (Harvey, 2015, p. 15).

As such, the 'girl games' subgenre – initially an attempt to capitalise on a potential market of female game players – is actually riddled with problems that instead restrict the options of their intended target audience due to being "designed based on essentialised notions of what girls like" (Harvey, 2015, p. 15). The 'pinkification' of products aimed at girls; the assumption that games based around traditionally 'feminine' activities will *only* appeal to women; conversely, the assumption that women will *only* enjoy games based around traditionally 'feminine' activities; and the association by the games community of femaleness with 'bad' games; each of these issues is fuelled by societally-enforced gender stereotypes around girls, women, and their ludic preferences, and work to limit players' choices to those considered acceptable for their gender. Even video game developers attempting to broaden the scope of games targeted at women and girls have often inadvertently perpetuated damaging practices within the gaming assemblage by further entrenching the idea of contrasting male and female modes of play. "Unfortunately," writes Massanari, "game designers often rely on outdated or oversimplified dichotomies when thinking about women's play and pleasure when gaming" (2012, p. 122). By creating a subgenre aimed at women within the medium of video games and inundating it with problematic gender stereotypes, it can be assumed that any game not in this category is inappropriate for girls. This societal assumption that girls/women and boys/men have "essentially different interests, desires, and preferences" to each other is another barrier to video game play for many girls and women, framing "computing and technology as an inherently masculine domain" (Harvey, 2015, p. 15). Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins come to a similar conclusion, noting that, just like attempts to diversity traditionally masculine jobs by advertising for 'woman engineers' or 'woman architects,' advertising some games as

'girl games' "may unintentionally reinforce the perception that technical, scientific, and professional fields are predominantly male turf" (1998, p. 25).

While there is a small space within the gaming assemblage that purports to 'cater' to girls and women, the 'girl games' genre is problematic in several ways. Rather than carve out a niche in a heavily masculinised space, it instead boxes girls and women in, in an attempt to exploit them for profit based on limited, stereotypical, and often outright lazy views of what they actually enjoy. In an interview with Shira Chess, games designer and author Sheri Graner Ray states "we have a problem where the game industry does not see women as a market. They see women as a genre," (2017, p. 39) a sentiment that perfectly encapsulates the essentialist 'girl games' category of video games. In addition to this, the use of the term 'girl games' by some in the gaming assemblage as a spiteful denigration of games with settings, play styles, and storylines perceived to be feminine, casual, or 'low skill' in nature also contributes to a feeling of alienation amongst girls and women who play video games. Until the gaming assemblage drops practices that arbitrarily limit players and actively works to deconstruct gendered hierarchies in play, the 'girl games' genre will remain, perversely, a barrier to play for many girls and women.

Conclusion

The intent of this thesis is to examine the ways in which gaming spaces are utilised by women as tools for resistance, transgression, and troubling binaries. As such, the purpose of this chapter has been to contextualise the findings of this research by highlighting what, exactly, there is to resist. Hegemonic rhetoric is commonplace and reinforced throughout the gaming assemblage – even in the areas supposedly 'for women' – through a variety of practices, from microaggressions and stereotyping to harassment and hate speech. These practices have traditionally celebrated the ludic activities of boys and men, while denigrating or outright ignoring the ludic activities of girls and women. This chapter has brought into focus the intricacies and politics of play for women, in order to better grasp the potential for resistance and disruption that their presence and participation within the gaming assemblage entails. Through their actions, existence, and play, women and girls work to challenge the fundamentals of an assemblage built on problematic – sometimes, as seen above, outright misogynistic – foundations. Emma Witkowski notes that, through

acknowledging the restrictive binaries that so thoroughly separate gendered engagement within the gaming assemblage, "we can start to grasp the disruptive work involved by those women who participate as experts, as they do the heavy lifting of undoing traditional gender relational patterns on their given scene" (2018, pp. 188-189). This thesis will continue that work, by centring testimony from and platforming the voices of women who regularly use games as tools of resistance against the hegemony of the gaming assemblage.

Chapter Two: Female Power Fantasies – Representations of Gender and Power in Video Games

The 2013 reboot of the *Tomb Raider* franchise sees protagonist Lara Croft – in this iteration a fresh-faced amateur explorer, not the battle-hardened and experienced adventurer from earlier games – shipwrecked on the island of Yamatai, off the coast of Japan. As she and her friends explore, they learn more about the island and its previous inhabitants, particularly its ancient ruler, Queen Himiko. After an exchange with a colleague reveals that Himiko was rumoured to possess shamanistic powers, Croft retorts "a woman wields that much power, and sooner or later it'll get called witchcraft." This line of dialogue is relatively easy to miss, uttered by Croft during gameplay rather than in a cutscene, but is a conscious nod towards how power in media narratives – who wields it, why, and for what purpose – is influenced, shaped, and problematized by gendered discourse. Croft's commentary on the tendency to vilify female power is ultimately undermined when, in the game's finale, it is revealed that Queen Himiko *is* a witch and the game's primary antagonist, who Croft must defeat in order to save her kidnapped friend and escape the island of Yamatai. *Tomb Raider*'s brief attempt to critique stereotypes of female power in games while simultaneously utilising those stereotypes is indicative of the ease with which these tropes permeate video game narratives.

Negative stereotypes of male power in video games do not exist in the same capacity at those of female power. Video games are typically considered spaces for the performance and celebration of hypermasculinity, with an assumption that the primary consumer of video game content is, as shown in the previous chapter, white, heterosexual, cisgender, and male (Harvey, 2015; Chess, 2017). This has typically not only led video game content to employ narratives and ludic activities that centre male acts of aggression, feats of strength, or shows of (hetero)sexuality, but also to actively celebrate them and link them to the empowerment of both the character in question and the presumed-male player themselves. Salter and Blodgett write that the juxtaposition of "the hypermasculine avatar" with the "decidedly un-masculine geek as a character," ultimately work to create game spaces "focus[ed] on wish-fulfilment as dictated by a heteronormative, cisgender male fantasy"

(2017, p. 13). In this way, representations of male power in video games often involve it being framed largely from a positive perspective of wish-fulfilment and empowerment, with games acting as "spaces of white male play and pleasures" (2018, Gray, Voorhees, & Vossen, p. 3).

By contrast, empowering female players is rarely the goal when depicting examples of powerful women in games, and as such, any actual feelings of wish-fulfilment on their behalf are largely incidental. Video games often set up masculinity and femininity as dichotomous, oppositional, and mutually exclusive; meaning that proactive and heroic male characters are often cast alongside passive, weak women. "Hypermasculine underpinning within the media positions women into background roles in a man's heroic quest," write Salter and Blodgett, "they exist to admire and define the degree of the main hero's masculinity and act as the reward for the hero's actions, either as a damsel to be rescued or simply an admiring audience for the hero's actions" (2017, p. 26). In this way, female characters' agency is often secondary to that of male protagonists in video games, just as the empowerment of female players through representations of women in-game is often secondary to the fulfilment of male power fantasies. As such, even female characters who resist such dichotomous categorisations often have their adeptness, capabilities, and power undermined by being framed through their sexual appeal to heterosexual, male players, leaving a dearth of characters specifically created as satisfying power fantasies for women and girls who game.

Through power structures that "reify certain norms about game play while subordinating other players and styles of play," the gaming assemblage perpetuates a "masculinist gender bias" that privileges ludic activities associated with traditional masculinity (Harvey, 2015, p. 30). As such, video games – and geek culture more broadly – are replete with examples of masculine power, as well as narratives, ludic styles, and objectives that aim to satisfy stereotypically masculine desires. One prominent manifestation of this is the archetypal Male Power Fantasy – a character that aligns with a particularly hegemonic interpretation of masculinity that extols conservative values, patriarchal, white, cisgender heterosexuality, and the right to violence (whether vigilante or state-sanctioned). Games that feature such archetypes "provide male players with specific and finely tuned opportunities to perform idealised masculinities, […] to be the kind of male that is presented as the hero in myriad films, television shows, and advertisements"

(Bertozzi, 2012, p. 4). As such, video game narratives that centre such power fantasies work to empower and embolden male players through processes of identification.

Empowerment, though, is complex and subjective; characters created ostensibly for the satisfaction of the archetypal male gamer may resonate differently to how developers intended, just as (evidenced in the previous chapter) an entire category of games 'for girls' can inevitably fail to impress. Identity groups are of course, not homogenous, and contain a multitude of intersections that individualise each person's motivations while gaming. The gamer identity is a "designed identity" (Chess, 2017), fabricated for consumer purposes and bears little resemblance to the lived reality of the gaming assemblage as it stands. As such, characters that inspire, empower, or resonate with a particular community within the gaming assemblage can be unexpected and unintentionally so. The titular character of hack-and-slash series *Bayonetta* (2009-present) is hypersexualised for the male gaze – literally designed as series producer Hideki Kamiya's "ideal woman" (Ramsay, 2009) – but also viewed favourably within LGBTQ+ games communities as a positive example of queer femininity (Phillips, 2017). Donkey Kong, the tie-wearing gorilla from Nintendo's *Donkey Kong* (1981-2018) series and *Mario* (1983-present) franchise, inadvertently became a trans icon in 2019 when Youtuber Hbomberguy played *Donkey Kong 64* (1999) live on Twitch for over 57 hours, raising over £265,000 for British trans youth charity, Mermaids. The stream spawned several 'Donkey Kong says trans rights!' memes, cementing the character as an unlikely ally of transgender video game players. The afore-mentioned Lara Croft, star of the *Tomb Raider* franchise (1996-2018), has long been a source of heterosexual male titillation within the gaming assemblage, yet has also operated as inspiration for others, functioning "(alternatively or simultaneously […]) as an object of sexual desire, a femme fatale, a model of empowered womanhood, or a masculine style of femininity" depending on who is asked (Gray, Voorhees, & Vossen, 2018, p. 2).

These examples highlight how video game characters can resonate with audiences outside of those they were intended for – thereby troubling the notion of a constructed power fantasy ostensibly *for* any particular identity category in isolation. This is fortunate, given the gaming assemblage's historical tendency to centre primarily the narratives of straight, white, cisgender men. As a result, examples of power fantasies for minority and marginalised identities are scarce. In a panel at the 2017 Nordic Games Conference, media critic Anita Sarkeesian stressed that video games still "don't really know" what a Female

Power Fantasy looks like, and that "we haven't really had space to design and develop that in a lot of meaningful ways" (Batchelor, 2017). This chapter is one important step in rectifying that oversight. It will examine data collected from a survey of over 350 female video game players and several follow-up interviews to map examples of empowerment, wish-fulfilment, and resonance of video game characters in female gaming spaces, as well as identify what an effective Female Power Fantasy might look like, according to players themselves. Adrienne Shaw writes that "in order to study representation in video games, researchers must understand how players actually interact with games and how game play contexts shape the implications of a given representation" (2014, p. 37). As such, this research acknowledges that it is not enough to simply take a given video game character at face value and interpret them through a feminist lens – this does not allow for intricacies produced by the contexts within which each individual person plays. Similarly, it does not attempt to categorise female video game characters as 'more' or 'less' empowering than others, applying a numerical hierarchy to something as subjective and personal as empowerment is fundamentally flawed. Instead, this chapter identifies trends and similarities in answers across the women surveyed in order to provide insight into general traits that an effective Female Power Fantasy must possess, according to players themselves.

The findings of this research come at a point when the gaming assemblage is seeing more female visibility than ever, but is still troubled by images of female power. As such, it is a crucial time to interrogate what images of female power look like, and indeed, what archetypes we can expect from the industry going forward. Shira Chess' *Ready Player Two* (2017) stresses the academic importance of 'girl games' in spite of the genre's lack of relevance to the lived experience of actual female players; this chapter similarly will examine the importance of the potential for a Female Power Fantasy archetype, even as it remains nebulous and without full form. It is important to question whether a Female Power Fantasy could – or indeed, *should* – be designed and developed (to use Sarkeesian's words) in the same way as the archetypal Male Power Fantasy. There is significant overlap in traits associated with both power and masculinity – strength, fortitude, muscles, etc. – and given the societal tendency to cast masculinity and femininity as dichotomous, examples of powerful femininity are thus less defined (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Bertozzi, 2012; Salter & Blodgett, 2017). Female Power Fantasies formed of societal expectations of

female power thus risk either oversimplified, offensive stereotyping such as that employed by the 'girl games' genre explored previously, or reifying similarly problematic, neoconservative values to those of the traditional Male Power Fantasy. As such, this chapter gathers data through ethnographic study, because "we cannot discuss representation in games without taking into account the subcultural norms within and against which they are consumed, […] nor can we unpack the meaning of representation in games without taking into account the context in which they are played" (Shaw, 2014, p. 38). The vast amount of fan-created content – fiction, art, crafts, cosplay, streams, video – proliferating the gaming assemblage is evidence that despite the Female Power Fantasy's relative lack of definition, games and their characters and contents continue to resonate with female fans. It is thus important to consider what characters made ostensibly *for* them might look like, by asking them themselves.

Methodology

This chapter draws largely from survey data detailed in the Introduction; the survey was circled both in-person and online via Twitter, ultimately resulting in data collected from 359 women who game from across the world. The survey featured multiple questions, but the three most pertinent to this chapter are as follows:

1. *The term 'power fantasy' is often used to describe a character the audience wants to be, or whom the audience feels empowered by. With this in mind, what characteristics would a female video game character have to possess for you to describe her as a 'female power fantasy'?*

2. *The role of video games and the gaming community in the empowerment/disempowerment of women has been a heavily debated topic in recent years. Have you ever felt empowered by a female video game character or a video game starring a female protagonist? If so, which character, which game, and why?*

3. *Are there any additional characteristics, mechanics, or other relevant in-game features that you consider to be essential to find a female video game character empowering? Please list them below.*

The survey data was coded manually into Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software that allowed for the organisation and analysis of responses. Asking 359 individuals for their opinions on such a subjective topic naturally generated 359 distinct responses, however, patterns emerged. These were then delved into further during follow-up gaming interviews with four survey respondents. This chapter occasionally draws upon data gathered from these interviews in order better contextualise and detail certain findings.

Playing with Power

When prompted to consider what their idea of a Female Power Fantasy might look like, some survey respondents struggled to answer. "I honestly can't even put those statements together," one wrote, "power fantasies feel like something inextricably tied to make [sic – male] stereotypes - beating up the bad guys, being king, being surrounded by attractive women. It's hard not to trade in stereotypes in the opposite direction when talking about women." Indeed, as mentioned above, power can be difficult to define, particularly images of female power. This work generally takes a Foucauldian view of power, recognising that while power can most keenly be felt through oppressive hegemonic systems (such as those described by Marx), it also exists within the individual, and is both created and bolstered by discourse and knowledge. "Power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production," writes Foucault (1991, p. 194). If power shapes knowledge, then within video games the power lies with those who shape the narrative – typically the player avatar, or the player themselves. With so many video game protagonists cast as male, it is no wonder that so many struggle to see alternative ways to (to use Nintendo's early 1980s slogan) 'play with power.'

Invoking Foucauldian analyses of power is also pertinent given the contexts within which women and girls game, as outlined in Chapter One. The barriers to play that they face are keenly felt through a long history of othering within the gaming assemblage, indistinguishable from the surveillance tactics Foucault identifies as utilised by disciplinarian regimes in *Discipline and Punish* (1979). Not only are the actions of women and girls in gaming spaces actively policed by misogynistic gatekeepers, but the spectre of surveillance remains present even in offline, private engagement with video game content, in-part due

to the ever-present paratextual nature of the 'gamer' as an (exclusionary) identity category with which women and girls must grapple. How exactly this impacts their ludic activity is examined in further detail in Chapter Three.

With these enduring struggles in mind, and given the importance this chapter places on the Female Power Fantasy as defined by audience study rather than by studios or cultural stereotypes, providing an absolute definition of power risks being adversely reductionist in this instance. "Discourse transmits and produces power," writes Foucault, and can be "both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, […] a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (1978, p. 101). Overruling survey respondent's own subjectivities with a singular definition of power could undermine the discursive power of my survey respondents and interviewees – as such, this chapter takes a largely subjective approach to definitions of power, preferring audiences to define such concepts on their own terms. This allows for a better analysis of responses and the contexts within which they are presented, without risk of seeking out 'correct' answers that align with those defined by this work.

Male Power Fantasies

Fantasies of male power are unsurprisingly common in a medium largely considered to be a bastion of heterosexual masculinity. Vigilante superheroes (Batman, *Batman: Arkham* series (2009-2015)), misunderstood antiheroes (Dante, *Devil May Cry* series (2001-2019); Kratos, *God of War* series (2005-2018)), 'chosen one' protagonists (*Dark Souls*' Chosen Undead (2011); *Skyrim*'s Dragonborn (2011); *Kingdom Hearts'* Keybearers (2002)), average joes thrust into danger (Gordon Freeman, *Half-Life II* (2004)) – each allow for the exploration of fantasies of power in a variety of different ways. Common examples are narratives that enable an individual to have power over the game's outcome, to overcome some sort of task or difficulty, or to topple some other form of power – such as that of a corporation or an overarching villain. These are, of course, not the only depictions of men in video games – in fact, the abundance of male avatars within the medium permits a variety of representations of masculinity, "[allowing] for a diversity of expression that minority and marginalised characters […] are rarely afforded within gaming narratives" (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 77). That being said, Male Power Fantasies remain one of the most common power

fantasies within video games as a medium, and as such, one of the most visible examples of idealised masculinity. In addition, as explorations of power their actions in-game tend to engage with real-life political issues or social anxieties that may resonate with the presumed audience of archetypal male gamers. This becomes problematic when we consider that many Male Power Fantasies demonstrate traits associated with toxic masculinity (aggression, violence, misogyny, etc.) and hegemony (racism, xenophobia, etc.), making them less fantasies of empowerment and more fantasies of dominance. "Rape culture, inscriptions of toxic masculinity, and homophobia are ubiquitous to gaming," write Gray, Voorhees, and Vossen (2018, p. 3), highlighting the archetype's use in enforcing traditionalist and conservative political ideologies. As such, often the Male Power Fantasy can be more appropriately dubbed the Straight, White, Cisgender Male Power Fantasy, that elevates the privileged at the expense of marginalised demographics. Commonly a heroic quest in a video game – such as saving the world, or the human race, for example – involves a threat to the status quo that must be thwarted by the player in order to restore 'peace'. In this way, many video game narratives seek not to interrogate and deconstruct hierarchies of power, but to uphold and protect them, providing players with "both training grounds for the consumption of narratives and stereotypes and opportunities to become instruments of hegemony" (ibid). Video games that cast the presumed archetypal male gamer as an underdog on a mission similarly play into what Salter and Blodgett describe as a yearning for "not the removal of an unbalanced social system that benefits one type of masculinity, but simply the inversion of the system to support their form of masculinity," that leaves "the cultural norm of unequal power in place," but with themselves at the precipice instead (2017, p. 34). It is from here – the intersection between power fantasies and real-world power hierarchies – where the Male Power Fantasy must be critiqued, as often they lean towards exhibitions of conservative individualised fantasies of dominance rather than fantasies of collective upheaval or social justice. In this way, the problematic aspects of many Male Power Fantasies are not necessarily the traits they embody, but the societal contexts within which they exist, the cultural anxieties with which they engage, and the agendas they perpetuate. Being able to exhibit competence when playing at "'hard' masculinities" is "important to establishing and enforcing masculinity outside the game" (Bertozzi, 2012, p. 5), given the significant cultural overlap between representations of masculinity and power, it is thus important to interrogate, critique, and evolve fantasies of

power within video game narratives. This also reinforces the importance of researching idealised images of female power through the eyes of video game players themselves, as ethnographic study allows for answers to be contextualised by the players, rather than by dominant hierarchies present within the gaming assemblage or wider society. In summary, while Male Power Fantasies often exhibit restrictive traits, "built upon harmful hierarchies of power [and] the traditional hypermasculine definition" (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 36), this does not have to be the case. As one survey respondent answered, power fantasies within video games have the capacity "to confront and mitigate the violent effect of oppressive systems of power," and act not as extensions of supremacy, but as tools for empowerment and resistance for players.

Women and Power

Male Power Fantasies are of course, not alone in their employment of problematic stereotypes and restrictive ideals; the way the gaming assemblage approaches the relationship of women to power is similarly fraught. "The focus on male as actor in these games allows us to consider the woman as passive," write Salter and Blodgett, "and that passivity holds consequences for the perception of feminine in geek identity" (2017, p. 76). The ubiquitous nature of the powerful male avatar coupled with the tendency to dichotomise representations of masculinity and femininity (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Harvey, 2015; Salter & Blodgett, 2017) renders representations of female power as a rarity – and often riddled with problems.

When considering women's relationship to power in video games, the most prominent examples are actually ones that involve their direct disempowerment; a common trope within the medium is to cast women as damsels in distress – kidnapped, killed, or otherwise endangered – to motivate a typically male protagonist within their own narrative. This is not to say that women never hold positions of power within video game narrative hierarchies (two of the most prominent video game damsels, Peach from the *Super Mario* franchise (1985-present) and Zelda from the *Legend of Zelda* series (1986-present) are princesses, so presumably hold monarchical power), nor that female video game characters never seek power – political, physical, or otherwise. But notably, this power is often easily stripped from them, and to obtain power often comes at a far greater risk compared to

male video game characters. One such in-game example involves damsels in distress being non-consensually imbued with physical power by a primary antagonist, and subsequently transformed into a monstrous entity with no control over their actions. Upon discovery, they often must be 'cured' by either being defeated in combat or killed by the player/main character. Loss of control, loss of sanity, and even death are unnervingly common outcomes for female non-player characters who obtain physical power within video game narratives, utilised to "conjure up supernatural situations in which domestic violence perpetrated by men against women who have lost control of themselves not only appears justified, but is presented as an altruistic act for the woman's own good" (Sarkeesian, 2013).

Even when women in games do appear to successfully possess skill or physical power, it is often done so through a lens of heavy sexualisation. "Women are allowed to be violent only within the parameters allowed by patriarchal discourse," writes Cristina Lucia Stasia of female action heroes, "that is, they may be threatening but are always heterosexually attractive" (2004, p. 238). This acts dually as a tactic to avoid alienating the archetypal gamer – generally viewed by the gaming assemblage as incapable of identifying with female protagonists, as evidenced in Chapter One – but also, as Alison Harvey suggests, "one way of boundary policing against the intrusion of femininity in a male-dominated domain" (2015), thereby acting as an additional barrier to play for women who take issue with the hypersexualisation of women in the media. The sexualisation of powerful female characters – exaggerated proportions, exposed skin, and objectifying poses and camera angles – is of course, not exclusive to video games. Regarding the 1980s action movie genre, Yvonne Tasker explains that "if images of men have often needed to compensate for the sexual presentation of the hero's body through emphasising his activity, then images of women seem to need to compensate for the figure of the active heroine by emphasising her sexuality, her availability within traditional feminine terms" (1993, p. 19). Nevertheless, the sexualisation of female characters within video games is so common that it is often excused or justified as a natural by-product of video game production by players. As critiques of this convention have increased, some video games have written female nudity into their plot as an attempt to use the game's storyline to justify the sexualisation of powerful women as a necessity. The action-stealth game *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015) features Quiet, a mute assassin and trained sniper with superhuman abilities – one of which is the ability to breathe through her skin. As such, she must wear as little as possible, or risk

suffocation. In the face of criticism of her character design when she was first revealed in 2013, the game's director, Hideo Kojima, commented that "once you see how she fits into the story, you will understand why she looks the way she does" (IGN, 2013). In the third-person action-adventure game *Bayonetta* (2009), the titular character is a witch whose weapons and clothes are both formed from her long, Rapunzel-like hair, meaning the more attacks she combos together, the less clothing she wears. In her critique of 'girl games', Shira Chess argues that the subgenre suggests "expectation[s] of how women *should* play, rather than the realities of how they *do* play" (2017, p. 15). Similarly here, depictions of powerful women often suggest not what women *could* be, but what they *should* be according to patriarchal discourses of power – depicted not as potential power fantasies, but instead as sexual fantasies to satisfy the gaze of the gamer archetype.

It is important to note, however, that player's engagement with texts is subjective and contextual, and just because a game may have been created with a particular player type in mind, does not mean that its contents and characters cannot resonate with a wider audience. "Subjective reasons for play and personal preferences drive the very personal experience of identification much more than textual elements can," writes Adrienne Shaw, further highlighting the importance of ethnographic study in academic analyses of video game content. Looking beyond textual representation allows for nuances to be observed in how texts are engaged with, because "text alone does not define how the player interacts or connects with the characters or avatars" (2014, p. 109). Female characters that perpetuate problematic tropes may still inspire female audiences; over 170 different video game characters were identified as sources of empowerment by survey respondents for this research, with characters mentioned above (such as Lara Croft, Princess Zelda, and Bayonetta) ranked among them. As such, while representations of female power in video games are often limited in scope, their worth to female players may be altered based upon the conditions within which they are engaged with. "As a site of explicit gender play, in which the player can adopt different identities and gain a sense of personal power, gameplay offers potential as a liberating tool in and of itself," (Westecott, 2018, p. 252) meaning often women are not just (to borrow Nintendo's old slogan again) 'playing with power,' but also playing with what power *means* within the contexts of the gaming assemblage.

Empowering Women in Games

The nebulous and as-yet uncharacterizable Female Power Fantasy has been preceded by thousands of female video game characters throughout the history of the medium, many of which have resonated with female audiences. As such, survey respondents were asked not just about traits they consider applicable to an archetypal Female Power Fantasy, but also if they had "ever felt empowered by a female video game character or a video game starring a female protagonist," and to expand on their experiences and reasons why. This research understands empowerment broadly to mean being imbued with a satisfying sense of purpose, confidence, determination, or autonomy, though, as with power, it recognises that definitions of empowerment are subjective and contextual, and as such respondents were left to interpret the question as they wished.

Overall, 170 different female characters were cited by respondents as having imbued them with a sense of empowerment – a statistic that, taken in isolation, seems quite high, implying that the gaming assemblage is full of robust depictions of women and girls which resonate with female players. However, of these 170 characters, only nine were mentioned more than ten times, and only two – Commander Shepard (FemShep) from the *Mass Effect* trilogy (2007-2012) and Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* franchise (1996-2018) – were mentioned more than fifty times, despite the survey receiving over 350 responses. This overall lack of consensus on which existing female video game characters actively empower female players instead indicates that there are very few adequate examples to be found within the gaming assemblage.

This is unsurprising for several reasons – afore-mentioned hostile practices within the gaming assemblage "tend to place players into male/female categories, rather than less binary approaches," and as such many games – and characters – are designed with the archetypal straight, white, cisgender male gamer in mind (Chess, 2017, p. 16). Those that are designed 'for women' are typically done so with a "non-existent feminised player" in mind, who "is almost necessarily white, middle class, and heterosexual," and "plays in ways that often presume a desire for domesticity, for consumer goods, and for Western concepts of beauty" (p. 28). These binaries not only do not represent the lived realities of many players within the gaming assemblage, but also invariably split games with deep lore, compelling plots, and heavy action – where we might be likely to see more involved

characters – and games for filling time, with light plots, and casual elements, by gender. This means games that are more likely to place the player in positions of empowerment – where they are granted agency and a sense of purpose and autonomy over a game's plot – are often crafted for a male gaze, and as such, any potential empowerment felt by female players is largely unintentional. Similarly, games created 'for women' – or more specifically, the designed identity of "Player Two" according to Chess – are not only "at odds with actual players," but also far less likely to feature traditionally empowering situations due to hegemonic presumptions about women's interests and leisure pursuits (Chess, 2017). In addition, the act of empowerment is subjective, often intensely personal, and reliant on the contexts within which an individual games; as such, it is unsurprising that a large-scale survey of women who game resulted in a large pool of female characters cited as empowering, but little consensus on any one character as a compelling example of such. The lived reality of female players and their multitudinous intersectional identities places them at odds with binary presumptions in development and marketing tactics, these results further trouble the problematic notion that female gamers are a homogenous group dichotomously oppositional to the archetypal male gamer, or a group that can be pacified with the superficial 'girl games' genre.

It is also important to note that 61 respondents commented that they had never felt empowered by an existing female video game character – this was the second-most cited answer to this question. Given that "media texts provide us with source material for what might be possible, how identities might be constructed, and what worlds we might live in," an interrogation of these responses is insightful, and offers a greater understanding of the nuances of female player's relationships with texts (Shaw, 2014, p. 3).

Of these 61 individuals, several provided further explanations alongside their answers. Some stressed the differences for them between an enjoyable, compelling character and an empowering one – "like, sure there have been some really great female characters, but none that made me feel really empowered," wrote one respondent, while another commented that "I don't think I have ever personally felt empowered by a game character. There are some I have loved and identified with, but saying I felt *empowered by that character* wouldn't be true." The differences established here by these respondents are indicative of "the ways individuals identify with video game and media characters in ways that do not always correspond to identifying as members of specific marginalised

groups" – a character can be an engrossing and complex representation of a certain identity group, but this does not necessitate identification *with*, or empowerment *of* audiences that share that identity. This further foregrounds the importance of viewing representation "as situated within larger contexts," rather than merely textually and homogenously (Shaw, 2014, p. 56).

Other respondents actively struggled to answer when prompted – "I skipped this question because I originally couldn't think of one," wrote one respondent, while another similarly explained "I'm struggling to think of any video games with mandatory female protagonists that I've played, empowering or not." While several high-profile video games with female protagonists have been released since this data was collected, these responses highlight how even contemporarily, female protagonists in certain game genres remain relatively scarce.

Some felt that the female characters offered by the gaming assemblage were either unrealistic, or unrelatable in some way: "they were always plastic or seemed uncommon," one respondent wrote, "something to which the average woman could not aspire." Another wrote that they actively preferred to play games with male protagonists because they "find the female characterisations under-developed or disinteresting." To these respondents, a degree of relatability is a necessity, and a lack of it often prevents them from establishing a connection to the largely "bland" or "absurdly unrealistic" female video game characters they describe. Further, a number of respondents cited the sense that a character was not made 'for them' as a barrier to empowerment. "No I have not played any [games] with an empowering female protagonist. Unless it's *Mass Effect*, in which case your character has almost exactly the same storyline regardless of which character you choose," wrote one respondent, "pretty much all other video games I have played with females have pink and girly characters or token women with massive sex appeal." This response highlights how binary gendered characterisations of video games ultimately fail female players' ludic desires. Another response echoed these sentiments, pointing out gendered differences in character-creation that they found alienating: "each time they [developers] introduced a playable female she always seemed to be weaker (physically)." One respondent wrote "I've never really felt empowered by your traditional player protagonist," but added that "I love my main in WoW [*World of Warcraft* (2004)] and that's because I have the power to make her who I want her to be. I'm not forced into running around in a mailkini even though it's

an option for those who do wish to." Their answer implies a disdain for the hypersexualisation of female video game characters, but also is one of many responses that spoke of finding empowerment through characters they had created themselves.

The significant number of respondents whose feedback highlights them having never experienced empowerment while gaming points to both a dearth of depictions of competent, confident, and autonomous women in games, but also highlights wider nuances at play with regards to players' identification with texts as subjects. One respondent who explained that they "don't find empowerment or disempowerment in pop culture generally" added that "the games where I am 'told' to find the female character empowering annoy the shit out of me - it always comes across as pandering and disingenuous." This affirmatively echoes arguments by Shaw that "identity, identification, and representation are much more complicated" than often considered in academic analyses of video games, and troubles the notion that "members of marginalised groups are 'naturally' concerned with representation of a group in which they might be classified" (2014, p. 22). Some respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with the way many video games represent women as objects of heterosexual male desire, whereas this particular respondent voiced their concerns about insincere attempts to appeal to women who game. These examples highlight how representation does not necessarily lead to identification or empowerment, and further encourage analyses of audiences alongside texts when researching gender in video games, because a focus on identification rather than identity "allows for the contextual self-definition of the individual, rather than defining them from the outside" (Shaw, 2014, p. 64).

This point is particularly significant when considered alongside additional responses to the question of whether or not survey respondents had experiences of empowerment while gaming. The results show that many of the most cited female characters were specifically from games that give players a degree of agency and control over the character creation process. Commander Shepard from the *Mass Effect* trilogy (2007-2012) was the most cited, with 76 responses; the three player characters from the *Dragon Age* trilogy (2009-2014) received 34 aggregated responses in total; and the *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* protagonist, the Dragonborn (2011) was cited by 12 respondents. All are leads in role-playing games that allow players to customise the physical features and, to a degree, the

choices and actions of the protagonist throughout each game's overarching narrative. In total, 122 respondents mentioned characters they had a hand in designing as empowering.

This suggests correlation between a character's creation process and that character's potential for player empowerment – when players are given more agency over who a character could be, they then are more likely to be invested in and affected by who they become. The *Mass Effect* trilogy is a sci-fi role-playing game that puts players in control of protagonist Shepard, whose gender, race, and physical features are decided by players at start-up and whose overall character (including romantic interests) are decided by players throughout the course of the game. FemShep – the fan-made nickname for the female version of Shepard, as opposed to BroShep or MShep for the male version – resonated with survey respondents as a figure of empowerment. One respondent explained her as having "the possibility of being rigidly righreous [sic], abhorrently evil or a mix of the two. You could project yourself on her since she was partially defined by what you wanted her to be like." Another respondent similarly praised FemShep, saying "it's empowering to be able to PICK yourself and play a customised version of what you imagine your ideal is and watch them become the special snowflake that saves the galaxy/world." Amanda Phillips writes that Commander Shepard's customisability in an otherwise rigid story provide the audience with "fissures into which gamers suture their own investments and begin to 'identify with' the character" (2020, p. 139). Indeed, characters such as FemShep "emerge as a character in [their] own right only through the extensive fan labour that brought [them] to life" (2020, p. 154), namely it is through fan's intertextual interpretations of customisable characters like FemShep, *Skyrim*'s Dragonborn, and *Dragon Age*'s Warden, Hawke, and Inquisitor that their power as identifiable and potentially empowering figures is unlocked. "Being able to play as a woman I designed made me feel strong and powerful how I wanted to be," wrote one respondent, "I could choose to be purely charismatic and physically attractive and quick, or I could choose to be a warrior goddess of sorts, with visible muscle build and brute force combat styles." Rather than create a character in their own image, the respondent highlights choice as the ultimate arbiter in their empowerment. This response echoes findings by Shaw (2014) and later in this chapter, in that while player identity may be largely fixed, it does not always determine identification and empowerment, which are far more flexible and changeable.

While it is clear that a significant number of survey respondents view customisable characters like FemShep positively, it is important to highlight the shortcomings of such protagonists as well. Optional representation – such as differing body types, race sliders, options for queer relationships, etc. – "place the burden of representation on players themselves," allowing developers (such as *Mass Effect*'s Bioware) to reap the benefits of being considered relatively progressive in a largely hegemonic space, without actively diversifying their canon cast of characters (Shaw, 2014, p. 34). Often in the gaming assemblage, the bar is set so low that any degree of customisability is seen as progressive. Phillips cites Commander Shepard as an example of this; at several points in the *Mass Effect* trilogy it becomes obvious that FemShep is actually just BroShep reskinned from a traditionally cis-male to cis-female body, all of which "add up to reveal a core belief in women as the second, ornamental sex." Cheaply substituting diversity signifiers over a white male default allow developers to maintain "a maximum appearance of diversity (which theoretically comes with increased market share) at the lowest cost" (2020, p. 152). This can be seen in numerous games – *Mass Effect 1* and *2*, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, *Dragon Age II*, and the *Fable* trilogy (2004-2010) – are all well-known for featuring customisable protagonists, yet all centralise a white male default in promotional materials and box art. Shaw notes that this strategy is a core aspect of neoliberal practices within the gaming assemblage. "Good neoliberal subjects are responsible for themselves, and, thus, are responsible for their own media representation," as such, capitalistic production strategies shift the onus for better representation from game development studios to already-marginalised individuals within the gaming assemblage (2014, p. 35).

While these criticisms all apply to *Mass Effect*'s FemShep, her resonance with numerous survey respondents – to the point where she convincingly topped the list of characters cited as empowering – is worthy of note. FemShep's interchangeability with BroShep, which Phillips argues makes her "not a woman at all, but a consensual hallucination" (2020, p. 138), was cited by several respondents as a source of empowerment for them. "Even though I rarely play as myself, I like to make women characters that I think are cool," wrote one respondent, "and I like when the game has to give gender-neutral responses to player actions so they can't comment on how I'm a woman." Another respondent wrote **"**I guess I would feel empowered by playing female Commander Shepard from *Mass Effect* because she's treated the same as MShep in virtually every way even

though she's a woman." For several respondents, Bioware's decision to layer interchangeable surface-level signifiers of diversity over a white male default avatar actively resulted in feelings of empowerment and agency. However, question one and two of the survey (analysed later in this chapter) yielded responses that overwhelmingly indicate that respondents value Female Power Fantasies that are more than simply feminised versions of pre-existing male avatars, and that they are not placated by 'gender-swapping' in video games. As such, FemShep's resonance with female players, rather than contradict academic critiques of the character as an example of neoliberal representation practices, instead hints at what respondents want from their Female Power Fantasies – to be treated as a Male Power Fantasy would be within the game's narrative: with agency, power, and respect. "Playing as a female protagonist in the *Mass Effect* games, and having dialogue options that felt like options I would actually use in that position, made me feel like *I* had agency in that world, rather than feeling like I was merely guiding someone else through it," wrote one respondent, "FemShep could be *me*, instead of me pretending to be FemShep, and still accomplish things." In this way, Commander Shepard's interchangeable attributes and identities are less influential than the narrative within which she acts, the labour invested into her story, and the contexts within which she exists. Phillips describes her as "a hegemonic structure (an avatar centred in white masculinity) riddled with holes and inconsistencies through which fans have achieved solidarity […] by inhabiting her contradictions, learning from them, and leveraging them to speak back to the policies demonstrating that she (and they) are less than in gamer culture" (2020, p. 169). As such, FemShep is not so much greater than the sum of her parts, but greater than the sum of her missing parts.

The only other female video game character to be cited as a source for empowerment more than fifty times by respondents is Lara Croft, of the *Tomb Raider* (1996-present) franchise. As one of the first female protagonists of an action-adventure video game, Croft was afforded agency that many other female video game characters at the time did not have, earning her status as an "icon of the PlayStation generation" with a "cult" following of dedicated fans (*Playstation 2: Official Magazine UK*, 2006; Silverton, 1997). For several respondents, Croft's representation marked a departure from the typical industry treatment of other female video game characters, including the limited few female protagonists that existed at the time of her debut. One respondent wrote:

"She was the first female protagonist I ever played in a video game. I was 9. Before that, in all the games I played, any female characters were the sidekicks or the character that had to be rescued, like in *Zelda* or *Mario*, but in *Tomb Raider*, Lara is the one who gets to go on the adventures. And it isn't a simulator game or one where you go collect stars or coins, it's a serious action/adventure game. Lara is an archaeologist who is smart, tough, and competent, not a love interest or damsel in distress. She can shoot guns, scale walls, and leap over pits of lava. She made me believe girls could be just as strong as boys, and while I didn't exactly want to go exploring temples or pyramids like she did, I still wanted to be as cool as her."

To this respondent, Croft's strength, intelligence, and competence differentiated her from most other representations of women in video games they saw as a child, who were often depicted as damsels in distress, sidekicks, or props in a (male) hero's story. Croft ability to avoid being cast in a role that is typically known to "disempower female characters and rob them of a chance to be heroes in their own right" ultimately led to player empowerment (Sarkeesian, 2013). Another respondent's answer expressed similar sentiments, stating "one of the games I played a lot growing up was *Tomb Raider*. Lara Croft was a great source of empowerment for me as a young teenage girl – she was intelligent, adventurous, and brave. She could handle herself in all sorts of situations, even on her own." Over half of respondents were between the ages of 25 and 34 years old when they filled in the survey, which explains why a number of them exhibit nostalgic fondness towards childhood memories of early *Tomb Raider* games (released in 1996, 1997, and 1998). For many, Croft was an early example of powerful womanhood, and her debut brought with it representation heretofore unseen in the games industry. *Tomb Raider* foregrounds a woman's strength, intelligence, and hero-status without hiding her femininity or casting her as a female counterpart to a successful man, as with previous female-led video games, such as *Metroid* (1986) and *Ms. Pac-Man* (1983), and that resonated with respondents.

While Croft's influence on the gaming assemblage since the release of the first *Tomb Raider* game cannot be understated, she has also been the subject of much critique for her problematic framing as a symbol of both hypersexualised femininity and postfeminist discourse in games. Early marketing for the series focused on Croft as both a powerful,

dangerous subject and an attractive, sexual object. An early magazine advert for *Tomb Raider* depicts Croft with her guns drawn and at her side, staring out of the page with an eyebrow raised; the page's primary text reads "sometimes, having a killer body just isn't enough," and that anyone or anything standing in the way of the game's "heroine heartthrob" are "all tempting fate once in Lara's path." It ends with "but hey, what's a little temptation? Especially when everything looks this good. In the game, we mean" (*GamePro Magazine* #98, 1996). The use of Croft as commodified set dressing in adverts for her own game was common; R. Mejia and B. LeSavoy highlight the gaming assemblage's treatment of the character as an example of Laura Mulvey's theory of fetishistic scopophilia – in which "the complexity of the feminine" is reduced "into a beautiful object: something that exists solely for the viewer and whose beauty obscures and displaces the threat she might otherwise represent" (Mejia & LeSavoy, 2018, p. 92; Mulvey, 1975). This is particularly plain to see in the franchise's marketing – one magazine advert for *Tomb Raider III* (1998) bears the tagline "she's back… in her biggest adventure to date" underneath a close-up of Croft's buttocks in her trademark brown shorts; another shows Croft lying down nude, censored by a tactically-placed bedsheet, with the tagline "it's hard to believe, but I just get better and better" (*PlayStation Official UK Magazine*, Christmas 1998 Issue). The sexual bravado attributed to Croft in these adverts may place her in a more 'active' role – actively rather than passively sexual – yet still ultimately indicate attitudes towards female video game protagonists clearly intended Croft as meant to be looked at as much as played as.

This sentiment was not lost on survey respondents, several of whom expressed critical views of the historic sexualisation of Lara Croft within the gaming assemblage. One wrote that they love Croft "as she was the first, but sadly wearing far too little clothing which is not good!" Another described her as "tough, smart, and a female lead," but added "she didn't need to be all about the boobs, though." This comment references Croft's iconic physique – allegedly introduced when Croft's creator, Toby Gard, accidentally increased the size of the character's breasts by 150% during *Tomb Raider*'s development, a mistake which ended up being kept after a discussion with the rest of the creative team (McLaughlin, 2008). Several respondents picked up on this: one wrote that they felt empowered by Lara Croft, but that "the only drawback was her physical appearance, which was clearly to draw in male players." Another noted that they felt empowered by the rebooted Croft – specifically in *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015) – but that "the original had Lara dressed in

tight fitted shorts and a vest, sexualising her," which they felt "strips the strong, independent traits as it makes her viewable as a sex icon from the male gaze."

Many respondents, however, cite Croft as empowering in spite of development and marketing tactics that invariably resulted in her hypersexualisation. "I never felt she needed the help of any man," wrote one respondent. "I never had a problem with her sexualised look because it did not seem to be *for* anyone. I can't imagine Lara to be disrespected by anyone without that guy regretting it really soon." Another explained "I loved *Tomb Raider* as a child - the sexualisation issues never occurred to me, because I was not yet aware of sexualisation in that way, and felt I could fully identify with a player-character for the first time." These responses highlight the nuances at play when it comes to identity and identification – "we can interpret Lara as a character with all of the tools of film theory, semiotics, and cultural production, those approaches, while valuable, do not tell us about how fans interact with her evolving characterisation" (Shaw, 2014, p. 63). In the case of both FemShep and Lara Croft, the survey responses suggest that characters have empowerment-potential regardless of who the audience is presumed to be, and while certain characteristics – most notably objectification – may make respondents wary, a character's empowering qualities lies in their potential as an empathetic subject, rather than as an object of power. For example, one respondent notes that Lara Croft is "an actual person, with fears, doubts, flaws, but she keeps trying, she pushes forward even though she's not sure how it'll turn out. That's life."

The wide range of feedback when queried on whether or not respondents had experienced empowerment while gaming speaks to the nuances of the gamer as a subject. My approach to this question echoes the 2014 work of Adrienne Shaw, who "rather than talking to players about how they connected with particular characters and then using their demographics to interpret those relationships," instead "began the discussion of representation by asking interviewees if, how, and why they identified with media characters generally as well as video game characters or avatars" (p. 65). In doing so, I was able to review respondents' play preferences regarding pre-existing video game characters, providing me with important context when analysing their answers to the important question of what their ideal Female Power Fantasy would be like.

Female Power Fantasies

Survey respondents were asked the following question:

> The term 'power fantasy' is often used to describe a character the audience wants to be, or whom the audience feels empowered by. With this in mind, what characteristics would a female video game character have to possess for you to describe her as a 'female power fantasy'?

This question received 359 responses, containing nearly 2500 suggestions for traits that respondents' ideal Female Power Fantasy would embody. Using the qualitative analysis software Nvivo, these responses were subsequently grouped by similarity into roughly 70 categories, providing me with numerical standings for respondents' most cited traits. The wide variety of responses speak to the varied subjectivities of each survey respondent, and highlight that there is no fully agreed upon idea of what a definitive Female Power Fantasy should be. However, certain traits were mentioned far more frequently than others, creating mappable patterns of characteristics that indicate certain key themes were important to a significant number of respondents when filling in the survey. From here, five specific traits were identified as key to a Female Power Fantasy.

Strength

Strength in a variety of forms was cited by a significant number of respondents – 147 in total – as key to their ideal Female Power Fantasy. As one respondent put it, a Female Power Fantasy to them is an "independent female heroine who is strong alone without the help of male characters; physically strong and capable of defending herself." Given the inherent links between commonly seen fantasies of power and strength, fortitude, and muscularity, respondents' focus on strength as a trait is unsurprising. Power fantasy narratives typically centre hypermasculine individuals who are "taller, stronger, more powerfully muscled, lacking in softness or curves, and just physically larger than those around them" (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 23), solidifying the link between power and physicality.

However, while physical strength was commonly cited by respondents, so too was emotional and mental strength. "The character would be emotionally strong – able to adapt to situations and unfazed by setbacks," wrote one respondent, "they will be independent

and resourceful and able to solve their own problems without needing male help! Physical strength and agility would be a bonus!" For this respondent, steadfastness and emotional resilience were prioritised, while physical strength was an afterthought. This already differentiates the Female Power Fantasy as designed by survey respondents from the traditional Male Power Fantasies designed by the games industry. Salter and Blodgett identify two common characters in geek fiction presented as male wish-fulfilment, the afore-mentioned hypermasculine image of "physical extremism" is prominently featured, but so too is the "psychic hypermasculine ideal," characters who are not hulking examples of physical power, but are instead "cold, calculating, and highly logical" examples of superior intellect (2017, p. 24). Regardless of archetype, these two characters are united by their relative emotionlessness, due to the cultural tendency to denigrate emotional outbursts as overly feminine. As such, Male Power Fantasies perpetuate the stereotype that men should limit their emotions to those that are acceptably masculine – such as anger, for example. Survey respondents' answers, however, indicate that this expectation for Male Power Fantasies does not transfer over to their idealised Female Power Fantasies, many of whom were specifically cited as needing to possess strength "either physically or emotionally (or both)," and who is "physically/magically/emotionally strong enough to achieve their goals." Unlike the industry expectations for Male Power Fantasies, survey respondents here make it abundantly clear that an emotionally stunted character was not an adequate trade-off for excessive brawn, and that both were desirable.

One respondent expanded upon these sentiments with a variety of scenarios:

"She has to be strong in some way - physically or socially/politically, usually - and in a way that is not easily taken from her. A Queen who can't be dethroned just because some guy in her government doesn't approve of her; there'd have to be a ton of political intrigue. A high-up member of her armed forces group whose team respects her because she's a good leader, who can't just get busted down to private without cause. A superhero whose super strength has a weakness that's proportionate to the weaknesses of the male superheroes around her (so, say, she has her own version of Kryptonite, but otherwise is just as strong as the guys). She knows what she wants, she's doing her thing and doing it well. She can have flaws, because flaws make for more interesting characters, but if she's supposed

to be the best at something, I don't want her flaw to be in that thing unless it's because she's fought her way past that flaw to achieve."

While physical power is mentioned by this respondent, the examples they give largely centre positions of power as key to their manifestation of a Female Power Fantasy, and crucially that the power must be durable. There is a palpable combativeness to this response; the insistence that the character in question cannot be easily stripped of power indicates that this respondent is aware of the afore-mentioned tendency to have power given and removed from female video game characters against their will, and stresses that this problematic trope must be absent for a character to adequately perform as a power fantasy. Importantly, the respondent also states that a Female Power Fantasy does not have to be entirely flawless – noting that flaws increase their interest in a character's story – but that said flaws must be proportionate to male characters within the same narrative and not applied with a misogynistic motive. This sentiment is echoed in other responses, who all stress that their Female Power Fantasy must be strong in relative terms, rather than 'strong for a woman', for example. One respondent wrote that they expect a Female Power Fantasy "to show strength of all sorts on par with a male character (physical, character/personality, perseverence [sic], intellect, etc)," while another explained that their Female Power Fantasy possessed "goals other than male validation, a respectable societal role within the presented world, and strength that is not limited or partial to that of other characters based on her gender." These respondents appear keenly aware of the tendency for video game narratives to attribute oppositional traits to male and female characters, setting up "'masculine' and 'feminine' as natural dichotomies" that invariably cast male characters as powerful and active, and female characters as weak and passive (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998, p. 6). Their frustrations with such tropes are visible in many of the survey answers; for example, respondents repeatedly stressed the importance of a Female Power Fantasy that not only demasculinised strength as a characteristic, but that also did so without question. "She would be able to act feminine but also strong and would not be demeaned for this. In touch with her emotions for sure," wrote one respondent. Another similarly explained "I appreciate complex characters but a 'female power fantasy' character to me basically just means that she is strong, respected, the best of the best and is treated like it (preferably not 'despite' her gender, not treating it like a trait to be overcome)." In this way, respondents

made it abundantly clear that not only was strength – in many varieties – a preferable trait in their ideal Female Power Fantasy, but also that said strength must be framed affirmatively and not called into question by the game's narrative. Throughout these answers, a tension between respondents and their perceptions of the gaming assemblage's treatment of female characters and female players is evident.

Some respondents idealised simply "a powerful female character written like a generic powerful male character," someone with "a big ass sword! Big shoulders and biceps! Pretty much the same things for a male power fantasy, but on a female character." For these respondents, a Female Power Fantasy was not too far removed from her male counterpart. One respondent wrote that she must possess "visible strength/muscles, significant destructive power if magical," hinting at a desire to, as another respondent put it, "just blast it all away" if needed. These responses imply that, for some respondents, a Female Power Fantasy offers players the same opportunities as a Male Power Fantasy does – someone who "doesn't have to have a complex backstory or a horrific past of abuse to justify her going out and being powerful, but she's just a cool leader who is fun to play." That being said, it is clear from other responses cited above that simply providing players with a physically strong female video game character is not enough for many to consider her a Female Power Fantasy. For many respondents, the contexts within which a character's physical strength is framed is often as important as the trait itself – they specify that a physically strong female character placed in a setting that undermines (as opposed to challenges) her power is not what they envision for their ideal. This is a key theme throughout respondents' answers, as will become clear over the rest of this analysis.

Not Just a 'Female Version'

When this survey was released publicly on Twitter and at events in-person in 2017, I was keen to determine what traits female players themselves would attribute to their ideal Female Power Fantasy. Pre-existing characters that fit the power fantasy archetype are typically targeted towards a male demographic, whereas games targeted towards women and girls often reinforce hegemonic gender hierarchies that place fantasies of power out of reach for their target demographic. In this way, games that actually resonate with the lived experiences of female players are rare, because those marketed towards them "have had

very little to do with what a woman wants, and everything to do with what is wanted from a woman" (de Castell & Bryson 1998, p. 238). Because of this, I was not sure what to expect when asking respondents about the traits their ideal Female Power Fantasy would possess; I easily hypothesised that the archetype would stretch beyond the limited scope of the 'girl games' genre that centres domestic tasks and vanity as core women's interests, but my expectation was that the sexist values often present in the Male Power Fantasy would also not fully resonate with respondents. As such, while I considered it likely that the survey results would indicate some crossover between traits respondents mentioned and the traits associated with Male Power Fantasies, I was not sure to what extent.

As expected, the responses were varied and hinted at the individual subjectivities of each respondent, but what is abundantly clear is that respondents overwhelmingly cited that their Female Power Fantasy should possess a variety of traits from across the spectrum of stereotypically gendered attributes. Many respondents stressed that their ideal power fantasy must be courageous, determined, proactive, and resourceful – relatively standard traits for a Male Power Fantasy – alongside traits that are more commonly thought of as 'feminine', such as being compassionate, empathetic, emotional, graceful, attractive, and feminine. For example, one respondent wrote that their Female Power Fantasy would be "intelligent, confident, strong, not just physically but emotionally, yet able to maintain compassion and empathy, and still portrayed as feminine rather than embodying traditionally male characteristics, aka not a 'tomboy'." For this respondent, a power fantasy is not simply about characteristics in excess, but about their utilisation within a narrative. Their comment implies that an abundance of physical power and intellect means little without the capacity to utilise them in a compassionate and empathetic manner. In addition, they were keen to stress that their Female Power Fantasy's role as a power fantasy must not come at the expense of her femaleness, but instead harmonise with it. Similarly, another respondent wrote that their Female Power Fantasy would be "independent, emotionally strong, badass, but still capable of love," while a third respondent stated their Female Power Fantasy must be "physically agile, moderately strong or slightly muscular, feminine in a sense that she does not have to have masculine traits to be used as her strengths. Clever, generally knowledgeable, and caring. She has to be empathetic and logic [sic] at once. Not robotic or pure emotion. Her actions have to be realistic." Respondents' citation of powerful traits considered more 'masculine' – such as physical prowess, superior

intellect, and being 'badass' – alongside traits usually rejected by Male Power Fantasy archetypes for being too 'feminine', highlights a dissatisfaction with the notion of gendered traits in general, and a desire to push towards a more nuanced power fantasy archetype.

It is important to note that once again, a tension is perceivable in these answers. Respondents were often keen to distance their ideal Female Power Fantasy from problematic tropes prevalent in the gaming assemblage that other women who possess too many masculine traits or interests (through classification as 'tomboys' or having a "boy brain" (Harvey, 2015, p. 110) for example). Instead, they frequently mentioned the importance of a Female Power Fantasy whose identity encompasses and includes – rather than hides, problematises, or rejects – femininity or femaleness. "For me," wrote one respondent, "a character in a female power fantasy […] could be any level of feminine, and other people would not question whether she was weak because of it." Another respondent put it far more simply: their ideal Female Power Fantasy must be a "badass, highly skilled, total babe." Once again, the answers submitted by survey respondents indicate a knowledge of and frustration with the denigration of femininity in the gaming assemblage.

Similarly, respondents appeared to reject the idea that a Female Power Fantasy should simply be a female version of the pre-existing Male Power Fantasy. One respondent commented that a Female Power Fantasy must be "smart, tough, sexy (but in a way that empowers her), and able to be a leader. I like seeing characters whose feminity [sic] is important to them as characters, instead of the usual trope of 'male power fantasy with boobs'." This is important, because it highlights that respondents are not satisfied with the notion of a carbon-copy, reskinned Male Power Fantasy, who is often portrayed as rejecting traits and acts deemed too 'feminine'. Instead, their responses actively combat the possibility of an internally misogynistic Female Power Fantasy. One respondent explains:

> "I don't think all female characters should be written or presented like men just
> to give them some semblance of 'power', I like female characters who own their
> looks and enjoy showing them off, or simply enjoy 'girly' activities, but calling it
> out again and again irritates me to no end. Even if it's for a joke it's kind of done
> to death. Unless of course the whole point of the game is addressing what it's like
> to a be a woman or how people perceive women."

This respondent simultaneously celebrates traditionally feminine video game characters while critiquing their framing within video games themselves, indicating a rejection of 'lean in' female geekdom (explored further in Chapter Three) that often involves women playing along with industry misogyny in an attempt to fit in. Rather than adopt the notion that femininity and power are mutually exclusive traits, respondents frequently stressed the importance of a nuanced Female Power Fantasy whose femininity played a key role in their narrative, but additionally often explained that this was for the satisfaction of female – rather than male – players. As one respondent answered, a Female Power Fantasy to them must be "clever, respected, intimidating, physically powerful, politically savvy, feminine, not sexy, not sexualized by other characters within the game, not sexualized on screen for viewer/player (i.e., appearance not drawn or designed for male gaze)." These answers highlight that for respondents, a Female Power Fantasy must not only possess several empowering traits, but also have the power to fundamentally challenge the gaming assemblage's approach to women, girls, and femininity.

Another facet of the Female Power Fantasy mentioned by several respondents regards the character's position within a game's cast, and how their peers interact with them. Forty-seven respondents emphasised that their ideal Female Power Fantasy would be either in a leadership role within the game's narrative or possess leadership capabilities, while a further forty-four stressed that the character must be respected by their peers. Thirteen respondents also mentioned that they wanted their Female Power Fantasy to be supported by a strong friendship group. "Being capable, respected/trusted by others due to her capabilities" are key, wrote one respondent. "It's not just having a badass combat ability. […] Being looked upon as a comrade or leader, someone you can rely upon and admire, someone who is determined and strong-willed. How other people treat these women is what's empowering to me." This is important to note, as it links to prior observations about how respondents viewed their ideal Female Power Fantasy's strength – namely, that the contexts within which the power is displayed are just as important as a character possessing the power itself. In this way, respondents continued to emphasise that empowerment cannot be found in scenarios where female power is actively undermined. "For me, a character in a female power fantasy would be independent, in a position that afforded her the respect of others," wrote one respondent, "people would come to her for direction or advice, or look to her for leadership in battle." For respondents, not only is the

notion of being in a position of power important, but so too is being able to command trust and respect.

There is also an important observation to be made here about the desire for collectivity and collaboration between a Female Power Fantasy and their supporting cast. This is particularly interesting as it counters the tendency to cast Male Power Fantasies in geek media as lone heroes of a narrative, or surrounded by an often superficially-developed group of secondary characters. "To the audience, heroes are the central focus of the story and their interpersonal relationships are the engine that powers the story's action," explain Salter and Blodgett. "The secondary cast is developed to highlight the uniqueness of the hero, motivate them to action and reflect upon their triumphs." They argue that traditionally, the ordinary-seeming secondary cast is rarely developed outside of their relationship to the exceptional protagonist, to make the hero "unknowable but relatable" for audiences (2017, p. 20). Contrary to this expectation for many male heroes in pre-existing media, survey respondents' prioritisation of contexts in answers thus far appears to extend to the Female Power Fantasy's relationship with their supporting cast, which must consist of "a network of personal relationships that are mutually supportive and respectful in all directions," according to one respondent. Another similarly expressed desire for their Female Power Fantasy to be "maybe a bit of an underdog, but with loyal friends who respect and maybe admire her. Maybe she has problems, but she only works through them with people she's intimate with." The desire for a Female Power Fantasy to branch away from traditional geek media tendencies to present the hero as a solitary, awe-inspiring individual in favour of a well-regarded, collaborative hero who commands respect within a wider collective echoes activity in the wider gaming assemblage. The move by many female players to distance themselves from the antisocial, solitary, emotionally distant gamer archetype (Alexander, 2014; Golding, 2014; Harvey, 2015; Mulkerin, 2017) while simultaneously building safe communities for themselves through platforms such as Twitch and Discord are easily observed in the answers given by respondents to queries about Female Power Fantasies. Further, while some respondents did note that a Female Power Fantasy could command respect by any means necessary – for example, one wrote that she would have to be "respected either from her achievements or fear of her power," while another explained that "npcs [non-player characters] trust & respect the character (or fear her)" – others were keen to describe a Female Power Fantasy with both a developed moral

compass and a desire to change the world for the better. She must be "physically and morally invulnerable, able to do the right thing consistently," wrote one respondent, "someone who is able to reject restrictions or expectations placed on her because of her gender in order to protect herself, others, and other morally good acts." Another further explained:

> "She'd have to be super smart and sassy. Maybe [with] a great animal companion or a solid group of close-knit friends who are varied in their backgrounds. She'd have crucial role in that group, doesn't really matter what role. She'd need to be in charge and delegate tasks to others, but she'd also be equipped to give up leadership roles to work for a larger goal. I think her story arc for me would be crucial - I wanna see her going through problems, solving them, living with the consequences. I want to see her protect herself AND protect others."

While it is not necessarily surprising that respondents are keen for a Female Power Fantasy that is able to perform acts of heroism, the focus on both their capacity for moral good and their ability to enact societal change – as one respondent put it, "she wants to make the world a better place!" – is particularly interesting. Through answers such as these, respondents' desire for societal change within the gaming assemblage becomes starker. By specifying that a Female Power Fantasy must be multifaceted, contain a mix of 'gendered' tropes, and exist as part of a wider collective of characters, respondents clearly reject the hypothesis that a Female Power Fantasy is simply a female version of a pre-existing male archetype. They resist the urge to discard more stereotypically 'feminine' traits in order to fit in with traditional expectations, both of power fantasies, and of women's actions within the gaming assemblage in general. It is through the most popular traits cited when asked to imagine their Female Power Fantasy ideal, who has "the ability to change the world around [her]," that respondents' desires to change the world around themselves is made visible in these answers.

Intelligence

Many respondents commented on their need for an intelligent, cunning, politically adept, wise, rational, or witty Female Power Fantasy – in total intelligence in a variety of forms was

mentioned 120 times in the survey responses. The scope for what forms the trait would take was wide, and largely situational. There were respondents who wanted a logical thinker who could outmanoeuvre their foes with their quick-thinking; for example, one respondent specified their Female Power Fantasy must be "intelligent – being a good judge of character and able to clock a situation well, being aware of her surroundings and knowing when things are tipping out of her favour and she's maybe out of her depth." Others wanted a strategist, such as the respondent who said her Female Power Fantasy should be "able to outthink the people around her and be the one who saves the day with her awesome plan and strong heart." In line with the responses examined earlier that specify the desire for a well-respected, authoritative Female Power Fantasy, some respondents suggested that the character should be politically savvy or streetwise, for example, one respondent argued for "someone who gets results and can help her friends, whether through combat, smarts, mind-blowing artistry, or mad diplomacy skillz." One respondent suggested they felt empowered by the idea of playing a cunning, intelligent anti-hero, using *Overwatch*'s (2016) hacker character, Sombra, as an example:

> "With the release of Sombra on *Overwatch*, I find her a perfect example of my power fantasy. Mexican, incredibly intelligent, ambitious, focused, not easily intimated, a sense of humour, and more importantly, she's a bit self-serving. It sounds selfish, but we as women are expected to be the nurturing caregivers who sacrifice ourselves for others, so I would like to see someone who cares for herself and her interests as well."

While the situations described by respondents often varied, overwhelmingly they indicated a desire for a Female Power Fantasy whose intelligence is an asset. One respondent – who initially stated they could not imagine a Female Power Fantasy – went on to add that intellect was a key factor for them: "I feel like women worry they aren't seen as smart, so moments where we look smart and aren't shamed for it are glorious." As with previously analysed results, this response suggests that both the possession of a trait considered powerful, as well as said trait being utilised in a fashion that highlights, rather than undermines it, are key to respondents. This response also touches upon a significant barrier to play for women – the gendering of technological adeptness. "Video games are imbued with a masculine cultural capital," writes Alison Harvey, "and this is linked to how

hegemonic, heterosexual masculinity is deeply tied to performances of technological mastery" (2015, p. 34). Video games are considered a key gateway to interest in tech-based careers, as such, the gendering of the medium and utilisation of practices that limit access to women and girls ultimately create spaces that "reinforce the understanding of games as masculine tools and threaten the intelligibility of the female gamer subject-position" (p. 35). Women and girls are rarely seen as knowledgeable authorities within the gaming assemblage due to hegemonic assumptions about technological competency; with this in mind, it becomes clear why intelligence in a variety of forms ranked so highly as a trait for respondents' Female Power Fantasies.

Independence

One of the most interesting traits that survey responses identified as necessary for a Female Power Fantasy to possess was independence. 106 respondents – nearly a third of everyone who filled in the survey – specified the importance of independence, freedom, agency, autonomy, or self-reliance to their ideal Female Power Fantasy. "She should primarily be an ACTOR in her own story, instead of ACTED UPON," wrote one respondent. "I want her to have agency, with decisions that have consequences (this doesn't necessarily mean that I as a player need to have decision-making options)." This respondent clarifies that they are not detailing a desire for a non-linear story that offers the *player* narrative choices, specifically it is the sense that the *character* has choice and agency that empowers them when playing video games. Another respondent similarly stated that their Female Power Fantasy must "have agency over the plot – even if she has a commanding officer, her actions are her choice; she's the one to reach conclusions about new information or what needs to be done."

The frequency of this specification is worthy of note because it highlights respondents' perceptions of the differences in treatment of male and female figures within the gaming assemblage (and perhaps geek media more broadly). It is commonly believed that "the collective history of games is largely the story of women as passive, casual, or non-essential participants within a culture dominated by endless narratives of men and hegemonic masculinity," a deliberately disenfranchising retelling of facts that respondents appear familiar with, and frustrated by (Gray, Voorhees, & Vossen, 2018, p. 5). As with prior

answers, their combativeness against traditional gender roles often perpetuated within video game narratives is heavily apparent, and respondents are clearly keen to specify that a Female Power Fantasy must resist such practices if they are to appeal to female audiences. One particular specification mentioned repeatedly by respondents was that their ideal Female Power Fantasy in no way caters to, or is reliant upon, men. They must be an "independent female heroine who is strong alone without the help of male characters, physically strong and capable of defending herself," wrote one respondent. Another wrote that they must be "strong, independent, [and not] need to be saved by anyone." That a Female Power Fantasy possesses "autonomy that isn't dependent on men," according to one respondent, and is "free to make her own choices, [and] isn't corralled into being the sexy minx for other male characters or the male gaze," according to another, was clearly an important factor for many. Sarkeesian notes that women in video games often exhibit disproportionately more vulnerability and need for support than men in video games, so when respondents repeatedly insist upon a Female Power Fantasy that will, according to one respondent, "be independent and resourceful and able to solve their own problems without needing male help," it is clearly a critique of "patterns of men frequently carrying and helping women in situations where they are otherwise helpless" in video gameplay, as evidenced by the commonness of damsel in distress narratives and escort missions (Sarkeesian, 2017). Building upon this shared sentiment, some respondents specified that their Female Power Fantasy should not only be independent from men, but also actively dismantle hegemonic structures within the gaming assemblage through her existence and actions in-game. One respondent commented that their ideal Female Power Fantasy must have "independence from men and from patriarchal power; [the] ability to exert her will on the world around her, whether physically, magically, or politically; [and the] ability and inclination to tear down male-dominated power structures if need be." In this way, some respondents specified that they not only want a Female Power Fantasy who will empower and motivate them as an individual, but one who will also resist dominant patriarchal practices. "It's coded into the gameplay that men are the ones who kill and protect, and women are the ones who experience moments of helplessness and need to be carried," notes Sarkeesian, citing *Ico* (2001), *Resident Evil 4* (2005), and *Bioshock Infinite* (2013) as examples of this dynamic between male protagonist and female sidekick. Narratives that place female characters on the periphery of action that centres active male actors are often

accompanied by similarly disempowering gameplay mechanics. James Malazita's critique of *Bioshock Infinite: Burial at Sea Part 2* (2014) highlights this – he argues the "magical feminist" attributes exhibited by protagonist Elizabeth are undermined by gameplay engines that centre the gun-based combat of the game's precursor, *Bioshock Infinite*, helmed by combat-heavy male protagonist Booker DeWitt (Malazita, 2018). Anita Sarkeesian is similarly critical of how the gameplay of *Bioshock Infinite* frames Elizabeth, arguing in her *Tropes vs Women in Video Games* series that the gameplay choices made by developers reduce a character with powerful and potent magical abilities to little more than a glorified locksmith and ammo-providing plot macguffin (2017). Respondents, once again, are also keenly aware of and deeply frustrated by gendered power disparities in both game narratives and play mechanics – some cited the fighting game genre as an example of this, due to their tendency to offer female characters that are physically weaker (and far more sexualised) than their male counterparts. As such, respondents who specify that a Female Power Fantasy must "actively reject or overwrite traditional gender roles" and "take effective action against patriarchal values" are not just looking for a postfeminist femme fatale to placate them, but actively voicing concerns over long-standing and long-recognised tropes within the gaming assemblage as a whole, and using this survey question to idealise an alternate state of being.

The importance of independence to respondents' Female Power Fantasies – it was the fifth most cited trait overall – marks yet another subtle difference between the imagined Female Power Fantasy and pre-existing Male Power Fantasies. Respondents want a Female Power Fantasy whose strength is contextualised, used altruistically, and not undermined; whose intelligence counters long-running stereotypes of female tech incompetency; whose personality is multifaceted and prioritises teamwork and collaboration; and whose independence is not only assured, but also an active challenge to patriarchal standards in the gaming assemblage. The traits and nuances cited by respondents here repeatedly highlight key differences in industry and fan perceptions of male and female video game characters. In the case of independence, the difference is not in the trait itself, but in the fact that is it mentioned at all. Independence is commonly cited as a trait that 'strong women' possess (consider how many 'strong independent woman' inspirational quotes, memes, and thinkpieces proliferate the internet), whereas often for men, independence is rarely cited as a trait because it is always automatically assumed.

When looking at the gaming assemblage, men are not only the default gamer, but also often the heroes of games narratives, possessing power, agency, and an active influence over the plot. Women, on the other hand, are considered outsiders within the gaming assemblage, and within games are often utilised as plot devices in male-led narratives, a passive actor upon whom actions are committed, not someone who contributes to the action herself. With this in mind, it becomes clear why specifying independence as a trait is so important to respondents who feel frustrated at being consistently denied characters with agency, autonomy, and the ability to "save herself (with or without help) from dangerous situations."

Combats Misogyny

This leads to the traits most cited in the survey results – respondents felt that the most important aspect of a Female Power Fantasy is their ability to combat, overcome, or not be affected by gender stereotypes and misogyny within the gaming assemblage. In total, this was mentioned 149 times throughout the survey in a variety of ways.

For many respondents, a Female Power Fantasy must be granted abilities and opportunities equal to male characters in the same (or similar) video game narratives. As with gendered disparities in displays of physical strength in video games, respondents here similarly express frustrations with games that limit the roles and skills of female characters. One took the opportunity to criticise typecasting in roleplaying games, commenting that their ideal Female Power Fantasy must "not just be a support/healer/thief class," and that they would like to see more diversity because "even games with balanced gender dynamics don't often have female characters in tank classes." Video games such as turn-based RPGs and team-based first-person shooters often involve building a party from a variety of character classes that prioritise different battle strategies in-game, many of which perpetuate gender stereotypes depending on how active or passive a character is in combat. There are, of course, exceptions – Tifa Lockhart from *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (1997, 2020); Hope Estheim from *Final Fantasy XIII* (2009); and Aleksandra 'Zarya' Zaryanova from *Overwatch* (2016) for example – but the association of active, weapon-wielding combat with male characters and healing or magic damage with female characters is common. This has repercussions in the wider gaming assemblage, with

terms such as 'one-trick Mercy' or 'healer girlfriend' used to disparagingly refer to female players who specialise in support roles in team-based PvP (player versus player) games. As such, the potential for real-world positive change within the wider gaming assemblage should combat roles in video games refuse the influence of gender stereotypes is clear. Respondents seem acutely aware of this, as Female Power Fantasy requirements such as, according to one respondent, "stats as good or equally as varied as the male options," or according to another, "equal or greater power and agency than male characters," highlight.

Similarly, many respondents cited frustration with the tendency to frame female competency as 'good, for a girl'. As one respondent commented, "she should be good at what she does without it being framed as her being good at whatever it is in spite of being a woman," while another noted that an ideal Female Power Fantasy "doesn't attribute her strength to having a lot of brothers or how her dad wanted a son." This echoes similar frustrations from other respondents about the tendency to attribute female power to an exceptional and unusual influence in her life, or the paternal mentoring of a stoic father figure or brother. The following respondent stressed the importance of a narrative simply accepting the possibility of female power, rather than dedicating a significant amount of time to justifying why a particular female character is in a more active role in a video game:

> "[…] many times, when we see a female in a role that a male would normally be placed in, so much character development is spent on saying why this woman is different from other women and why they might be more relatable to men while still having to define them as a woman. Instead, it needs to be portrayed as just as normal as it is with men, it is not special behaviour to be in her role beyond the fact that adventurers are a special kind of person no matter what the sex. After all this is a fantasy world with no need to hang upon the social structure of our own why are we still binding females to the same roles as if the same things would influence them?"

It is telling that for respondents, the opportunity for a female character to exist on an equal field, with the same access to opportunities and skillsets as male characters, is considered a power fantasy.

Another trait (or lack of) heavily cited by survey respondents was that their Female Power Fantasy must either not be hypersexualised, or not be solely defined by their

relationships to surrounding male characters. Opposition to both the sexualisation and the underdevelopment of female characters in video games was voiced by 58 respondents. Some specifically mentioned frustrations with common cosmetic disparities in games, such as the respondent who said they wanted a Female Power Fantasy to "have all same in-game options and choices as a male character, with no patronising cute costumes or slutty armour when there's not a functional alternative." Another similarly responded that they wanted "it to be normal to wear full pieces of armour without it being too revealing just for target audience appeal." In addition, many respondents were firm in their demand that a Female Power Fantasy's role be as a power fantasy for women, rather than as a sexual fantasy for straight men. "The bare minimum is that the character can't feel like she was designed with titillating males in mind," wrote one respondent. While some respondents were happy for a Female Power Fantasy to be 'sexy' or physically attractive, they clarified that she must also "exist as more than purely a sex object," as one respondent wrote. This is hardly surprising – frequent hypersexualisation of female characters in video games is often cited as a barrier to play for women. A large-scale survey of female MMO (Massive Multiplayer Online) players conducted by Nick Yee found that nearly every respondent considered problematic sexualisation in games a deterrent; he argues "for many of these female players, the problem with being in an MMO is that they are constantly reminded of the intended male subject position they are trespassing on" (2008, p. 92). In this way, a Female Power Fantasy that avoids common tropes of hypersexualisation aids in shifting the gaming assemblage towards being a less adversarial space for female players. This is plain in one survey response, which read that a female character is "not going to feel like a female power fantasy for me if she's dressed to mainly appease the eye," setting up the oversexualisation of female characters in games in direct antithesis to female empowerment in the gaming assemblage.

In addition to criticising the hypersexualisation of female bodies and the underdevelopment of female backstories in video games, some respondents took the opportunity to voice their discomfort with backstories or plot points that centralise the threat of sexual assault of a female character. One respondent said a Female Power Fantasy should be "smart, capable, [and] no-one assaults her sexually," while another similarly demanded that she is "not threatened with sexual violence." These specifications take direct aim at video game narratives that utilise the threat of sexual violence against women

as player motivation – either as an edgy way to make game antagonists appear particularly nefarious, or to increase tension when playing as a female protagonist. An early scene in *Tomb Raider* (2013), Ellie's playable segment in *The Last of Us* (2013), and when playing as Sam in *Until Dawn* (2015) are all examples of this trope. It is also commonly utilised in media narratives to justify and explain a woman's own violent acts; the rape-revenge narrative in fiction typically uses the threat of sexual violence to "transform the woman into a powerful and independent agent who can protect herself" (Projansky, 2001, p. 100). Such narratives present the rape as a "painful but ultimately positive event" that transforms a woman from a passive to active character, a deeply conservative trope that multiple survey respondents found troubling (ibid). To them, it was imperative that a Female Power Fantasy have "no history/plot points based in sexual violence, [and] not [be] granted (or removed) powers paternalistically;" the freedom to "not have to be concerned about assault, gender-related belittling or prejudice;" and that she "doesn't have to have a complex backstory or a horrific past of abuse to justify her going out and being powerful." Rather than paint a picture of an idealised Female Power Fantasy, these responses highlight how often media narratives fail women by explicitly linking their power to the threat of, or repercussions of, sexual violence. Earlier in this chapter, I explained that commonly while male power – in video games and the media more broadly – is often presumed, female power often must be earned unwillingly through trauma. These responses clearly indicate that respondents would not tolerate the continuation of this trope in their Female Power Fantasies.

As explored above, many respondents were also adamant that their Female Power Fantasy exist as a character outside of her relationship to men. She must be "good at what she does" and "presented as a person in her own right rather than a foil/reward/obstacle for the male characters," according to one respondent. For many, her ability to "not act as a plot device, but as her own character with her own goals and motivations" is key, with responses keen to stress that a Female Power Fantasy must be a character in her own right, and either overcome or subvert narrative tropes that traditionally sideline female stories in favour of supposedly more relatable male protagonists.

More explicitly, multiple responses mentioned that in their mind, a Female Power Fantasy must be combative to, or unaffected by, misogyny. "She's never looked down upon or [has] people constantly remark[ing] 'Wow, a woman that fights? That's impossible,'" wrote one respondent. Another echoed sentiment explored earlier regarding the threat of

sexual violence in-game, commenting that their Female Power Fantasy would "not [have] to be concerned about assault, gender-related belittling, or prejudice." For respondents, framing female power in a patriarchal context does little to aid feelings of empowerment; one response specifically drew attention to gendered disparities in the treatment of protagonists in *Batman: Arkham City* (2011), in which enemies will refer to Batman as a 'freak', but Catwoman as a 'bitch', as an example. In-game patriarchal reminders of real-world social disparities sometimes accompany representations of powerful women in video games – as with the harassment of *Arkham City*'s Catwoman – perhaps to make punishing the individual perpetrators of such harassment particularly satisfying for the player. Interviewee Jane was familiar with this, and gave some examples:

> "…in *Saints Row: The Third* (2011) or *Saints Row IV* (2013), you can hear someone catcalling/trash-talking your friend and calling her a slut, and it's just like, 'well I'm just gonna punch the gas and run over them! And then I'm gonna back up and drive over them again!' I'm certainly not going to do that here, in Chicago. […] I certainly can't take another person's life, but I can destroy that sentiment. Like 'oh that is representing the catcall, that is representing street harassment, let's gun it!'"

For Jane, in-game harassment overheard in the *Saints Row* series mirrored her experiences with catcalling in everyday life, and the ability to – violently – punish misogynists in-game offered a satisfaction that she could not otherwise achieve. Chapter Four of this thesis highlights how video games are often utilised as an outlet for players to 'blow off steam', and her gameplay choices echo these findings. However, other respondents note that being able to punish a misogynistic individual in a video game does little to ultimately end the patriarchal status quo in which such statements are normalised, both in the game itself, and in the wider gaming assemblage. Phillips writes that industry attempts at inclusivity "tend to preserve the underlying structures of heteronormativity and patriarchy" rather than undermine them, because "diversity has a history of being easily co-opted by institutions to extend the lifespan of hegemony – or at the very least, of directing change in the most convenient ways possible" (2020, pp. 162-163). In this way, attempts to insert deliberate, small, assailable examples of misogynistic sentiment into games as soft evidence of 'girl power' in action do not so much empower female players, but instead ultimately belittle

female power through postfeminist platitudes that act as reminders of the patriarchal status quo. As one respondent put it, regardless of the competency of the character, empowerment is "nullified if her accomplishments are filtered through 'but she's a woman, she can't do this - OR CAN SHE!' or 'CAN women have it all?'"

To many respondents, a Female Power Fantasy would not simply combat or overcome patriarchal expectations within a game, but exist within a space where such structures do not impede her in the first place. The following responses highlight such sentiments:

"[she] lives in a universe free from being expected to be subservient, treated like they are lesser or stupid. OR lives in a universe where she proves all of that wrong (though in my female power fantasy, I don't even want to acknowledge this oppression exists in order to give it the biggest 'fuck you' by not acknowledging it exists)."

"[she has] the ability to confront and mitigate the violent effect of oppressive systems of power. Either through direct confrontation with said systems, or the ability to meaningfully reduce/eliminate their violence towards others. I want the power fantasy of being able to protect myself and other women from the violence we face as women, or the power to explore alternatives to our status quo assumptions of how society must operate. A Female Power Fantasy is not just playing in a space where the status quo is there, but [in which] the misogynist violence is superficial or absent. (like, playing a Bethesda RPG with an avatar that is a woman. That's just superficially skinning myself into a Male Power Fantasy.)"

"[she is] capable, in an unquestioned leadership role, not devoid of emotions, relationships, or sex, but not defined by that or doing something stupid for that; overcoming self-doubt, not following trope expectations. Doing something important, but overcoming social/societal issues as part of doing that amazing thing. Women have real everyday barriers to success, not just game-based ones – and I'd like to see and overcome those as well as the fantasy world saving."

These three responses and others like them reject liberal feminist representations of 'empowered' women in otherwise patriarchally structured settings in favour of games that

feature representations of women in societies that do not mirror real-world misogynistic hierarchies of power. To many respondents, in-game reminders of everyday realities – even if a game gives them the ability to overcome them – are, as one respondent put it, "just a constant reminder of the societal expectations I deal with every day." This highlights another fundamental difference between pre-existing Male Power Fantasies and the concept of a Female Power Fantasy. As described earlier in this chapter, narratives that centre Male Power Fantasies often feature (cisgender, straight, white) male heroes saving the day, typically by negating destructive threats to society and prevailing over attempts to fundamentally alter the status quo. These threats are often over-exaggerations of neoconservative fears around risks to heteronormative, white supremacist patriarchy, and not typically based in reality. To many women, however, patriarchal influence has a daily impact on their lives, to the point where preserving the status quo does not have as rewarding an impact as is does to the archetypal gamer. As such, a Female Power Fantasy empowered with the ability to save the day in the same way as typical Male Power Fantasies does not have the same appeal, and in many cases may be actively exhausting for female players, particularly those with intersecting marginalised identities. Frustration with the status quo is certainly discernible in many survey responses, as noted throughout this chapter. These frustrations continue here, one respondent wrote:

> "my female power fantasy is a female holding any and all positions men currently hold in video games without fucking sex appeal or being a token. I want female characters that are made for the benefit of females rather than for the fantasies of (shitty, entitled) men (that will surely perpetuate oppression on women)."

This respondent's use of swear words, as well as their conviction regarding presumptuous male entitlement to gaze upon and sexualise female bodies is one of the more vitriolic responses to the survey question, but similar sentiments are expressed again and again. One respondent stressed that "characteristics are less important than the way she's treated by those around her. […] I would rather the world/setting/other characters never questioned the PC's [player character's] ability to get stuff done on the basis of their gender."

In total, the most cited Female Power Fantasy 'traits' (often more specifically not so much traits as circumstances or settings) were ones that actively combat pre-existing

misogynistic stereotypes and tropes in video games. The importance of a Female Power Fantasy's independence and autonomy; access to equal opportunities; definition as a character beyond male relationships; lack of hypersexualisation; and ability to overcome misogyny, or exist in a game without it, were cited 255 times by 183 survey respondents – over half of all respondents. These results simultaneously offer insight into an idealised Female Power Fantasy, as well as act as an indictment of representations of female power in the gaming assemblage at the time the survey was taken. It is clear that a large number of respondents are not only dissatisfied, but actively frustrated and angry at the treatment of women in video games.

What Was Not Said

As mentioned earlier, when conducting this survey in 2017, I was not sure what responses to expect. While I hypothesised a degree of dissatisfaction with historical and contemporary representations of women and power in video games, beyond that I was uncertain what results the survey question would yield. Perhaps one of the more surprising results was not what *was* said, but what *was not*. Numerous responses detailed their ideal Female Power Fantasies attributes, actions, motives, and treatment within the game, but significantly fewer listed any physical characteristics or identity markers in their answers.

Once all 359 survey responses were dissected and coded into Nvivo, the results totalled 1257 entries; of these, only 73 made any mention of physical characteristics at all. Of these, a significant number were nonspecific or subjective – 25 mentioned the importance of physical attractiveness, 15 mentioned sexiness, and 2 mentioned unsexiness. Beyond this, very few respondents cited specific physical examples. 18 responses made reference to their ideal Female Power Fantasy's body type; and while a variety of different body shapes and builds were suggested, typically respondents agreed that their Female Power Fantasy's body differ from traditionally attractive, sexualised examples typically displayed within video games. "Beautiful/sexy is fine, but she should have muscles," wrote one respondent, while another similarly answered that "personally, I like being big and strong. Physically imposing. Think Illaoi from *League of Legends* (2009), she's kind of the ultimate power fantasy for me, to be honest." One respondent cited Zarya from *Overwatch*

(2016), as "a big, buff woman in a way that is not traditionally feminine. I find her very appealing, as she is a representation of physical strength that I do not have." Other respondents cited the importance of "having more realistic body proportions," one response read "being slim/fit is fine (though I would die of happiness at a fat, or even thick/jacked woman), but no giant bouncy boobies and tiny booty shorts."

Another surprisingly low-cited trait by respondents was that of customisability. Despite *Mass Effect*'s Commander Shepard – a customisable character – being respondent's most cited example of an empowering female character, only nine actively mentioned character customisability as a key facet of their ideal Female Power Fantasy. "I personally feel it's more of a power fantasy when it's a game where there is a lot of character customization, because it means I can take ownership of that character and her decisions," wrote one respondent. Another similarly stated "I just need to identify with her on some level, or want to be like her. The ability to customise a character's appearance helps with this."

The overall lack of responses that offer an opinion on a Female Power Fantasy's physical appearance, or the ability to influence such decisions, as well as the wide variance of preference in the small pool of those who did discuss it, indicates that a character's overall physicality was less of a priority for respondents than other issues that they dedicated more time to, such as how she is treated by the game, and how her physical form is portrayed to the player.

The lack of concern for physical characteristics of a Female Power Fantasy continues in respondents' discussion of identity markers such as race and ethnicity. Only five respondents cited a character's race as an important aspect of a power fantasy for them – specifically the importance of seeing a person of colour represented on-screen. Of the five who made this specification, two identified themselves as Black, one as Hispanic, one as Caucasian, and one as white. While this low number could be explained as a result of the survey's lack of circulation in communities of colour (over two-thirds of respondents identified as white or Caucasian), we can look at the low citation of other minority identity markers to conclude that that is not necessarily the case. Nearly half of survey respondents identified themselves as being part of the LGBTQ+ community, yet the importance of queer sexuality to a Female Power Fantasy was only cited by three respondents, one of whom

identified as heterosexual, while the other two identified as bisexual and lesbian, respectively.

Given the significant amount of time fans, industry professionals, and academics have dedicated to pushing for better representation of women and minorities in the media, the discovery that physical representation was not at the forefront of respondent's minds when designing their ideal Female Power Fantasy may seem unexpected. However, these findings correspond with other research in the field of games studies and representation. Adrienne Shaw's work notes that "people connect with media texts via the intertwined processes of identity and identification," but that the way these processes intertwine with textual representation "does not necessarily follow a linear or static path" (2014, pp. 3-4). They critique the notion that marginalised individuals are always acutely concerned with visual representation of themselves on-screen, arguing that representation is important to "highlight diversity in what is possible rather than the marketability of niche audiences" (p. 56). In this way, industry attempts to diversify representation without any attempt to understand an audience's ludic desires are ultimately flawed. The findings in this chapter support this – respondents repeatedly stated that being able to see representations of powerful women was not enough for them, that power had to be contextualised and set against a backdrop that ultimately fuelled identification, empowerment, and industry change. In their work on queer gaming practices, Bonnie Ruberg similarly notes "it is not enough to simply count the number of LGBTQ characters who appear on-screen. We must also think about how experiences of difference can be given voice (or once again be silenced) by video games' seemingly non-representational elements, such as their interactive systems, their controls, and their underlying computational logics" (2019, p. 14).

This is not to say that there is not a problem with the limited representation many identity groups see (or do not see) in the gaming assemblage, instead that reasons for increased diversity go beyond processes of identity and identification; Shaw posits the question "[if] players/audiences, owing to the complexity of their identities, are able to have strong connections to people unlike them on a regular basis, […] why does everyone in games, and other media texts, look so much alike?" (2014, p. 5). Industry misinterpretations of identity and identification have historically done more harm than good – it is because of the presumed intrinsic link between identity and identification that until very recently, developers feared the repercussions of creating games helmed by non-male characters due

to concerns that the archetypal gamer would not be able to identify with them (Schreier, 2012; Crecente, 2015). In actuality, identification *with* and identification *as* are not necessarily intertwined – after all, gamers are regularly considered able to identify with unrealistically strong and intelligent Male Power Fantasies without issue. The same is true of respondents and Female Power Fantasies – affective qualities were cited as key far more regularly than tangible identifiers.

The findings of this survey indicate, once again, not that individual identity is not important to respondents, but that it was not necessary for them to feel empowered by a Female Power Fantasy. It is also yet another indicator of the importance of combining textual analysis with audience studies when conducting video games research. As Shaw notes, "analysing texts tells us how the audience was constructed and about the inner workings of industry logics, but an audience study helps us make sense of where these meanings go after they are constructed" (2014, p. 63).

Conclusion

As expected, the findings of this survey highlight the individual nuances of each respondent, resulting in 359 uniquely subjective answers that took a significant amount of time to analyse and code. There may be no guaranteed, perfect, catch-all Female Power Fantasy archetype – just as the Male Power Fantasy is crafted with a "designed identity," the gamer, in mind (Chess, 2017), any one Female Power Fantasy archetype would risk othering those who do not adhere to expectations of female play. Still, correlation in survey responses reveals insight into respondents' experiences, desires, and concerns as female players, ultimately facilitating the reveal of basic traits upon which respondents consider important. While several traits were mentioned, their significance lies in the contexts within which they exist – how a character embodies them, and how she is then perceived by a game's audience, and how she is treated within the game itself. As such, while traits such as strength and intelligence were commonly cited by respondents as key to a Female Power Fantasy, they were also foregrounded by prerequisites; strength without morals, strength undermined by patriarchy, or strength without emotional intelligence were not satisfactory for respondents. Their answers prioritised not so much a list of traits as a list of

circumstances for a Female Power Fantasy, that largely place the archetype as combative to patriarchal structures of the gaming assemblage.

The large number of responses that focus on the potential of the Female Power Fantasy as a force with which to restructure the gaming assemblage indicates how concerned respondents were with issues of representation within the community as it stands. Respondents were clearly very eloquent and well-versed in the topic of their own subject-positions as female gamers, indicating that many were acutely aware of gendered disparities within the gaming assemblage. As such, these results not only indicate commonly agreed upon traits for a Female Power Fantasy archetype, but also provide insight into the dissatisfaction many feel with the state of the gaming assemblage in a post-gamergate world.

As such, the Female Power Fantasy – whether it eventually takes form in a video game, or remains a possibility – has potent power. Unlike the Male Power Fantasy, whose practices and performances ultimately offer empowerment to the already-empowered – the gamers themselves – the Female Power Fantasy represents the potential for change, destruction, and, to borrow a term from Phillips, "gamer trouble" (2020). Respondents' answers provide a clear mandate for a fundamental restructuring of the gaming assemblage in a way that topples the supremacy of the gamer archetype, abandons the gendering of play, and pushes for more nuanced, variable, and affective representations of power in video games.

Chapter Three: Identity Fluidity and Willing/Unwilling Politicisation in Games

The previous chapter uses empirical data from survey respondents and interviewees to construct an outline of a video game character whose purpose is to empower female players, and be someone with whom they can identify. As Adrienne Shaw points out, however, there is an important distinction between identification and identity itself. Shaw differentiates the two by troubling the assumption that "identification *with* a character is the same as identification *as* a member of a specific group," instead explaining how people connect with media texts "via the intertwined processes of identity and identification," of which the former is more likely to be a surface-level identifier, whereas the latter has the ability to be "contextual, fluid, and imaginative" (2014, p. 63). This certainly adheres to the findings of the previous chapter, in which physical qualities (such as appearance, hair colour, body shape, etc.) and shared identities (such as race, sexuality, gender, etc.) ranked lower on survey respondents' lists of empowering female character traits compared to more affective qualities. One of the shortcomings of representation studies, according to Shaw, is their tendency to essentialise identities and overstate their influence on how a text is approached; she instead argues that identification "is not about a static, linear, measurable connection" to a text, that it is far more nuanced, intersectional, and qualitative (2014, pp. 70-71). Chapter Two reiterates these arguments – survey participants were far more engaged in discussing what their Female Power Fantasy could *do* rather than who she could *be*. This chapter, however, builds upon the work of Shaw and others to highlight how women's ludic activities often entail fluid, inventive, and resistive approaches to not just identification, but also identity. Through their engagements with the politics of the gaming assemblage, this chapter will show how women's actions render their identities malleable and fluid through processes of willing or unwilling politicisation.

As detailed in Chapter One, the gaming assemblage has an identity problem. The archetypal antisocial, white, heterosexual, male gamer is misogynistic in origin: ultimately conceived from the mid-1960s push to remove women from computer science jobs, and

bolstered by games industry marketing from the 1980s onwards that targeted teenage boys and men as primary consumers. Its exclusionary history is sustained in contemporary policing of the gamer identity and gaming spaces; Salter and Blodgett note that while "once defined by their outsider status and victimization, geeks are now powerful enough as a subculture to make victims out of others, particularly those perceived as lacking the credential earned through suffering that makes one a 'true' outsider geek" (2017, p. 12). The gamer archetype, conceived as an identity "based on difference and separateness," and constructed to unite nerdy (male) individuals with a common niche interest, has evolved very little since its inception. As such, it is also completely at odds with the reality of the gaming assemblage as it exists today. In 2020, the Entertainment Software Association reported that more than 214 million people in the United States play video games for at least an hour each week (The ESA, 2020); data collected in 2021 revealed that video game streaming website Twitch had clocked over 17 billion hours of watch-time in 2020 (Stephen, 2021); and a 2021 presentation by games company Sony revealed that nearly half of all owners of PlayStation 4 and PlayStation 5 consoles are women (Ryan, 2021). "The narrative media of geek subculture space, once a way to identify and commune with fellow geeks, has inarguably leapt into mainstream culture," write Salter and Blodgett (2017, p. 11). It is no longer uncool to be a gamer, and the medium of video games is now just as readily engaged with by the general public as movies, television, and music. The rise of social media has offered platforms to marginalised individuals whose ludic activities were previously rendered invisible, and the increase in accessibility – through the popularity of mobile games, as well as consoles such as the Nintendo Wii and Switch – has invariably broadened the market beyond the archetypal gamer of days gone past.

In spite of this, the gamer identity – and the gaming assemblage more broadly – remains heavily policed. The imagined community of the gaming assemblage, viewed by gamers as a fraternity built upon a "deep, horizontal comradeship […] regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail," (Anderson, 1983) imbues participants with a nationalistic desire to protect it from outsiders. This makes it particularly easy to cast "women – and feminists in particular," as "an easily defined other to identify as representing the supposed influence of the mainstream, [who] are out to destroy geek culture," and who must be combatted by supposed "'true' geeks" (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 12). Chapter One identifies multiple instances of hegemonic practices utilised by

gatekeepers within the assemblage to quash the visible participation of women and minorities in games. Calls to 'keep politics out of games,' to promote 'ethics in games journalism,' or hyperbolic reactions such as 'did you just assume my gender?!' all work to ostracise those who do not fit the gamer archetype and to protect the sanctity of a space that historically prioritises the straight, white, cisgender male subject. Exclusionary tactics actively enforced by misogynists and passively accepted by others render masculinity as normative and anything else as Other. Vossen argues that this "hegemony of play allows men to pass through games culture, to participate fully, without being questioned, no matter what type of games they play, while women in games culture will be viewed as outsiders, even after a lifetime of participation" (2018, p. 7). Specific evidence of such hegemony was perhaps most keenly felt during the height of the Gamergate hate campaign that began in August 2014, which saw numerous women, minorities, and allies in the gaming assemblage harassed and doxxed by a vitriolic group of angry gamers hoping to 'protect' the gaming assemblage from progressive influences.

The gamer identity is not only demarcated by those who identify as such, but also by those who explicitly do not. Vossen specifically distinguishes between a gamer – a person who plays games – and a capital-G Gamer – someone who "performs the hegemonic masculine tropes necessary to be accepted by other Gamers" – in her work, to highlight the ideological split within the community (2018, p. 5). Research by Shaw finds that many players do not *want* to identify as gamers, both because of the negative connotations of the term, and in some cases, because they do not feel like they are doing 'enough' to warrant the classification. In addition, the research found that men are far more likely to identify as gamers than any other genders are, suggesting comfort with the identity may split along gendered lines (2011). In 2013, games developer and ex-editor of video game website Gamasutra Brandon Sheffield argued for the term 'gamer' to be retired completely due to its "regressive" nature: "If you use a word that fully defines you, leaving no room for extra interests or hobbies, what does it say about you? It immediately becomes something to defend, or qualify," he argues. The gamer archetype "accepts the portrait of us painted by the mainstream news media, and every time I hear it or read it, it actually makes me feel a little sick" (2013). Further, following the rise of Gamergate, games journalist Leigh Alexander and media studies academic Dan Golding penned scathing takedowns of the gamer identity, referring to it as 'dead,' and 'over'. "'Gamer' isn't just a dated demographic label that most

people increasingly prefer not to use," writes Alexander, "gamers are over. That's why they're so mad. These obtuse shitslingers, these wailing hyper-consumers, these childish internet-arguers – they are not my audience. They don't have to be yours. There is no 'side' to be on, there is no 'debate' to be had" (2014). Unlike Shaw's interviewees that hesitate to use the term to describe themselves, Alexander, Golding, and Sheffield actively reject the identity category. Golding writes:

> "The hysterical fits of those inculcated at the heart of gamer culture might on the surface be claimed as crusades for journalistic integrity, or a defence against falsehoods, but—along with a mix of the hatred of women and an expansive bigotry thrown in for good measure—what is actually going on is an attempt to retain hegemony. Make no mistake: this is the exertion of power in the name of (male) gamer orthodoxy—an orthodoxy that has already begun to disappear."

Reactions to acts of gatekeeping of the gamer identity in the form of hesitation, critique, or outright repudiation are unsurprising – to label oneself as a gamer can "signal a great many things, not all of which are about the actual playing of videogames" (Golding, 2014). The hostile atmosphere fostered by some towards those outside of the imagined community means that many women and minorities who play games have found their ludic activities unwillingly cast as a political act, as have developers and event organisers who fall foul of the arbitrary rallying cry from gatekeepers to 'keep politics out of our video games'. These groups maintain that gaming is an apolitical space, however, often their practices – including the misogyny, harassment, and nationalistic tendencies mentioned above – align them with much more reactionary, conservative politics. Visible women within the games community, industry, or within games themselves often find their very existence imbued with political significance, being cast as 'SJW [social justice warrior] pandering', 'forced diversity', or 'bringing politics into it', regardless of their participatory choices. As such, their identity within these spaces is demonstrated to be malleable to the whims of others within the community, and is something they often must be aware of and consider when navigating these spaces.

Ironically, it is precisely the grave rigidity with which gamers police their identity that enables those who do not fit to render their own identities more flexible, changeable, and fluid. Shaw posits a difference between the fixed *identity* of a player and the more fluid

ability to *identify* with characters – however this chapter argues that the navigation of video game spaces by women often necessitates a navigation of identity, which in itself is much more readily both utilised and discarded to suit a female player's needs than typically assumed. Women who play video games adopt strategies regarding their identity – whether to hide, highlight, explore, or otherwise – as either modes of resistance or modes of restraint, depending on a variety of variable factors and influences. These strategies are utilised by the women highlighted in this chapter to resist categorisation by an exploitative market and hostile player base, oppose unwilling politicisation, explore their own identity and identifications, but also to secure their safety in gaming circles that may not welcome them. This chapter will highlight these findings and frame them through the specific lens of interviewee's gaming interviews. Through critically analysing the texts created for their interviews alongside survey responses and interviewee's testimony, this chapter will highlight how identities are navigated fluidly by women who game.

Willing/Unwilling Politicisation

Within this chapter, the term identity fluidity specifically refers to the act of picking up and putting down aspects of an identity to better traverse, critique, avoid, or resist hierarchies within the gaming assemblage. It can be accomplished in a number of ways – this chapter will specifically address three examples: self-surveillance identity fluidity; 'lean in' female geekdom; and resistive identity fluidity. These actions occur as a result of a female participant in the gaming assemblage being either willingly or unwillingly politicised – imbued with political significance or meaning – by themselves or by others within gaming spaces.

Before continuing, it is important to stress that, despite protestations, the gaming assemblage is not an apolitical space. Such an argument is based in the need to justify behavioural patterns of harassment and abuse as the result of objectivity and fact, rather than imbued with any sort of political backing, beliefs, or prejudices – but the fact is that just like the personal, the workplace, and just about everything else: the ludic is political. Gray, Voorhees, and Vossen point out that video games typically "offer spaces of white male play and pleasures, and create a virtual and lived reality where white maleness is empowered to police and criminalise the Other" (2018, p. 3), marking the medium as

intrinsic to the maintenance of hegemony. Even outside of the *act* of play itself, the contents of many popular games – covering topics such as war, societal hierarchies, power and control, abuse, death – are far from apolitical. The gaming assemblage has also long been associated with conservative, regressive, and reactionary politics – most prominently visible during the height of Gamergate, but also easily witnessed in the industry's historic treatment of women, minorities, and its exploited working class.

However, while the gaming assemblage is already inherently political, the actions of its inhabitants can still be further politicised by being cast as factionally significant or indicative of social change. The existence of women (and othered identities more broadly) is often considered disruptive to 'apolitical' gaming circles, and if not worthy of critique, at the very least worthy of commentary. A 2016 study of language use in the chat boxes of streaming website Twitch found clear contrasts between the language used by viewers of popular male and female streamers, noting that "game-related words are clearly overrepresented in male channels while words that signal objectification are strongly associated with female channels." However, they also noted that less popular female-fronted Twitch channels feature significantly less objectifying word choices from viewers, suggesting that the bigger a streamer's platform, the more prone to – and, according to some, deserving of – objectification she will be. "When female gamers have revealed their identities online," write the study's authors, "gamers cease speaking about game-related topics and instead shift to the gamer herself and her gender" (Nakandala, Ciampaglia, Su, & Ahn, 2016, p. 7, 2). This is an example of participants within the gaming assemblage – in this instance, female streamers on Twitch – being unwillingly politicised by others. The larger a female streamer's platform, the more she 'invites' commentary on her existence within such a space and how it is at odds with normative gendered hierarchies within the assemblage. Emma Witkowski highlights this through the example of *World of Warcraft* streamer Rumay 'Hafu' Wang, who claimed in a 2014 interview that her achievements in esports tournaments were "overshadowed" by the focus on her gender. Witkowski writes that "despite Hafu's ongoing efforts to 'lose herself' sans gender, femininity and the girl gamer are palpably wrapped up in the history of performance around her play;" in this way, Hafu's identity is unwillingly politicised through her construction as oppositional to her more 'typical' male counterparts (2018, p. 190). A similar example can be seen in professional Overwatch League player and streamer Se-yeon 'Geguri' Kim, whose gender

has been centred throughout her career by external forces; from being accused of cheating in 2016 at the age of seventeen, (an accusation rarely levelled at 17-year-old males, whose adeptness at video game precision is automatically presumed) to – reluctantly at first – becoming a role-model for female *Overwatch* players everywhere when she was signed as the first female Overwatch League player in 2018 (Fitzpatrick, 2019). In both cases, Geguri's gender was a cause for discussion by external forces – as grounds for suspicion in the first instance, and in the second, as a reason for veneration and celebration – leading to her unwilling politicisation on the grounds of her gender identity.

While the above examples specifically cite women in the public eye, even without a platform, unwilling politicisation of women and girls in games can persist. Alison Harvey documents how private spaces such as the home often reinforce binaries; she writes that "the regulation of ludic technologies goes hand in hand with the disciplining of gendered subjectivities in the home." This means that even with games consoles, computers, or handheld devices in the household, actual access for women and girls is often found to be "curtailed by dominant gender norms about what a gamer looks like, what a mother and a father do, how young girls and boys engage with youth culture, and who is expected to be an expert in technological domains" (2015, p. 138). In this way, the existence of women and girls in ludic or technological spaces is often imbued with political significance based on the assumption that their existence there is unnatural, or an attempt at 'forced diversification' or pandering.

Sometimes, unwilling politicisation can be performed by an individual upon themselves. The act of modifying ones behaviour by engaging in identity fluidity – by masking one's identity or modifying one's actions in order to avoid suspicion by hostile parties; 'leaning in' to the unwilling politicisation of women and girls; or through 'putting oneself out there' as a potential form of resistance or binary challenging – all acknowledge that existence within the gaming assemblage is political, whether one wants it to be or not. However, there are also plenty of examples of individuals *willingly* participating in identity politicisation in gaming spaces – often utilising the space for resistive acts against dominant hegemonies and stereotypes and to champion progressive agendas. Through visible occupation of and community-building within gaming circles, ludic activities that centre what Chess refers to as "playful activism" (2009), and game-making that critically assessed and challenges hierarchies, women and girls navigate the politics of play and identity in a

multitude of ways. This type of politicised play is not new, despite what rewritten narratives of 'apolitical' gaming history would have us believe. Boluk and Lemieux describe the art of the metagame, "games created within video games," that create an alternative discourse, mode of play, and way of thinking that "reveal the alternate histories of play that always exist outside the dates, dollars, and demographic data that so often define video games in industry magazines and encyclopaedia entries" (2017, p. 9). This mode of modified or redefined play can be seen throughout the testimonies collected for this research, but also in wider, more well-known and popular forms of play – such as through modding, speedruns, romhacks, and challenge runs. It is also echoed in the form of queer play, "a transformative practice that reframes and remakes games from the inside out" in order to "imagine alternative ways of being and to make space within structures of power for resistance through play" (Ruberg, 2019, p. 1). In this way, identity fluidity can be influenced by a number of sources.

While the ludic may be political, this thesis acknowledges that existing and participating within the gaming assemblage does not necessarily entail political intent – to imply such risks aligning this research with the misogynistic reactionaries critiqued above. As one interviewee comments, "I know to some people it looks like something else, but for me it's just me trying to enjoy my days off or my time after work." While in a hegemonic community it may be powerful, require strength, and be politically significant to be visible and counted, it is also perfectly valid for marginalised individuals to 'just want to have fun'. This research views politicisation within the gaming assemblage as either self-constructed or externally imbued, and uses these examples to frame its analysis of fluid identity practices. As such, when discussing the willing politicisation of interviewees, the analysis focuses on how their *actions* and *decisions* may have political significance, rather than solely their existence. In this way, this thesis works to comment on women's movement and visibility within the gaming assemblage, without fostering the dominant hegemonic narrative that their mere presence is political. The notion that the gaming assemblage caters to and is occupied solely by the gamer archetype is popular, but ultimately a fabrication – one of the aims of this research is to aid in the cultivation of a gaming assemblage in which members are not unwillingly politicised, surveilled, or critiqued for their participation.

Gaming Interviews

Before highlighting how interviewees exhibit identity fluidity in their gameplay, this chapter will briefly provide a synopsis of the gameplay footage they submitted before their interviews, along with pertinent details about the games they chose to play. This data will then be analysed in more detail below alongside secondary texts and other examples from the gaming assemblage.

Georgia - Overwatch

Georgia played *Overwatch* (2016) for both of her gaming interviews. *Overwatch* is a team-based first-person shooter (FPS) video game, in which two teams of six players compete to complete objectives – such as escorting payloads, and attacking/defending control points – over a selection of set maps. One game is often split into multiple rounds – for example, payload objectives offer both teams a chance to push the payload, whereas control point maps are best-of-three – and typically takes around 15-25 minutes to complete. Players have a choice of 32 characters to play, each of which are sorted into three classes: tank, damage, and support, based on their abilities. The game features a variety of different modes; Quick Play and Arcade support more casual models of gameplay; Competitive Play is for ranked battles, in which players are assigned a Skill Rating (SR) depending on how well they perform in matches; Play vs AI offers players a PvE (Player vs Enemy) experience; and Custom allows players to create games with customisable objectives and preferences. There are also multiple competitive esports leagues based around the game, such as the Overwatch League and Overwatch Contenders, both organised by the game's developer, Blizzard Entertainment.

Overwatch was announced at Blizzcon – Blizzard Entertainment's annual convention – in 2014, with a starting roster of 12 heroes, which expanded to 21 when the game was first released in 2016. At the time of release, twelve of the game's playable characters were male, eight were female, and one was ungendered. At the time of writing in early 2020, the game's roster has expanded to 32 heroes. After briefly achieving gender parity between male and female characters in early-mid 2019, the game's roster currently stands at sixteen men, fifteen women, and one ungendered character. This is significant, giving *Overwatch*

fans more playable female characters than most other FPS games. This fact does not appear to be lost on female video game players; in 2017 it was reported that women make up 16% of the game's player base, equating to roughly five million female players, double the amount that play other games in the FPS game genre (Yee, 2017). The game's popularity among women is reflected not just in the amount of players, but also in the fans of the Overwatch League, participants' responses to this research, and in my own interests.

On the subject of identity vs identification in video games, Adrienne Shaw writes: "at times we want to see ourselves in the place of characters who are as we wish to be. At other times we use media texts as fodder for imagining what else might be possible in our everyday lives. In either case, […] representation of different types of bodies remains crucially important to shaping what types of worlds we can imagine" (2014, p. 93). This certainly rang true for multiple survey respondents and all four interviewees. When asked if they had ever felt empowered by a female video game character or a game starring a female protagonist, *Overwatch* had the largest variety of characters cited by survey respondents, with seven different women from the game's roster named as inspiring or empowering. "I love Zarya from *Overwatch*," one survey respondent wrote, "just playing as her makes me feel strong. She is so beautiful and powerful in a way that doesn't fall back on old stereotypes of what women 'should' look like." Each interviewee mentioned the value they placed in *Overwatch*, either as a game, or as an example of positive representational steps being taken by AAA developers (admittedly, with caveats). Two interviewees placed particular emphasis on the game's 23rd playable character, the Mexican hacker and damage-dealing character, Sombra. "I was really excited when Sombra came out," Opal commented, "I was like 'wow, she's fully dressed, she's coloured, she's a minority and she's proud of it and it's not a big deal', you know?" She continued "actually to be honest with you, I was really excited because I found out in a comic book that her name is [similar to mine], and I was like 'I have never played a game as a coloured chick [with a similar name to me]!' Like what, that was so crazy!" Georgia cited her as "a perfect example of my power fantasy. Mexican, incredibly intelligent, ambitious, focused, not easily intimated, a sense of humour, and more importantly, she's a bit self-serving." She likened Sombra's gameplay to hide-and-seek, Marco Polo-style games that she played growing up: "we'd play in tight spaces like hallways, so you're doing acrobatics to try to get away from whoever's It. It's

that kind of playstyle that I found fun […] when I was younger – sneaking around, that type of thing – so it was totally her playstyle and also her backstory [that drew me to her]."

Each of these are examples of women drawn to particular characters for specific analogous reasons, suggesting a degree of success with regards to Blizzard Entertainment's attempts to diversify the rosters of team-based first-person-shooters. At PAX East in March 2015, *Overwatch*'s director Jeff Kaplan was in attendance to tease new details on the game's settings to an audience of game developers, journalists, and fans. During the reveal of the game's first female tank, the Russian professional weightlifter, Aleksandra Zaryanova, Kaplan stated "our goal with *Overwatch* heroes is that there's some level of fantasy fulfilment for as many players as possible, […] To really deliver on that promise of a really diverse, heroic experience" (PAX East 2015 Blizzard Overwatch Panel, Youtube, 2015). While the game has received criticism for its roster (a common critique is that there are still no Black female playable characters); its in-game moderation (team chat – as evidenced by interviewees later – remains a toxic experience); and its hiring practices (to this day, just one player in the Overwatch League has been female), it remains more popular with female gamers than many other first-person-shooters (Yee, 2017).

Georgia's gameplay footage begins with her loading up Mystery Heroes – a game mode in *Overwatch* in which a player's character is randomised upon start-up, and then changed randomly each time they respawn after a death. It is known for its tendency to spawn unusual team compositions outside of the standard two tanks, two healers, two damage dealers 'meta'. The map is Temple of Anubis – a two-point assault map, on which Georgia's team is defending first – and Georgia spawns in as the tank, Roadhog. She notes she is not a fan of the character, but nonetheless takes a flanking position by the first choke point to try to pull enemies out of position with Roadhog's signature chain hook. She admits that she is being careless, but manages to stall the enemy team alongside two of her teammates, who are playing the damage character, Sombra and a healer, Zenyatta. After destroying traps laid by the enemy team's Junkrat, she eventually suffers her first death while 'ulting' (characters in *Overwatch* have an ultimate ability, which can only be utilised when a percentage bar is maximised) the enemies outside of their spawn point. She respawns as another tank character – the shield-wielding Reinhart – and grimaces, "I don't like tanking." The enemy team capture the first point, and advance to the second. Georgia respawns as Genji, a ninja-like damage character, and appears more comfortable with his

skillset. She utilises Genji's secondary movement abilities for mobility, and takes the high ground in defending the second point. She survives several enemy ultimate abilities and delays any capture progress on the second objective, but is ultimately overpowered – "careless," she mutters. She respawns as Roadhog again, but by this point, the game is already over, and her team has lost.

In her second match – this time attacking the Temple of Anubis – Georgia spawns in as Sombra, a damage character with which she has a lot of experience, and personally identifies with. She sports Sombra's golden weapon – a cosmetic buyable with in-game currency earned from winning seasonal games, competitive matches, and buying loot boxes. Accumulating enough currency to purchase a golden weapon takes a lot of time, as such, players typically only purchase them for characters they feel proficient with. It often works to symbolise to other players that this character is one's 'main' (a character a player regularly plays with a degree of competence and skill). As the match begins, Georgia's proficiency as Sombra is clear – she flanks to the right of the enemy objective and uses one of Sombra's secondary abilities to hack the map's heal packs. She approaches the point from behind and manages to kill one of the enemy team's healers, Mercy, and one of their damage characters, Junkrat. Her teammates approach and they capture the point immediately. "I get a lot of shit for wanting to play [Sombra] because people think I'm gonna suck," she comments, indicating that the character is known for being particularly difficult to master. Her team approaches the second point, Georgia takes the high ground, but is eventually taken out by an enemy while trying to attack one of the enemy team's tanks. "That bitch was dead!" she mutters with a frustrated tone. She and her teammates then proceed to attack the enemy point in multiple waves; she dies and switches characters to Soldier, Zenyatta, Orisa, and Zarya, and vocally expresses her frustrations with her team's failed attempts to capture the objective – "maybe I'm being too aggro – I'm totally expostulating," she says, while laughing. Eventually she respawns as the damage-dealing grenadier, Junkrat. She notes her team's strange composition – consisting of two snipers, two shield-wielding tanks, two Junkrats, and no healers – but rushes in anyway. She takes out two opponents while her teammates capture the point, winning the game.

Georgia's third match is once again in Mystery Heroes mode, but this time on Lijang Tower, a best-of-three control point map in which teams must successfully occupy and control an objective until the game tracker reaches 100%. Georgia spawns in as Pharah, an

air-based damage dealer, but is quickly taken out by the enemy team, who spawned in with four turret-based characters – a heavily anti-Pharah line-up on a map that does not favour flight-based characters. She respawns as a sniper, Hanzo, and repeatedly takes out enemies from afar until her team cleanly captures the objective. "That was a good run," she admits to herself, clearly pleased. While in her later interviews she claims to spend most of her time playing healers, by this point is it also very clear that Georgia excels at high-skilled damage characters that require keen game-sense and accuracy. "Damn, those 'plinks' feel good, man," she says, referring to the noise made when one of her arrows successfully makes contact with an enemy. By this point, the game notifies her that she is 'on fire', an indicator that she is playing particularly well. Players who are 'on fire' are highlighted to teammates and enemies by a flame surrounding their in-menu character portrait, allowing both teams to become aware of who is successfully performing kills, healing, or capturing objectives, and edit tactics accordingly. Georgia's team easily wins the match's first round. In the second round, on a different map with more enclosed spaces and an objective with a wall either side, she is finally killed, but does not seem phased. She admits that she does not enjoy playing Hanzo on this particular map "you have to snipe from the courtyard, and I prefer to play point," and moves in as the turret-focused damage character, Torbjörn. Shortly afterwards, she and her teammates sweep the point, taking out four enemies and stopping multiple further advances. She is eventually killed – the game reveals she was on a 9-player kill streak at this point – and respawns as the sniper, Widowmaker; she returns to the objective just in time to successfully snipe the final enemy on-point, securing the victory for her team. At the end of every match in *Overwatch*, a player is algorithmically revealed to have made the 'play of the game' – a play that changed the course of the match, successfully killed multiple enemies, or saved multiple teammates. This is revealed to be Georgia. The game proceeds to show some of her gameplay as Hanzo in the first round "of course it's the one where I missed all my shots!" she laughs, and reiterates the sentiment to her teammates via text-chat.

Jane – Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

For both of her gaming interviews, Jane played *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011). *Skyrim* is a single-player, open-world role-playing game (RPG), and takes its name from the fictional province within which it is set. Like prior *Elder Scrolls* titles, *Skyrim* takes place in a medieval-

style high-fantasy setting, within which magic and mythological creatures are commonplace. Players take on the role of the prophesied Dragonborn (or Dovahkiin) and must save the realm from the wrath of the game's primary antagonist, the god-king dragon, Alduin. The game features a wide variety of side-quests, sub-plots, and other objectives outside of the main quest, which see players traverse the game's map to explore new towns and cities, settlements, caves, bandit camps, mountains, ravines, and fortresses. Along the way they can complete tasks for various non-player characters (NPCs) and factions, such as the Imperial Legion or the Stormcloaks – who are engaged in a civil war with each other; the College of Winterhold – a mage's guild; and the Dark Brotherhood – an organisation of assassins.

Skyrim has received praise for its character-creation process, which has been heavily expanded from those of prior *Elder Scrolls* titles. Players can create a character choosing from a variety of humanoid fantasy races, such as High-Elves (Altmer), Bretons, Nords, Orcs (Orsimer), and Khajiit, and modify their skin tone, weight, complexion, facial structure, and hair as they wish. Players can add scars, war paint, facial hair, wrinkles, and suchlike to their character's faces, and are largely treated the same by NPCs regardless of race or gender. These factors were favourably noted by some survey respondents, who – as noted in Chapter Two – largely preferred games to treat characters the same, regardless of gender. One respondent said they found *Skyrim* empowering because "there was no generalised misogyny, my character had exactly the same power and skill advancement potential as any male alternative, and wasn't shoehorned into and particular roles due to gender." Another respondent agreed, stating that "I loved playing as a woman in *Skyrim*, being maxed out in archery and slaying major creatures single-handedly."

This does not mean, however, that *Skyrim* is without criticism. While its armour choices for female characters are notably less objectifying that other video game titles, it does liberally employ 'boob-plate' – in which a woman's chest is fully covered, but the plate mail accentuates her breasts – a form of armour-design that is often critiqued by female video game players. In addition, although a player character's gender and race bear little impact on the game's content, Skyrim remains a racist, patriarchal society. The player character is able to move through the province unhindered, but various side-quests and plotlines feature NPCs engaging in racist or misogynistic behaviour, and the player is often not granted the opportunity to challenge these views. For example, one of the primary

storylines demands that the player take a side in the civil war between the Stormcloaks and the Imperials, both of which are notoriously xenophobic, a fact that does not change upon the player's recruitment into either faction. As such, while player characters themselves are largely able to experience *Skyrim* without prejudice, the realm of Skyrim itself still employs such tropes liberally, suggesting a blasé attitude to racism and misogyny, more generally. In spite of this, the game is liberally populated with a mix of male and female characters of each of *Skyrim*'s ten playable races; this has led to some more conservative players utilising unofficial mods to alter the game's visuals to fit their own agendas – for example, to make female NPCs more sexually appealing, to make clothing more revealing, or to remove women from positions of power in the game completely (Josuweit, 2017). As such, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* is a fan-favourite, but remains contentious for a variety of reasons.

When the game loads up, Jane is in the College of Winterhold, the mage's guild. She introduces her character, Melusine, as a Breton noble from High Rock – a province to the west of Skyrim. She explains the backstory that she has created for the character, that Melusine's family agreed to let her travel to Skyrim to learn magic on the condition that she become a high-ranking court wizard – though she notes that Melusine would much rather go on adventures than work in court. On the way to Winterhold, Melusine becomes entangled in the events that lead to her becoming the legendary Dragonborn. While she knows this fate awaits her, she is currently prioritising her magic lessons in order to fulfil her dream of becoming a mage. All of this backstory is not built into the game, indicating the extent to which Jane enjoys world-building outside of the game's contents.

She exits the College and vocalises her admiration for the game's visual beauty – the landscape is dark, snowy, and dotted with ancient ruins – but is interrupted by a dragon attack. She pauses the game to edit Melusine's stats and equipped magic abilities in the main menu, and begins to fight the dragon with a combination of lightning magic and 'shouts' (the legendary Dragonborn is able to harness ancient, linguistic-based magic to aid them in battle). She admits that her character is still at a very low level, and suspects that she has advanced the plot further than Melusine's skill level – this is confirmed by the number of times she has to access the game's menus to heal, edit skills, and level up. "I don't really like levelling up on the fly like this," she says, "but in order to survive this dragon, I think I need to." Eventually, the dragon is slain, and Jane reacts with excitement. She switches from first-person to third-person view because "I want you [referring to me

watching] to see this really cool bit. I am absorbing a dragon's soul! I just killed a dragon!"
When a dragon is successfully defeated by the player character in *Skyrim*, they absorb the
dragon's soul, which can later be used to strengthen or unlock new shouts. The soul is
visibly sucked from the corpse of the dragon into the player character, "I love how badass
that makes me feel!" Jane says.

Melusine re-enters the College, and Jane expresses her disappointment that none of
the mages inside came to her aid moments before – "where is your school spirit?" she jokes.
She tells me that she is currently working on a quest to find the Augur of Dunlain, and
descends into the basement of the College via a trapdoor. The basement is a sprawling,
grim-looking dungeon littered with bones. As she explores, Jane becomes distracted upon
discovering an artefact called the Atronach Forge. "Do I mess with this thing?" she asks, "it's
not part of my quest… oh it's so cool, though!" she uses it to summon a Flame Atronach,
which she quickly destroys, allowing her to level up her destructive power. She continues,
making sure to check each room thoroughly before moving on – indicating an attention to
detail and appreciation of mis-en-scene in her ludic style. Eventually, she discovers her
objective; she talks to the Augur of Dunlain – a huge orb of blue-white light – who gives her
a new objective, to find a powerful magic item called the Staff of Magnus.

Jane begins her second set of game footage where the first left off. Melusine checks
her quest list before immediately stumbling upon a dark, round room full of bones, which
she investigates extensively before approaching a large gauntlet at the centre of the room.
"Oh, this is something Daedric," she says, referencing inhabitants of the primary province in
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (2006), "I bet a demon prince is involved." She moves on upon
discovering that she is missing the key components to be able to activate it, and after
wandering through more caves and tunnels, she finally finds an exit. Upon emerging,
Melusine finds herself on a grey, snowy cliff-face above a glacial river, which she begins to
descend towards. Jane seems relieved to be out of the caves – she notes that she does not
normally like to start up a save mid-way through a dungeon – but keeps her guard up as she
is attacked by wolves shortly after. She notes that it would be easier to fast-travel (*Skyrim*
allows players to speedily travel to areas they have previously visited via the in-menu maps),
but that she enjoys the potential for discovery experienced by traversing Skyrim on-foot.
Melusine stumbles across a "weird, creepy vignette" of two skeletons, one of which is
snared in a bear trap, the other of which is propped up, as if gazing at their ill-fated

companion. Jane takes some time to examine it, wondering aloud what their story may have been and once again highlighting how her gameplay and ludic enjoyment is enhanced by her own imagination. After a short while, she continues through the frosty tundra and notes a statue in the distance. She tells me about the character that it is based on, once again exhibiting her expansive knowledge of the lore of the *Elder Scrolls* series.

Finally, Melusine finds herself back at the College of Winterhold. She seeks out the Arch-Mage, Savos Aren, who praises her abilities and offers her aid in her quest to locate the Staff of Magnus. Melusine, Jane notes, is "a very eager student, almost insufferably so," and as such she roleplays the character as very eager to impress the College's Arch-Mage. The next step of her quest means she must seek out the ancient ruins of Mzulft, far to the south of Winterhold. Melusine fast-travels to Whiterun and catches a ride with a carriage driver to Windhelm, where Jane decides to save and end the session for the day.

Rachel – The Sims 4

For both gaming sessions, Rachel played Maxis' *The Sims 4* (2014). *The Sims* is a franchise of life simulation games in which players create characters (Sims), build them homes, and influence their life choices. Unlike many other video games in which players step into the shoes of specific characters, *The Sims* casts players as an omnipotent presence in the lives of those who inhabit the various neighbourhoods available in the games. As such, Sims have some free will, and will go about their own business unless directed otherwise by the player. They are also capable of defying players orders, particularly if their basic needs – such as hunger, hygiene, bladder, and happiness – are not adequately met. As an simulacra of real-life, *The Sims* universe juxtaposes mundane tasks such as working jobs and doing the dishes against alien abduction, magic, and visits from the Grim Reaper. Because of its distinct lack of narrative, traditional conflict, and violence associated with the ludic preferences of the archetypal gamer, *The Sims* is often derogatorily referred to as a 'girl game'. This means it is marked simultaneously as one of the few video game franchises accessible to women, as well as one that they may be denigrated for enjoying because of its 'feminine' playstyle. Its differences from titles in the 'girl games' genre are pronounced – the franchise has never solely been aimed at women, and its sandbox play style and potential as a creative outlet far exceed the often vapid, limited, and sexist presumptions of more typical 'girl games', yet its visual similarities to 'playing dollhouse' lead to it being considered inferior by some

archetypal gamers. In spite of this, *The Sims* is hugely popular – particularly with women – and is the most successful PC game franchise ever, with over 200 million sales (Favis, 2020).

Rachel's first segment of gameplay footage is the only one of eight to not feature any additional audio commentary from the player. She reveals to me in our follow-up interview that this was because she felt uncomfortable at the thought of her gameplay being observed – "I think *The Sims* gameplay feels quite creative, so the idea of someone looking at my creative endeavours is a bit embarrassing." She expresses regrets about the footage she submitted and wishes she had played more in-line with her own ludic style. Rachel's protectiveness over her gameplay indicates the degree to which it is important to her – much like Georgia and Jane, it is clear that video games are a formative and key aspect to her lifestyle.

The footage begins in character creation, Rachel randomises physical assets for a household of three women, before going through to manually select their genders and traits. In 2016, *The Sims* character creation system was overhauled to grant more diverse gender options for players; rather than simply ask players to select whether their Sim is male or female and lock in physical options from there that assumed a cisgender identity, the update allowed for characters to have a mixture of masculine or feminine traits, thereby allowing players to create more diverse, explicitly transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming Sims. Rachel makes one of her Sims a trans woman, before moving all three of them into a small flat in an urban area of town. The flat is pre-furnished, Rachel buys an easel for one of her Sims, Stacey, before sending Karina out to a nearby street food truck for dinner. At this point, Rachel quits the game and loads up a different family, consisting of the older, more traditional Princess Thurston, and Alyse, her outgoing, party-loving socialite daughter. Both are vampires, and inhabit a small, gothic-looking house surrounded by trees. I witness Alyse going to a club to practice her skills as a DJ, before the gaming session ends.

Rachel's second gaming session is accompanied by audio commentary, and she tells me it is far more indicative of her usual ludic preferences than her previous footage. She informs me that she is going to be attempting a 'challenge run' – a mode of play that adds in rules, limitations, and win conditions to make gameplay more challenging – something that she has done many times in *The Sims 3* (2009), but less so in *The Sims 4*. The game loads in on the household of Leah Windfall, who Rachel informs me can only eat food that she has foraged, and is not allowed to buy or cook anything herself. Her house is woodland themed

with lots of green and brown tones, but due to the challenge's stipulations, does not contain a kitchen. To prevent Leah from autonomously buying food, Rachel has turned off the game's currency (Simoleons) and edited Leah's character aspirations to ensure that they are not financially motivated. Rachel tells me that she will need to get creative with cheats when it comes to paying Leah's bills in a cashless challenge run of the game – most likely by cheating the exact amount needed to pay her bills into the household funds, and then immediately paying them away to prevent them being spent elsewhere.

Rachel sends Leah out into the nearby forest to forage for food – she tells me that she has decided that Leah must wear a bear costume whenever she forages, and quickly instructs her to change outfits. Sadly, Leah is unsuccessful in her search, but she does find a dog to play with – presumably added from the latest (at the time of play) expansion pack, *Cats & Dogs* that was released in November 2017. Rachel decides to send Leah to a nearby neighbourhood – Whiskerman's Wharf – to see if there is any food there. The Wharf features a saloon, where Leah is able to steal some leftovers from an NPC Sims' plate. Her hunger satiated, she walks inside the bar, pets a stray cat, and befriends the Grim Reaper, who is sat at a table nearby.

Self-Surveillance Identity Fluidity

The harassment, gatekeeping, and abuse levelled at female video game players is often so relentless and contradictory, that it creates a situation in which female players simply cannot 'win'. Georgia describes her experiences with harassment in *Overwatch* as a "a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't situation," in which fabricated and subjective perceptions of the skill-level of specific characters, their roles within a team, and the individuals considered most likely to play them, lead to criticism regardless of that player's lived reality. In her gaming footage, Georgia described her experiences playing a number of different *Overwatch* healers – Mercy, Lucio, and Zenyatta – and commented that she often had received less harassment when playing as the latter two (male) characters than the former (female) character. However, in her first interview, she recalled being criticised by other players for *not* playing Mercy: "I wanna go play something else, and that's when I felt like the whole 'you should be healing, what are you trying to do, you have all these Mercy hours, why are you playing Reaper?' it's like, 'cos I'm trying to have fun and enjoy the

game!'" In this way, female *Overwatch* players are critiqued through a lens that simultaneously casts them as 'low-skill' and of limited use if they play the healer, Mercy, or as stepping out of bounds if they play something else. This is once again evidenced in her gaming footage, in which she performs admirably as the damage character, Sombra, but states that she is often criticised for wanting to play the character due to the expectation that she will not be able to do so effectively.

These practices, both deliberately obtuse and confusing, and also often relentless, are coercive attempts to control the ludic activity of women and girls in order to keep them maintained and docile. "Woman's space," writes Sandra Lee Bartky, "is not a field in which her bodily intentionality can be freely realised, but an enclosure in which she feels herself positioned and by which she is confined" (1988, p. 66). We can see this, too, in games – barriers to play such as marketing practices defining female play through limiting stereotypes; games studios creating hostile environments that women do not feel comfortable or safe in; and vocal critics within the games community working to limit women's movement within that space through tactics already mentioned, such as harassment and gatekeeping. Through a social construction of gaming as being a male dominated space, these critics thoroughly situate power in the hands of socially privileged men and boys. These "subtle and insidious" surveillance techniques echo Foucauldian ideas of disciplinary power, in which a docile population of bodies is created through oppressive structures and regimes (Downing, 2008, p. 82).

Foucault's use of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon to illustrate his points on disciplinary surveillance is still relevant to contemporary exercises of power, including those utilised within video game spaces and communities. The panopticon takes the form of a cylindrical prison structure built around a central tower occupied by a single guard. Inmates are kept isolated from each other, but in turn are constantly subject to observation, "effectively preventing plotting, insubordination, or insurrection, since these are communal strategies of resistance" (Downing, 2008, p. 82). In time, inmates – under the impression that they are constantly being watched, and wary of punishment – begin to self-regulate and self-surveille, regardless of whether or not they are actually being observed at that point. The panopticon as a disciplinary concept can be scaled to fit contemporary "disciplinary society" more broadly; as unlike the panopticon, "effects of disciplinary power are not exercised

from a single vantage point, but are mobile, multivalent and internal to the very fabric of our everyday life" (ibid).

It is not difficult to see how these concepts of disciplinary power translate to the treatment of the Other in gaming spaces. As explained above, visibility within the gaming assemblage often entails risk of adverse treatment from male gatekeepers – something which many women naturally do not want to deal with. One such way to protect themselves is to engage in identity fluidity – specifically to mask, hide, or deny their gender when engaging in online communications with strangers within the gaming assemblage. In doing so, through fear of the potential omniscience of the panoptic gaze of the gaming assemblage, women are self-surveilling; modifying their behaviour and hiding themselves so as not to be chased away, thus allowing gatekeepers to continue to believe the charade that the gaming assemblage is a homogenous space. Bartky, echoing Foucault, explains the insidious nature of power and control in a disciplinary society: "the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no-one in particular" (1988, p. 74), as such, female responses to these nebulously located critiques are similarly multifaceted. They perform identity fluidity because the disciplinary power structures at play within the imagined community of video game players do not allow for them to move freely or without critique without some form of identity malleability, willingly or not. "For many women," writes Emma Witkowski, "being visible as expert players is in tension with erasing parts of oneself (dismissing aspects of voice, identity, and outlook) in order to persist 'normally' in their leisure space" (2018, p. 193). This segment provides some examples of how this erasure is utilised by women, often as a necessity in order to exist safely and criticism-free within ludic spheres.

Georgia is open and chatty in her gameplay clips and interviews – evidence of her experience using voice chat in video games, and of her experience as a streamer (more on this later) – but in her first selection of gameplay clips, she reveals her experiences with male gamers in *Overwatch* have often been toxic. "I kinda wish I'd been recording yesterday," she tells me, "I had in at least three different games, just because I was a female, I had different guys tell me 'you're a girl, so you're meant to be a healer'." Coding support classes in games as feminine is not solely confined to *Overwatch* – survey respondents cited in Chapter Two expressed frustration with the tendency for RPGs to cast women as magic users and healers, and men in more heavy-handed, damage-dealing roles.

'Justifications' for such stereotypes are often rooted in misogyny and gatekeeping, from assumptions about the physical inferiority or nurturing nature of women, to the refusal to allow for the possibility that a woman be anything other than support for a male player or character. In *Overwatch* at the time that this research took place, these arguments often centred around one particular support character, the angelic-looking doctor, Mercy, who is able to heal, buff, and resurrect her teammates, and who typically does not do attack damage. When female players choose to play as Mercy, they are often harassed for playing a 'low-skill' character (Mercy is considered easy to play for *Overwatch* beginners) or for being a 'one-trick Mercy' ('one trick' means a player only ever plays one character, and never tries to diversify their skillset). When female players do not play Mercy, they are often harassed for stepping out of bounds, or because Mercy is considered to be one of the few characters they may be effective as. In her gameplay footage, Georgia continues that "not only did I get verbally harassed for being a female, I also got textually – the guy was in text chat, just talking shit over and over. […] He said 'make me a sandwich, you whore, get back to healer, you Mercy'."

Georgia's tone and word-choice as she chats in her gaming footage and in later interviews is jolly, as if to make light of the harassment she had received, but it clearly frustrates her. In her first game, she details a recent uptick in hateful comments she has received during gameplay. "I only go on comms because my friend and I talk to each other in-play," she explains, and sometimes they accidentally enter a voice channel that contains all teammates – including strangers – rather than one that is solely between Georgia and her friend. "That's why it exposes me to talking to all those people who I probably normally wouldn't want to be talking to in the first place," she says, noting how talking in voice chat renders her visible as a woman, and at risk of commentary from misogynistic players. "That's why I've been going in Random [Mystery Heroes] lately," she continues, "because it puts you as whatever character and it's luck of the draw, and I don't have rude people on mic." The reason Mystery Heroes appears to be a safer space for Georgia is because the game mode randomises character-selection – there is no way to make judgement calls based upon the character a player chooses, because the player cannot choose – and because the mode is considered more casual than Competitive, and therefore voice chat is typically not as expected. Georgia explains that she has not only altered her game-mode choices, but also limited the amount she talks in voice chat, as well:

"I also haven't been going onto voice chat unless I've been doing Comp [Competitive mode], so unless I'm doing Comp people haven't seemed to pick up on the fact that I'm female, so, I don't know what was going on with the atmosphere at the time [of the footage being recorded], but, it was near constant. Any time I'd go on the mic on my main account – which I guess it a level 800-and-something? I have the silver border with the two stars – any time I play on that account specifically it's like 'you're not playing like a Silver,' and it's like the first game of the day and they're already critiquing my gameplay, and I'm like 'I just woke up, man, I just wanna enjoy my life.' But yeah, on that account specifically – the silver-bordered account – the flaming on voice chat was pretty gnarly, it would happen often, and on text chat, too."

Through reducing the amount of time she spends on voice chat, as well as actively changing her play-style to avoid malicious comments, Georgia is engaging in a form of self-surveillance. Her decision to mute her mic is a form of identity fluidity performed as a result of unwilling politicisation – Georgia's presence within *Overwatch* matches, as well as her decision to not stick with characters solely associated with feminine play, was considered stepping out of line by gatekeepers. As a result, out of concern for being noticed and attacked, she began to limit her actions by choosing when she felt comfortable utilising voice chat, and what game modes she played in, in order to continue existing within the space.

This behaviour – of masking one's identity as a woman when gaming – is common practice. A 2015 Pew Research Centre report found that of the 60 percent of teenage girls who play video games, only 9 percent use voice chat when playing games online (Suellentrop, 2015). While the study does not offer a hypothesis for why this might be, it is not difficult to link these findings to a fear of sexist harassment. A 2014 study found that 40% of adult internet users had experienced some form of online harassment, and while men were slightly more likely on average to be subjected to online harassment, women were far more likely to experience it in particularly severe forms – such as sustained harassment campaigns, sexual harassment, stalking, or threats of physical violence (Duggan, 2014). A 2017 viral Reddit thread exposed hundreds of examples of misogynistic harassment received by female *Overwatch* players, prompting a response from the Overwatch team in

the form of a Youtube video titled 'Play Nice, Play Fair', in which game director Jeff Kaplan implored users to not engage in toxic behaviour, and stressed the importance of utilising the in-game reporting functions to relay egregious examples to the Blizzard team for action (Developer Update, Youtube, 2017). Many of the women who contributed to the thread revealed examples of identity fluidity of their own – in order to avoid potentially being teamed up with abusive strangers during play, they had set up safe spaces and communities on platforms such as Facebook, Reddit, and Discord to find like-minded people to play with. In this way, they removed themselves from a situation that posed a risk and altered their gaming practices to continue playing as best they could without a significant risk of harassment or bullying. This can be considered a double-edged-sword – while female players are taking necessary steps to protect themselves from harassment after the games industry's repeated failure to do so, it manifests as self-surveillance, self-silencing, and hiding who they really are. However, until better infrastructure to combat harassment is enacted – or until the gaming assemblage fundamentally changes its ideologies and works to deconstruct its own hegemony, many female players see this mode of identity fluidity as their safest option. As Emma Witkowski explains, while mic muting could further spread the inaccurate idea that gaming spaces are predominantly and only populated by men, any attempt to challenge those ideas – even by simply making oneself known – can be an invitation for harassment: "when individuals encounter and challenge gendered spaces, they become acutely aware that a personal attack is always just around the corner, only one comment or tweet away. As such, full visibility is understood as treacherous terrain" (2018, pp. 191-192).

This sentiment is echoed by some interviewees. In her first interview after playing *Alice: Madness Returns* (2011), Opal comments that "I'm sure you're aware, if you go onto an MMO of any sort, or a situation where you can play with lots of people on the internet, it's a very cautious place to be if you're female because you expect that people will be rude to you." Her statement is twofold – firstly, she implies that harassment, gatekeeping, and other forms of policing of women's activities online are so pervasive, that one does not even need to have experienced them first-hand to be both aware and apprehensive of them when considering entering certain gaming spaces. Secondly, preceding her thoughts with "I'm sure you're aware" indicates a shared experience, an implicit acknowledgement that what she is about to say is something universally known to women and minorities within the

gaming assemblage. Rachel admits in her first interview that she deviated from her usual playstyle when recording footage for this research because of anxieties about being observed and rendered 'seen'. "I consider the *Sims* plays that I do to be stories that I'm telling with the game, it makes them feel a bit personal sometimes, so the idea of showing someone the story I've been telling, I felt a little silly," she admits, "so I ended up making characters I was less interested in." Despite her gameplay being for research purposes and not available to wider audiences, prior experiences with feeling othered within the gaming assemblage led her to alter her ludic activities for fear of mockery.

The cautiousness of Opal and Rachel, as well as their expectation of backlash is comparable to the actions of Georgia, who added in her interview that another reason she sometimes chose to keep silent when playing was to avoid ridicule for her age or race:

> "I just want to take away from the age, from the gender, from anything that could possibly make people make fun of me. I've also gotten flamed for speaking Spanish on mic before – and oh my god that was hilarious – they started calling me 'Sombra' and saying a bunch of other stupid things in Spanish, and I had to stop and go AFK [away from keyboard] 'cos I reported all of them."

While these identity markers can be more difficult to perceive in voice chat alone, linguistic profiling is pervasive in gaming communities where vocal communication is the norm. Kishonna L. Gray's work on queer, black, female resistance in Xbox Live lobbies highlights the extent to which the necessity of voice chat affects their interactions with video games: "in voice-based communities, information is revealed automatically when someone speaks," and "as many women and people of colour explain, this mere technological advance creates the most havoc in their virtual lives – racial and gendered inequality based off how they sound" (Gray, 2013). Gray's findings are echoed in interviewee's testimony, Georgia notes multiple instances in which either strangers or friends have expressed incredulity that she – a 30-year-old Mexican woman – was a fan of video games, while Opal notes that when playing online "I think that people will not expect you to be a black gamer, especially a chick. I know they're out there, because I have friends who are, but again, they don't say anything online, and you play games on your own or online, so you don't really talk." Opal's statement highlights both the issues with self-surveilling identity fluidity and one of the goals of persistent harassment: when women and minorities are forced to silence

themselves in online spaces, it becomes increasingly more difficult to organise and mobilise against hegemony.

Opal's reluctance to use voice chat online (she did not play online games in her gaming footage, but did discuss her experiences in interviews) also extends to her experiences as a Muslim video game player:

> "I remember one of the last times I played *Counter-Strike: GO* – which is always set in different warzones and all have these vaguely realistic backgrounds for why you're there and what you're doing – and of course one of the favourite enemies right now are these obscurely Arab peoples who will shout things and then try to bomb you. I remember playing with a group of friends who are all pretty nice and respectful, but some guy we were playing against, when he killed some dude he started trying to say 'get those terrorists!' or some approximation in the name of Allah, and I wanted to say something, but I was afraid of drawing attention to myself."

Unlike Georgia's experiences with hateful conduct, which were a result of her speaking on-mic, Opal was subjected to Islamophobia and felt afraid to speak out in case it drew further harassment despite remaining silent. This shows that keeping quiet does not necessarily limit the amount of hate one will be exposed to in online gaming spaces, and explains why some choose to withdraw entirely to their own segregated safe spaces in order to minimise potential harassment (Gray, 2013; 2017; Mulkerin, 2017).

One such example of this is utilised by Georgia when she wants to further distance herself from gendered harassment. She explains that she has recently begun playing *Overwatch* on an un-gendered alternate account, and had found her experiences with strangers to have moderately improved as a result. "My name on there is 'Boop' so it doesn't say 'Georgia' or anything, it doesn't have a gender on it, you know?" she explains. In addition to her main account's username containing her own feminised name, she notes that it also bears similarities to a popular female streamer who often encourages and leans into trolling and abusive online behaviour, and suggests that this, too, could unintentionally invite unwanted comments. She concludes that, despite her alt-account's low level (low level accounts are newer, thus players are assumed to be less skilled), she has received less in-game harassment during *Overwatch* matches. "It's strange," she says, "but maybe it's just

the name and the fact that I don't go on mic any more has cut down a lot on that voice chat and text chat flaming." Georgia's reasoning echoes the belief that, sadly, negative retaliatory behaviour is to be expected by women who publicly reveal themselves online. "Women are persistently derailed as authentic participants of this serious leisure activity via both personal and community attacks alongside of institutional positioning and dismissal," write Witkowski. The lack of institutional or communal support for victims of harassment within gaming spaces means strategies are "often [left] to the individual players to tough it out and devise methods to self-protect" (2018, p. 191). Witkowski cites the short-lived, all-female, professional *League of Legends* team, Team Siren, as an example, whose players created a 'buddy system' to talk to each other when their 2013 promotional video was met with a critical response from the game's fans; considering the lack of support for these players at a professional level, it is no surprise that the everyday female video game player must limit the amount of space she takes up in order to persist – if, indeed, she is not chased from whatever platform she may have entirely.

The expectation that women and minorities who make themselves known online can expect harassment merely for existing is commonplace. The pervasiveness of this knowledge is once again an exemplification of the Foucauldian panopticon in action: women who play video games do not necessarily even have to have experienced harassment themselves – Opal's earlier statements are evidence of this – to feel the need to mask their identities online via the practice of mic-muting. Thus, they perform identity fluidity in the form of self-surveillance by policing their own actions in order to avoid notice. While gaming spaces, as this chapter will go on to argue, can allow identity to be navigated and explored on the gamer's own terms, in this case, women are forced to mask their identity – to make malleable their identity presentation – in order to protect themselves. In this way, through the pressures forcing them to self-surveille, "women are participating in their own erasure as expert actors in growing and global serious leisure activities" (Witkowski, 2018, pp. 191-192).

Often, self-surveillant tactics employed by female players are not solely to avoid online harassment, but to protect oneself in real life, too. During her interview, Georgia detailed her experiences as a content creator, streaming video games on Twitch, and what ultimately led to her unwilling exit from the platform. She begins:

"I stopped because one of my viewers… this guy ended up donating a total of $12,000 to my stream. At first it was like $50, then it was $100, $200, then $500, then $1000… at first it was like '…okay' but then like 'this guy needs to stop', I started getting kinda weirded out."

The practice of donating to streamers is common – many streamers on Twitch, Youtube, and Facebook Gaming, among other platforms, prominently feature information on how viewers can support them. Twitch, currently the largest online streaming platform with 63.6% of the market share (Kastrenakes, 2020), allows viewers to subscribe to their favourite streamers at either $4.99, $9.99, or $24.99 USD per month – of which the streamer gets half, while Twitch pockets the rest – as well as purchase 'bits' with which to 'cheer' in streams. One bit is worth approximately $0.01 USD and can be bought in bulk, bits cheered in streams go directly to the streamer themselves. Viewers can also donate to streamers through third-party apps such as Paypal. Typically, the practice of tipping, donating, or subscribing to a streamer is considered an act of support, or as thanks for the content that they produce. Sometimes it is done in celebration of something happening in-stream: for example, a streamer may have completed a difficult game live on-stream, prompting viewers to donate, cheer bits, or gift subscriptions to other viewers in celebration. Sometimes, donations are in exchange for rewards, or added extras from the streamers themselves. Twitch channel subscribers often get access to exclusive emotes to use across Twitch.tv, for example. It is not uncommon, however, for streamers to offer additional rewards to thank viewers for their monetary support. Lena Uszkoreit notes that prominent streamer Alinity offers subscribers access to her Snapchat, as well as a "daily 'sub dance'" (2018, p. 171). While these are typically considered additional thank yous for the support, it is not difficult to see how the process of donating to streamers in some cases can be seen as transactional, which is why Georgia's experience, while shocking, is not necessarily surprising:

"I guess I had mentioned in my stream once or twice where I lived, so he was going to do a southern California tour because he was in San Diego or something, and he wanted to meet up with me. I was like 'uhhhhhh <laugh> okayyyy… don't kill me'; he met up with me [in December], he bought me a gold-plated rose, and it was creepy. He wanted to meet up again after that, and I told him no. [...] then he

came back again in February and didn't say anything; then the second time he came back he asked me if I wanted to move in with him. I was like, 'are you kidding me?'"

While it was this experience that led to Georgia ceasing streaming online, she also detailed other experiences of sexual harassment online. "There was always that odd random dude coming in and sending me [private messages] while I'm trying to stream," she told me in her first interview, "like 'oh can you point your camera down a little bit?' or 'can you pose like this?' [or] 'do you do foot stuff? I'll pay you to do foot stuff'." Her experiences exemplify typical experiences of women detailed in Chapter One, where one of the few acceptable role for them within gaming spaces is one that prioritised the titillation and gratification of male gamers. Georgia is bilingual, but found her experiences were the same whether streaming in English or Spanish:

"It's like 'dude can I just play the game?' I'll turn off my facecam and I'll play for a little bit but then nobody shows up to the stream, so it's like, do I want viewers or do I want to enjoy my time when I stream? So there's that sort of annoyance of should I? Should I not? Should I stream with cam? Should I not? What games should I play? What games shouldn't I play? […] Do I really want to put myself back in that situation, back in the public eye, and back in front of people who [I] don't know?"

The frustration apparent in Georgia's testimony mirrors that of her "damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't" experiences while playing Mercy in *Overwatch*. Not using a facecam – something which many viewers value – causes her viewer count to fall, but switching it on invariably invites harassment. Similarly, she deliberates over what games she should play, how she should play, and even if she should play at all as a result of her experiences. In this way, the regulatory mechanism of harassment and sexualisation of Georgia as a female public figure with a Twitch platform led to her own self-surveillance and self-regulation in the form of mic muting, removal of facecam, and ultimately, deplatforming herself all together.

Contrary to techno-utopian visions of the internet being a space of unlimited freedom, a "non-hierarchical web of connections rather than a top-down chain of command and control," (Harvey, 2020, p. 117) real-life subjectivities and prejudices are not

reinvented, but reinforced online, with the lived reality of women and minorities being one not of being free of one's body, but of having to mask it. In order to safely traverse the gaming assemblage, many women are forced by unwilling politicisation to perform identity fluidity, utilising self-surveillant tactics to disguise themselves when in potentially hostile spaces.

Lean-in Female Geekdom

This next form of identity fluidity is not, to my knowledge, practiced by any of the interviewees for this research, but it merits discussion and attention.

In 2019, internet personality Belle Delphine uploaded a sexually suggestive video to her Instagram account. In the video she sits in a bathtub wearing her trademark long pink wig, a pink gaming headset, and a blue swimsuit with 'game over' in 8-bit text across her chest. "Rise up gamer boys," she says, winking, "it's time to get your gamer girl bath water." She then proceeds to fill up plastic jars with water from the bathtub, with further clips showing jars full of water that she had either swilled around her mouth first, or that she had twerked in before bottling it. The video was accompanied by a link to her online store, where fans could purchase jars of her bath water for $30 USD each. They sold out instantly, and the video went viral. Before this point, Delphine was largely known as a cosplayer and model, and while she had a lot of support on the payment platform Patreon, the virality of her bottled bathwater allegedly earned her £10 million GBP (Cook, 2020).

Delphine has always been a controversial figure within the gaming assemblage – she epitomises 'fake geek girl' stereotypes that gatekeepers use to deride women in gaming spaces, and her status as a sexually active, sexually explicit cosplayer and female content creator online marks her as someone who gamers love to objectify, but hate for her financial and viral success. Delphine appears to be not only aware of this, but also to actively lean into it. "So, there is a joke in the community among gamers where they will comment on a post saying 'let me drink your bath water'," she says in an interview, "and although it's a joke, I just kind of found the idea of turning it into a reality and actually letting people own my bath water funny" (Bakar, 2019). In this way, Delphine turned unsavoury objectifying comments into a viral meme, a way to expand her social media platforms, and a money-making opportunity.

Her actions are examples of another form of identity fluidity. Rather than hide her identity as female to safely traverse online spaces, Delphine actively accentuates, exaggerates, and draws attention to herself as a sexual feminine woman – an act that invariably garners her more hate, but also, more opportunities for marketisation and profit. I call this form of identity fluidity 'lean-in' female geekdom. Named for Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's problematic book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, it describes the act of leaning into an oppressive system in a way that works for you. In Chapter One, I explained that one of the few 'acceptable' ways for women to be visible participants in the gaming assemblage was by virtue of their heterosexual appeal. However, anyone who actively utilises this tactic risks being branded a "titty streamer" or a "Twitch thot," and subsequently harassed (Alexander, 2018).

An example of this can be seen in 2020-21's 'hot tub meta' controversy. Twitch prohibits the broadcasting of sexual activity or nudity on their platform, but the subjective nature of interpretations of these rules has sometimes resulted in women being banned from the platform for innocuously breastfeeding, cosplaying, or simply wearing an outfit deemed too revealing. The rules necessitate that the bodies of those who "present as women" (to use Twitch's terms) are more heavily policed than the bodies of men, which have fewer restrictions placed upon them. One loophole to these rules, however, is that more revealing clothing is permitted provided it is contextually appropriate; in mid-2020, some female streamers began to take advantage of this, and started broadcasting streams from hot tubs and paddling pools, clad in bikinis and beachwear. Many women who did this found their viewer numbers, followers, and subscriber count – all metrics for success on Twitch – rapidly increase as a result of this new 'meta', but also became the targets of vitriol from some male Twitch users. Successful, visible women in the gaming assemblage have often been accused of faking their interests in the medium for popularity, or for 'stealing views' from more deserving male content creators. Following the introduction of the 'IRL' streaming category to Twitch in 2017 (IRL stands for In Real Life – the section intended to provide streamers a place to produce content not directly related to video games), streamer Trainwreck's viral rant mourned the end of the platform as a space for (male) gamers: "this used to be a god damn community of gamers, nerds, kids that got bullied, kids that got fucked with, kids that resorted to the gaming world because the real world was too fucking hard, too shitty, too lonely, too sad and depressing," he said. "Now it's ran by the same sluts

that rejected us, the same sluts that chose the god damn cool kids over us. The same sluts that are coming into our community, taking the money, taking the subs, the same way they did back in the day" (Grayson, 2017). He was temporarily suspended from Twitch for his outburst, but the sentiment from entitled male gatekeepers persists, and is visible in the polarised, often vitriolic response to the 'hot tub meta'. "We live in a world where it's okay for men to sexualise women in media all the time," tweeted streamer Pokket in response to the recent outcry, "the minute a woman owns her own sexuality it's somehow...*gasp* immoral!" (Grayson, 2021). Her tweet highlights the double standards at play when it comes to women and sexuality online: to misogynistic gatekeepers of the gaming assemblage, a woman is best when she is unwillingly politicised – when her body and her presence in gaming spaces are made political and sexual against her will. Any woman who willingly politicised herself for her own financial or social benefit is, according to these same gatekeepers, gaming the system and worthy of hate. To misogynistic gamers, the sexualisation of women is only acceptable when it is done against their will.

In an interview for gaming website Kotaku, prominent IRL streamer Amouranth says "welcome to being a female. I'm gonna be objectified even if I'm wearing a shirt up to my collarbone." Her attitude towards the inevitability of objectification on the internet is akin to 'if you can't beat them, join them'. She continues that when she is the recipient of harassment in her streams, she often deliberately exaggerates her reactions: "if I'm feeling really sassy, I can act like I'm super offended and make them think they won. Then they post that clip on Reddit and YouTube and I get more views" (D'Anastasio, 2018). In an environment where women are made to feel as if they cannot 'win' regardless of how they act, it is unsurprising that some have chosen to create 'metas' that work for them. Being able to dismantle, deconstruct, or alter the oppressive hierarchies of the gaming assemblage is a daunting task; by 'leaning in' to a system that sets them up to fail, many female content creators have instead managed to find a way to financially and socially profit from said systems by accentuating and drawing attention to their identities as sex-positive women. In this way, they perform another mode of identity fluidity in an assemblage that necessitates it.

Resistance

All examples of identity fluidity explored so far in this chapter result from either the willing or unwilling politicisation of marginalised identities against a backdrop of hegemonic pressures that force many women and minorities in the games community to alter their actions in order to coexist. In this way, identity fluidity often occurs because of "sexist activities and performances [that] allow individuals to regulate the boundaries of appropriate gender behaviour, projecting a gender ideal and maintaining heterosexual hierarchies" within the gaming assemblage (Harvey, 2015, p. 34). However, identity fluidity can also be utilised as an act of resistance, defiance, and protest, as the remainder of this chapter will highlight. There are a multitude of examples of players, developers, and critics using video games to critically examine and push back against dominant hierarchies in gaming. Importantly, Gray and Leonard write that "to change gaming in an effort to change culture, to use gaming as an instrument and technology within larger social movements, is to bolster the toolbox for justice" (2018, p. 8), as such, pushing for change within the gaming assemblage has the potential to influence and alter wider society, too.

In their 2006 investigation into potential resistive practices in boy's ludic activities, Sanford and Madill conclude that resistance is unlikely to be meaningful in a medium known to be heavily associated with toxic masculinity, heteronormativity, and white supremacy. "The resistances made possible by videogame play serve only to reify the traditional stereotypes and cement them firmly into place," they write, noting that any in-game resistance without critical engagement with real-world political structures means many examples of ludic resistive practices risk being "limited to small acts of adolescent defiance" (2006, p. 301, p. 304). However, it has been fifteen years since the publication of this paper, and examples of resistive practices in the gaming assemblage are becoming increasingly common. Individuals are utilising video games, gaming communities, and gaming platforms to either carve out a niche for those who do not fit the gamer archetype, to comment upon and critique representational issues within wider society, or to change gaming spaces altogether. For example, the increase in readily available and easily accessible game-making software and tutorials online has massively expanded the pool of video games created by independent developers, allowing for a wider variety of diverse stories to be told outside of those created by large studios for mainstream audiences. In *Rise of the Videogame*

Zinesters, game designer Anna Anthropy describes how video games are being "taken back" as an artform by marginalised voices:

> "What I want from video games is for creation to be open to everyone, not just to publishers and programmers. I want games to be personal and meaningful, not just pulp for an established audience. I want game creation to be decentralised. I want open access to the creative act for everyone. I want games as zines. It's a tall order, maybe, but the ladder's being build as you read these words." (2012, pp. 9-10)

Bonnie Ruberg's *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* highlights how LGBTQ+ players utilise video games resistively by queering their play; they write that:

> "All video games can become platforms for playing at the boundaries of heteronormativity – or for disrupting and dismantling heteronormativity itself. The queerness in a video game may lie in the opportunity to resist structures of power, or partake in alternative forms of pleasure, or inhabit embodied and affective experiences of difference." (2020, p. 15)

Similarly, Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux's work in *Metagaming* interrogates how deviations in mechanical choices made by players when gaming can work to resist and alter ludic styles and developer intentions entirely:

> "Metagames transform video games from a mass medium and cultural commodity into instruments, equipment, tools, and toys for playing, competing, spectating, cheating, trading, breaking, making, and ultimately intervening in the sensory and political economies of those technologies responsible for the privatisation of play." (2017, p. 4)

As these examples indicate, despite hegemonic caveats associated with video gaming as a medium, it can be an effective tool for challenging, resisting, and enacting change. Gray, Voorhees, and Vossen write that "western feminists need to start examining play more carefully and examining how it can be used to subvert patriarchal norms, to promote equal rights, and to ignite new forms of activism" (2018, p. 13), which the remainder of this chapter will endeavour to do.

To do this, it is important to unpick one of the previous theoretical frameworks used to frame the findings of this research so far – that of the panopticon. One of the key issues with Foucault's panopticon model is that it presumes a passivity of the bodies that are rendered docile by its surveillance practices. This is something that feminist scholars that have engaged with Foucault's work since its inception have worked hard to critique and interrogate within a framework that more accurately incorporates the lived reality and the persistent activism of women and minorities. In *Foucault and Feminism*, Lois McKay writes that Foucault's "unidirectional and monolithic model of power's operations on the body leads to an oversimplified notion of gender as an imposed effect rather than a dynamic process," that does not offer explanations for nuances of "how individuals may act in an autonomous and creative fashion despite overarching social constraints" (1992, p. 12). When applied to the gaming assemblage, it is clear that while women under the hegemonic gaze of the gaming panopticon may alter their actions, and indeed, their identities to exist safely within that space, they are definitely not beaten down by it. On the contrary, there is an abundance of evidence that women and girls engage in and promote "a playful (and play-filled!) feminism" (Chess, 2009, p. 1) within the gaming assemblage. Gray, Voorhees, and Vossen argue that games have become "an increasingly viable platform for feminist activism and the struggle for social justice," echoing Shira Chess' insistence that "being playful has power: it is infectious, unifying, and gratifying," and that video games have the potential to both advocate for feminine play and reinvigorate feminist activism (2018, p. 8; 2009, p. 2).

Fuck It (be the change you want to see)

Georgia's high-skill gameplay and clear competency when playing as damage-dealing heroes in *Overwatch* is indicative of her competitive ludic style, but her introduction to the first-person shooter genre was not easy. In one of her interviews, she explains how she persisted despite the genre's inaccessibility:

> "The first game I got on the Xbox 360 when I graduated in 2008, I got the *Modern Warfare* Xbox, so that was the game that came with it; I have never played *Call of Duty* before so I popped it in, and I jumped into a game, and I immediately started getting flamed, I immediately started getting killed… but it was such a high crazy

learning curve, and instead of being like 'this isn't for me' I was determined to figure it out and to kill these bastards <laughs>."

Georgia's attitude towards her initial playthrough of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) – that of stubbornly continuing despite the obstacles – bears similarities to her attitude towards visible women within the gaming assemblage. In her second interview, she discusses her perceptions of prominent and successful female *Overwatch* streamers, and states how she hopes that their rising visibility causes other women and girls to say "'fuck it, I'm gonna go for it anyway because I'm good at the game and this is something that I can do'." In this way, one prominent example of women using identity fluidity for resistive purposes within the gaming assemblage is by harnessing that 'fuck it' attitude, prominently broadcasting oneself as a visible female player, and being the change they want to see. Visible women in the gaming assemblage who build their platforms as prominent, competent, and successful female players effectively push back against and resist the toxic norms of the assemblage for the sake of others within (or others hoping to enter) it. In her second interview, Georgia talks with cautious optimism about the future of women in video games, and discusses the importance of role models – and of being one herself:

> "One of the […] things I feel passionately about is that there's still a lot of girls and women that are afraid to show that they're nerdy, I feel desensitised to it because I've been into this for a while, but there's still 14, 15, 16-year-old girls who are afraid to pick up a controller because it's what the boys do, or because they'll be bad at it, so I'm hopeful that maybe a changing atmosphere will make it easier for them in the future to be more comfortable in their hobbies and with what they like and who they are, so that this isn't the same thing that we're dealing with twenty years later, hopefully they'll be more comfortable and enjoying a video game the way that I do every single day."

Georgia's early video gaming role models were family members – her uncle owned a shop that contained *Pac-Man* and *Street Fighter* arcade machines, and her cousins had access to a Nintendo Entertainment System. She speaks with fondness of this time, "that's when I first started gaming, with [my uncle], so I have that memory of enjoying video games with a family member. He ended up passing away, so it's even more of a dear memory to me." Despite early access and keen interest in video games, Georgia still found herself

decentralised from the hobby growing up and into adulthood – friends would act surprised when they discovered she was into video games, and in her first interview she describes her childhood as having a distinctly "tomboy" aesthetic. Alison Harvey's research on games in domestic spheres highlights the significance of framing young girls with an interest in the digital as having a 'tomboy' subject-position, "an acceptable temporary identity for some of the gender play of young girls around masculinity before it becomes restricted in the passage to adolescence" (2015, p. 111). Harvey notes that often, families consider a daughter with an interest in gaming as being an exception to the norm, rather than an example of how the association of video games with masculinity is fundamentally faulty. Through these classifications, parents "make reference to the exceptional nature of these interests and [their daughters'] difference from the feminine norm, reifying the concept that interests in video games were transgressive for girls and serving to again associate ludic pleasures and tech savvy with masculinity, suggesting the force of this mythologised relationship in everyday life" (2015, p. 112). As such, the more female players who utilise social media and streaming platforms broadcast themselves as visible and successful examples of women in the gaming assemblage, the more these assumptions are rendered demonstrably false.

While Georgia's family did not attempt to limit her ludic interests growing up, she still found herself othered from the gaming assemblage as an adult, Mexican, female player. Despite the influence of video games on her childhood, she cites several instances where new friends would react to her interest in video games with incredulity. "It was always a surprising thing to people," she says, "just like 'how old are you? You're twenty-six, you're Mexican, I thought Mexicans didn't like video games!' and I'm like… where do these stereotypes come from? So yeah." This comment in particular highlights the intersectional damage that the gamer archetype enacts – the association of video games with young white masculinity means those that do not fit the archetype are consistently finding they need to verify their existence within the gaming assemblage. As such, it is hardly surprising that a key motivator in the willing politicisation and identity fluidity of women and minority players is to resist – and ultimately render false – the hegemony of the gamer identity.

In between her first and second interviews, Georgia made the decision to begin part-time Twitch streaming again. Her gameplay footage is indicative of her competency – in her second *Overwatch* Mystery Heroes match, she defeats the enemy team and claims the first

objective largely solo as her 'main', Sombra, and in her third match she quickly dispatches enemies as Hanzo, playing so adeptly that it earns her play of the game. Her skill as damage-dealing heroes alone is enough to combat misogynistic stereotypes about female *Overwatch* players cited earlier; in her second interview, Georgia discusses the importance of being both a visible female and visible Hispanic role-model in her decision to return to streams, as well as her decision to join the EA Game Changer's program as a *Battlefield* (2002-2018) content creator. The EA (Electronic Arts – a prominent American video game company) Game Changers is a "community partnership program that fuses content creators and expert players directly into the game development process enabling early collaborative feedback for improvements" (EA, 2020). The program offers collaborators early access to beta testing, pre-release events, and a platform boost in exchange for feedback on upcoming game releases. Georgia speaks with a cautious optimism about the project, commenting that while she was one of only a few women in the room, that she felt it important that she be there.

> "I wasn't in the program a few years ago – I officially joined the program late last year, early this year – but I had been going to events on my own and talking to people that were involved on my own, and I noticed that, yeah, it was very male-heavy, it was always guys being sent out to these things, and… I guess the changing atmosphere and everything – of having more females in the game and playing the game – has, I think it's been a good thing. […] there's still not too many women involved, so I applaud their want to add more females, as far as *Battlefield* is related, but I think it's still a work in progress."

Her trepidation comes from uncertainty about EA's desire to advocate for genuine change within the gaming assemblage – "I wanna say that it's genuine, I hope that it's genuine," she tells me, "[…] I feel like yeah, they're trying to push for it, but I don't know if it's earnest and genuine or if it's more of a marketing push." She also cites her concerns about the raised risk of harassment that comes with returning to the public eye – a risk many women and minority content creators have to reckon with, as this chapter has shown. Still, Georgia concludes her interview with optimism about the potential for growth and change as a result of more women becoming prominent content creators in the gaming assemblage:

"If you look at the *Battlefield* directory on Twitch, every Tuesday there's a girl gamer night, so at least half, if not more, of the people who are live are female, so I know there's more females playing this game. […] Like I said, I've been gaming for ten years, the first time I played *Battlefield* was four or five titles ago, so I've been playing this for a while, playing games for a while in general, and just hearing and comparing the first *Call of Duty* game I ever jumped into as opposed to now when I'm running with two full squads of women, that's a huge change, but it's a slow change. I'm hopeful to see where this goes in the next five years."

Georgia's approach – of being the change you want to see in a hostile space – echoes the attitude of innumerable individuals across the gaming assemblage, coming together to create comfortable spaces within the games community by centring the activities of women and players of marginalised identities. Emma Witkowski points out the significance of this work in *Feminism at Play*; when we remember research that argues that masculinity is always "socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) from femininity," she argues, "we can start to grasp the disruptive work involved by those women who participate as experts, as they do the heavy lifting of undoing traditional gender relational patterns on their given scene" (2018, pp. 188-189). While some early examples of well-known all-female gaming teams – such as the Fragdolls and Team Siren – notably utilised postfeminist marketing tactics that targeted their presence in the gaming assemblage largely at male players, community-building by women and minority players through subreddits, Discord servers, and other social media platforms such as Twitter ultimately work towards fundamentally altering the face of the gaming assemblage.

Meaning-Making Through Alternative Play

In addition to more visibly broadcasting *who* is gaming, another resistive strategy utilised by women and minorities within the gaming assemblage is to alter *how* one is gaming. Kathryn Hemman points out the influence that fan practices have upon the games industry, and that as such, "a surge in feminist consciousness is fully capable of influencing the development of media properties" (2018, p. 224). This influence is not solely employed through discussions

within the gaming assemblage, but also through in-game practices and emergent gameplay – such as players engaging with texts in ways that developers did not anticipate. For example, Supermassive Games' *Until Dawn* (2015) is a single-player horror game with a 'butterfly effect,' where decisions made by players will be 'remembered' by the game and influence its potential conclusion. The game's developers expressed surprise upon release after discovering that large numbers of players were playing in groups, with one person being 'in charge' of the controller while their friends deliberated about the best course of action to take in-game. What was designed as a single-player game became, through players' emergent gameplay, a makeshift multiplayer experience (Samuels, 2019). Another example is illustrated in player's actions in Rare's *Sea of Thieves* (2018), an online first-person multiplayer action-adventure game that casts players as pirates who sail the seas, completing quests and competing with other players in the hope of becoming pirate legends. In a devlog released on Youtube during a free in-game event called *Cursed Sails*, producer Joe Neate relayed the development team's surprise at finding that one of the ways that players were defeating enemies (the main objective of the event was to sink AI-controlled NPC skeleton ships in naval warfare) was to sneak a Chest of Sorrow – a rare treasure chest that causes a ship's hull to fill with water while it is aboard – onto the skeleton's ships (Official Sea of Thieves Developer Update, Youtube, 2018). Players had discovered that the skeletal crew of these ghost ships were programmed to be capable of patching holes in the ship's hull, but not to bail water – knowledge that they exploited by sneaking aboard and allowing the Chest of Sorrow to do the hard work for them. Both of these examples of emergent gameplay went on to influence later decisions made by the respective development teams.

With these examples in mind, it becomes clear how ludic styles that deliberately go against the grain, disrupt dominant hierarchies, or draw attention to injustices all work as legitimate resistive practices within a patriarchal assemblage. Female players hoping to resist and ultimately destroy hegemonic gaming practices engage in a willing politicisation of their gameplay – by playing in such a way as to draw attention to their identities as female participants often rendered as Other in ludic spaces. Boluk and Lemieux write that video games have a "radical potential" as a "medium for creative practice, philosophical experimentation, cultural critique, and political action" (2017, pp. 3-4), and the rise in use of content-sharing platforms such as Youtube and Twitch – as well as the breaking down of

barriers between developers and players through social media – renders these practices more potent than ever.

These resistive practices and emergent gameplay styles can manifest in several ways. Kishonna L. Gray's research highlights how griefing tactics – ludic styles that involve repeated and deliberate disruption to the flow of a game – are utilised by queer, female, players of colour to protest in-game harassment. When participants were subjected to harassment by strangers in their game lobby, they would deliberately play poorly, spawn-camp, kill their own teammates, or otherwise 'throw the game' in ways that diminished the fun for all involved. Gray likens these actions to resource mobilisation theory, in which the players involved "have re-appropriated resources in an attempt to recreate resistance tactics employed by women and people of colour in previous social movements" (2013). Emma Westecott's work on gender and gameplay performance provides insight into how modding – modifying pre-existing games by coding in alternate or additional information – is utilised by feminist players to add female playable characters into formerly masculine-dominated games like *Doom* (1993), *Quake* (1996), and *Counter-Strike* (1999) (2018). Similarly, Gee and Hayes highlight how the largely female modding community centred around the *Sims* franchise utilises mods and 'challenge runs' (modes of play that involve community-set house rules that must be followed, typically to make a game more difficult or add a layer of complexity) to highlight social issues. They give the example of a *Sims* toolkit that is designed to simulate the struggles of a poor single parent, thereby "socially organising [the] community to play in a certain way, to think and reflect in certain ways, and to relate to each other in certain ways as they take [the] challenge, negotiate over it, and comment on it" (2010, p. 54). Kathryn Hemman highlights how resistive and awareness-raising practices can transcend initial texts – in their work on the *Legend of Zelda* (1986-present) fandom, they note examples of fanfiction and fan-made comics that centre secondary female characters such as Malon and Tetra, or rewrite storylines to grant characters (such as the eponymous Princess Zelda) more agency in what is typically a traditional damsel in distress narrative. "Writers and artists creating fan comics and amateur games have demonstrated an understanding of these digital texts as open-access narrative platforms to be challenged," writes Hemman, "and these fans deconstruct and reconfigure dominant narratives to better reflect social and political concerns and their own personal interests" (2018, p. 227). Each of these are examples of resistive practices in which players

use the ludic tools available to them to form alternate modes of play and ultimately engage in the process of alternative meaning-making, for politically motivated purposes.

In her interviews, Jane discusses the importance of alternative meaning-making in her gaming practices. "We've all had to redefine success," she tells me, "I never got as far in my career as I hoped I would as a kid... I'm only thirty but I think every millennial is a bit disappointed in how far we've gotten in such circumstances, you know?" for Jane, video games provide space to process the lack of control she feels as a 30-year-old liberal millennial in the United States. Our interview is very politically focused; she discusses her concerns regarding the Trump presidency, the rise of the alt-right, and coming to terms with the potentiality that her generation may be the first to be worse off than its predecessors. Game worlds offer her a space to process these concerns, as well as practice alternative meaning-making in a variety of ways. While she admits that video games do offer a sense of escapism, Jane also stresses that they provide her with a place to think: "it's challenging," she tells me, "and it really does work out my brain in a way that I don't get elsewhere. In games I really do get to think about stuff, which is nice."

This is apparent in both of Jane's *Skyrim* gaming sessions. She dedicates a lot of time to world-building, storytelling, and extrapolating from in-game lore, which clearly indicates the amount of mental energy and time she has dedicated to the game. While playing, she tells me about the intricate backstory she has crafted for her player character, Melusine, a trainee wizard who has emigrated to Skyrim from High Rock to study. Jane is notably pleased upon successfully killing a dragon – something she admits she may have been under-levelled for, thus making the feat more impressive – but also equally enthralled when exploring the dungeons under the College of Winterhold and trying to work out the solution to her quest. In her interview following the first gameplay session, she spoke about how different in-game tasks can satisfy similar urges; for example, successfully defeating a foe and solving a puzzle can both enable her to feel 'like a badass'.

> "Accomplishing a really good, a really hard fight is good, figuring out a hard puzzle is good, figuring out a clever solution to something is amazing... I guess if you combine that all together? Like, I've had as much satisfaction of figuring out a really awful-good puzzle in a *Nancy Drew* game as slaying a dragon – it's like that good workout of my brain that I don't feel like I get everywhere."

In this way, gaming for Jane appears to be heavily cognitive – successful gaming sessions largely involve a 'brain workout' – but also act a way to explore options she does not feel she can elsewhere, whether it be a challenging task to accomplish, a way to feel empowered, or, additionally, a way to act in ways she would not be able to in the real-world. In her interviews, Jane discusses her use of in-game violence as a form of vigilante justice. When playing *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012), she comments "although there's a lot of missions where you don't *have* to kill anyone, boy is it fun to shank a slave owner in the kidney, or an overseer." She also notes that in the *Saints Row* series, she makes it a personal goal to kill in-game catcallers: "you can hear someone cat-calling or trash-talking your friend and calling her a slut, and it's just like, 'well I'm just gonna punch the gas and run over them! And then I'm gonna back up and drive over them again!'" These relatively minor, non-central to the main narrative moments in the game allow her to take out her real-world frustrations in a healthier way, as well as reflect upon her place in U.S. society. She tells me that she is a descendant of U.S. slave-owners, and that nuanced portrayals of painful political topics in video games have helped her process her family history, as well as some contemporary political conflicts. Jane's feelings of powerlessness in real-life are masked by the power video games offer her: she notes that "I'm certainly not going to [run over catcallers] here, in Chicago. [...] I certainly can't take another person's life, but I can destroy that *sentiment*. Like 'oh that is representing the catcall, that is representing street harassment, let's gun it!'" In this way, while video games do offer fantasies of power unavailable in real-life, they also provide ways for players to cognitively process and deal with real-world issues. Westecott notes that combining politics and play can create more meaningful engagement and motivation, arguing that "playfulness is a much more potent force than direct conflict and offers an important means of engagement," this is certainly true of Jane, whose play and politics are very much intertwined (2017, p. 252).

Jane's in-game meaning-making does not end there, however. Her engagement with video games not only allows her space to process, explore, and be creative, but also to recharge. "It gives me a little bit more energy to face the long fight, you know?" she tells me. Following a particularly intensive bout of volunteering for both the local Democratic party and a pro-immigrant group, she explains that she retreated away from the news cycle and used video games to help her process her emotions.

"We actually had really impressive mid-term election results here in the U.S. just a few days ago, it was way more than I ever thought it would be. I'd been giving money, and knocking on doors, and various other local actions and was just 'oh my god it's paying off! All of this exhaustion…' I wouldn't have been able to have the energy to do that stuff without 'okay this is what I can accomplish in games,' because everything else in life is so much slower."

As such, her ludic activities – of world-building and alternative meaning-making – allowed her to re-enter the real world recharged and able to engage in real resistive practices of protest and combatting a xenophobic, white-supremacist government. She tells me "games recharge me, they recharge my batteries, they recharge my energy, and I don't know that I would've been able to get though the last year – I don't know if I'd be dead but – but I don't know if I would be as engaged and as active as I am now [without them]. […] I don't know that I'd have the energy to keep going with all that stuff without games. I kind of need them to keep me charged." Jane's resistive gaming practices – utilising video games to fuel her activism – join the abundance of other examples of resistive ludic activities utilised by women in the gaming assemblage. By practicing identity fluidity to centre her political beliefs and cultural anxieties, Jane transforms video game play into tangible real-world power. Her example, as well as others in this chapter are indicative of how women create new, alternate modes of play that "transform video games from a mass medium and cultural commodity into instruments, equipment, tools, and toys for playing, competing, spectating, cheating, trading, breaking, making, and ultimately intervening in the sensory and political economies of those technologies responsible for the privatisation of play" (Boluk & Lemieux, 2017, p. 4).

Conclusion

This chapter has worked to highlight the nuanced ways in which women navigate the gaming assemblage; identity fluidity is utilised in the form of hiding or accentuating femaleness in order to traverse a hostile space that often renders their presence unwillingly politicised. In drawing this identity fluidity to light, I build upon Adrienne Shaw's important work on identity vs identification in video games to highlight how gender is performed in

such spaces. Shaw writes that player identification is "contextual, fluid, and imaginative," (2014, p. 63) I argue that so too is identity. Women render their identities malleable in the face of an imagined community that considers them invasive Others due to their gender – their gender identity is unwillingly politicised by hostile gatekeepers that ultimately influence and limit the ways that they can engage with gaming spaces. One of the ways that women may decide to alter how their present their identity is through self-surveillance – the gaming assemblage's metaphorical construction as a Foucauldian panopticon instils a perception anxiety in female players, thereby causing them to hide their identity through tactics such as self-silencing their microphone, playing on alternate gaming accounts, and removing themselves from certain platforms entirely. Another way women may decide to perform identity fluidity is by accentuating not just their femaleness but also their femininity and sexuality; by leaning in to the unwilling politicisation of their gender, some women find they are able to profit from the pervasive sexism in the gaming assemblage, and use these tropes to their advantage. Finally, there is also a significant amount of evidence to suggest that women engage in willing politicisation, accentuating and drawing attention to their gender in order to act as a role-model for others, an example of the falsehoods of the gamer archetype, and a resistive symbol against hegemony in the gaming assemblage. As this research has highlighted, the frustration that survey respondents and interviewees feel towards the gaming assemblage's attitudes towards women is palpable, and examples of resistive practices in their actions are plentiful. Georgia, using harassment in *Overwatch* matches as an example, states:

> "I feel like just because something is like 'that's just the way it is!' doesn't mean that makes it okay, so for people that are okay with being toxic on voice because 'that's just the way video games are,' it's like, no, that's the way you are, and that's the negative attitude you bring to video games. […] So whenever people are like 'that's just the way it is,' I've always been fighting that my entire life; […] so for me, for someone to say 'that's just the way it is,' it's always been like I'm gonna be the first one to say 'well let's change it because I think that sucks.'"

These words are indicative of how many women I spoke to feel regarding the state of gaming assemblage – that they were frustrated with being told that the toxic status quo is 'just the way things are' if one wants to exist in gaming spaces as a woman. As

such, their practices became resistive. Through creating platforms and safe spaces for themselves and other women in order to push for change; using the increased availability of game development software to amplify their own voices; and through emergent gameplay practices that use reappropriated ludic resources, resistance is being enacted. This is highlighted in this chapter through the platforming of gameplay sessions and further interviews by four female interviewees, each of whom engage with video games and the gaming assemblage in different, nuanced ways. Boluk and Lemieux point out that interrogations of the medium's potential for "creative practice, philosophical experimentation, cultural critique, and political action" have been happening in academia for at least the last decade, however, "a striking and shared feature of these theories is that each relegates the radical potential of games to a speculative horizon rather than a historical practice" (2017, p. 4). This chapter works to highlight that these practices are not conceptual, they are being utilised by women (and have been for a long time) regularly in order to traverse, challenge, and ultimately alter the face of the gaming assemblage.

Chapter Four: Interrogating Violence in Ludic Activity

The topic of representations of violence in video games is contentious – particularly when discussed in tandem with women's involvement in the gaming assemblage. The proliferation of high-profile, popular video games that centralise acts of violence has long been used as an explanation for the perceived dearth of women who game. For many, the assumption that women do not enjoy violent video games acts to absolve them from obligation – *'women are naturally repulsed by the medium, so why bother trying to include them?'* For others, actions taken in good faith because of the assumption ultimately result in further disparities within the medium – as seen in the restrictive 'girl games' genre covered in previous chapters. The topic has also received academic attention in the past, Cassell and Jenkins cite sources that suggest "that the violent nature of many video games specifically alienated girls," and that "girls report stress when working with educational software that has violent themes" (1998, p. 11). Subrahmanyam and Greenfield come to similar conclusions in their research into games for girls:

> "To summarise, studies of computer game design and game preferences suggest that girls are less enthusiastic than boys about the thematic embedding of good versus evil in story narratives. Nor, as we saw earlier, do they like the violent feedback that normally accompanies such themes. Unfortunately, most commercially available video games make strong use of narrative that involves both violence and the conflict between good and evil." (1998, p. 53)

Such assumptions about the inherent ludic interests and inclinations of women are of course, problematic and limited in scope. Their reliance on biological essentialism offers little room for the consideration of cultural and societal influence on player perceptions and subjectivities, and additionally renders queer identities as moot by pushing cis-heteronormative binaries. Explaining away the perceived lack of women in the gaming assemblage as being a result of their disinterest in violence also actively ignores both the abundance of non-violent video games, and the fact that women have always been integrally involved with the games industry and community. T.L. Taylor points out that research that takes these assertions as given risks essentialising gendered differences in

gameplay, or, as Yee explains, "lead us to mistake the *how* for the *why*" (Taylor, 2008; Yee, 2008, p. 88). Taking fandom representation in isolation and extrapolating biological differences from it also perpetuates false narratives – for example, explanations of the dearth of women in games being the result of their distaste for violent media contradicts the well-known large female fanbases for various horror movie franchises (Donaldson, 2017).

An early motivator for this research was a desire to analyse the violent ludic tendencies of female video game players, with the ultimate goal of rendering assumptions about women's disinterest in violent mediums as demonstrably false. As explained in the Introduction, I was keen to tackle dominant prejudices surrounding the ludic activities of women, and at the time, their engagement with video game violence was an important topic I wanted to analyse. As such, the survey distributed for this research featured three questions asking respondents about their perceptions of, and uses of, violence in video games. The questions were as follows:

1. *How do you feel when playing games in which the protagonist's ability to commit violence is a core factor? Feel free to write different answers for different genres or different types of/contexts for violence.*
2. *Have you ever voluntarily performed in-game acts of violence that were not essential to gameplay? If so, please give examples.*
3. *If you answered yes to the above question, please explain your motivations for your choices.*

As expected, responses were varied, from those that abhorred committing in-game violence – "I actively avoid playing meathead games. If the lead character only requires brawn and no brains, it's not worth my time or money" – wrote one respondent – to those who revelled in it:

> "In games where I have character agency, I occasionally have them be cruel and violent people who go on vicious rampages to achieve power. That's one of the power fantasies that I enjoy immensely, someone who accumulates power above all things and disregards life around her, except maybe for some choice allies if I've gotten to know them over the course of the game. Though, even then, I've occasionally enjoyed betraying allies before and crushing their feelings and lives.

Like in *Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) when I decided to go for absolute power
in the end, betraying my former lover and causing him heartbreak, and forcing me
to kill many of my allies as they tried to stop me. In the end though, I ruled the
empire. It's essential to win the game, but damn it was satisfying. There are also
smaller examples, *Mass Effect* gives you a lot of chances to choose a harsh/cruel
response to someone, and if I'm playing a ruthless character, I will take that
chance even if it isn't necessary to the proceeding of a game."

Respondent's answers to the survey, as well as interviewee's insight when prompted on the
topic clearly indicate, at the very least, that the media consumption of women is not in any
way inherently inclined to be violence averse. The majority of respondents – 203 out of 359
– express either positive or accepting opinions towards violent video game content,
compared to just 16 respondents who cite avoiding violent video game genres entirely. The
responses are clear and decisive evidence that disproves assumptions about why women do
or do not participate in the gaming assemblage.

However, as I concluded the initial analysis of the survey responses and interview
testimony for this thesis, I began to think more critically about my research goals. Providing
demonstrable evidence that disproves long-standing negative stereotypes about women in
games is certainly satisfying, but when considered alongside my other research findings, it
does not feel satisfactory. While respondent's and interviewee's testimony clearly resist
gendered assumptions of ludic pleasure, I found I was struggling to fit these findings into
wider discourses surrounding the gaming assemblage – particularly the games industry, a
demonstrably violent system that has its foundations in hegemony. Previous chapters have
utilised survey responses and interviews to highlight issues within the gaming assemblage as
seen by some of the women who occupy it, but given the topic of this thesis – of women
and resistance in the gaming assemblage – my findings felt insular and difficult to
extrapolate to wider cultural movements within the games industry. I struggled to answer
the question: is it resistive to enact violence in a medium so replete with structural
violences? Unlike prior chapters – where my findings and conclusions were clear in my mind
– I found myself repeatedly putting off this chapter as I tried to gather my thoughts on the
topic.

Then on 20th July 2021, mere weeks before the submission of this thesis, the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing filed a lawsuit against games company Activision Blizzard, publishers of titles such as the *Call of Duty* series (2003-2020), *Hearthstone* (2014), and *Overwatch* (2016), among others. The suit alleged that Activision Blizzard as a company had fostered a toxic "frat boy culture" over many years that encouraged widespread harassment, discrimination, and mistreatment of female employees (Allsup, 2021). At the time, this chapter was half-written, but the news prompted me to immediately begin a rewrite. How could I reconcile my argument that survey respondents' acts of in-game violence resist dominant hierarchies, when the structures of the games industry repeatedly downplay and excuse violence against women? The allegations against Activision Blizzard have sparked an employee walkout, protests, and boycotts of Activision Blizzard titles in the short time since the lawsuit was publicised, but allegations of similarly toxic workplace cultures were made against U.S. games company Riot Games in 2018 and French games company Ubisoft in 2020, and neither resulted in demonstrable change or long-term repercussions for those responsible (D'Anastasio, 2018; Gartenberg, 2020). On 29th July 2021, it was announced that Activision Blizzard had hired WilmerHale, a law firm known in the tech industry for union-busting, to review the company's HR policies, implying that any attempt to enact meaningful change within the industry will be fought by games companies (Fahey, 2021). At the time of writing, I find the words of Shira Chess particularly relevant:

> "I would indeed like to destroy the video game industry, as it is currently known. I want to annihilate the toxic cultures, mediocre products, and public reputation of this industry. In turn, I would like to see a better industry making products for a larger audience. I want to see a mass scale of games that captivate, enrapture, and educate. I want to destroy the industry, disrupt the playground, and find ways to make games better." (2020, p. 86)

While I agree wholeheartedly with this statement, it would be remiss to cite it without context. Chess's *Play Like a Feminist* is a manifesto advocating for resistive play within the gaming assemblage. Chess argues that "play is an ideal space for changing minds and bodies and disrupting patriarchal hegemonies," and that video games act as an ideal medium for playful activism and as an advocate for female leisure (p. 39). Chess's belief in the political

power and potential of ludic activity while simultaneously remaining critical of the structural inequalities of the games industry were instrumental in enabling me to formulate this chapter. In citing Salen and Zimmerman's definition of play as "free movement within a more rigid structure," (2003, p. 304) Chess explains how resistive play is possible within a hegemonic assemblage:

> "A playful feminism is one that plays into a structural paradigm yet pushes at the boundaries of that structure. […] A playful feminism is about taking the games already out there – and by this I mean both actual games and the metaphorical games of protest – and reforming the boundary work created by these games. It addresses the messiness of play, but also its possibilities in the everyday aspect of our lives." (2020, p. 40)

With this in mind, the ludic activities of respondents and interviewees become viewable as acts of resistive play and playful feminism. As such, I intend to critically analyse respondent's answers and interviewee's gameplay through a lens that sees the potential, but also the limitations of violent ludic activity. This is further compounded when taking postfeminist performativity into account; Lisa Coulthard describes violent women in media as "offer[ing] the image of innovative of even revolutionary change while disavowing any actual engagement with violence and its relation to feminism and female solidarity, collectivity, or political action" (2007, p. 173). As such, my original hypothesis that violent ludic activity performed by women is, in itself, resistive rather than cooperative, feels simpler still. The data collected from the survey and interviews will instead be examined closely and critically in order to come to more nuanced conclusions that take wider contexts into account. Adopting Chess's strategies for playful feminism, I will explore the messiness of violence in games – not to solve it, but to highlight how women and girls engage with it in order to satisfy their own ludic desires. While this thesis has worked to highlight problematic aspects of the gaming assemblage, it remains a piece of research that is fundamentally audience focused. As such, I accept that it is beyond the scope of this chapter to resolve the variety of issues regarding violent ludic activity; instead, the goal of this chapter is primarily to continue to highlight the voices of female players and centre their experiences within wider participatory contexts.

This chapter is less structured than previous chapters, owing to the complexity of the topic of violence within the games industry. It will deliberately leave the question of whether or not respondent's participation in violent mediums can be resistive against said mediums open, as – much like with previous chapters that utilise testimony from respondents and interviewees – the topic is deeply nuanced and personal for each individual. It will platform testimony from survey respondents and interviewees, providing insight into how they view video game violence, and if/how they perform it themselves during play. It will reveal that some respondents utilise in-game violence in nuanced, satisfying, and sometimes humorous ways, and that their interactions with in-game violence are often informed by their wider opinions and belief systems. This chapter begins with a short summary of video games as a structurally violent medium – its intent is not to be exhaustive, but to contextualise my own reservations about the topics covered here. Importantly, the topic of video game violence's influence on real-world physical violence will not be covered, as this has already received extensive academic attention as a result of frequent media-led moral panics on the subject. Instead, this chapter highlights a few examples of structural violences within the gaming assemblage – including the influence of the military-industrial complex on the video games industry. It will conclude with some examples of in-game violence used resistively by players to protest, counteract, or trouble the medium's hegemony.

Violence in Games

When describing the gaming assemblage (and the games industry in particular) as structurally violent, I am not referring to the violent content of many popular AAA video game titles so much as I am describing the structures of misogyny, racism, and exploitative capitalistic practices upon which it has been built and presently thrives. The influence of violent video game content on acts of real-world aggression has been a common source of contemporary public anxiety, particularly since the Columbine High School mass shooting in 1999. As such, the topic has received significant media and academic attention, with multiple studies largely concluding that there is little evidence to suggest a strong link between the two (Markey, Markey, & French, 2015; Zendle, Cairns, & Kudenko 2017; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2019). The moral panics and media commentary centring

representations of physical violence committed within video game narratives acts as a distracting smokescreen, drawing attention away from other, more dangerous, forms of violence in the gaming assemblage. Bareither explains that "'violence' can mean very different things. It can be physical, psychic, structural, symbolic, cultural, political, direct, personal, individual, or collective" (2020, p. 6), and outside of academic contexts, little attention has been paid to the impact of structural violences on the gaming assemblage. While the stance of this research is that consumption of violent in-game content does not lead to perpetration of real-world physical violence, it does maintain that media consumption influences the opinions, emotions, and beliefs of individuals, and as such it is necessary to highlight what other, more subtle modes of violence are visible in the gaming assemblage.

As with all forms of media, video games are susceptible to having their content influenced by external bodies – a game's production studio, a marketing company, or a nation's government could have a hand in determining a game's content, for example. As such, video games can be effective propaganda tools. Evidence of this can be perhaps most clearly seen in the effective use of first-person shooters, military simulations, and war games by global defence forces; Huntemann and Payne contend that "there is no media artifact that better illustrates the convergence of interactive media and national defence interests than the military video game" (2010, p. 3). The term 'military-entertainment complex' describes the links between the military-industrial complex and the video games industry, a "post-Cold War phenomenon that enjoys considerably more opaque linkages between its numerous constituents, and generates texts that blur the line between entertainment and militarism" (Ibid, p. 5). The influence of the military-entertainment complex on the gaming assemblage sees numerous examples of games industry and national military collaboration, often with the intent of recruitment through entertainment. One such example is the first-person shooter franchise *America's Army* (2002-2007), the result of the United States Army licensing Epic Games' Unreal Engine and partnering with games publisher Ubisoft to produce and release a series of pro-military games with the explicit purpose of recruiting players into the armed forces (ibid). Another example is the 2014 recruitment of Dave Anthony, a writer for first-person shooter series *Call of Duty* (2003-2020), to the Atlantic Council (an international security thinktank) to "advise outside-the-box thinking on the nature of future threats, and propose proactive solutions to

mitigate against them" (Parkin, 2014). The military-entertainment complex can also be seen in the use of Microsoft's Xbox 360 controllers by various defence forces – including the U.S. Army and Navy and the British Armed Forces – to remotely pilot drones, tanks, and submarines (Brown, 2017; Mills, 2017). These examples highlight how video games are used by military institutions such as the United States Armed Forces as both a marketing tool and recruitment device, and how barriers between war and play are effectively broken down to make real-world conflict more appealing and accessible to those familiar with popular video game platforms and hardware.

Beyond the military-entertainment complex's utilisation of video games as a medium for propaganda distribution, the history of the video games industry more generally is intertwined with that of defence forces due to military interest in technological development as an improved tool for warfare. Ed Halter writes that "the technologies that shape our culture have always been pushed forward by war," highlighting the pervasiveness of military-funded developments and breakthroughs in the tech industry (2006), while Corey Mead confirms:

"For several decades – from the 1960s to the early 1990s – the armed forces took the lead in financing, sponsoring, and inventing the specific technology used in video games. Without the largesse of such military agencies as DARPA [Defence Advanced Research Project Agency], the technological foundation on which the commercial game industry rests would not exist. Advanced computing systems, computer graphics, the Internet, multiplayer networked systems, the 3-D navigation of virtual environments—all these were funded by the Department of Defence." (2013)

One of the most well-known examples of this is *Spacewar!* (1962). Considered one of the earliest known computer games, *Spacewar!* was created by computer scientist Steve Russell and associates while working at a DARPA-funded lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, using a PDP-1 microcomputer that was also used by the American nuclear and defence industry (Wills, 2019). The creation of several influential early-era video games have links to military activity, including *Tennis for Two* (1958), *Pong* (1972), and *Battlezone* (1980), each in some way "either directly connected to, or but a step removed from,

national defence interests and its considerable financial largess" (Huntemann & Payne, 2010, p. 5).

Huntemann argues that military-themed video games "advance a worldview that military intervention and use of force are the only viable responses to global conflict, and that war is inevitable and perpetual, with enemies unmistakably on the side of evil. Furthermore, the depiction of war presented is cleaned up, void of horrific consequences, civilian casualties, and psychic devastation" (2010, pp. 231-2). As such, this genre of games risks normalising and sanitising warfare, particularly considering that while the prevalence of physical violence in video games is well-known – and often overstated, knowledge of the insidious influence of the military-entertainment complex on the gaming assemblage is less established. In addition, military institutions mentioned above – such as the United States Armed Forces – have a long history of imperialist and colonialist politics, and are known to be bastions of racism, misogyny, and homophobia, each of which are, in themselves, a violence. As such, video games that act as pro-military propaganda risk perpetuating such violences by portraying the military, war, and armed conflict as positive or necessary institutions.

In spite of this, research suggests that video game players do not consume media incognitively, and are not willingly assimilated when exposed to pro-military propaganda in video games. Scott A. Lukas writes that "while critics may lump all weapons and all video game violence into one category, gamers are more understanding of the nuances that appear in games, especially as weapons are involved," highlighting the interactive and complex nature of media consumption (2010, p. 83). Meanwhile, Huntemann writes that the players she interviewed for her research on emotive responses to military video games "retained their scepticism about current military actions" despite their interaction with popular first-person shooters, "questioning the motives, strategies, purported goals, and likely success of U.S. foreign policy and military intervention" (2010, p. 232). Research conducted for this thesis also indicates that players engage with in-game acts of violence in nuanced ways, with many survey respondents actively rejecting game genres set in real-world locations and active or historical warzones in favour of games that centre more abstracted, fictional conflict. While such games are not without controversies, it indicates that respondents are less willing to engage with titles that force them to sympathise with a fundamentally problematic institution.

A similarly controversial topic in the gaming assemblage is the regularity with which certain video game genres rely on not just warfare, but also imperialism and colonialism as ludic models for players to engage with and enact without critique. Video games continue the tradition of board games and other modes of tabletop play that gamify acts of colonialism such as land takeover and occupation through conflict or frontier politics. Examples of such practices can be seen in multiple video game genres – including first-person shooters and military-themed games cited above – but are perhaps most obvious in turn-based strategy games such as Sid Meier's *Civilisation* series (1991-2016), the *Age of Empires* series (1997-2021), and the *Total War* series (2000-2020). These games see players take control of a nation (*Age of Empires III* (2005), for example, covers the European colonisation of the Americas) with the purpose of building an empire through democracy, warfare, and economic strategies. Some titles in the genre are often referred to as '4X' games, shorthand for 'Explore, Expand, Exploit, Exterminate', due to the utilisation of such tactics being necessary for success. Such games cast players as colonisers and empire expansion as a win condition, and as such risk presenting the destructive impact of imperialism as a necessity and ultimately positive endeavour. The potential of video games as an influential tool is not to be understated – King and Leonard write that "video games represent a powerful pedagogical vehicle, providing youth, and perhaps all users, with ideological, political, historical, and racial lessons that guide U.S. hegemony around the globe," as such, the role they can play in excusing systemic violence must be acknowledged (2010, p. 94). This is particularly true when, in gamifying conflict, a game also participates in problematic historical revisionism. John Wills cites early video game depictions of the American Frontier as an example of this – arguing that the games industry took inspiration from fictional tales of the already heavily-mythologised Wild West to create "a past America for players to explore, then ultimately conquer, and a world where every gamer could be a cowboy and shoot an Indian" (2019, p. 82). He continues "overwhelmingly, the dominant male protagonists were white cowboys, with Mexicans relegated to the role of corrupt banditos and African-Americans absent" (ibid, p. 61). Such depictions seen in arcade titles like *Custer's Revenge* (1982), *Cheyenne* (1984), and *Blood Bros* (1990) simplify the American Frontier to fundamentally racist 'good' vs 'evil' conflicts, leaving the notion of manifest destiny not only unchallenged but actively cast as a win condition for players. Wills describes this early era of video game history as responsible for essentially creating a

simulacra of a simulacra, and compares it to Disneyland's nineteenth century themed Frontierland, in that it "told an entertaining story to suit its white, middle-class guests, but one with only a loose hold on reality" (ibid, p. 82). When such myths are presented unchallenged by the gaming assemblage, they risk further participation in historical revisionism and the glorification of historical systemic violence. As such, it is important to highlight these violences that may not be as immediately obvious to players as in-game depictions of individual, physical violence.

One of the most common examples of perpetuated violences within the gaming assemblage is the long-standing culture of misogyny within the games industry itself. Earlier chapters in this research have already highlighted multiple examples of pervasive sexist harassment within the games community that acts as a barrier to play for women and girls, but, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, workplace harassment within the industry itself is also endemic. The July 2021 lawsuit filed by the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing against Activision Blizzard alleged a long-standing "frat boy" workplace culture normalising racism and misogyny that had been cultivated by those in charge. Female employees at Activision Blizzard are reportedly subjected to "'cube crawls,' in which male employees 'drink copious amounts of alcohol as they crawl their way through various cubicles in the office and often engage in inappropriate behaviour toward female employees,'" and endure a toxic working environment that sees male employees regularly "engage in sexual banter and joke openly about rape." The lawsuit also alleges that "male employees play video games during the workday while delegating responsibilities to female employees," and that female employees regularly noticed that they are held back from promotions, overly criticised, and excessively micromanaged due to their gender (Allsup, 2021).

A 2018 investigation by gaming news website Kotaku found similar instances of widespread harassment at U.S. games company Riot Games – developers of *League of Legends* (2009) and *Valorant* (2020). The investigations found that Riot Games had a toxic "bro culture" that persistently belittled, harassed, and sexualised its female (and some of its male) employees. Their feature reads:

> "Among the people we spoke to, three women described being groomed for promotions, and doing jobs above their title and pay grade, until men were

suddenly brought in to replace them. Both male and female sources have described seeing unsolicited and unwelcome pictures of male genitalia from bosses or colleagues. One woman saw an e-mail thread about what it would be like to 'penetrate her,' in which a colleague added that she'd be a good target to sleep with and not call again. Another said a colleague once informed her, apparently as a compliment, that she was on a list getting passed around by senior leaders detailing who they'd sleep with. Two former employees said they felt pressure to leave after making their concerns about gender discrimination known. One former male employee said that Riot's 'bro culture' is more pronounced behind closed doors, and hurts men too: one of Riot's male senior leaders regularly grabbed his genitals, the source said, adding, 'if he walked into a meeting with no women he'd just fart on someone's face.'" (D'Anastasio, 2018)

Following the investigation, several ex-employees sued Riot Games for workplace harassment, eventually resulting in a collective pay out of over $10 million USD to around 1000 female members of staff (BBC, 2019). However even after this, there is little evidence to suggest Riot Games has undergone widespread change; at a mass walk-out of over 150 employees from the company's Los Angeles-based offices in 2019, one employee said "so far I haven't seen a single outcome of our diversity and inclusion efforts at Riot. I haven't seen a single metric or number to indicate things have improved and I haven't seen a single project get finished" (Grayson & D'Anastasio, 2019).

In 2020 similar allegations of sexual harassment, assault, and misconduct were made against several high-profile employees of French games company Ubisoft, with 25 percent of nearly 14,000 employees allegedly having either witnessed, or been the victim of, workplace misconduct in their time at Ubisoft (Gartenberg, 2020). While the allegations resulted in multiple accused employees stepping down or being placed on leave, in May 2021 a report from GamesIndustry.biz revealed that some of the accused employees remain in their roles, and that little had been done to hold those responsible accountable for cultivating a hostile working environment (Dealessandri, 2021).

Beyond these three prominent examples of widespread cultures of misogyny in high-profile games studios, the games industry also suffers from systemic racism. Women of colour in the above allegations cited the harassment and microaggressions they were

subjected to were multitudinous, and that their race, as well as gender, played a factor in their discrimination (Allsup, 2021). Poor labour practices are also endemic within the games industry, most visible in the prominence of 'crunch', the term for unpaid overtime that employees are expected to take to ensure the smooth release of an upcoming video game title. Prominent examples of this are the 100-hour work weeks that writers for Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) were subjected to in the run-up to the game's release; and the notorious *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), which saw developers at CD Projekt Red work six-day weeks, additional evenings and weekends for over a year as the game's release was continuously pushed back (Good, 2018; Hall, 2020).

The examples of violence listed here are not exhaustive, but are intended to highlight the less prominent and more subtle ways that the gaming assemblage is built around systemic, cultural, and politically violent practices. Each are indicators of the games industry's large-scale acceptance of – and reliance upon – fundamentally violent structures in the form of hierarchical hegemony and exploitation. Marcus Schulzke writes that "players are not solitary actors in a vacuum," and that "their entertainment takes place in a broader social context in which there are legitimate concerns about what individuals think and how they behave" (2020, p. 6). As such, the potential impact of games industry biases on player's consumption of games has been consistently on my mind when approaching my research findings on women's engagement with violence within the medium. However, it is important to not forget that the reverse is also demonstrably possible: women's engagement with video games as a medium has the power to influence and fundamentally change the games industry for the better, particularly as modes of resistance and playful protest. Shira Chess stresses the power inherent in play, "it is infectious, unifying, and gratifying. Given this, play can be a tool; it can be a source of agency for feminists and activists" (2020, p. 67). As such, while the remainder of this chapter will examine testimony from respondents and interviewees on their thoughts and experiences of violence in video games, it will also consider how these textual interactions are influenced by and in turn work to influence the wider gaming assemblage.

Context is Key

In response to the three survey questions prompting reflection on violence in video games, the majority of respondents reacted either positively towards or were generally accepting of in-game acts of violence. Some enthusiastically expressed their love for violent video game genres, for example one respondent wrote "I feel awesome, it's always fun to play an over-the-top violent sort of game like *Prototype* (2009) or *Bulletstorm* (2011)," while another admitted "personally – they are the only games I play. I really enjoy them – it feels good to be bad." For these respondents, violence is cathartic, "to me it's entertaining as well as relaxing that I can take out my aggressions on virtual enemies," wrote one respondent, highlighting how in-game violence is often utilised for stress-relief, satisfaction, or entertainment. One respondent was very enthusiastic about in-game violence in fighting games (specifically wrestling/boxing), saying that:

> "I LOVE smashing someone's face in as a female MMA fighter. My favourite move is the 'ground and pound'. Get 'em on the mat, then smash their face with your fists and elbows. The sheer visceralness of that kind of violence is invigorating and empowering."

In his work on playful virtual violence, Christoph Bareither refers to the invigorating emotive response players experience when enacting video game violence as a "wow effect" or "bam effect," which he describes as "the pleasure of a deeply embodied emotional experience" that a player receives when "he or she experiences the rush of vanquishing an opponent" (2020, p. 15). Violent video game content used as a means for emotional management has also been observed by Nina B. Huntemann in her research into catharsis in military-themed video games, in which she notes "players use the sanitised fantasy, uncomplicated by ethical questions and the gory details of war, to calm the terror inside" (2010, p. 232). Her work specifically references player's coping mechanisms for war-related anxieties in a post-9/11 world, but parallels can be drawn between her conclusions and the way respondents to this research utilise video game violence as a means to an end. In her interviews, Jane discusses how video games provided her with an outlet after a stressful period working with a local political group helping DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) immigrants avoid deportation: "I [had] to basically help with this paperwork and photocopy everything exactly

right or a child might get deported. It was an incredibly intense couple of days, and after that I mainlined a whole bunch of *Overwatch* and *Fallout 4*. I really needed to process all of those emotions." Similarly, Opal explained that as educational commitments became more demanding in her life as a student, video games became less about fun and more about escapism: "I've been asked personally if escapism is one of my main motivators for gaming, and lately as things get more difficult and school has more pressure it's become more like that, but it hadn't been in the beginning." For these participants, violence in games acted as a healthy way to relieve stress or entertain themselves after a long day.

For many respondents who expressed positive views about video game violence, there was often further specification provided – as they typically described preferring certain genres, or certain depictions of in-game violence, over others. One respondent, for example, wrote "I like games with violent sword-play; I dislike gun and technology-based violence. Magical violence is also acceptable." Another differentiated between "shooter[s] like *Unreal Tournament* (1999) or *Overwatch*" and "hardcore shooters and military sims," preferring the former for their more well-developed characters over the latter, which "seem to be hyper-focused on the violence and destruction." Similarly, another respondent differentiated between the violence in fantasy-based RPGs and real-life inspired action games, stating that "I only enjoy violence when it's fantasy – I am always a mage (*Fable*, *Skyrim*). I detest the *GTA* [*Grand Theft Auto* (1997-2013)] series for their encouragement of violence and disrespect toward women, and police, for that matter." These responses hint at a more common trend in the answers submitted for the survey; while many respondents simply expressed positive attitudes towards or acceptance of in-game violence as a game mechanic, a large number of answers were more nuanced, and took the time to explain when, how, and in what form they consider in-game violence to be acceptable. While respondents are generally receptive towards violent video game content, they are not mindlessly bloodthirsty: the responses overwhelmingly show that context is key to respondent's enjoyment and utilisation of it as a game mechanic.

Marcus Schulzke explains that while video games enable players to engage in violent or immoral acts without consequence, they still subtly discourage what he refers to as "unreflective play." Using the *Grand Theft Auto* (1997-2013) and *Saints Row* (2006-2015) series as examples, he explains that engaging in violence in these games results in police pursuit – a built-in indicator of wrongdoing. He argues that these indicators and rules

actually enable players to enjoy such actions more freely, as they manage to feel resistive while being ultimately harmless:

> "Much of the fun in these games comes from flaunting societal rules, which means tacitly recognizing what these rules are. These games permit us to intentionally simulate evil actions, but they do so while emphasizing that the actions are evil and by extension telling us that we should understand simulated worlds in moral terms. We may enjoy crushing an old lady under a semi in Liberty City or Steelport [locations in the *GTA* and *Saints Row* games, respectively], but we also know that this is wrong and that we can only enjoy it because it is fictional." (2020, p. 12)

While this is true for some respondents who – as cited above – actively enjoyed consequence-free in-game violence, many others explained that violence in video games was fine if it had a purpose, but less acceptable if it felt gratuitous and pointless. "I like to kill things in video games," wrote one respondent, "but I also need it not to be the main or only thing I do. There needs to be a reason, in the game story." A different response read "we all have the ability to commit violence. The reasons for it are what make a character appealing to me or not," while another put simply "it depends on the context and my mood." For these respondents, despite there being no overarching repercussions of their in-game actions, they still viewed their ludic practices through a specific moral code – namely that violence must be contextual and appropriate as opposed to senseless and pointless. One respondent explained:

> "Self-defence, survival and hunting violence feels less arbitrary than games where the sole objective is to wantonly kill. Violence can be a core factor if the violence has meaning, but seems unnecessary if for example the game is about being a hitman and the sole objective of the entire game is a series of murders. Fantastical violence to me is more acceptable than games portraying real world or historical violence."

Many respondents elaborated on which particular contexts made them feel more or less receptive to violence in video games. "For a dramatic effect with the reaction 'wow, that was violent/gross' and not something like 'wow, I empathise with the character and it hurts me to imagine being in her situation' I am not a big fan," one wrote. "Just to show violence

for the sake of showing violence is very boring to me." Unnecessary 'shock factor' violence was off-putting for this respondent, however, violence as a tool to evoke deeper thought in the player and further connect the player and character were deemed more acceptable: "as part of the gameplay when I like other things (story, environment etc.), that's fine. Used to raise questions and thoughts in the player (not disgust): perfect!" Several other respondents provided similar explanations, and differentiated between games that revolve around enacting violence and games in which violence felt more peripheral to the plot. "If the central aspect of the game is committing acts of violence (for example, first person shooters), I tend to find the game boring," read one response. "If violence shows up in the context of interesting moral choices or character development, or in some way progresses the story or theme in an interesting fashion, then I might enjoy it." Despite Schulzke's assertion that video games enable safe exploration of 'evil' acts, many survey respondents here are cited as not enjoying mindless, excessive, or unnecessary violence when they play.

The topic of morality and its influence on a player's willingness to enact violence in-game was a noticeable theme that ran through several survey respondent's answers. For many, violence was a lot more easy, fun, and acceptable to commit if done with 'heroic' or morally good intentions. "Most of the games I play involve some sort of violence or killing, but usually involved with saving the world on some level," wrote one respondent. Another differentiated between two different 'types' of violence in two different gaming franchises, "things like *Grand Theft Auto* - ugh. Games like *Zelda*, where you fight to save a kingdom (but, yes, with violence) is okay." Both responses indicate that the player is happy and willing to participate in acts of violence in video games provided said acts are committed with good intentions, such as for preventing the end of the world or saving a magical kingdom. One respondent similarly wrote "I like games about epic struggles and saving the day; often these take the form of violence, which I am willing to have my character participate in, within reason." These responses imply that, for some, in-game violence is deemed more acceptable and fun when it is a tool for heroism rather than for no purpose or for a nefarious purpose. This is supported by similar answers from other survey respondents, a number of whom described their willingness to kill or injure "evil characters," "bad people," or "monsters," but their aversion to hurting "non-evil characters," "normal humans," or "civilians."

These responses bear similarities to findings by Adrienne Shaw in her research into sexuality, gender, and identity in gamer culture. In one gaming interview, her interviewee, Bryan, explains that he enjoys games that offered him the option between "nice" and "snarky" responses to non-player character interactions. "I pick nice more often," he explains, "and that definitely mimics how I view myself." Shaw continues:

> "He asked me whether he should choose the nice or the snarky responses. We went back and forth between nice and mean choices, laughing at the results. We both use the research context as an excuse to explore optional 'badness' that we would not have taken normally in our own gameplay. Eventually, we came to the dog in the game, a computer-controlled sidekick who would follow the player throughout the game if the player was nice to it. Bryan had told me before that he could never bring himself to hurt the dog. When the time came, neither could I. Bryan told me afterwards that he had hoped that I would go for the snarky option, giving him an excuse to see what would happen. I found, however, that I did not want to make a choice that would reflect negatively on my own morality in front of him. Clearly, for both of us, kicking a dog was a line we were not willing to cross, even playfully." (2014, p. 121)

Shaw's reluctance to harm the dog in *The Bard's Tale* (2004) is presented as her not wanting to appear morally compromised in front of a relative stranger, but Bryan admits he has never been able to harm the dog, whether playing the game with a friend, or alone. In this way, he demonstrates that the pleasure he finds in having the choice to select the 'evil' option in games has its limits – at unnecessary violence towards an animal. In this way, the ludic activities of Shaw's interviewees correspond with many survey respondents for this thesis in that their performance of in-game violence and 'evil' acts was influenced by wider contexts.

It is important to not over-generalise these survey results, however, as the following response clearly highlights that some players find enjoyment in video game violence regardless of motive: "if there is a story established whereby I am a Hero doing things to save The Innocent, then it feels satisfyingly righteous. If it is established I am a Jerk doing things to be a Jerk, then I feel satisfied by being gloriously awful." In-game violence can be

enacted for multiple reasons. Sometimes in-game violence is committed because it feels appropriate to the story, or like something the player character would do:

> "I was imagining what my character, Shepard, would really do in that situation, based on the story and personality I made up for her in my imagination, and based on what had happened so far in the actual game. It was an immersive technique to find out what would happen, and what would be the cost of her destructive choices."

Sometimes it is for in-game rewards, achievements, or recognition:

> "*InFAMOUS* (2009) simply to get the trophy. I didn't like the game particularly, and contrary to my usual choice, I went full on bad, murdering citizens and making them scream. I got the trophy, and then went full on good (to get that trophy), and within half an hour all the citizens loved me. That's bad game design."

> "Optional kills can be easy ways to level a character, or they may drop currency or gear that will help. Optional bosses exist that are often tougher than the main plot enemies and test your skills and tactical capacity. Destruction of property can be tactically useful, or even be as simple as the enjoyment of breaking stuff. Violence is not the same as cruelty."

Sometimes it is because the player considers it to be deserved:

> "Violently killing the enemy character mentioned above gave me, the player, a sense of closure. In the game plot, it is impossible to save your friend from being killed, and this gives the character (and the player) a feeling of guilt. I committed violence against the enemy character as means of retribution, to repay the pain he caused the character and their allies. I was surprised that I was willing to pick this option, and how satisfying it was."

Other respondents explained that they enacted violence out of curiosity, or to test the boundaries of what a particular game would let them do:

> "Games are an opportunity to experiment with boundaries that have much worse consequences when experimented with in the real world. Women are human and humans are fascinated by violence and destruction, to some extent. Of course I've

done unnecessary violence when the real-life stakes were zero just to see what happens. It's interesting. I like to destroy stuff but I don't like bad consequences in my real life, so games are perfect for this."

Whereas for many, it was just for fun, humorous purposes, or for in-game entertainment:

"In *Minecraft* (2011), I killed all of my villagers that were in a certain colour shirt because they did not match my castle, which was made of melons. It was an odd time in my life. I could try to come up with some bs about this like my last explanation, but srsly, I made an enormous castle out of melons and systematically murdered all of the non-green shirt wearing villagers, who died also when the monsters broke through the flimsy melon walls. This was intentional, and took me hours. I have no excuse for this."

In this way, while common themes between survey answers have been highlighted here, ultimately responses to in-game violence are highly dependent on individual context.

Never Okay

The findings so far have established that survey respondents exhibit a moral code in their ludic activities, and that while most are generally accepting of in-game violent content, contexts are key in determining how much they engage with it as an action. As one respondent explains, "fighting weird monsters feels better than fighting humanoid enemies, fighting violent enemies feels better than fighting passive ones." In this way, a player's self-imposed moral code, and their ability to justify their actions, plays a role in how, when, and upon whom they enact violence – however, as the responses show, this moral code differs from individual to individual.

Multiple respondents cite examples of in-game violence that they disapproved of, or that made them uncomfortable. Some explain that they dislike killing humanoid enemies – "this is always different depending on the human-ness of the enemies the protagonist is facing," wrote one respondent – whereas others explain that they "would be comfortable killing evil characters, but not really if the characters were not evil or not relevant to the storyline." Other respondents abhor violence against animals: "also hate hunting animals in games like *Assassin's Creed* (2007). Whaling? Really?!" These responses indicate that while

many respondents exhibit boundaries to their enjoyment of ludic violence, the specifications of those boundaries differ from person to person. However, there are a few examples of violence that the majority of respondents generally agree they do not tolerate in video games in any form. Sexual violence, sexualised violence, or Violence Against Women were three such examples, with multiple responses mentioning them as 'deal-breakers' when it came to respondent's enjoyment of in-game violence. "I got no problem with violence in games in general. I do have some strong feelings about sexualised violence and the context in which it is sometimes used," wrote one respondent. The pervasiveness of these forms of violence in video games has been addressed in prior chapters as a clear matter of concern for the majority of survey respondents and interviewees – its presence in responses to questions about performed violence in games is significant, as it highlights another way that misogynistic content impacts women's ludic activity.

Multiple responses express concerns about games that permit unnecessary, peripheral violence against marginalised groups of women – particularly sex workers in the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise (1997-2013). "I've played *GTA* and there were definitely parts that were a little too much for me (the attitude towards women mostly)," wrote one respondent, while another said of the game's negative attitude towards female sex workers "I feel that particular game mechanic is toxically male, and degrading." One response further elaborates that "situations which reflect a current social disparity bother me; for example, the encouragement to hurt or kill sex workers bothers me, whereas killing zombies or people hired to engage in violence does not." Here, the attitude towards women in the sex industry that the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise encourages is used as an example of unacceptable video game violence, in which real-world social issues are utilised as superficial plot points or jokes. The game's attitude towards women, specifically female sex workers, is well-known even to those who have not personally played it, as the following response indicates: "I feel weird about *GTA* and the whole beating up prostitutes angle. I haven't played it myself, so take all of this with a pinch of salt, but the impression I get is that there is a fair amount of gendered violence, and this seems unappealing to me." Some respondents explained that they had previously performed the act of violence in question – of paying a *GTA* sex worker for their services, then killing them to get their money back – either out of curiosity, peer pressure, or because they were a "teenage jerk." One respondent explained that they were "taught the hooker killing trick by male peers" as a

child because "it was considered smart gameplay," while another explained that they "just wanted to see what would happen." While a small number of respondents did admit that they found the lack of consequences of this form of violence fun, others cited it as an example of in-game violence that they regretted engaging with. "In the moment I was mostly just interested to see what would happen," explained one respondent, "but honestly the moment of lining up the shot and shooting her left me feeling really icky and I had to quit playing for the day because I felt very morally reprehensible." Another similarly explained their reasoning, "I think I read about it, was tempted to try it, but decided I am not a fan of unnecessary violence." In both of these examples, respondents performed in-game violence out of curiosity, but came to regret their decision. Schulzke argues that video games provide players with "low-risk opportunities for moral reflection," and as such, "offer a forum for moral experimentation without being sites of moral degeneration" (2020, p. 12). Survey respondents seem acutely aware of this, and regularly cite examples of their own violent in-game acts (explored further later) performed for numerous reasons, from humour, to curiosity, to malice. However, performing acts of sexual violence or targeted Violence Against Women in video games is repeatedly cited as a line that respondents would not cross, or regretted if they did.

Many respondents also express distaste at the use of sexual violence upon female video game protagonists, with *Tomb Raider* (2013) being mentioned multiple times throughout the survey. One respondent highlights an early scene in the game in which protagonist Lara Croft is threatened by a male villain; the scene was used repeatedly in advertisements for the game's release, and emphasis was placed on the scene as a potential sexual assault. "I didn't like the rapey scene in *Tomb Raider*," one respondent wrote, "unless deployed deliberately and cleverly to provide commentary on the issue, I don't like when male-on-female violence/threats of violence has sexual undertones." Another respondent juxtaposed their perceived disempowerment of Lara Croft with the disempowerment they feel in real life:

> "This is a game where I felt violence was actively employed in order to make Lara feel vulnerable, and I found that constantly unsettling and disempowering. The threat of violence was, especially in the first game, incredibly gendered, which just felt like a constant reminder of how I'm viewed as weak and vulnerable in real life.

[…] Lara shivered delicately when she was cold, she whimpered when she stumbled--and it made me feel weak and annoyed, because I felt like I was complicit in torturing her. And like this was an attempt to 'put me in my place'."

Respondents also express distaste at the use of sexual violence as a plot point. Similarly to the 'damsel in distress' trope often utilised in video games, many consider it an example of gameplay that empowers men and male protagonists at the expense of women and female characters. "I'm tired of games that the 'hero' saves [the damsel] in the middle of or right before she has some sort of sexual violence against her. It is not necessary for good game play," wrote one respondent. Another said that "where violence is superfluous or presented as sexual violence against women for manpain or humour, that's obviously very unnecessary or concerning," highlighting a common trend in which violence is committed against female characters in order to justify an emotive response from a male protagonist. Sarkeesian explains that video games often "use female trauma as the catalyst to set the plot elements in motion" for male-led titles, in which women "are just empty shells whose deaths are depicted as far more meaningful than their lives" (2013). In this way, games that utilise such tropes further entrench gendered practices in the gaming assemblage that cast women as little more than inconsequential to male-led stories. Respondent's objections to such forms of violence highlights their awareness of, and rejection of, such practices.

For some respondents, in-game sexual violence is not only a mechanic they consider unacceptable, but also a deterrent to buying some games altogether. "I am fine with general violence and fighting," wrote one respondent, "but I feel hugely confronted with sexual violence and would not play a game where that was a component." Another elaborated on her thoughts on the subject, again using the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise's treatment of women as an example:

"Never bought a game that included extreme gendered violence like *GTA*, and I never will. Games like *GTA* that include the ability to use and harm women as background pieces to the male protagonists push me away as a consumer and their popularity reminds me of the dominant negative worldview of me as a woman."

The distaste for these tropes exhibited by respondents is not limited to those who, as described above, only enjoyed 'moral' or 'heroic' violence. One respondent details how they

enjoy playing "ruthless and cruel" characters, who "respond to insults/threats with overwhelming physical force," before continuing "I would not be okay with sexual violence in any game, for any reason, I wouldn't participate or enjoy that as a feature." The opposition to gendered violence expressed by survey respondents further emphasises the importance of context when it comes to the enactment of and enjoyment found in committing in-game acts of violence. Respondents who explained that they found enjoyment, pleasure, or stress-relief in enacting violence in video games repeatedly cited sexual or gendered violence as their only caveat. It also highlights the perceived overuse of these tropes by video game developers, and how including these forms of violence in their games can alienate or deter female players, thus reinforcing perceptions of gendered disparities in video game fanbases.

While mentioned less frequently, racial violence is another form of violence that multiple respondents felt was unacceptable content for video games. One respondent expresses her disgust at the *Call of Duty* franchise (2003-2020), after playing a game which "turned out to be a load of racist bullshit." The game's prompts to "shoot 'enemies' who had brown skin and wore turbans" forced her to quickly discard it: "I put it away after half an hour. It made me sick." Another response also gave an example of a game the respondent stopped playing due to its focus on violence against people of colour:

> "There was a point-and-shoot zombie FPS I used to play […] but I stopped playing it because at a certain point *all* the levels seemed to be set in Africa and it was just asking you to shoot black people from gunships all the time - i.e. if a game is implicating me in desire for real world racialised violence that isn't something I want to be dealing with."

Both responses echo the reaction many survey respondents have to sexual violence in video games, specifically the discomfort felt when forced to participate in and perpetuate "situations which reflect a current social disparity." Racial violence – as with gendered violence – is often utilised lazily in video games in ways that sustain negative racial stereotypes and further entrench hegemonic hierarchies and prejudices. One respondent notes that these stereotypes manifest in games that contain fantasy races as well as those set in the real world; she wrote that "fighting weird monsters feels better than fighting humanoid enemies, […] unless there are obvious racial connotations like with 'thugs' or

orcs, which is unpleasant in general." Assigning a morality such as 'good' or 'evil' to certain fantasy races is common in video games and other mediums that take place in high-fantasy settings, however, this often uncomfortably echoes real-world racial prejudices, particularly when races associated with 'good' are often light skinned and beautiful such as elves and races associated with 'evil' are dark skinned and monstrous such as drow ('dark elves') and orcs. One such example is J.R.R. Tolkien's orcs as depicted in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, whose physical descriptions typically "concentrate on unfamiliar characteristics [to European audiences], stereotypical ideas of 'degradation' often associated with the racial 'other', and with the discourse of disability" (Fimi, 2018). This comparison may not be apparent to many respondents, who, rather than talk about the fantasy genre's poor approach to race, instead focused on their preference for fighting 'evil' characters over 'good' characters, or 'monsters' over 'humans'.

Survey responses that cite limitations to otherwise unhindered enjoyment of violence as a game mechanic are important as they highlight how a player's opinions and morals can impact their ludic activities. While many respondents enjoy utilising violence in the games that they play, that does not necessarily mean that they accept violence in video games blindly. These responses show that many will commit violent in-game acts only within certain parameters, and that for some, there are lines that they will not cross when it comes to video game violence. While these parameters and lines may differ depending on the individual – for example, some respondents found violence against animals upsetting, while others preferred fighting animals to fighting human characters – a common denominator amongst respondents was their distaste for sexual violence, sexualised violence, gendered violence, racial violence, and targeted violence against real-world marginalised groups, with multiple respondents claiming they would not buy games which featured these particular violent contexts. While many respondents did not make explicit references to structural violence in the gaming assemblage – such as misogynistic practices within the games industry – their outright rejection of sexual violence, sexualised violence, and Violence Against Women within the medium coupled with similar indictments for other forms of misogynistic content in games examined in earlier chapters suggests a strong opposition to structural misogyny within the gaming assemblage.

Pro Choice

Another nuance to player's violent ludic activities that was made apparent by the survey results is that of the importance of choice. Many respondents who admitted to enjoying violence as a mechanic in video games also showed a heavy preference for games that granted them choice between violent and non-violent resolutions to problems, quests, and plot-points. "I play games that involve violence as a core factor, but I prefer when there are also non-violent options to solve a quest," wrote one respondent. Another agreed, "I do prefer games where I get to make the choice to kill or not kill; and when I have to kill someone in a game, I need at least a good explanation why I'm killing these people in the first place." For some, the ability to solve issues non-violently was important to their impression of the character they were playing: "I think it's good to have the ability to choose between violence and non-violence. You can have a strong lead whose [sic] doesn't want to hurt others but still make a difference." Similarly, one respondent commented "in non-Japanese RPGs I prefer having some non-violent options since sometimes violent reactions feel unnecessary for the given situation," while another explained that "requiring a character to walk the minefield of negotiation instead of 'murder everyone in town' is often far more interesting."

Multiple respondents claimed that, while they often enjoy enacting in-game violence, video games in which violence is the only option for plot progression are less likely to hold their attention, and can feel shallow compared to those that offer alternative options. "Violence has its place in games based upon mechanics, but it's also nice to find ways around having to beat everyone up if for no other reason than it can get boring," wrote one respondent. "Violence that makes sense in the context of the story is important," wrote another respondent, citing Ellie from *The Last of Us* (2013) as a positive example, "but when the only reason a character exists is to be violent, they just become a plot tool, or an object of violence. I honestly think anything based strictly on violence is boring."

The classification of video games that focus too much on violent mechanics as 'boring' was something mentioned repeatedly by respondents, regardless of whether they like, dislike, or expressed ambivalence towards violence in video games. "[Violence is] fine, but if that all the game has to offer then it's short-lived," wrote one respondent, "violence is not enough to keep me engaged." Another agreed, writing "I don't really have any -

negative- feelings about [violence], although I feel a lot of games use violence to prop up a lack of any other kind of substance." This respondent cites the combat in *Bioshock Infinite* (2013) as an example of a game that emphasises violence over substance – "I just think, -why- is this SO violent, what did this accomplish?" Interestingly, they also mention *The Last of Us* as an example where violence adds to – rather than detracts from – the plot and the overall player experience of the game. This reinforces opinions cited above: violence in video games is not always a mindless, bloodthirsty endeavour – in fact, these answers show that players can be deterred by overt, unnecessary gore – and can instead often enhance player experiences and plots. These responses indicate that problems arise when games become too heavily invested in violence as a mechanic, one respondent explains that "I feel like a lot of AAA games are constrained by the expectation of violence being the core gameplay element, making the possibilities less expansive and imaginative."

Being granted the ability to choose between violent and non-violent conflict resolution strategies in video games not only makes these games more interesting and engaging for respondents, but several also said they felt more empowering, as well. "Although feeling powerful and skilled in committing violence can be a satisfying aspect of games," wrote one respondent, "I always feel more empowered/inspired by a protagonist who is able to negotiate solutions to problems rather than punch their way through them." These answers correlate with findings from Chapter One, which interrogated respondent's impressions of a Female Power Fantasy archetype. Respondents emphasised the importance of traditional signifiers of power such as physical strength, but also stressed that independence and autonomy were key to a female video game character feeling like a power fantasy. With this in mind, it makes sense that while many respondents do respond positively to performing violence in video games, they also stress the importance of being granted the freedom to choose violence, rather than simply being railroaded down a path of violence with no alternatives. "An empowering female character for me would have more than the ability to commit violence," wrote one respondent. Another explained that when it came to violence they preferred "maturity" to "slapstick," and gave the *Devil May Cry* (2001-2019) franchise as an example of a game genre and style they would like to see led by a female protagonist, "but I wouldn't find that as empowering, for example, as a game that allows me to choose whether to fight or not, and then how to fight moreover." The implications of these ludic preferences regarding performed violence in games hints at

wider implications for the games industry; as Shira Chess explains, agency as a game mechanic allows players to "[train] themselves to reconsider their own agency against systematically oppressive structures, and create action, meaning, and motion out of them" (2020, p. 105). In this way, respondent's ludic preferences and demand for choice could potentially challenge structural violence in the gaming assemblage.

While many of the responses quoted above specifically note that enjoyment and empowerment is sometimes found in deciding between violent and non-violent conflict-resolution choices, games which gave the players an option between different forms of violence were also positively viewed by many respondents. For example, one respondent comments that "In *Dishonoured* (2012), I liked that you had the option to sleep dart, avoid, or knock out people rather than just kill them." Some respondents claim that, while enacting overt violence in video games can be cathartic, they find avoiding enemies or killing them using stealth to be more challenging and therefore more rewarding and satisfying as a result. "I play a lot of games in which violence is a core part of gameplay – I enjoy the challenge of it in games like *Dishonoured*," wrote one respondent. "I particularly enjoy games that give you the option of lethal violence and emphasise the consequences of using that method rather than a less lethal approach, especially if the less lethal approach requires more skill." Similarly, another respondent explained that "[if] I get the option to do non-lethal things I usually go for that option. Not necessarily because of the violence but because I prefer the challenge of sneaking and being non-lethal." One respondent used *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) as an example: "there are quests where you can charm/sneak your way to a goal rather than battle and I think this can be much more fun and challenging." For some, however, the ability to sneak around, and choose to avoid or perform violence stealthily were all that kept them engaged in a game with otherwise less than enthralling mechanics and plots:

> "For *Assassin's Creed II* (2009) I did enjoy casually stealth assassinating those poor guards who were standing between me and 12 florins. [...] The characters, writing, fake history, etc. of *AC2* completely failed to make me care, so I can only admit that the stealth gameplay was enough to satisfy my desire to be able to walk up to someone, slit their throat, and walk away."

These responses show that games which give players the option between violence or diplomacy, or even overt violence and stealth, are far more positively viewed by many respondents than games that railroad players into (largely consequence-free) violent conflict resolution strategies. This makes sense when considered alongside other answers to this survey, which stress independence, agency, and autonomy as important character traits to respondents.

Violence and Resistance

The responses highlighted above indicate the nuances at play when respondents engage with violence in video games. Through respondent's answers it becomes clear that violent gameplay is performed in ways that build upon their own subjectivities and experiences of the gaming assemblage and wider society. Despite the survey questions largely focusing on respondent's textual interactions with violence, these interactions are influenced by their experiences and unique subject-positions, and as such, through their interactions with violence in games it becomes possible to infer their thoughts on violence within the industry itself. As with questions analysed in earlier chapters, respondents also regularly used the platform offered to them by the survey to contextualise their ludic activities – and given the nature of the survey, critiques of industry treatment of women are evident in their responses. Respondent's refusal to engage with gendered or sexual violence in games echoes findings in Chapter One, where fantasies of power were explicitly linked to a character not being exposed to such risks. Similarly, the importance of choice to respondents in their engagements with in-game violence correlates with the importance they place on independence and agency in their female protagonists. Chess describes agency as "a term used by feminists to articulate the need for active voices speaking up against systems of power," (2020, p. 102) as such, respondent's desire for agency in multiple areas of gameplay speaks to a wider desire for agency within the gaming assemblage. In this way, demanding choice when engaging with violent video gameplay can be linked to Chapter Three's findings on willing politicisation and identity fluidity – both are examples of "having a will to act and speak back to systems of power" (ibid).

In *Play Like a Feminist*, Chess calls for "playful (and play-filled!) feminisms" to invigorate protest, because "feminist activism needs play. Because feminisms don't play.

Feminisms work. And then work more" (2020, p. 66). With this in mind, violent gameplay performed by respondents – informed by their prerequisites of context, choice, and restrictions – can be seen as a form of feminist play, particularly when considering the frequency with which respondents cited violent gameplay as a form of stress-relief. "I play video games to relax," wrote one respondent. "Blowing things up or stabbing dragons in the face or assassinating people is a good way for me to unwind. It lets off steam in a way that is not damaging to my environment or the people in it." Another wrote that in-game violence "allows you to let off steam/channel energy. As a woman it makes me feel like I'm physically tough and makes me feel ready to face the world and the challenges of my day." This respondent specifically cited their gender in their answer – implying their violent ludic choices were linked to their experiences as a woman in the gaming assemblage. Several other respondents expressed their opinions simply: "I like violent video games. Great stress relief," one read. "I think it's a good way to blow off steam and should not be restricted to any one gender of character," said another. "I feel it's a good way to get anger out, and feel like I am accomplishing something/powerful," one respondent wrote, while another similarly explained "it's good, you feel confident, cocky, like you can deal with whatever the game world throws at you."

Multiple responses cited violent video games as an outlet for aggression caused by real-life issues. "I enjoy video games revolving around violence. […] To me it's entertaining as well as relaxing that I can take out my aggressions on virtual enemies," wrote one respondent. Another said "I don't mind the violence - I feel that video games are a good outlet for anger, etc." Some respondents highlighted how games become proxies for real-life struggles: "Violent videogames often help me relieve stress. I often have to remind myself that I'm not killing anything, just pixels on a screen and symbols for my struggles in life." These responses are examples of how "the virtual gun functions for video gamers as a semiotic vessel whose meaning […] changes with its context" – in this way, respondents once again demonstrate that their engagement with violence is rarely taken solely at face-value, often their ludic activities are shaped by wider experiences and subjectivities (Huntemann & Payne, 2010, p. 12). One respondent wrote "I'm a fan of first-person shooters. Violence is just as enjoyable for female players as it is for male players. I know some vicious girls, and I know some girls who enjoy using gaming as a relief from our day-to-day stress." Another agreed, "when I pick a core violence game to play it's usually because I

want a sort of cathartic, brainless, smash everything feel after a bad day." One respondent described in-game violence as a replacement for violence they could not commit in real life:

> "Being able to shut down your enemies by force, in a way that you could NEVER do in real life (because you're either not strong enough or scared of the legal repercussions) is really nice. That falls into the literal 'fantasy' category. Maybe this is just toxic masculinity speaking, or maybe it's just an outlet for pent-up rage, but either way. It feels good when it is done right."

For these respondents, enacting violence in video games is not simply fun but also cathartic, providing a safe outlet for stress in their day-to-day lives. Even when highlighting this, however, many respondents pointed out that it was not a clear-cut issue. One response details the player's struggle between both the empowerment she finds in enacting video game violence, and her feminist political views, which make her feel as if she should find enjoyment solely in less violent, more story-driven games:

> "I enjoy [violent video games] a lot and often feel guilt or pressure from the feminist community (which I consider myself a part of) for doing so. I got into gaming because those things appealed to me, and while I enjoyed *Gone Home* (the classic example!) and other plot-heavy, non-violent games, I still have fun with *Grand Theft Auto* or lots of zombie shooters. I enjoy games in which I have a fixed and straightforward goal - for example, kill all the zombies on this level to progress. For me it feels like having a little checklist and I am blatantly checking little things off each time I take down one zombie. It also relates to my feeling of general powerlessness in real life. Being able to take control and do whatever you want is freeing when you feel like you have very limited options in real life. For me it is often an indulgent fantasy."

Another response similarly juxtaposed the catharsis often found in in-game violence with the importance of critical analyses of the topic; the respondent wrote "on one hand violence is just straight up cathartic and I do enjoy it in video games. However, people rightly criticize downplaying the consequences of violence and its glamorization. There is a right and wrong way to frame violence in video games."

These two responses hint at the complexities of a feminist analysis of video game violence, particularly when using resistance against binaries and assemblage prejudices as a lens. My own reservations about the impact of resistive violence enacted within a structurally violent industry have already been examined – however, as multiple responses have shown, it is entirely possible for violence in games to be both resistive and impactful when said violence disproves, combats, or otherwise challenges the structural violences endemic within the gaming assemblage. Boluk and Lemieux's definition of metagaming – utilising pre-existing ludic practices for alternative modes of play – highlights the potential for players to "transform video games from a mass medium and cultural commodity into instruments, equipment, tools, and toys for playing, competing, spectating, cheating, trading, breaking, making, and ultimately intervening in the sensory and political economies of those technologies responsible for the privatisation of play" (2017, p. 4). As such, respondents who engage with violent video game content in nuanced, contextual, and subjective ways join players who utilise "the radical potential of videogames as a medium for creative practice, philosophical experimentation, cultural critique, and political action" (ibid). Anna Anthropy highlights queer and feminist video game modding as an example of this, citing artist Anne-Marie Schleiner's gallery of feminist first-person shooter mods as an example of players playing alternatively for "the purposes of gender play, to correct gender bias by the game's authors, or to subvert the aggressive masculinity of this school of game creation" (2012, p. 74). Kishonna L. Gray's research into women of colour's use of Xbox Live also highlights examples of resistive in-game violence utilised by players; interviewees revealed their griefing tactics – deliberate ludic activity with the purpose of annoying or trolling other players – when confronted with racist, misogynistic enemies or teammates. In this way, the players she interviewed demonstrably utilised the tools available to them in-game to combat hate-speech and harassment – practices that the systemically hegemonic games industry often overlooks and implicitly encourages. The work of artist Joseph DeLappe is another example of using violent video game content to protest wider systemic violences – most notably his *dead-in-iraq* (2006-2011) project, in which he utilised the in-game text chat in *America's Army* to type the name, age, and date of death of every U.S. troop who had died in the Iraq war (Westecott, 2018). In this way, violent video game content can be, and has been, utilised for resistive purposes. Respondents cited here

demonstrably resist dominant ideologies surrounding women's ludic preferences, and as such, could also be examples of such practices. As Chess explains:

> "We play like a feminist when we retool the pleasures of play, creating powerful opportunities for players to experiment with identity and agency. We play like a feminist when we apply intersectional approaches to leisure disparities and help find playful opportunities for others. We play like a feminist when our play isn't just about white, cisgender, young, straight, abled, dextrous women; it is about play that aligns itself with a larger cause of leisurely freedom. We play like a feminist when we play as a genre of protest, eschewing dated stereotypes of both feminism and femininity. And […] we play like a feminist when we transform video game culture, forging a space within it for new kinds of games and gamers." (2020, pp. 40-41)

By this definition, respondents can be said to be playing like feminists, gaming resistively, and working towards the destabilisation of hegemonic practices within the gaming assemblage.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how survey respondents engage with violence in video games in nuanced ways. As with respondents' answers to other questions in the survey, their engagement is influenced by their perceptions of and experiences within the gaming assemblage, with correlation between respondents' preferences for violent ludic activity and preferences for empowering female video game characters. By this I mean respondents demonstrated a distaste for sexual violence in both their in-game violent practices and their female characters, as well as requiring a degree of agency, independence, and choice with regards to both. Respondents also showed that, while the majority of them were largely accepting or enthusiastic towards in-game acts of violence, they were less likely to perform violence mindlessly, and enjoyed it much more when it was contextually appropriate – for example, for 'heroic' or morally good reasons. Kathryn Hemmann explains that fans often "view media properties not as passively consumable content but rather as templates from which more personalised and individually meaningful stories may be created," through this

lens, respondent's subjective and personal interactions with in-game violence can be read as forms of alternative meaning-making (2018, p. 214).

Contextualised against explanations and examples of structural violences endemic within the games industry, it is possible to read respondent's engagements with ludic violence as modes of feminist protest. The potent power of video games as a medium means they are "bursting with opportunity to make change, protest the status quo, and improve the lives of players" (Chess, 2020, p. 87). As such, even small-scale, insular, and highly personal engagements with violent content have the potential for positive and industry-altering impact due to the dual nature of influence. Just as a player influences a game's outcome, so to do games impact and influence player's lives. In turn, players' actions can go on to influence, challenge, and potentially change the wider games industry and assemblage through modes of "playful protest" (Chess, 2020). As this chapter – and thesis more broadly – has demonstrated, the games industry and wider gaming assemblage are in need of drastic change. The industry's roots in misogyny and racism continue into the present day, and its problematic labour practices and conservative allegiances require deconstruction. While – as explained in this chapter's introduction – it is ultimately beyond the scope of this research to satisfactorily resolve the many contentious issues regarding violence in games, the findings of this chapter give me cause for cautious optimism. Through resistive acts that highlight these issues, women and minorities in games can challenge – and hopefully ultimately upheave – the structural violences endemic within the gaming assemblage.

Conclusion: Resistive Present and Resistive Futures

"I think one of the best things about games," Opal tells me in our first interview, "is that it's a situation in which you're presented with a challenge that you know you can overcome – which can be very helpful to individuals who are feeling helpless or defeated in their own lives – or to teach lessons about challenges and decision-making and agency." For the respondents and interviewees who took part in this research, video games often act as gratifying tools of empowerment, escapism, alternative meaning-making, and resistance. Many demonstrate the "infectious, unifying, and gratifying" power of play in their responses, highlighting how ludic activity can ultimately be utilised to challenge a fundamentally hostile gaming assemblage (Chess, 2009, p. 1). Opal continues:

> "I think there's a lot of room within different genres for games that will challenge people's ideas of what is right and wrong, what is normal, and what isn't. They're an extremely effective way of putting yourself in someone else's shoes, in their perspective, and the games that do that really well are the games that I think are resisting the status quo, and the more games we make that do that, the more that we tell people 'here are a whole group of people, here are marginalised people who have interesting stories and a lot to say and do, and their struggles and ideas are worth considering and worth undertaking as well'."

Opal speaks with optimism and enthusiasm about video games as a medium, and is demonstrably aware of their potential as mechanisms for combatting hegemony. This research has worked to highlight not just how video games can better bolster the voices of the marginalised, but also how those players themselves, through their ludic preferences and practices, regularly work to resist restrictions placed upon them by the gaming community, the games industry, and wider society. Through platforming the voices and experiences of female players alongside academic analysis of the assemblage within which they operate, I have demonstrated the palpable frustrations and the committed investment that women and girls feel towards an assemblage both full of opportunity and fraught with problems. "It is clear that women in games and gaming push back and contest patriarchy in as many ways as they are challenged and ensnared by it," write Gray, Voorhees, and Vossen,

a statement that neatly summarises the findings of this research (2018, p. 8). While the gaming assemblage features several qualities designed and upheld by participants – either consciously or unconsciously – to ostracise and other female players, they persist, nevertheless. Women participate in the gaming assemblage despite hostile designed identities, both of the archetypal gamer and of the idealised, feminised female gamer (Chess, 2017); misogynistic origins built on the exclusion of women from STEM (Ensmenger, 2010; Hicks, 2010); antagonistic and hateful conduct from other players, from microaggressions to hate campaigns such as Gamergate; typecasting and exclusionary marketing practices that reify gender hierarchies; and the gendering of the very act of play itself. Once these barriers to play are overcome, many discover that, "as a site of explicit gender play, in which the player can adopt different identities and gain a sense of personal power, gameplay offers potential as a liberating tool in and of itself" (Westecott, 2018, p. 252). As such, from within, the limiting barriers to play inherent in the gaming assemblage can become brittle, malleable, or ultimately destructible through modes of resistive ludic activity.

This research has a number of important findings. It is one of the first audience-led examinations of representations of female power in video games, exploring not just what respondents' experiences are with pre-existing representations of women in video games, but also gathering data to construct an image of what a truly empowering Female Power Fantasy archetype may look like. It finds that the Female Power Fantasies imagined by respondents diverge from more traditional representations of power fantasies in contemporary media, in that they must explicitly combat and deconstruct dominant hegemonic hierarchies of power rather than uphold and reify them. Female Power Fantasies embody more complex and intricate evolutions of common traits associated with masculine power – such as strength and intelligence – while also exhibiting traits traditionally associated with femininity, such as empathy, compassion, and emotional intelligence. Respondents' insistence that Female Power Fantasies have independence and agency; are respected by both in-game characters and game mechanics; and ultimately resist patriarchal subordination speaks to their frustrations with the gaming assemblage's treatment of women both in and out of game. This research ultimately finds that female players are acutely aware of the prejudices at play within the gaming assemblage, and demand fictional characters that destabilise and subvert the patriarchal status quo.

This research also advances studies on female participation in the gaming assemblage. Building upon important research into identity and identification by Adrienne Shaw and using Foucault's theories on power and surveillance as guidance, this thesis demonstrates that women's participation in an often-hostile gaming assemblage necessitates identity fluidity – a practice in which female identity is either masked or accentuated to suit the needs of the individual. Respondents and interviewees traverse gaming spaces as dictated by discourse that renders them either willingly or unwillingly politicised by virtue of their existence within a space coded both historically and contemporarily as not for them. Identity fluidity ultimately allows women to resist binary notions of gender and participate in transgressive identity practices within the gaming assemblage, often while simultaneously working to combat misogynistic gatekeeping practices in gaming spaces. Amanda Phillips writes that "identity is an important marker for imbalances of power and a crucial site of resistance, but an overdetermined focus on identity itself can also mask the operations that sustain that imbalance," by examining identity alongside the hegemonic structures that necessitate rendering policed identities malleable, this thesis avoids such an issue (2020, p. 9). Going forward, these findings can be built upon to further examine the impact of women's identity fluidity upon regulatory practices within the gaming assemblage, as well as how identity fluidity could alter gaming spaces.

The enactment of in-game acts of violence by female players is also examined as part of this research – with findings demonstrating that violence as a ludic practice is commonplace among respondents and interviewees, who engage with violent video game content for numerous reasons, including empowerment, stress-relief, curiosity, and humour. However, much like with their other ludic preferences, women's enjoyment of violence in games is subject to nuances determined by each individual's own unique experiences and subject-positions. Respondents and interviewees generally demonstrate a love for contextualised, heroically motivated violence, and a rejection of sexual, or misogynistic violence in games. These findings correlate with others from this research, which demonstrate female player's awareness of and frustrations with misogynistic practices endemic within the gaming assemblage, as well as their desire for widespread change.

With the benefit of hindsight, there are some areas of this research that I would like to have expanded upon. I regret not including survey questions that asked respondents more about the impact of their intersectional identities on their ludic practices. Evidence of how a respondent's race, sexuality, class, or dis/ability informs their treatment within the gaming assemblage alongside their gender would provide valuable insight into how identity politics are enforced by and upon players in gaming spaces in a multitudinous, intersectionally oppressive capacity. In particular, going forward I am keen to develop and build upon my findings through a queer games studies lens. The way my respondents resist dominant hierarchies in the gaming assemblage bears a resemblance to Bonnie Ruberg's observations of how LGBTQ+ players 'queer' games content through alternate modes of play that "resist and repurpose games for alternative desires," transforming them into "space[s] for testing the boundaries of pleasure, identity, and agency" (2019, p. 18). Each of these act as an example of what Amanda Phillips refers to as "gamer trouble," a mode of problematising discourses regarding the gaming assemblage, including its players, industry, spaces, and tech more broadly (2020). With this in mind, I intend to move forward looking for more instances of, and opportunities to enact, gamer trouble. This is of personal importance to me due to my own identity as a genderqueer feminist academic, but also particularly relevant given the concerning rise of transphobic rhetoric in feminist academic circles in recent years. Troubling the narratives and attitudes of hostile spaces is highly important, but ensuring that feminist academic circles consistently and unequivocally champion the voices and rights of marginalised individuals in an intersectional and equity-focused way is fundamental. As such, I intend for my contributions to the future of gender and games studies to trouble, resist, and work towards the demolition of hegemonic structures in both the gaming assemblage and academic institutions.

As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, my work joins a "renaissance of queer, feminist, and critical race scholarship in games studies" (Phillips, 2020), and I hope that it will be beneficial to the field going forward as a document that critically analyses audience participations and engagements with the gaming assemblage. Gray, Voorhees, and Vossen write that "as more people work their way in from the margins of games and game cultures […], games become an increasingly viable platform for feminist activism and the struggle for social justice" (2018, p. 8). With this in mind, my research findings and future linked endeavours will only grow in relevance as marginalised players continue their push

for structural changes in the games industry and gaming spaces. Going forward, I intend to build upon my work on identity fluidity within the gaming assemblage, particularly looking at how intersecting marginalised identities impact such practices. From here, I also hope to interrogate changes to both ludic practices and gaming spaces in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, which has impacted all aspects of life, not least how leisure time is allocated and spent.

This research has highlighted the resistive attitudes and actions of respondents and interviewees in both their ludic preferences and their ludic engagements. Through their attitudes towards play, the ways they play, and the way they traverse gaming spaces, women regularly resist hegemonic practices and binary notions of gender within the gaming assemblage. By drawing attention to these actions, this thesis has enabled the platforming of marginalised voices, and hopefully in turn has contributed to resistive efforts within the gaming assemblage.

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