GAMING LIFEWORLDS

Videogames in Culture

Mahli-Ann Rakkomkaew Butt

For Dad, who always believed in me –

and to all the haters who didn't.

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Abstract |

This research examines the continuities, relations, and transformations of gaming lifeworlds. Taking on a feminist and cultural lens to study videogames as assemblages of play, this thesis investigates the problem of the 'lack of diversity' in gaming culture and seeks to intervene into its hegemony tied to a persistent imaginary of 'Gamers' as young white heterosexual men. Popular interventions have often aimed to improve representation and diversity by promoting 'new entry points' for marginalised players and game creators or recommending fixing the 'leaky pipelines' flowing from games higher education into the industry workforce. However, these interventions tend to critically ignore the existential-material conditions giving rise to embodied precarity and exclusion in the first place. In turn, those who do not fit the limited Gamer identity continue to experience a burden of difference when they are asked to represent 'diversity' on behalf of the otherwise hegemonic institutions. Accordingly, those who are rendered precarious (including women, people of colour, LGBTQIA+ folk) are required to cope with exclusionary norms when they participate in environments that are still hostile to them.

In studying gaming lifeworlds, this thesis takes an intersectional feminist approach that draws from people's lived experiences. While being sensitive to identity, here I have not presumed the importance of all identity categories, such as the Gamer identity. In this research, I have thus included players who do not necessarily identify with the stereotypical image of Gamers. Using an existential-materialist approach, I report on the lived experiences of embodied precarity and

how people cope (or do not cope) with hegemony. In thinking about everyday struggles, I establish the concept of '(not)coping' to challenge the assumed dichotomy by which every instance of 'not coping' designates a failure 'to cope'. Rather than viewing 'coping' and 'not coping' as positive and negative binaries, I write '(not)coping' in order to highlight the liminal zone in between these affective states. (Not)coping is thus used to further describe the transformative affective spaces necessary for the refusal to cope within and against hegemony.

This research examines everyday struggles within (and against) hegemonic systems of oppression, reporting on how people are (not)coping with embodied precarity across their digitally entangled and materially embedded lifeworlds. I use qualitative mixed methods, combining semi-structured interviews, ethnographic participant observation, and discourse analysis to study this. My findings are presented as three main chapters, which investigate videogames in relationship conflicts, videogames in drunk spaces, and videogames in self-care discourses. In doing so, I examine the ways that gaming lifeworlds are transformed through conflicts and everyday struggles. Since the study of gaming lifeworlds crucially apprehends videogame assemblages as embedded in materiality, rather than separate from everyday life, I hope to demonstrate its use as a generative framework and model for feminist games, media, internet, cultural researchers to study videogames in culture.

In the field of game studies, methods of investigation are frequently configured around the study of play, players, or the creation of play. However, this focus can ignore non-players, non-play relationship dynamics, and non-play-centric

spaces that themselves also significantly shape videogame and play assemblages. Instead of treating videogames as exceptional and unique, this thesis invests in more closely looking at the continuities, relations, and transformations of gaming lifeworlds to develop a more complex everyday understanding of videogames in culture. To understand these ordinary socio-cultural aspects of videogames, play, and culture, I stress that game researchers must take greater stock of non-players, non-play relationship dynamics, and non-play centric spaces, as well as the existential-material conditions, continuities, relations, and embodied precarity that might transform gaming lifeworlds.

Declaration |

I certify that to the best of my knowledge; the content of this thesis is my own work. It has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes, except as specified, and all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Human Research Ethics Committee approval for this thesis was valid for five years from the University of Sydney (HREC Project Number 2018/021). The research and recruitment methods used for interviews reported in Chapter 3 were approved by the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Human Ethics Committee (HC Number HC16628), and parts of that interview data appear in "Girlfriend Mode: Gamer Girlfriends, Support Roles and Affective Labour" submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Honours degree of Bachelor of Arts awarded by UNSW in 2016.

Mahli-Ann Butt

February 2022

Funding |

Acknowledgements |

Cherry Baylosis opens the acknowledgements section of her PhD thesis by recounting how our friend Kyle would often say that it takes a village to produce a thesis: "While I am childless, and don't really know what it's like to raise a kid, this PhD has felt like a baby that I have seen grow with support and care of the community around me over the years – not to mention the late nights and lack of social life that have come along with undertaking such a mammoth task." Indeed, my thesis too would not have been possible without the generosity, mentorship, and support of many people – perhaps a dozen villages would be a more appropriate description here – who have helped to carry me throughout my PhD candidature.

I would like to first thank my ultimate dream team of supervisors, who I am utterly indebted. I am incredibly fortunate to have had Catherine Driscoll as my co-supervisor during my entire candidature. Catherine, thank you so much for being such an extraordinary inspiration and academic powerhouse. I have learnt so much from your extensive wisdom and critical insight over the years. Before you, I would have never believed that it was even possible for one person to know just so much about literally everything. Thank you for your careful eye and detailed feedback on every aspect of my work from the proposal to the submission. Thank you for continuing to challenge me so that I could produce a thesis – sometimes to my own surprise – that I'm proud of.

I am exceptionally grateful to my primary supervisor of the last few years, Marcus Carter. Thank you, Marcus, I have been so very fortunate to have had your

guidance and support during the toughest final laps of my candidature before crossing the finish line. Firstly, I would not have even considered doing a PhD – let alone one in game studies – without finding the welcoming community of game researchers that you fostered, not only in the Sydney Games Research Lab but also the game studies community across Australia. I remember attending my first DiGRA Australia conference in 2015, one that you had organised, and can vividly recall how instantly I felt at home, having found 'my people'. Your stellar knack of knowing how to ask all the right questions has helped me numerous times to better convey a jumbled mess of ideas and bring them together into something with greater clarity. Thank you for constantly reminding me that the best thesis is a done thesis and teaching me to unionise myself. I aspire to be the kind of community-minded academic that you are, and I am incredibly thankful to have had your academic mentorship and solidarity. I'm also truly sorry that Alcoholic Mountain Dew is a thing and that you've had to read such cursed words in this thesis.

I'm certainly a very lucky duck to have had three rockstar supervisors, and would like to deeply thank Gerard Goggin, the primary supervisor who welcomed me into this project. Thank you for your expert guidance through the first few years of my PhD journey and setting me on a steady path. Thank you for instilling a wild amount of confidence in my abilities right from the very beginning. I appreciate the ways that I always felt so supported and thank you sincerely for your ongoing mentorship and sharing so much of your wisdom with me. I really couldn't have asked for a better, more knowledgeable, or more generous supervisory team, and am so

unbelievably fortunate to have received so much of Catherine's, Marcus', and Gerard's inspiration, time, wisdom, advice, and support.

Many thankyou to my academic mentors and good friends, Tom Apperley, Robbie Fordyce, and Kyle Moore. Tom, thank you for your mentorship, wisdom, and guidance, both academic and life. Robbie, thank you, my honorary big brother for always being so thoughtful, for being the first person who said "actually it doesn't matter" after asking me if I played videogames when we first met (it was so refreshing), and for the end-PhD survival kit – an AIATSIS map of Indigenous Australia (a good reminder of survival). Thank you, Kyle, for all the incredibly helpful advice you have shared with me over the years and for being such a kind-hearted and generous person. Thank you again from the bottom of my heart, Tom, Robbie, and Kyle – I wouldn't have been able to do a PhD without your camaraderie and mentorship. An additional thanks to Kyle and Robbie for the countless hours that we played *Destiny* together.

Thank you to the Sydney Games and Play Lab. Massive kudos, again, to Marcus for fostering such a supportive games research community here at the University of Sydney. Thank you, Mark Johnson, for your expertise, feedback, academic mentorship, and shared appreciation of *Werewords* style games. Thank you, Premeet Sidhu, Mads Mackenzie, and Ryan Stanton, for all your feedback on my work and our billions of pomodoros (honestly, I'm glad we didn't count them as it would be slightly terrifying to know exactly how many we've done now *tomato emoji*). Harriet Flitcroft, thank you for our D&Ms, asking about 'the spicy levels' in vanilla *WoW* (you are truly a blessing), and being the MVP of our game studies

thankyous to my friends across the Australian game developer community. My sincerest gratitude to all the research participants for their time, insight, and stories – this research would not have been possible without them. Thank you to all the feminist writers, feminist game researchers, and advocates who continuously teach and inspire me in so many ways. Here, I would like to additionally thank my thesis examiners, Adrienne Shaw and Alison A. Harvey, for their detailed and thoughtful feedback on my work, as well as their in-depth advice on how to develop this research further in the future.

During my PhD candidature, I was my father's primary carer, and he passed away in 2019. I also survived two separate cases of domestic abuse, which each resulted in short periods of homelessness. Thank you to all those who supported me during a very difficult time in my life. There are so many people that I could thank here, but I want to give thanks to Sally Curtis for being my emotional well-being mentor these past few years. Thank you, Sally, for helping me to trust myself and feel like myself again. Thank you, Yiğit, for offering me a place to stay when I didn't have anywhere else to go. Thank you, Kiona, for lending me your feminist ear. Thank you, Alex, for your friendship, and running over during your work break to help me carry suitcases to the train station when I had a broken hand. Thank you, Jyll, for talking with me about ADHD over drinks one evening. Thank you, Gregory Patterson for diagnosing me with ADHD when I was 28. Doing a PhD is already a massive life hurdle but this one was also during an especially tough time for me; and then, of course, COVID-19 happened. I'm incredibly fortunate to have had such an amazing, caring, supportive network of people in my life and it is only because of them that

when I look back on this period of my life, I think about how much I loved doing this PhD. It feels like I shouldn't even be saying this – seems a bit taboo to admit that I've really enjoyed doing a PhD, while I'm also going to politely ignore the fact that I am indeed typing this with RSI in my right arm – but there you go. I am determined more than ever to pay it all forward to those who will come after me.

Chapter 1 | Introduction

Gaming Lifeworlds

A complaint: when we let out, spill out, what we are supposed to contain.

A complaint: when we transform what we do not cope with into a protest at what we are supposed to cope with.

Not coping: it can feel like a failure; you can feel like a failure. It can feel like you have lost the handle. Maybe we need to fly off the handle. And maybe not coping is an action. And maybe not coping is how we create a collective. That collective might be fragile but it is also feminist and furious.

(Sara Ahmed, 2018, n.p.)

One of my earliest childhood memories is playing *SkiFree* on my father's desktop computer. Packaged alongside games like *Solitaire* and *Minesweeper, SkiFree* was a 2D skiing simulation game preloaded onto early Microsoft Windows systems. Thinking back to my childhood in the 1990s, I still remember the sense of wonder, thrill, and adventure involved in sneaking into my father's home study to boot up his computer and play videogames.

As physical education teachers, my parents encouraged play in my childhood, letting me jump on the couches and make a grand mess throughout the house like a hurricane. Dad's home study was the one area safeguarded under lock and key in our family home. Naturally, it was the one room that my grubby little hands wanted to break into the most. The computer was 'his computer', and I was told that it was

'meant for his work'. But as a child, I just wanted to play. So, his computer room was the holy grail, a moreish cookie jar beckoning me.

Sometimes the door was unlocked. With glee, I imagined I had somehow stealthily hacked into Dad's intricate security system, pretending to be a Power Ranger. Other kids from kindergarten designated me the Yellow Ranger, "Because you're the Asian one" they said. At the time, I didn't understand why I disliked what they had told me, but I liked the Yellow Ranger the most anyway. I remember explaining exactly why the Yellow Ranger was the coolest: her robot transformed into a lioness, and lionesses are the hunters of the pride, therefore the coolest. The other kids could not argue against such watertight reasoning. I performed incredible acrobatic feats to ensure that I went undetected by the invisible lasers, roared at the imaginary guard dogs to keep them at bay, and leapt across the boiling moat of lava. Then, triumphantly, I would climb up onto the leather office chair. My nose must have barely reached the computer desk.

SkiFree opens with a bird's-eye view of the player-avatar, a pixelated skier on top of a slope. The skier travels down the hill while the player uses the arrow keys to navigate trees, other skiers, animals on the track, and star jump over rainbow arches. Unbeknownst to the skier, however, we are doomed to be eaten by a Yeti after crossing the finish line. Each time I reloaded *SkiFree,* I hoped that maybe this time – just *maybe* – I would somehow slip through the fated grip of the computer programme. As Laurent Berlant explains, "all attachment is optimistic" (2011, p.1). The affective structure of attachments, she writes, "involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to

this thing will help you, or a world, to become different in just the right way" (Ibid., p. 2, emphasis in original). Death by Yeti is inevitable, but despite the odds, I persevered.

Figure 1: Screenshot of *SkiFree*. The bottom right corner pictures the endgame Yeti gobbling up the skier.

Why am I thinking about this story? At the centre of this PhD thesis is an exploration of the liminal zone between coping and not coping as a form of resistance. My *SkiFree* anecdote thus serves as an allegory for discussions to follow. To paraphrase Meaghan Morris, anecdotes are models for how the world is working at a given time and place (1988, p. 7). Extracted from hazy childhood memories, the account above is likely a partial recreation of those events. However, Morris suggests that anecdotes need not be true in order to serve a discursive purpose.

In the story above, I found ways to challenge the use of space designated as the home office, I refused the racist worldviews of other kids from school, and I fought against the virtual world programme that *SkiFree* presented to me. This story thus highlights the role of resistance emerging in everyday life and acknowledges that many such refusals of systems are paradoxical. Of course, continuing to play *SkiFree* is what the gaming system wants me to do and is not a form of 'resistance' even if it sparked rebellious feelings. So then why did it feel resistant? There is resistance in my story – the sneaking into the room that I know is off limits, the repurposing of an assignment (Yellow Ranger) as a goal, and the refusal to accept the yeti as inevitable. As with various other videogames, I could also quit *SkiFree*.

Reminiscing about playing *SkiFree* reminds me how this looping mechanism of playing over and over again both describes a kind of Sisyphean task that breaks the illusion of player-agency and highlights how I never had to win to enjoy such a game. There was pleasure in failure and replaying as if I could still somehow overcome the impossible. This is partly how I understand some aspects of an everyday experience of coping. It's certainly not a complete account, but it captures some of the attempts to find ways to go on, even in the face of great adversity. Continuing, going on, persevering, hoping – even if there aren't any true 'winning conditions' in life (outside of what might be personally or socially made, such as setting goals to achieve). We are shaped by the traces of historical material conditions, observing the lingering footprints on the pathways cleared by traffic. However, the journey itself is never entirely predestined by those more well-trodden roads. We could cut across the marshlands to squelch our toes in the thick mud or

follow along a scenic route to watch the moon rise over the ocean. We could run towards our destination, march in rhythm, or stroll at our own pace. We might even dance. Cartographic maps can only provide a certain amount of information about how to get somewhere. A Global Position System (GPS) might instruct on which are the quickest or shortest routes when travelling to a chosen destination, but it does not necessarily describe which are the safest or the most beautiful directions to wander. In other words, looking at pathways alone cannot adequately speak to all the many splendorous ways that we can traverse through time and space. Similarly, scars, marks, and stretches on our bodies can tell partial stories but never the whole.

The ordinariness of both coping and not coping highlights the importance of routines, structures, and 'programming' in our everyday life, as well as their failures. When these things break, we can break. We can snap. Sometimes quite the opposite; sometimes, alone or with others, we're the agents breaking them. While life is not as readily reducible to coded sets of 1s and 0s, the processes of enculturation – of what becomes normalised or institutionalised – can be understood as a kind of programming (Chun, 2011). Certain practices get coded as what is to be expected in particular circumstances, however contingent they might be. Michael Jackson insists that the social sciences must deploy a double perspective, encompassing "particular situations – local, familial, and personal – *and* general conditions – global, national, cosmopolitan, historical, and human" (2013, p. xvi, emphasis in original). In other words, it's vital for us to consider diametrical oppositions: the consistent and the contingent; the persistent and the particular; the commonalities and the contrasts. In one way, I therefore also define coping and not

coping as an embodied reconfiguration and expression of emotional enculturation. Coping and not coping are both affective attunements seeking ways to live with what we feel to be *inevitable*. Therefore, coping and not coping do not organise a binary of positive and negative feelings. Writing about (not)coping – with the 'not' placed in brackets for my thesis – thus highlights the slipperiness of these affective dimensions and the complex relations between *coping, not coping, and the refusal to cope*. As my opening epigraph from Ahmed suggests (2018), 'not coping' is often understood as, and can feel like, a failure to cope. At the same time, a refusal to cope can be made into collective action that inspires change. For the purposes of this research, (not)coping infers critical potency: a transformative affective space for the refusal to cope within (and against) hegemony. The future orientation of these everyday struggles with what feels inevitable might also speak to the transmutability of potential actions. What problems do we feel to be inevitable and why? To add more to Sara Ahmed's provocation in the epigraph above, (not)coping: "can feel like a failure; you can feel like a failure" because we are feeling the failures of a system (2018, n.p.). Our breaking points might reveal when the code is broken, as well as how we might *rewrite* the code.

In this introductory chapter, I first provide an overview of the aims, topic, and scope of this research as a study of diversity in gaming culture. Secondly, I establish what I see to be gaps in the relevant fields of research for such a project. Here, I provide a critique of influential feminist interventionist literature which has widely focused on 'improving representation'. Thirdly, I outline how this thesis occupies that research gap, providing an account of my conceptual, theoretical, and

methodological frameworks, as well as a brief overview of the mixed methods used in my own research that are to be further detailed in each relevant chapter, and finally I situate my work in a feminist genealogy. After explaining these overall approaches, I will provide an overview of the chapters to follow.

1.1. Establishing the Research Territory

1.1.1. Videogame Assemblages

Given that gaming culture is the focus of this thesis, it is necessary to first unpack videogames/games from its various 'suitcase' definitions.[1] As Adrienne Shaw outlines (2010a, pp. 404-409), researchers have studied the phenomenon of videogames as an industry (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009), a social practice (Taylor, 2006), a cultural artefact (Steinkuehler, 2006), an artform (Jenkins, 2005), and a subculture wherein people perform specific internal cultural signifiers (Winkler, 2006, p. 147). Interweaving the phenomena of videogames and communities of gaming practices, T.L. Taylor draws on Bruno Latour's actor-network theory to describe videogames and gaming as an "assemblage of play" (2009, p. 332):

> Games, and their play, are constituted by the interrelations between (to name just a few) technological systems and software (including the imagined player embedded in them), the material world (including our bodies at the keyboard), the online space of the game (if any), game genre, and its histories, the social worlds that infuse the game and situate us outside of it, the emergent practices of communities, our interior lives, personal histories, and aesthetic experience, institutional structures that shape the game and our

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[1] For this thesis, I consider the broadest understanding of 'videogames', including all forms of digital games. I also use 'games' to better include analogue games, such as tabletop and card games.

activity as players, legal structures, and indeed the broader culture around us with its conceptual frames and tropes.

In treating gaming as an assemblage, Taylor emphasises the technological and material objects and practices that constitute play. In other words, videogame assemblages present an account of the complex ways non-human agents are intertwined with the agency of human actors. This definition acknowledges the multiplicity of various moving parts, comprising different objects, practices, identities, communities, and environments of gaming. In this thesis, I extend the notion of videogame assemblages with 'affective networks' (Paasonen et al., 2015) to highlight the intersubjectivity of people's relationships to videogames.

In hand with situating this research in the area of feminist game studies, this thesis also draws heavily on a wider feminist literature, primarily in media studies, gender studies, and cultural studies. My treatment of game studies and media studies is thus significantly influenced by the feminist theory, affect theory, and critical identity theory that appears in them, but is, generally, more widely appreciated, developed, and used in the scholarship of gender studies and cultural studies. I approach the study of videogames in this thesis as a form of 'new media', with a keen interest in studying the historical, situated, and cultural processes of mediation in the world. Therefore, in this research, I want to supplement Taylor's concept of videogame assemblages with what Susanna Paasonen, Ken Hillis, and Michael Petit describe as affective networks (2015).

This media research is grounded in Alfred Whitehead's proposal that we conceive the world as "a medium for the transmission of influences" (1978, p. 284).

That is, thinking of the world as a medium, framed the project's inspection of the *mediation* of affective networks contouring and rippling through videogame assemblages. In my research, I have found the flexibility of Paasonen, Hillis, and Petit's conceptualisation of affective networks (2015) to be particularly useful. I learn from the ways that they have developed their concept of affective networks by blending competing assemblage, affect, and actor-network theories, and combining their ideas with work by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Silvan Tomkins, and Latour. The fluctuating dynamics of affect, as Paasonen, Hillis, and Petit attest, give shape to various online and offline connections and disconnections (2015, p. 1) in ways which can – for the purpose of this thesis – transform videogame assemblages and gaming lifeworlds.

When affective networks are modified, they are rearranged into different assemblages: sticking, sealing, shifting, slipping, shaking, or shattering the ties between nodes – nodes comprising of human actors and non-human actants. Accordingly, affective networks entail a panoply of attachments and detachments, which remain always contingent and moved upon by "the proximities and distances of love, desire, and wanting between and among different bodies" (Paasonen et al., 2015, p. 1) – with bodies being understood in the broadest Latourian sense of the term, including nonhuman bodies, games themselves, digital connectivity, venues, and other non-human actants. In these ways, my research seeks to investigate the affective dimensions of attachment and detachment to videogame assemblages, by observing how invested and/or unravelling relations of affective networks evolve as (dis)connections, (dis)engagement, and (re)orientations. My research seeks to show

how these ideas can help to explain and describe the mediated processes and transformations of videogame assemblages. It is my claim that this recognition of videogame assemblages as dynamic rather than static can help to critically develop different cultural understandings of videogames and gaming culture. Such a recognition is needed to conceive of ways that videogame assemblages not only might be reconfigured, but rather *can* be reconfigured to be more inclusive.

1.1.2. Diversity in Gaming Culture

How do we diversify videogame/gaming culture? Gaming culture, like all cultures, is not a static object that exists in a vacuum, merely to be subjectively experienced. The cultures of videogames, like all cultures, are intersubjectively co-constructed, in-flux, contingent, and transmutable (Frow & Morris, 1993). Contributing to the field of game studies, and in particular, the area of feminist game studies, this thesis explores the topic of 'diversity in gaming culture' framed first by this recognition. In doing so, this research draws approaches from feminist game studies, media studies, gender studies, and cultural studies to investigate the problem usually seen as gaming culture's 'lack of diversity'.

One premise of my argument here is that we should treat diversity as a question rather than a solution. Ahmed has argued that seeking solutions to diversity problems can create new problems (2012, p. 46). Acknowledging that treating the goals of diversity as if they were checkboxes to be ticked can insinuate that diversity questions are solved by the accumulation of a specific set of superficial inclusions. Instead, treating the work of diversity as questioning, situates it as part of ongoing

conversations. Therefore, rather than seeking solutions to diversity, I treat the problem of 'the lack of diversity' in gaming culture as an ongoing question. This research is one specific form of investigating the systemic institutionalisation of sexism, heteronormativity, racism, and so on (Ibid., p. 49). To this end, this thesis suggests that fostering diversity must first come from resistance against hegemony through the form of complaint work, solidarity in collective action, and the refusal to cope with failing systems (cf. Ahmed, 2021).

Organising these questions in my research, I have drawn on Judith Butler's feminist performative theories of embodiment, and related concepts of precarity and precarious bodies (2015; 2017). As Edwin Ng and Zack Walsh observe, Butler's performative theory of the body challenges conventional thought which otherwise regard and reduce individual bodies as "discrete entities or blended into some amorphous social body," and productively cuts "a middle path between these reductionisms to emphasize the shifting network of relations by which the body is bound" (2019, p. 3). Since performativity defines the body as "less an entity than a living set of relations, [it] cannot be fully dissociated from the infrastructural and environmental conditions of its living and acting" (Butler, 2015, pp. 64-65). According to Butler, this means that (Ibid.),

> The dependency of human and other creatures on infrastructural support exposes a specific vulnerability that we have when we are unsupported, when those infrastructural conditions characterising our social, political, and economic lives start to decompose, or when we find ourselves radically unsupported under conditions of precarity or under conditions of threat.

Concerned that many people develop a sense of obligation towards another based on feelings of identification, Butler proposes 'precarity' and 'precarious bodies' to

frame a different mode of political and ethical engagement based on recognition of the shared existential-material conditions of life's vulnerability. In considering the precarity of bodies, Butler calls for moving beyond identification to the harder but necessary task of maintaining "an obligation to those by whom we feel ourselves to have been injured, to those we fear, or to those whose difference from us seems to be quite severe" (2017, n.p.). Here, Butler also draws from Hannah Arendt's definition of freedom to argue that freedom "does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us, or, indeed, among us," and that, thus, together, "we bring the space of appearance into being" (Butler, 2017, n.p.).

Since social freedom cannot be understood as separate from *what arises between people*, the idea of being definitively bound up together also takes a stance that fundamentally opposes the entrenchment of individualism. Indeed, "to have a body is already to be in the care of the other or to be in need of such care," Butler asserts, and thus "we cannot separate our idea of a persisting body from networks of care in this regard; when infrastructures fail and falter, so too do we" (2017, n.p.). In these ways, infrastructural and environmental conditions are also what give rise to the precarity of "how a body is unavoidably exposed to vulnerability as it navigates the world" (Ng & Walsh, 2019, p. 3).

The precarious nature of life is a shared condition. However, precarity is not a condition that makes everyone the same, but a condition shared by everyone. For Isabell Lorey, such precariousness denotes "a shared differentness" that is, at once, divisive and connective (2015, p. 19). The notion that we are obligated to others, follows from "the fundamental insight that one life is not living without the other,"

which is, at once, an ontological and ethical matter (Butler, 2017, n.p.). The precariousness of life affirms that living can only be made possible by means of interdependence. It not only affirms the interdependency between humans and other humans, but further recognises the messy entanglements of human life in the ecologies, assemblages, and networks connecting humans, non-human lifeforms, environments, and technologies (Ng & Walsh, 2019, p. 7). Since there can be no vitality without the agency of "vibrant matter," living together in a shared ecology requires that proper attention be given to the role of *objects* and *things* in sustaining all life (Ibid., p. 8).

In such ways, the material and symbolic forms of structural support, or lack of such support, highlight the fundamental interdependencies between human and nonhuman lives and the ecological systems that support or don't support them (p. 5). The existential exposure to vulnerability "arises in relation to a field of objects, forces, and passions" conditioned by lived and living histories (p. 10). As Ng and Walsh propose, within a web of relations, the ethos and work of what they term "making refuge" for the vulnerable, would also examine how existing structures and systems create living conditions that foster stress, exploitation, and inequality (p. 11). In turn, looking closely at embodied precarity can locate the reality of the existential-material conditions of inequality.

In this thesis, I redirect the question of diversity in gaming culture through an examination of the conditions of existential-material inequality: what arises from structures and environments that either support or do not support the precarity of the bodies caught up in videogame assemblages. This framing of the question of

diversity thus considers 'the lack of diversity' in terms of the hegemonic mechanisms and impacts that render some bodies more vulnerable than others. I incorporate these feminist understandings of the body as performative, and precarity as embodied, by focusing on the shared conditions of (not)coping with the hegemony of gaming in my research, as I have outlined above and will continue unpacking further below.

1.1.3. Gaming Lifeworlds

A great deal of research and popular press tends to define gaming culture as clearly distinct from any wider culture or more general culture. However, as Shaw (2010a) argues, how videogames become presumed to be distinct from 'mainstream' cultures writ large needs critical reflection. One consequence of describing gaming culture as a distinct culture, is that researchers studying those who have been Othered in the field are often "forced to talk about their subject in relation to the perceived centre" (Ibid., p. 408). For example, researchers will often speak about girls' and women's limited opportunities for participation in relation to the perceived image of videogames as a boy's club.

My core argument is that closely inspecting how gaming lifeworlds are *transformed* is key to developing a more complex and multifaceted understanding of the role of videogames *in* culture. Following the need for attention to diversity as a question, I take a phenomenological approach and explore people's gaming "lifeworlds" (Jackson, 2013). The term lifeworld centres lived experiences with a phenomenological focus on people's intersubjective struggles over power. Holding

this in mind, this thesis asks: *How are people (not)coping against and within hegemonic gaming publics? How are gaming lifeworlds transformed by conflicts, (not)coping, and precarity?* By investigating gaming lifeworlds, this research seeks to emphasise the role of videogames *in* culture rather than *as* a culture per se (Shaw, 2010a, p. 416). In doing so, I examine how people can become affectively (re)orientated towards and away from certain *videogame assemblages* – assemblages of objects, communities, and practices, as outlined above (cf. Taylor, 2009; Paasonen et al., 2015; Latour, 2005; Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987).

Such (re)orientations of relations within videogame assemblages are contingent on ongoing conflicts and interpersonal histories which energise multiple forcefields within, across, and beyond what is otherwise traditionally bound to hegemonic definitions that determine who or what is to be formally included in or excluded from gaming culture. Accordingly, one of the core contributions of this research is to offer the study of gaming lifeworlds and how they are *transformed* as a flexible transdisciplinary model for researching videogame assemblages in culture. Games, media, and cultural researchers must observe the existential-material *continuities* and ongoing power struggles between gaming publics and gaming counterpublics more closely.

The term "lifeworld" is often attributed to the work of phenomenologists, such as Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Martin Heidegger, in which field lifeworld names the experiential world of intersubjective relationships (Jackson, 2013, p. xii). Jackson writes that lifeworlds can describe "a social field as a forcefield (*kraftfeld*), a constellation of both ideas and passions, moral norms and ethical

dilemmas, the tried and true as well as the unprecedented, a field charged with vitality and animated by struggle" (2013, p. 7). Animated by struggle, the concept of gaming lifeworlds speak to the crucial role of intersubjectivity (rather than the fantasy binary of subjectivity and objectivity) and its impact on people's (dis)connections, (dis)engagement, and (re)orientations to videogame assemblages as existentially and materially intertangled.

This thesis studies 'players' – as in anyone who plays games – and not the 'gamer/Gamers' that game studies traditionally focus on. I have used the term 'players' to describe all who play videogames (to designate practice), 'gamer' for those who claim the title to me during interviews (to designate identification), and 'Gamer' to refer to the limited default marketed identity as young and masculine, together with its particular sets of performative signifiers (to designate representation).[2] In these ways, this research is sensitive to the role of identity and how identity categories shape people's lived experiences, consumptions, and practices. However, I do not seek to presume that all identity categories are salient to my research. For instance, game studies' focus on stereotypical 'Gamers', imagined as white heteronormative young males, frequently overlooks those who play videogames but do not identify as 'gamers' (Shaw, 2011). Therefore, studying gaming lifeworlds is one way which can critically investigate how normative identities, such as the default 'Gamer' identity, work to construct gendered, heteronormative, and racial power dynamics. Instead, I have used an intersectional lens that focuses on people's lived experience, rather than impose the assumed

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[2] I unpack these distinctions further in Chapter 2.

importance of certain identity categories. As I will unpack below and further contextualise in Chapter 2, I use this approach because I want to challenge the naturalisation of differences, such as gender, that has been widely assumed to produce certain 'types' of players and essentialised forms of play.

1.1.4. (Not)Coping, Ordinary Affects, and Research Motivations

Feminist games, media, internet, and cultural researchers frequently conduct research with the understanding that we will most likely experience the same kinds of sexism, harassment, and abuse that are part of the culture we research (Humphreys, 2019; Chess & Shaw, 2015). This thesis is partly concerned with the exacerbated forms of discrimination, hostility, and violence directed against more precarious lives by dominant gaming publics. Specifically, it is concerned with how 'digital' abuse has become increasingly widespread to the extent that it is seen as an ordinary part of people's everyday lives – ordinary in the sense that we feel that we must simply accept its inevitability (to conjure the yeti). As a researcher as much as a player, I am self-reflexively situated in this ordinary world in which abuse is anticipated.

In January 2016, I attended my first Global Game Jam (GGJ). While I was participating, a young man grabbed my hair and shoved my head towards the desk. He walked over to the back of my chair, gripped my hair, and shoved my head forward, holding it down for a few seconds. My face did not collide with the table, but he pushed with enough force that my neck felt stiff for several days. If he had held me down for a longer amount of time, I would have been able to react, scream,

or fight back. Witnesses could have intervened. But those seconds were more than enough time to make it clear that he wanted to communicate 'control' over me. He wanted to show me how his actions were not only controlled but *about control*. What he was expressing to me through his actions was that "he could hurt me and really make me feel pain *if he wanted to*" and also that "*he wanted to*." This was confirmed the next time we crossed paths when he candidly said to me, "I can't help but hurt people like you." While his level of hostility certainly shocked me, I was also unsurprised that it happened because I already experienced similar 'things' before. This kind of 'thing' just often happens – to use his words – to 'people like me' in games.

Sacrificing a sense of safety that I had worked to produce as a player has felt like the cost of entry to becoming a feminist game researcher. But the fact that people like me, meaning not only people differentiated from the presumed gaming publics by such factors as gender or race, but also feminist game researchers' fear for their own safety, *is why we need feminist games research*. The well-documented attacks on feminists, women, femme-presenting, and other precarious groups writing about games (Consalvo, 2012; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Humphreys, 2019) highlights the urgent need to develop better interventions into dominant gaming publics' hostile hypermasculinity. The crucial work of countless feminist games scholars before me has created a space where I can depart from presenting the core arguments or conclusions in my own research to emphasize once again how we must recognise 'how bad things really are for minorities in games'. Here, I am afforded the ability to move away from the task of trying to convince people who don't already

care to care about issues of diversity (either because it doesn't impact them or because they maintain privileges from the status quo). Instead, my research can be for the 'people like me' whose embodied knowledge means that we already understand too well the urgent need for change. I want to explicitly acknowledge that it is only because of all the feminist work before me that am I able to explore the limitations of the politics of recognition as I do below, and more closely attend to my growing concerns about how the heightened threats of harm are *becoming environmental* (seen as inevitable or inescapable unless or even if we remain hypervigilant) for game studies researchers. Ultimately, my work is indebted to the feminist researchers and advocates who have paved the way for this project.

I am concerned that (not)coping has become commonplace to the extent that it is routine, taken-for-granted, or even dismissed as simply inevitable parts of life in the world of videogames. My phenomenological approach in this research also helps question that taken-for-granted-ness. To investigate gaming in culture using a phenomenological approach orients the researcher to face what is obscured *because* it seems to be ordinary. Rather than uncovering truths hidden under the surface of the world like a magician's prestige, as Eve Sedgewick calls "paranoid reading" (2003, p. 123), the phenomenological study of ordinary affects aims to witness the world as it is unfolding. To gesture to Baruch Spinoza, ordinary affects take our capacities to affect and be affected as the dynamic powers that give meaning to everyday life, or what Kathleen Stewart articulates as "the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences" (2007, p. 2). Everyday struggles – including how we cope, do not cope, and refuse to cope – are

part of what makes up our ordinary affective lifeworlds. At the same time, it is the ordinariness of our everyday struggles that also make them worth our attention.

1.2. Establishing the Research Gap

The literature of feminist game studies has widely identified and debated the problem of the hegemonic culture of videogames (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Consalvo, 2012; Chess, 2020). The default Gamer identity critiqued by many feminists has frequently alienated girls, women, and feminist voices, framing them as 'outsiders' and 'space invaders' (Vossen, 2018, pp. 100-103). In response, popular feminist interventionist literature often focuses on 'diversifying' gaming culture by improving its 'representation' of marginalised groups.

Scholars such as Nick Yee (2014), Aditya Deshbandhu (2016), and Shira Chess, Nathanial J. Evans, and Joyya J. Baines (2017) have challenged the Gamer stereotype in the interests of developing a better understanding of who, how, and why people play videogames. In recent years, many feminists also turned to intersectional frameworks, offering a more nuanced approach to observe a wider range of social factors affecting player identities and the complexity of recognition (cf. Richard et al., 2017; Shaw, 2018; Gray, 2020). Feminist advocacy work has also increasingly become more widely reflected in public discourse. Anna Everett declares that it is "a sign of our millennial times" that gaming journalists are more willing than ever to "raise concerns about race, gender, and sexuality discourses in gaming culture and the gaming industry complex" (2017, p. ix). More noticeably since Gamergate pushed issues of cultural gatekeeping into the media spotlight in

2014, inclusivity measures, and accessibility policies have become an industry 'hot topic', generating a pursuit of the improved representation in the workplaces producing or engaging with videogames (Harvey, 2021, pp. 2-5). In the widespread uptake of "equal opportunity" hires, videogame companies have sought to retain and grow their (body)count of minorities as both consumers and employees. In many ways, challenging the stereotype of Gamers has been a crucial step towards fostering a sense of diversification in the industry, but it commonly fails to address embodied precarity.

Despite all the attempts to improve representation in videogames, most approaches do not demand significant structural or environmental change, and thus generally continue to foster precarity. A conservative, vocal, and powerful minority have resisted and *resented* progressive changes, holding onto hegemonic dominance in gaming's industrial and public spheres. Gaming culture is thus often described as experiencing a "civil war" (Vossen, 2018, p. 4; Goldberg & Larsson, 2015, p. 12) or a "culture war" (Alexander, 2014b, n.p.). Dan Golding makes a more explicit consideration of his use of battle/war imagery when writing about the state of gaming culture. He explains that "the battles (and I don't use that word lightly; in some ways perhaps 'war' is more appropriate) to make safe spaces for videogame cultures are long and they are resisted tempestuously" (2014, n.p.).

In the struggle over who *should represent* or *be represented* in videogames, skirmishing stakeholders in dominant gaming publics and counterpublics (cf. Salter & Blodgett, 2012), as well as those 'caught in the crossfire', inevitably remain hypervigilant. Precarious players continue to worry about their personal safety when

participating in online games; often they come to hold the belief that gendered, homophobic, racially targeted hate and digital harassment are simply *par for the course* (Jane, 2016, p. 3; McLean & Griffiths, 2019). For many precarious players and games industry figures, the main solution to date has been seeking out more effective coping strategies and more carefully managing increasingly hostile environments (Fox & Tang, 2016; Cote, 2017; Harvey, 2021).

Coping with the hostile environments of gaming culture is a form of preemption. Brian Massumi proposes that "*preemption is when the futurity of unspecified threat is affectively held in the present in a perpetual state of potential emergence(y) so that a movement of actualization may be triggered that is not only self-propelling but also effectively, indefinitely, ontological productive, because it works from a virtual cause whose potential no single actualization exhausts*" (2015, p. 15, emphasis in original). In other words, preemption is not *prevention* (Ibid., p. 5). Prevention operates in an objectively knowable world, in which "events run a predicable, linear course from cause to effect" (p. 5). Conversely, preemption is an "environmental power" (p. 40) because it assumes that what we must deal with has "an objectively given existence prior to its own intervention" (p. 5). This argument is one that can help address the taken-for-grantedness of hostility and harassment experienced by precarious groups in videogame culture. Under the present terms of reference, there is an urgent need to find other interventions since there can be no rest or reprieve from these ever-looming "*becoming-environmental*" threats (p. 40) manifesting in a hostile hegemonic gaming culture.

The research gap I will address is highlighted by these tensions between 'improved representation' and the fact that many continue to experience precarity. Below, I outline the limitations of using certain kinds of representational frameworks as a basis to form socio-political interventions, including its possible diversion into constructing new audience categories, the burdens of institutional representation on minorities, and limitations of institutionalised intersectionality. These modes of intervention, I contend, do not always challenge the social constructions on which they depend. Instead, they may operate within established markets, institutions, and approaches that treat identity as a set of fixed categories. Therefore, the constructions of dominant markets, hegemonic institutions, and popular identitarian interventions demand further examination. In the section below, I outline three common pitfalls of identitarian approaches within feminist interventionist literature: the limits of audience categories, the limits of institutional representation, and the limits of institutionalised intersectionality.

1.2.1. Limits of Audience Categories

Feminists and diversity advocates in the field of game studies have often sought to improve representation of marginalised (non)participants. For instance, feminist interventionist literature often focuses on the development of new entry points for girls and women, as Kelly Bergstrom has critiqued (2019; see also Chapter 3). These popular approaches sometimes seek to develop 'girl' and traditionally 'feminine' themed videogames, and girl-oriented options within existing popular genres (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). However, creating 'new audiences' in either way only

produces a greater variety of player identity categories. As Shaw argues, targeting 'Girl Gamers' and constructing new audience categories may serve to pluralise videogame markets but it does not diversify the medium itself (2011, p. 29). Particularly following the revolution in gaming that has seen casual and mobile games emerge as enormous market segments with a very wide demographic appeal, videogames are fast becoming seen as "for *everyone*" (Juul, 2010, p. 152, cited in Shaw, 2011, p. 40; emphasis in original). However, as Shaw observes, the fact that "there are games that appeal to mass audiences [...] is not the same as saying that all games are *for* everyone. Research on the politics of representation in games must deal directly with the marginality of games as a medium" (2011, p. 40; emphasis in original). Rather than challenging the stereotype of Gamer identity and reasserting that "we game too," the construction of the medium itself must also be challenged. To this end, treating videogames as part of (rather than separate from) people's ordinary and everyday media rituals might more productively work to reform the medium by normalising playing videogames for all.

1.2.2. Limits of Institutional Representation

The limits of diversifying institutional representation warrant further consideration here. Increasing the number of marginalised participants before ameliorating structural inequalities places a burden of difference onto those minorities who must 'represent diversity' on behalf of those otherwise homogeneous institutions. According to Ahmed, "people of colour are welcomed *on condition* they return that hospitality by integrating into a common organisational culture, or by 'being' diverse,

and allowing institutions to celebrate their diversity" (2012, p. 43; emphasis in original). In fact, institutions can express a 'commitment to diversity' to disguise how they do not seek to "*produce the effect that it names*" (Butler, 1993, p. 2, cited in Ahmed, 2012, p. 116-117; emphasis added). In other words, declaring (a commitment to) diversity, inclusivity, and accessibility can be used as a "non-performative speech act" to maintain the status quo (Ahmed, 2012, p. 117). Likewise, the tokenised inclusion of 'all but one' is a way of holding onto the 'all' (Ibid., p. 178). The specialised game with a markedly different mode of gender representation in one year's releases, or the single 'women in games' panel at industry or field conferences, are acts which promise inclusion and can be offered in a way that negates the discussion of exclusions.

When videogame markets define Gamers as generically young heterosexual cisgendered white males, this representation produces a series of binary Otherings for those who don't fit this limited category (Harvey, 2021, pp. 4-5). Consequently, the appearance of "we game too" arguments in-and-of-themselves signal how those who are Othered must perform (not)coping work in the attempts to be included. If hegemony is a structural and systemic problem, we must closely consider the participation costs for those attempting to 'fit in' male-dominated environments.

1.2.3. Limits of Holistic Intersectionality

Proposing a more nuanced understanding of the intersection of identities, such as race, gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability, Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) framework of intersectionality offers an indispensable contribution to feminist research and

advocacy work, especially when applied to the historically white and male-dominated field of game studies (Humphreys, 2019; Phillips, 2020). Various contemporary feminist game scholars have utilised intersectionality to better observe a greater complexity of player identities (Gray, 2020) as well as to develop multifaceted textual analyses when studying the politics of representation in videogames (Murray, 2017). Indeed, a great deal of feminist games research used intersectional approaches long before it became more widely taken up in social science and humanities research (Shaw, 2018, pp. 76-77). Shaw suggests, however, that concerns should arise when some feminist game researchers deploy intersectionality "in a way that takes for granted the construction of the categorised that are intersecting" (2018, p. 78). Similarly, writers such as Aja Romano have critiqued the recent embrace of intersectionality in mainstream white feminism as a "feel good catch phrase" (2016, n.p.) which displays a critical lack of reflection on the movement in which intersectionality had in fact called upon. To critically engage with the theory of intersectionality in this section I will consider, more specifically, the potential limits of institutionalised intersectionality when appropriated as a stable representational framework.

In considering these limits I take up the work of Jennifer C. Nash (2011), who mounts a troubling critique of how intersectionality has been popularly deployed. In recent years, contemporary feminists have widely appropriated intersectionality as if it were one and the same as contemporary feminism (Ibid., p. 5). Along with many others such as Sirma Bilge (2013), Nash stresses that we should not too quickly forget how Crenshaw's intersectionality was partly proposed as a critique of dominant white

feminism (2011, p. 5). In treating intersectionality as a holy mantra, Nash argues, we risk devaluing a much richer history of Black feminism and Black feminists' contributions. While Black feminism has otherwise become associated with identity politics and often siloed to identitarian work, Nash traces the history of affective 'love-politics' to emphasise that the theory of intersectionality is one of the various other significant contributions (Ibid., p. 3). Nash identifies institutionalised intersectionality as its major pitfall: institutionalised uses of intersectionality primarily seek to *pluralise categories* of identity, assuming their stability. While this institutionalised approach to intersectionality can seem like a pragmatic tool used to explore more complex intersections of identity categories, Nash is critical of how it fails to jettison the myth of shared identity categories altogether. Nash explicitly states she is not suggesting that we should disregard intersectionality, but she is instead seeking to champion a wider appreciation of Black feminist writing, theorising, and advocacy work (p. 5).

Crenshaw's original intervention coined the term intersectionality to make visible the work identity categories do as mechanisms of institutional and governmental recognition, but she did not seek to assert the importance of identity categories themselves (Shaw, 2018, p. 78). One of the focal case studies of Crenshaw's first writing on this topic in 1989 was a case in which a Black woman unsuccessfully sued a company for workplace discrimination in the North American legal system. She was unsuccessful because the existing laws recognised that the company hired women and Black men, even if they did not hire Black women. That is, the law only recognised discrimination in separate categorical terms: discrimination against 'women' and discrimination against 'people of colour'.

Crenshaw thus proposed the framework of intersectionality to better represent how Black women's experiences overlapped with gender and racial identity categories but were also uniquely positioned as women of colour. For such instances, using categorical identities limited a rights-based approach, while Crenshaw's called for more nuance. Shaw notes the importance of seeing that "Crenshaw is not arguing for a new theory of identity; she's arguing for a new accounting of it" (2018, p. 78), quoting Crenshaw as follows: "intersectionality is not being offered here as some new, totalizing theory of identity. […] My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (1991, pp. 1244-45, cited in Shaw, 2018, p. 78).

As such a critique, intersectionality can be used to expand the field of feminist game studies in the direction of more nuance and complexity. Acknowledging the potential limitations outlined above, I stress that feminist games researchers must resist the urge to treat intersectionality as a holistic approach to identity or an answer to the 'lack of diversity' in games and games research but continue to pose it as a question. Against its own aims, intersectionality can be used to silo certain identities and ignore other forms of unjust disadvantage; its categories can become equalised, marking their own exclusions. Moreover, intersectionality, like all representational frameworks, must not be conflated with *lived experience* because *life* itself is eminently uncontainable by representation.

But the point here is not to turn away from identity politics or identity categories. Rather than "getting beyond" identity categories, like race and gender,

"as if the categories themselves have restricted our understanding, as if the categories themselves are the blockage points" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 180) we might better recognise that the bluntness of such instruments – in that they might be 'less precise' – can also give *weight* to critique, offering a sharper edge. As Ahmed argues (2012, pp. 180-81),

> It is not that the categories described as "blockages of thought" introduce blockage into our thought; rather, we need to account for blockages and restrictions within institutional worlds. Maybe we could redescribe social categories as blunt instruments. It could be the case that by exercising their bluntness we might lose a certain precision. Or we could say that institutional life is full of bluntness into a point: stop! You are brown! The blunter the edges of political instruments, the sharper their points. Being sharp in our descriptions of this world requires a certain willingness to be blunt.

Rather than imply that we should cast aside intersectionality, representational frameworks, or identitarian work, what I take from the above critiques is a need to critically explore, develop, and use a wide variety of reflexive frameworks. We should not simply seek to turn away from old terms and methods but understand that all frameworks are necessarily limited. As Donna Haraway puts this (1988, pp. 581-90, emphasis in original):

> Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*. […] We seek those ruled by partial sight and limited voice-not partiality for its own sake but, rather, for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible. Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular.

Ultimately, it is important to treat intersectionality as one of many frameworks in a feminist toolkit. Indeed, "whether studying marginalised or mainstream gamers, games, and producers" as Shaw proposes (2018, p. 78), a productive use of intersectionality in games research can approach identity with greater complexity but

it might also unpack the implications of how gender, sexuality, age, race, class, and so on *"shift the very boundaries"* of what they *mean* in particular contexts as bodies move through the world (Valentine, 2007, p. 100, cited in Shaw, 2018, p. 78; emphasis in original).

1.3. Occupying the Research Gap

Critiques of sexist, racist, and homophobic depictions of in-game characters often seek to promote the 'diversification' of industry workforces aiming to achieve greater representation 'from the ground up' (see Chapter 2). While identitarian and representational work should not be discounted, I contend that we must also diversify approaches for examining and discussing social justice issues. To paraphrase Amanda A. Phillips (2020, p. 29) and Clare Hemmings (2012, p. 158): *We must provide different accounts of lived experiences, but we must also learn how to tell these stories differently*. In this context, my research seeks to promote a greater appreciation for a wider plethora of feminist approaches by offering gaming lifeworlds as another model – another vehicle in the pursuit of social justice.

I situate 'the lack of diversity' as referring to a problem regarding the *hegemony* of gaming (Fron et al. 2007). This reframes the problem as a question that investigates *power structures* and *systems of oppression* – the infrastructural and environmental factors that produce precarious conditions. Conversely, 'poor representation' can describe one aspect of hegemony. I make these distinctions to highlight the limitations that might allow the features of 'poor representation' or 'lack of diversity' to stand in *for* the problem of hegemony itself. As outlined earlier,

identitarian work that too heavily relies on claiming a holistic rather than partial exploration of identity, risks overlooking other kinds of tensions arising from material conditions. Therefore, this research proposes existential-materialism as an alternative mode of investigation that overcomes some of the common pitfalls seen in certain forms of identitarian work that depend on representational frameworks. Existential-materialism mounts its critique of hegemony through the exploration of people's lifeworlds, everyday struggles, and, in the case of my research, how people are (not)coping with those worlds and struggles because they are rendered precarious.

Because diversity cannot be fostered from improved representation alone, this alternative approach addresses the broader cultural formation of digitally entangled videogames. My focus on gaming lifeworlds examines how the culture of videogames has become increasingly characterised by the amplified tensions between old gaming publics and the heightened visibility of counterpublics online. To this end, existential-materialism is a useful generative tool for feminist games, media, internet, and cultural researchers seeking to investigate how people are (not)coping with hegemonic formations and struggles over power. I use the term existential-materialism to describe a type of phenomenology that further emphasizes Existentialist and Marxist contributions to an understanding of how lifeworlds are formed through power struggles. Studying everyday struggles of (not)coping aims to challenge notions of the public sphere as detached from the private (see also Fraser, 1990), assumed divisions between online and offline environments (see also Taylor, 2006), and highlights the personal as political. One motivation for this

approach is because I believe that we must closely attend to our moments of *resistance* as a critically potent site for socio-cultural and political transformation (see also Hemmings, 2012). Gesturing to Simone de Beauvoir's famed proposition that "one is not born but becomes" (1949/2011), the sensibility of existential-materialism presents a certain provocation: material conditions produce one's *being-in-the-world* but don't have to define one's *becoming-in-the-world*.

In the following sections, I describe the necessity of examining gaming cultures as dynamic lifeworlds formed through everyday struggles over power. I explain the existential-materialist framework and qualitative mixed methods developed and used to explore gaming lifeworlds and how it has been situated in a genealogy of feminist games scholarship. First, I build on the phenomenological approach I introduced earlier, unpacking my specific phenomenology as indebted to Michael Jackson's 'existential anthropology' (2013) and focused on the lived experience of (not)coping. Examining how people are (not)coping maps the tensions between those who are and are not included in hegemonic gaming publics while acknowledging their membership and contributions to gaming culture. Therefore, I suggest that the examination of (not)coping offers another way to understand the impacts of hegemonic powers on people's limited (non)participation in hegemonic gaming publics. Following this discussion, I will provide a brief overview of the qualitative mixed methods that are to be further detailed in each relevant chapter. Then, I will situate the significance of this research in feminist game scholars' critiques of game studies' disciplinary rigidity, anxious formalism, and

narrow scope, before I turn to mapping the thesis structure and briefly summarizing the content to be presenting in the following chapters.

1.3.1. Phenomenology

In this thesis, I examine how practices that maintain a hypermasculine hegemony in the dominant publics of gaming force people – even those who might not be defined as 'players' or identify themselves as 'gamers' – to carefully manage their digitally entangled environments.[3] People are in constant negotiations with how they play (or do not to play) videogames, what genres of videogames they play (or do not to play), and how they navigate across a multitude of gaming relationships and spaces through their online, offline, political, personal, public, private, work and domestic spheres of living. Participation in gaming is not merely a set of choices to play or not play, but a multitude of unfolding choices that can easily include contradictory decisions, such as playing videogames but not playing them in certain ways.

In exploring gaming lifeworlds, I unpack how certain lifeworld (re)configurations impact people's affective (re)orientations towards and/or away from certain videogame assemblages. Turning towards a phenomenological mode of engagement, I map the ordinary affects that comprise people's gaming lifeworlds as forcefields animated by struggle, focusing on how people are (not)coping with the tensions this involves. Studying lifeworlds, as I suggested above, attends to people's everyday and existential-material struggles, conflicts, tensions, and refusals.

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[3] For example, some spectators don't consider themselves to be 'players'. Although, following T.L. Taylor's position on the matter (2012), I would also still consider spectators to be 'players' too.

This conceptual framework captures a sense of the "transitional world" of a dynamic social web of intersubjective relationships, comprised of the tensions between individual subjects and "techniques, traditions, ideas, and nonhuman things" (Jackson, 2013, p. 5). The study of gaming lifeworlds seeks to describe the agency of an individual's capacity to "generate, perpetuate, and celebrate life *as well as one's ability to stoically endure its hardships*" (Ibid., p. xii, emphasis in original). This mode of investigation is well placed to highlight some key problems relating to both diversity and gaming culture that might otherwise be ignored.

1.3.2. Existential-Materialism

The research represented in this thesis reflexively acknowledges that all knowledge is formed through the communal collection of partial understandings (Haraway, 1988). My use of existential-materialism as a theoretical framework draws centrally on Michael Jackson's book, *Lifeworlds*: *Essays in Existential Anthropology* (2013). I have found his theoretical framework particularly useful in this research, which is not to establish existential-materialism as the only solution for understanding the questions raised by diversity in gaming. Specifically, philosophies such as existential-materialism can be used to productively enlarge the scope of the social sciences by "radicalizing" it rather than "compromising" empirical methods (Ibid., xii).

Western knowledge traditions have often adulated scholars as seers and hierophants who possess mystical powers; able to unravel, reveal, and understand the profound or otherwise elusive mysteries of the world. As Jackson argues, along the same lines as Haraway's famed essay on situated knowledges (1988), the social

sciences traditionally cultivated an image of 'objectivity' by "reducing persons to functions and identities" (Jackson, 2013, p. 4):

> Individuals filled roles, fulfilled obligations, followed rules, performed rituals, and internalized beliefs. As such, persons were depicted one-dimensionally, their lives little more than allegories and instantiations of political, historical, or social processes. To all intents and purposes, society alone defined the good, and human beings were slaves to this transcendent ideality.

The above outlined "alienated view of human existence" has critiques which, Jackson notes, "came not from within the social science but from philosophy" (p. 4). As Jackson further acknowledges, these critiques came instead from critical theorists, such as William James, John Dewey, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin, as well as existenz and existential-phenomenological philosophers, such as Arendt, Heidegger, de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (pp. 4-5). For Jackson, existentialism describes an intersubjectivity of lifeworlds, wherein "the relational character of human existence as being-in-the-world (*Dasein*) and our own world (*eigenwelt*) is inextricably tied up with the world of others (*mitwelt*) and the physical environment of which we are also vitally a part (*umwelt*)" (p. 5, emphasis in original). Therefore, instead of examining the unity of groups, identities, and categories, in this research the intersubjectivity of lifeworlds turns our attention towards the dynamic and relational conditions of contingency, differences, and struggles shared between both human and nonhuman agents, actants, and actors.

The praxis of existentialism insists that "an emancipated society is one that achieves coexistence in difference" (p. 9). It is along these lines that I insist on not proposing to establish a superior or more holistic model. Instead, I want to highlight how "situated knowledges" (Haraway, 1988, p. 581) produced through theoretical

frameworks such as existential-materialism foster a *conversation with* an assemblage of partial understandings about the world, being "one of the many *technics* that we human beings deploy in our struggle for life in a world that is precarious, unpredictable, and largely beyond our grasps" (Jackson, 2013, p. 251, emphasis in original). Positing existential-materialism as one of many other possible modes of feminist engagement offers a productive route that returns to the rich tapestry of various, flexible, and other *ways of thinking* so as to resonate with, reflect on, and mirror the multiple diverse *ways of being* and *becoming* in a materially embedded and inherently experiential world.

1.3.3. *Qualitative Mixed Methods*

This research challenges dichotomies and seeks to attend to the persistence of world environments, messier relations, and power struggles more closely. In the same manner that I comprehend all bodies, selves, subject positions, and subjectivities as intersectional, my work is intersectional in that I approach my own and other's lived experiences as starting points to develop my research. Shaw clarifies that "being sensitive to identity is not the same as using identity as an analytic category through which to analyse data" (2010b, p. 252). In such ways, an intersectional lens established based on lived experiences is one that is sensitive to identity but does not anchor the research design to studying certain identity categories overall. By providing accounts of lived experience, I have included my participants without requiring them to identify as 'gamers' in this research.

Gaming lifeworlds are constantly reconfigured in processes of becoming. Accordingly, a multifaceted study on the different ways that gaming lifeworlds can be transformed demands the use of methods and approaches more suitable and appropriate. The findings presented draw from qualitative data gathered from a combination of semi-structured interviews (Chapter 3), participant observation (Chapter 4), and discourse analysis (Chapter 5). Because I have used mixed methods, each core lifeworld chapter that deals with a particular approach to examining how gaming lifeworlds are transformed, details the specific methods I have used for its set of findings. My analysis draws from the material generated by these different forms of investigation to explore how the existential-material conditions and continuities of lifeworlds impacts people's evolving attachment and detachment towards or away from certain videogame assemblages. Further exploring this movement shows how gaming lifeworlds are always in transformation and in-flux. Each core chapter is not so much a set of 'case studies' resulting from different methods of the use of mixed methods, but rather, each follows an exploration of how gaming lifeworlds are transformed in ways which different methods were deemed more appropriate and more suitable to examine that reconfiguration. Pursuing these different forms of investigation enabled a sense of openness to experimentation, researcher reflexivity, and grow a greater investment in feminist situated knowledges.

1.3.4. *Situating the Research (in a Genealogy of Feminist Games Scholarship)*

In this section, I situate my own research in a genealogy of feminist games scholarship to highlight my contributions to these ongoing conversations. Various feminists have challenged more widely assumed dichotomies between female/male (Jay, 1981), femininity/masculinity (Butler, 1990/2011), body/mind (Haraway, 1988; Bondi, 2005), personal/political (Hanisch, 1972; Lorde, 1984/2017), public/private (Fraser, 1990), and paid labour/unpaid (domestic/emotional/affective) labour (Horchschild, 1983/2012). In the same ways, feminist game scholars, such as T.L. Taylor (2006), Torill E. Mortensen (2019), Mia Consalvo (2019), and Amanda A. Phillips (2020), have critiqued dichotomies in games and game studies. These have included critiques of divisions assumed between the virtual/real, online/offline, games/not-games, and game studies/not-game studies. My research grows from these scholar's provocations, their critiques of dichotomous models, and challenges against the narrow scope and disciplinary rigidity in the field.

While I have not sought to reconstitute, move, or expand the boundaries of game studies, this research highlights the ways those borders are contested and negotiated (Taylor, 2006, p. 153). Taylor writes that "there is no firm line between these multiple worlds we move through" (Ibid., p. 154) but rather, we move through cycles of (re)orientations through persistent world environments. Following in the footsteps of Taylor's work, and particularly the second chapter of *Play Between Worlds*, itself named 'Gaming Lifeworlds: Social Play in Persistent Environments' (2006, pp. 21-66), I further expand on the investigation of persistent environments

and networked relations, continuing to critique the dichotomous understanding of these in my own research.

Taylor's ethnography of *EverQuest* players maps a rich and complex ecological understanding of the game artefact as a "boundary object" that is circulated in and "created through particular and multiple communities of practice" (Ibid., p. 162). Taylor outlines that the sociality of games, such as *EverQuest*, is not simply a matter of players communicating with one another, but "a web of networks and relationships – sometimes weaving between on- and offline life, in-game and out-game – developing, and disintegrating, over time" (pp. 30-31). Many players arrived to play *EverQuest,* Taylor observes, because of pre-existing offline ties, such as a family member, friend, or co-worker (p. 52). These offline ties provide an account of how people are first exposed to the game, but they also serve as an important component in the enjoyment of play (p. 52). Pre-existing offline relationships give players an instant social network in the game. But also, Taylor notes, through those pre-existing social relationships, family and friends continue to bring forms of social capital into the shared game space (p. 53). At the same time, game relationships often move offline, forming out-of-game relationships with one another (p. 53).

Indeed, gaming communities exist and reach far beyond their games and gaming platforms. For instance, when looking at the Gamergate community, Mortensen emphasised the need for researchers to take on "the study of game culture seriously and pursue it across several platforms" (2018, p. 787). Mortensen notes that "[Espen] Aarseth's seminal editorial emphasises the importance of games being its own object" in game studies (Ibid., p. 800). However, Mortensen argues

that Gamergate underscores the fact that "no matter which platforms games are played on, their communities go far beyond that" (Ibid.). Therefore, Mortensen suggests that "it may be time for games research to live up to its interdisciplinarity and study cultures of play beyond the narrow circle of games" (Ibid.). Other feminist scholars have argued similarly, calling for game researchers to better observe the field's continuities and relations.

Videogames are often assumed to be the central focus of game studies. However, Consalvo outlines 'game mods' and 'streamer personalities' as two examples when game 'paratexts' decentre games and challenges their (seeming) centrality (2017, p. 177). When game researchers consider paratexts, Consalvo notes that "games scholars tend to take games as their central texts, which are surrounded by a constellation of supporting paratexts" (Ibid.). However, significant 'game mods' as well as 'streamer personalities' both clearly showcase specific instances when "games themselves become paratexts – supporting texts – to other more central media artefacts" (p. 182). Rather than expand the definition of paratexts, creating more nuanced (sub)categories, Consalvo argues that researchers should use a more flexible account of the term (p. 178). Reflecting on wider implications for future games research, Consalvo writes that (p. 182),

> For game studies scholars, games may indeed be central to our understanding of a certain phenomena or event. But in another situation games may only be supporting players, used as examples or props for another central text. This is important to keep in mind when thinking about how fan texts sometimes supplant "canon" texts as central experiences for certain fans, and in certain situations. It also shows how certain commercialised game texts can only be understood in relation to other texts from other media. In other words, we need fewer "central" texts and more study of the relatedness, interconnectedness, and contingent nature of many kinds of popular culture texts" (p. 182).

In accord with my arguments above, Conslavo's proposition here is that we need more games research on the *relations*, *interconnection*, and *contingency* of videogames (as assemblages), and fewer concentrating on central points of convergence. As other feminist scholars have noted (Phillips, 2020; Humphreys, 2019), departures from the canonical and formalisms in game studies builds a fuller, more complex, and more nuanced understanding of videogames. But, furthermore, disrupting the field's hegemony is also a form of feminist and socio-political intervention.

Mapping game studies' affective history as a scholarly discipline, Phillips argues that the inaugural journal issue of *Game Studies* and the infamous 'narratology versus ludology' debate from the early 2000s, reflect a highly "anxious and emotional rhetoric of early game studies field imaginary" (2020, p. 1). Phillips observes that this imagined formation of the discipline created an environment "hostile to the political perspectives of feminist research and other political scholarly fields" (Ibid., p. 12). Intensified flashpoints – exemplified by Gamergate, Feminist Frequency, and Dickwolves (see Chapter 2) – have demonstrated the ways that feminist scholars in game studies are "repeatedly targeted and pursued by online harassers without substantial support from the community" (p. 30). Phillips stresses that "the exclusion of these scholars from the protection of the game studies community, the failure to understand their precarity as part of the precarity of game studies and academic knowledge generally, is *a result of the lines we draw around notions of appropriate work in the field*" (Ibid., emphasis added). Phillips thus

emphatically pleads for an extension of the field's boundaries (pp. 30-31, emphasis added):

> I must insist that we *adjust our storytelling practices when we talk about ourselves as a coherent field of study to encourage openness and experimentation* rather than celebrating a more perfect game studies scholar that can emerge after applying this understanding of the field's history.
>
> […] Confronting the silences and omissions within our own writing is laborious and painful work, and it requires us to say things and point out omissions that might hurt one another's feelings. […] However, feminist politics and the pursuit of social justice in gaming and game studies require us to *interrogate ourselves* and *continually shift our approaches to power* if we are ever to effect meaningful structural change.

Challenging the narrow scope of game studies is not just a matter of theoretical rigour, but addresses the ways that game studies, as a scholarly *community*, has "repeatedly failed to secure safety or respect for the marginalised scholars in its midst" (p. 30). Since game scholars can also experience embodied precarity, welcoming experimental work and encouraging different ideas is a way we can support precarious scholars and people of difference in our research community.

What makes feminism vital and significant to game studies is its mode of critiquing *power relations*. When studying gaming lifeworlds, I emphasise the intersubjective web of social relations, both pre-existing relationships and the relationships fostered through the game space. I follow the persistence of world environments across assumed online/offline, virtual/real, and game/not-game divisions. The feminist game scholars whose work I outlined above have argued that we must make a better account of the continuities and relationships, including precarity, in the circulated literature and research community of game studies. I depart from more canonical and formalist approaches in game studies that often

focus on play, players, and the creation of play. Instead, I open myself and my research to experimentation as a way I can simultaneously promote a wider appreciation of forms of diversity emerging in different ways of thinking about the world, experiencing the world, and becoming in the world.

Feminist games research seeks to generate and produce new forms of situated knowledge, and resisting game studies' hegemony can help foster a more welcoming scholarly environment for precarious scholars. One of the overall contributions from feminist games research is its reflexive challenge to the boundaries which have historically marked exclusion of alternative forms of scholarship, and noncanonical approaches in the field. Some of the significance, contributions, and implications resulting from my own study, as an experimental feminist project, are at once theoretical, social, and political: studying gaming lifeworlds is a feminist mode of engagement with rethinking and reassembling different approaches beyond the dominant paradigms of the field.

1.4. Thesis Structure

This Introduction (Chapter 1), the following Literature Review (Chapter 2), and the Conclusion (Chapter 6) chapters follow a standard thesis structure to establish, situate, and summarise the work overall. Like naming a band after a song, the title of my thesis *Gaming Lifeworlds* is a reference to the chapter cited above from Taylor's *Play Between Worlds* (2006). Similarly, the subtitle of my thesis 'Videogames in Culture' is a homage to Shaw's key arguments in the article 'What is Video Game Culture?' (2010) which has also inspired my work. I have taken a leaf from Ahmed's

book, *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), in following her appreciation of feminists, women, and women of colour's writing. I have selected certain words, structures, rhythms, and repetitions to instruct my naming practices for the thesis title, thesis subtitle, chapter headings, and chapter subheadings, as a mode of engagement with feminist citational politics.

For Chapters 3-5, the three core 'Lifeworld' chapter headings have been named with reference to the thesis title, evoking resonating themes across the research, each tracing how gaming lifeworlds have been reconfigured by a social co-constructed world through lived experience: the intersubjective attachments to a romantic relationship (Chapter 3 'Intersubjective Lifeworlds'), the drunk site configuration of a social space (Chapter 4 'Intoxicated Lifeworlds'), and the institutions of contemporary self-care discourses (Chapter 5 'Resilient Lifeworlds'). These three lifeworld chapter headings offer a structural rhythm to summon a recognition, a revisiting, a returning. They signal that we are traversing a familiar yet different landscape. Meanwhile, each chapter subheading – often the unsung heroes of a thesis structure – provides a straightforward guide that summarises the content and core argument in a brief, plain, and direct manner (i.e., 'Chapter 1 – Gaming Lifeworlds,' 'Chapter 2 – The Post-Gamer Turn in Feminist Game Studies,' 'Chapter 3 – Videogames in Relationships,' 'Chapter 4 – Videogames in Drunk Spaces,' 'Chapter 5 – Videogames in Self-Care Discourses,' and 'Chapter 6 – Videogames in Culture').

I reflect here on my naming practices because they offer an argument as well as a set of signposts. The words "Lifeworlds" and "Videogames in […]" are repeated as a meditation. Each time I refer to Gaming *Lifeworlds*: Videogame *in* Culture, I am

amplifying a study of videogames 'in' rather than videogames 'as' culture per se. My analysis focuses on videogames *in* relationship conflicts, not the ways that videogames define relationship conflicts; videogames *in* drunk spaces, not the ways that videogames define drunk spaces; videogames *in* self-care discourses, not the ways that videogames define self-care discourses. These titles restate the thesis' core argument that game studies must more closely attend to existential-material conditions and *continuities* in a manner that can decentre the investigation of videogames as the field's primary and central text, moving beyond the focus on studying play, players, and the creation of play. Repetition also builds a stronger foundation. Each time the naming rhythms reappear, layering and folding in and around the core argument, the new layer adds another different multifaceted aspect to this study. These repetitions also work as a reminder that my work grows from a genealogy of feminist game scholarship, situated as part of an ongoing dialogue.

1.4.1. Chapter 2 – Literature Review: The Post-Gamer Turn in Feminist Game Studies

In Chapter 2, I map the post-Gamer turn in feminist game studies to situate and contextualise this research as an ongoing dialogue within this research area. As another way to frame the literature, this chapter reviews a genealogy of feminist scholarship created in response to the default Gamer identity. Drawing from poststructuralist deconstructions of identity and building on feminist scholars such as Taylor, Shaw, and Emma Vossen, I explain my use of the term 'player' to describe anyone who plays videogames (to practice), 'gamer' to describe anyone who self-identified as a gamer to me during interviews (to identify), and capitalised 'Gamer'

to describe sets of performative in-group signifiers affiliated with one hegemonic marketed audience stereotype (to represent). I propose that this subtle but vital shift can help to clarify discussions about player practices, identifications, and struggles over representation, and observe how the stereotype of Gamers as 'hardcore' young white heterosexual males fails to adequately represent all players and gamers. Through a series of historical flashpoints exemplifying (post-)Gamer tensions, I closely examine how the tensions between old gaming publics remain tied to the default image of Gamers heavily marketed in the 1980s – 1990s and come into conflict with an increased visibility of the gaming counterpublics which have always included a more diverse range of games and play, as well as players, gamers, and intersecting identities.

1.4.2. Chapter 3 – Intersubjective Lifeworlds: Videogames in Relationship Conflicts

Various scholars have critiqued the primary methods of popular new entry point interventions that seek to invite women to 'enter' gaming. However, many women play and have always played videogames despite barriers. In Chapter 3, I draw from in-depth semi-structured interviews with seven research participants, speaking with self-identified women who played videogames with their romantic partners. In this chapter, I describe the lived experiences of how women's gaming lifeworlds are transformed and investigate how intersubjectivity impacts women player's evolving (dis)engagement and (non)participation. Inspired by Angela McRobbie's (2020) critiques of the contemporary feminist politics of resilience, I explore the ways that these women's stories can also describe the affective contours of 'leaning in' towards

or 'leaning out' away from different videogame assemblages.

Examining the role of videogames in relationship conflicts, the main findings emerging from my interviewee's stories indicate that conflicts were only reported if a couple's gaming patterns diverged. However, rather than suggest that couples should simply better converge their gaming patterns, my analysis suggests a different reading from these results. Taking McRobbie's uses of the figure of "the perfect" (woman, partner, relationship, life), I argue that the imperative to converge gaming practices into the couple's gaming contributes to relationship conflicts. Studying the intersubjective pressures on women to lean in towards and/or lean out away from certain aspects of videogame objects, communities, and practices helps to provide a more complex account of women's (non)participation in videogames that remain unaccounted for in new entry point interventions.

1.4.3. Chapter 4 – Intoxicated Lifeworlds: Videogames in Drunk Spaces

Chapter 4 reports on empirical data gathered from 30 months of participant observation attending over 30 'offline' professionalised videogame events at alcohol-serving venues. This chapter describes a site analysis of these social 'drunk spaces' related to the professionalisation of videogames. As exemplary of these fieldwork findings, I centrally examine the social and gendered reproduction of drunk spaces at the Intel Extreme Master's 2017 eSports championship as well as the Game Developers Conference 2018.

In response to the gender divide seen in the eSport and videogames industry, rather than propose that videogame professional events and social scenes should

simply remove alcohol from the equation (although it certainly proves to be one direct method of intervention), this chapter emphasises that a careful curation and reconfiguration of drunk spaces and venue sites might be another productive mode of engagement to encourage and foster more inclusive participation. Accordingly, I observe that both non-drunk space and alternative drunk spaces co-exist and contribute to reshaping the hegemonic and more exclusionary formations of videogame social scenes. I propose that a closer investigation of how drunk spaces are coded (such as how sport arenas can be coded as jock masculine domains, or the ways that bars, pubs, and nightclubs can be coded as 'pick up zones'), can contribute to a better understanding of how gender hostility is reproduced – knowledge which is urgently needed to inform the development of more effective interventions.

1.4.4. Chapter 5 – Resilient Lifeworlds: Videogames in Self-Care Discourses

Across my research project, I observed that self-care discourses are widely used by various players and industry game workers to address their embodied precarity. Building on this, Chapter 5 presents a critique of the popular rhetoric of 'self-care' that they have widely utilised. In response to discussions about the associated risks of precarious players (not)coping with a perceived inevitability of online harassment, as well as games industry workers speaking about precarity and (not)coping with the perceived inevitability of crunch culture, contemporary self-care discourses seem to offer a vocabulary for them to address systemic issues. However, I observe that self-care discourses increasingly displace wellbeing and care from institutional powers

onto individuals.

In this chapter, I map the historical 'affective slips' between former stoic frameworks revisited in the 1980s by Michel Foucault as the "care of the self," and Audre Lorde's feminist rendition of "caring for the self." I juxtapose these approaches with contemporary neoliberalist and post-feminist consumerism self-care discourses. Through what I term and describe as a process of 'hermeneutic liquidation', the affective slip of contemporary self-care discourses speaks to the ways that they can still *feel* ethical and political without necessarily enacting an ethics or feminist politics that it seems to promise. However, instead of calling for a return to former ethical and feminist frameworks of care, I argue that a feminist politics based on *affective solidary,* and the collective amplification of the refusal to cope, can provide more sustainable grounds for enacting change. In this way, we might resist and challenge the assumed inevitability of online harassment and crunch culture when they otherwise have increasingly become viewed as essentialised characteristics of participation in gaming culture.

1.4.5. *Chapter 6 – Conclusion: Videogames in Culture*

The conclusion chapter provides an overall summary of key findings from my research, outlines their significance, highlights their contributions, and discusses their limitations as well as implications for future research. I return here to feminist epistemology's appreciation of partial and situated knowledge, and the demand that game researchers reflexively investigate game studies' conventional disciplinary methods and approaches. To better understand the ordinary and

everyday role of videogames in culture, I insist that we must take greater stock of non-players, non-play relationship dynamics, non-play centric spaces, and non-play centric themes, as well as the existential-material continuities, relations, and forms of precarity that continually transform gaming lifeworlds.

Chapter 2 | Literature Review

The Post-Gamer Turn in Feminist Game Studies

> To borrow a turn of phrase from Simone de Beauvoir [1949/2011]: one is not born a gamer, one becomes one. (T.L. Taylor makes a similar twist of the classic phrase in *Play Between Worlds* when she says "One is not born an *Everquest* player, one becomes one" [2006, p. 32]).
>
> […] Rather than expanding who might be included in "[G]amer" identity, how might we argue for greater representation in games in a way that works outside the market logic of the term itself?
>
> (Adrienne Shaw, 2013, n.p.)

This literature review maps the post-Gamer turn in feminist game studies as an ongoing conversation and situates this thesis in a continuing and much longer linage of feminist critique. Exploring different interdisciplinary histories challenges the dominant narrative of the field's formation. This literature review focuses on the significant contributions feminist research has made to game studies, which is often sidelined in the wider discipline. To focus this, given how extensive such a review might become, I map one important conversation I call the post-Gamer turn.

Various doctrines, frameworks, and philosophies in academic fields, such as postmodernism (Jameson, 1991), poststructuralism (Derrida, 1967), post-feminism (McRobbie, 2007), post-colonialism (Fanon, 1961/2001), have frequently used the prefix 'post' to denote approaches that come after and critique a currently dominant discourse – modernism, structuralism, feminism, colonialism, respectively. However, it might be more productive to consider the use the 'post' prefix as foregrounding

how a new constellation of literature develops in conversation *with* an established discourse and in response *to* the problem it articulates, rather than to assume that 'post' indicates temporal, ideological, or teleological narratives about *progress.* To be sure, attaching 'post' here as post-Gamer means not just 'to come after' or 'to advance forward' but rather a conversation developed *with* feminist critiques in response to the limitations of the Gamer identity category as it appears in the industry and in wider games literature.

With this caveat, I take up the concept 'post-Gamer turn' to describe theoretical shifts in feminist game studies from the mid-to-late 2000s and early 2010s that moved towards a post-structuralist or Derridean 'deconstruction' of the Gamer identity. Post-Gamer arguments are a form of deconstruction in that they focus on deconstructing identity from persons. In other words, detangling the default Gamer identity from players. To this end, framing this review as an account of the post-Gamer turn emphasises how this collection of literature can be placed *in conversation with* a particular lineage of feminist theory and prior work in the field of feminist game studies that *responds to* the Gamer identity.

The literature of the post-Gamer turn retraces and draws together concepts from key thinkers in the history of critical identity theory, such as Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011), Judith Butler (1990/2011), and Eve Sedgewick (1996), who formulated their ideas about the (de)construction of sex, gender, and identity *in conversation with* concepts from existentialism and poststructuralism. The literature articulating this 'turn' aims to evoke a sense of familiarity for feminist games scholars in recognition of this linage of critical identity theorists, gesturing to the work of key

thinkers such as Beauvoir, Butler, and Sedgwick. Often situated under the broader umbrella of critical theory, this field of feminist research often explores the *contextuality* of lived experience, rather than seek to stake broader or more universal claims about the world. As with the strengths and limitations that can be attributed to qualitative or quantitative methods, all theoretical approaches can be evaluated in terms of whether they are more or less suitable for certain studies than others. As a genealogical account of the post-Gamer turn in the literature of feminist games studies, this review also maps how my own research project developed *in response to* the Gamer identity and emerged *in conversation with* this field of feminist game studies through evaluation of its usefulness in relation to the analysis of my findings.

Consequently, to begin this review, I will briefly map some of the (much) rich(er) interdisciplinary history of feminist game studies. I outline here two main branches of this research, one drawing primarily on approaches from the humanities and the other drawing predominantly on the social sciences. Both branches, of course, regularly overlap or work in tandem, but there are still clear tendencies along these lines. In attending to the significance of gender to videogames, however, despite this variety of approaches, much of the existing literature clearly responds to the impact of the default Gamer identity.

Secondly, I present an overview of the post-Gamer turn and its main critique of earlier interventions. While, as I will discuss below, female players now represent half of all player demographics, the marginalisation of girls and women in videogames remains a core issue. Despite the 'girl games' movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s (also discussed below), the default Gamer identity was widely

understood to continue being distinguished from femininity and femme-presenting people, continuing to shape how videogames are seen as a medium for boys and young men. Adrienne Shaw's pivotal work 'Do you identify as a gamer?' (2011) explains how popular interventions and attempts to pluralise videogame markets, such as into 'girl games', don't diversify the medium itself. As Shaw finds, women, non-binary, and transgender folk are less likely to identify as 'gamers' than other demographics. With this in mind, I outline my own alignment with the deconstruction of Gamer identity and my use specific terminology to distinguish 'players', 'gamers', and 'Gamers'.

Thirdly, I provide an overview of the legacy of the Gamer identity as that to which the post-Gamer turn responds. The gendering of fields of computing and videogames as by default a male-domain is commonly naturalised and taken-for-granted in public discourse, in much marketing, industrial production, and game studies. However, from its initial development and up until the mid-1980s videogames originally were marketed towards families and seen as relatively gender-neutral. Understanding the marketed Gamer identity with an emphasis on its more recent gendering, challenges the widely assumed masculine naturalisation of the medium.

Fourthly, I elaborate on a distinction between dominant gaming publics, defined by attachment to the hegemonic Gamer identity, and the videogame/gaming culture that is the central subject of my analysis and argument. Here I draw on Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett's description of "the new gaming public" to describe one community associated with the image of a default

hypermasculine Gamer identity and its woman-hostile defensive postures as a hegemonic mechanism which continues to significantly impact wider online culture. This impact has come to some particularly vicious boiling points over the last decade, and so finally I will map three flashpoints from this period, used as case studies for elaboration of these earlier points, and exemplify the ongoing tensions between the post-Gamer turn. These three flashpoints demonstrate an intensification of the ongoing hostility towards feminists, women, and femme-presenting people, where each event and its aftermath must be contextualised against the longer history of anti-feminist sentiment within this predominantly masculinised field.

2.1. Feminist Game Studies

Spanning over three-decades, feminist games studies provides a rich history of investigating the gender divide observed in computer science and gaming industries. To put it very briefly (and I want to here acknowledge the reductionism that comes tied to literature reviews), the academic literature of feminist game studies has often taken two key forms: studies drawing approaches from the humanities that most often set out to critique the depictions of in-game characters (Summers & Miller, 2014); and studies using methods from the social sciences usually focused on the demographic representation and experiences of marginalised players (Taylor, 2006; Shaw, 2014a) or workers in the games industry (Consalvo, 2008; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). This interventionist literature has unpacked how the Gamer identity has often alienated players and industry

figures from full participation, and it has also therefore challenged the sexist, racist, and homophobic depictions seen in videogames treated and produced as texts.

The first branch of scholarship, which I referred to above as generally aligned with the humanities, often draws on frameworks such as intersectional, gender, critical race, post-colonial, and queer theory to critique representations of in-game characters (Nakamura 2007; Butt & Dunne 2019; Ruberg & Shaw 2017; Murray, 2017). The significant ink that has been spilt on the buxom figure of Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* series (1996–2021), (Schleiner, 2001; Kennedy, 2002; Carr, 2002; King & Krzywinska, 2006; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014a; Shaw, 2014a, pp. 57-63) exemplifies this branch of work. Comparably, Anita Sarkeesian's 'Feminist Frequency' YouTube series, *Tropes vs Women in Video Games* (2013–2017), popularised this style of critical work, making feminism more accessible for a wider audience (Golding & van Deventer 2016, p. 103). In analysing how characters have been depicted in the medium of videogames themselves, this first branch of research applies an interventionist mode which works alongside a history of feminist work that critically considers the impact of media representations on gendered practices and identities, including conventional norms and ideals.

The second core branch of scholarship in the field of feminist game studies tends to focus on 'human subject' research. In doing so, sociologists and scholars from contiguous disciplines have focused on investigating how games and related tech fields have become seen as a 'boys club' (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Kocurek, 2015; Golding & van Deventer, 2016, pp. 79-102). A wide array of publications, especially from the late 1990s to the early 2010s, frequently have sought to develop

a better understanding of how and why games had become seen as being 'for males, not females' (Margolis & Fisher, 2002; Flanagan & Booth, 2002; Kennedy & Dove, 2006; Abbate, 2012). While describing these two core branches and delineating them as based on methodological distinctions, I also want to call attention to how both branches frequently raise concerns and provocations in relation to one another. Accordingly, feminist critiques about the depictions of in-game characters also seek to promote the diversification of gaming industry workforces in order to achieve overall greater representation from the ground up. Despite methodological diversity, much of the work across the field of feminist game studies developed in response to challenge the hegemonic Gamer identity.

Much research from the 'first wave' of feminist game studies promoted the diversification of videogames to include more feminine-friendly themes as its primary mode of intervention. Earlier literature on this theme advocated for more games to be made for girls using the terminology of 'pink' and 'purple' videogames (see figure 2) (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Chess, 2017). Targeting these feminine players has since often been criticised as merely creating seemingly new audience categories, such as 'Girl Gamers' or 'Gamer Girls'. Scholars such as Shaw criticise these consumer-driven approaches that initially motivated the greater production of pink and purple games as merely promoting a plurality of markets, not diversity in gaming more broadly (2011, p. 29). This critique is core to the arguments that have promoted the post-Gamer turn outlined below.

Figure 2: *Barbie and her Magical House* (MS-Dos, 1994). Screenshot taken at 00:46
from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_JcQG85h6rk

To be clear, I do not define the post-Gamer turn as distinct or separate from feminist game studies. Rather, I position the post-Gamer turn as one important discussion within or emerging from feminist game studies to emphasise its significance to the field of game studies. Hostile resistance to feminism and the post-Gamer turn has generally come from public anti-feminist movements and the dominant hegemonic gaming publics that are entangled with the default Gamer identity (see section '2.5. Flashpoints and [Post-]Gamer Tensions' in this chapter). However, the ways the 'wider' field of game studies narrativizes and traditionally defines its canonical literature has also problematically ignored the vast contributions to the field from various feminist and women researchers. For instance, in 2001, Espen Aarseth, Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Game Studies*, claimed to mark the discipline's "year one" (cited in Phillips, 2020, p. 15), dismissing the research on games that had predated the millennium, especially notable work of several feminist and women

scholars published in the 1980s and 1990s. Following this dismissal, a so-called formalist duel, infamously known as the 'narratology versus ludology debate', continued to shun and cold-shoulder feminist, gender, and women's researchers' work, informing an affective disciplinary history where feminists and women feel unwelcome in the field of game studies (Phillips, 2020). Undoubtedly, there is significantly more nuance and complexity to the research in the rich interdisciplinary field of feminist game studies that lies beyond the scope of the summary above. This very brief mapping of tendencies only emphasises the themes which have underpinned the literature in the post-Gamer turn, acknowledging its place in an important feminist lineage that I will continue to detail and explore in greater specificity in the sections below.

2.1.1. The Post-Gamer Turn

Contrary to the imagined default young male Gamer, a wealth of research over the past two decades demonstrates how player demographics are much more diverse. Approximately half of all players are female (Entertainment Software Association, 2020, p. 5). Women over the age of 18 represent a far greater portion, at 37% of the game playing population, than boys aged 17 or younger who only count as 13% (Entertainment Software Association, 2016, p. 3). Statistics on gender representation are comparable across different countries and regions. For instance, in Australia, where most of this research project was conducted, 47% of players are female (Brand & Todhunter, 2016, p. 4). In terms of player demographics, girls and women already play and have always played videogames. Evidently, in terms of gender, the lack of

diversity frequently attested in scholarship on games is less a problem concerning the number of female players than a concern with how those players nonetheless continue to experience precarity.

Shaw's pivotal article 'Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity' (2011) summarises the legacy of the Gamer identity and its impact on how marginalised players often struggle to feel a sense of belonging. Drawing on interviews, Shaw found that female, transgender, and genderqueer interviewees claimed the Gamer identity to a significantly lesser extent than other players (Ibid., p. 34). Based on these findings, Shaw argued that researchers must not reproduce constructed audience categories regulated by markets, such as 'Gamers' and 'Girl Gamers', or presume the importance of "essentialized notions of identity" *a priori*, if they were not to risk reifying the same "categories already used by the industry" (pp. 39-40). To this end, feminist interventionist literature must challenge the whole culture of gaming rather than seek to create more and more complex audience categories.

The post-Gamer turn attends to the problem constructed by such a limited identity category being used to denote the assumed audiences of videogames. While the default Gamer identity remains seated at the forefront of the social imaginary, this limited category continues to regulate, marginalise, and obscure the contributions of femme-presenting players in the public spheres of gaming (Shaw, 2011; Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Cote, 2017; Golding van Deventer, 2016; Vossen, 2018). As argued in this chapter's epigraph from Shaw (2013), researchers must reject the market logic of the Gamer identity itself to develop a better understanding

of people's relationships with videogames which is much more complex. In place of the prevalence of "we game too" arguments, expressed by and on behalf of marginalised players, this imperative asks that we take greater stock of how people play (or do not play) videogames in relation to their everyday lives regardless of who claims or does not claim the so-called Gamer identity (Shaw, 2013; Huntemann, 2013).

Over the past decade, scholars have begun to increasingly deconstruct the category of Gamer, often replacing that term with 'players' to better represent a diverse range of participants more accurately. For instance, in Vossen's autoethnography of the cultural inaccessibility of gaming, she distinguishes between 'gamer' and 'Gamer' (2018, p. 5). In her dissertation, Vossen uses the capitalised 'Gamer' to refer to the *performativity* (cf. Butler, 1990) of fixed hypermasculine signifiers as a socio-cultural expression of hegemonic in-group cohesion. Conversely, Vossen uses the decapitalised 'gamer' to describe anyone who plays videogames. This distinction between the Gamer identity and gamers helps to detangle the limited audience category from the people who play videogames.

In this thesis, both in agreement with her arguments and drawing on critical identity theory, I have adopted Vossen's capitalised 'Gamer' and decapitalised 'gamer'. However, I mostly use the term 'player' to refer to anyone who plays videogames and save the decapitalised 'gamer' to describe players who have *self-identified* as a 'gamer', as in the case of participants who identified as one to me during an interview. While the rhetorically discrete categories of 'Gamer', 'gamer', and 'player' have otherwise been regularly conflated, this nuanced linguistic shift

helps to showcase the important distinctions between the practices of players (to play), the contextual lived experiences of gamers (to identify), and the default image of Gamers (to represent). In this way, we can unpack how the Gamer identity has ontologically failed to *represent* the *practices* of all players and the *lived experiences* of all gamers it seemingly has wanted to serve. Despite these minor but still significant acts of reparation, a need remains to critique prevailing narratives and study how the hegemonic Gamer identity continues to impact gaming communities.

2.1.2. The Legacy of the Gamer Identity

Some people might be surprised to find that women pioneered computer programming and dominated the field for many decades. In 1967, *Cosmopolitan Magazine* advertised computer programming as "women's work" (see figure 3):

> Now have come the big, dazzling computers – and a whole new kind of work for women: programming. Telling the miracle machines what to do and how to do it. Anything from predicting the weather to sending out billing notices from the local department store. And if it doesn't sound like women's work – well, it just is.

Gender essentialist arguments claiming that men/males and women/females are each born with different abilities and interests have often circulated alongside narratives attempting to naturalise 'the absence of women' in male-dominated science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. However, what these gender essentialist arguments have regularly overlooked is that these fields weren't always dominated by men. Indeed, as Raewyn Connell posits, "gender concepts should always be understood historically, as concepts that concern the making and transformation of gender orders through time" (2016, p. 306).

The Computer Girls

BY LOIS MANDEL

A trainee gets $8,000 a year …a girl "senior systems analyst" gets $20,000—and up! Maybe it's time to investigate….

Ann Richardson, IBM systems engineer, designs a bridge via computer. Above (left) she checks her facts with fellow systems engineer, Marvin V. Fuchs. Right, she feeds facts into the computer. Below, Ann demonstrates on a viewing screen how her facts designed the bridge, and makes changes with a "light pen."

Twenty years ago, a girl could be a secretary, a school teacher . . . maybe a librarian, a social worker or a nurse. If she was really ambitious, she could go into the professions and compete with men . . . usually working harder and longer to earn less pay for the same job.

Now have come the big, dazzling computers—and a whole new kind of work for women: programming. Telling the miracle machines what to do and how to do it. Anything from predicting the weather to sending out billing notices from the local department store.

And if it doesn't sound like woman's work—well, it just is.

("I had this idea I'd be standing at a big machine and pressing buttons all day long," says a girl who programs for a Los Angeles bank. I couldn't have been further off the track. I figure out how the computer can solve a problem, and then instruct the machine to do it."

"It's just like planning a dinner," explains Dr. Grace Hopper, now a staff scientist in systems programming for Univac. (She helped develop the first electronic digital computer, the Eniac, in 1946.) "You have to plan ahead and schedule everything so it's ready when you need it. Programming requires patience and the ability to handle detail. Women are 'naturals' at computer programming."

What she's talking about is *aptitude*—the one most important quality a girl needs to become a programmer. She also needs a keen, logical mind. And if that zeroes out the old Billie Burke-Gracie Allen image of femininity, it's about time, because this is the age of the Computer Girls. There are twenty thousand of them in the United

Figure 3: 'The Computer Girls' article in Cosmopolitan (1967). Image sourced from https://www.siliconrepublic.com/people/women-in-technology-the-computer-girls-cosmopolitan

From the late 1940s, computer programming was first assigned as "women's work," initially seen as a feminine 'secretarial' task akin to scheduling meetings or planning a grocery shopping list. Then, rather abruptly, the number of women in computer science plummeted in 1984 (see figure 4; Margolis & Fisher, 2002, p. 23). In the award-winning book, *Recoding Gender* (2011), Janet Abbate investigated this sudden drop in women's engagement with computing by examining newspaper archives and conducting interviews with the first generation of programmers. Abbate's study reveals that, over time and among various other factors (such as men returning to society post-war), the industry eventually 'caught on' that the work of programmers (as a lucrative white-collar career) required seemingly 'masculine

coded' problem-solving skills in 'hard logic' akin to competitive chess playing (Ibid., p. 38). The field was rebranded, and programming was reclaimed as "men's work" in ways that began to discourage women from entering the field: skewing interview requirements, favouring arbitrary masculine behaviours, and requiring qualifications that white men traditionally acquired (pp. 71-72).

What Happened To Women In Computer Science?

% Of Women Majors, By Field

■ Medical School   ■ Law School   ■ Physical Sciences   ■ Computer science
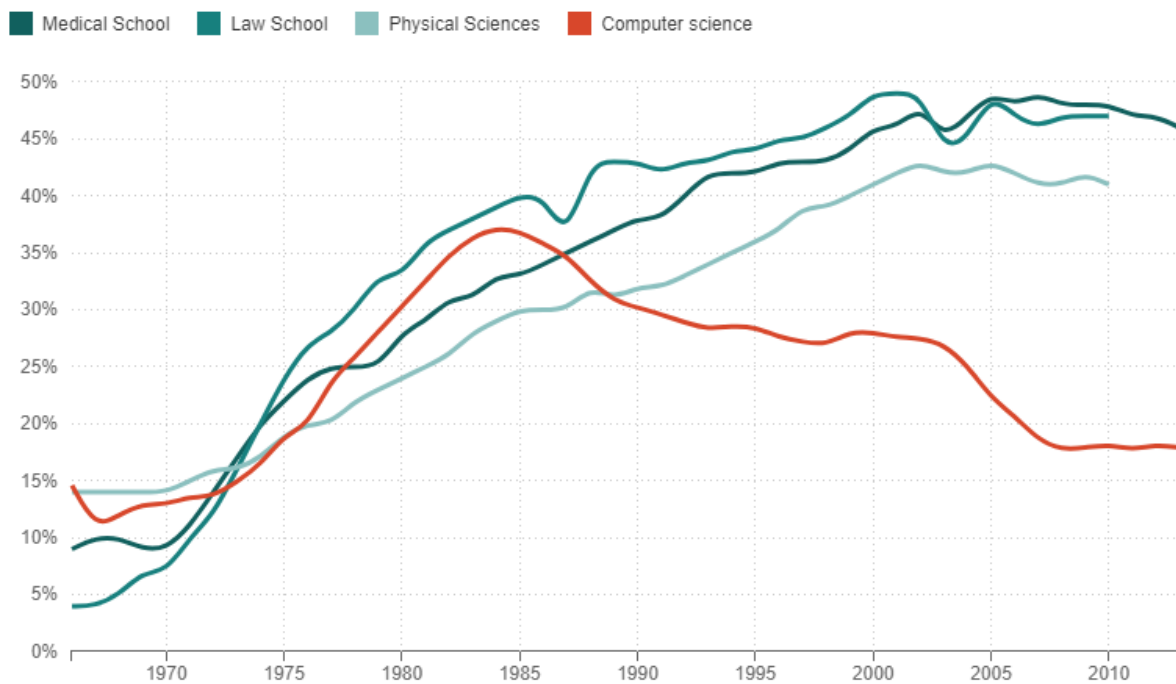
Figure 4: Line graph depicting the number of women enrolled in computer science (red line) compared to medical school, law school, and physical sciences in higher education (National Science Foundation, American Bar Association, American Association of Medical Colleges). Image sourced from https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2014/10/17/356944145/episode-576-when-women-stopped-coding

The ways that many parents have uncritically purchased "toys for boys" and "toys for girls" has also contributed to incidentally discourage girls and women's further from participating in computing fields and videogames. In *Unlocking the Clubhouse* (2002), Jane Margolis and Allen Fisher interviewed computer science university

majors to investigate the gender gap in the field. Compared to the female students, several male students reported having first used a computer when playing videogames at home. Many male students were first introduced to and given a computer as young boys (often by their fathers who would also 'tinker' on computers with their sons as a male bonding activity), while a girl was only encouraged after she had showed interest. Compared to 40 percent of male students, only 17 percent of female students were given a computer earlier in life (Ibid., p. 23). By middle school, when girls were granted access to computers, most of the boys were already familiar with them, since playing videogames on computers were part of their childhood toys. How videogames became marketed as "toys for boys" in the 1980s is a key moment that unlocks a historically situated understanding of the gender divide in both gaming and computing industries.

Videogames were initially marketed towards families, and even considered somewhat gender-neutral. The paradigm of Gamers imagined as young white heterosexual cisgendered males developed over a decade after the release of *Pong* (1972) and it was not until the mid-1980s that videogames started to be marketed towards boys and young men. Tracing the history of target-marketing to the Gamer identity, drawing from a Bourdieusian understanding of 'habitus' and 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1993), scholars such as Graeme Kirkpatrick (2012) have proposed compelling arguments describing how the masculinised Gamer identity emerged from magazines and advertisements intent on selling videogames to a targeted younger male audience in the 1980s and 1990s (cf. Consalvo, 2008, pp. 175-190). Understanding this historical shift towards the marketed construction of videogames

as being 'for boys', the post-Gamer turn proposes that gaming necessarily has the potential to better acknowledge a wider diversity of players and gamers once again.

In 1983, the videogame market crashed, falling from 3.2 billion to 100 million dollars, a 97% decrease within the United States (Kao et al., 2020, p. 56). In 1982, Atari released over 2.5 million unsold copies of *E.T.* which eventually saw thousands of cartridges dumped (see figure 5; Seppala, 2014, n.p.). After this infamous videogame crash, also known as the 'Atari shock' in Japan (Ernkvist, 2006, p. 1), companies took more conservative approaches to the development and sales of games, fearing monetary losses from potentially taking greater risks, and thus cultivating a progressively hegemonic mainstream AAA market (Fron et al., 2007).

Figure 5: Thousands of copies of *E.T.* (1982) dumped; excavated from landfill in 2014.
Image sourced from https://www.engadget.com/2014-05-01-true-story-et-atari.html

One of the ways that markets rebranded videogames to consumers was to distance them from the earlier family friendly aesthetics, turning towards a new type of

'hardcore' target audience defined as resistant against an uncool parent figure. Companies such as Nintendo have successfully continued a family-oriented focus as remnants of earlier marketing. Although, the Nintendo 'Game Boy' systems of the 1990s and 2000s are another example of the market's gendering narratives. In refashioning games to be cool and desirable to their new hardcore market of boys and young men, many of these adverts also overtly sexualised women's bodies to draw in the male gaze (see figure 6), starting a trend of women being depicted as erotic computer accessories (Apperley, 2016; Cornfeld, 2016).

While some girls and women could be seen as having been 'included' in videogames, more often their presence is restricted. They are frequently assigned heteronormative roles in the discourse of gaming, given to them on precursory, limited, and conditional terms (Butt & Apperley, 2018, p. 40). An imagined 'alternative masculinity' of geeky Gamers developed in opposition to dominant forms of 'mainstream masculinity' that created a culture of 'the underdog' where Gamers were united to defend the against perceived threats to their fandom from outsiders (cf. Consalvo, 2003; Salter & Blodgett, 2017). As Raewyn Connell argues in coining the phrase, "hegemonic masculinity" is a Gramscian treatment of hegemony applied to the recognition that multiple forms of masculinity exist (2016, p. 303). It describes a hierarchy among these masculinities, and claims that "a hegemonic version, at the top of the hierarchy, connected the subordination of women to the subordination of marginalised groups of men" (Ibid.).

The term hegemonic masculinity names "a key mechanism sustaining an oppressive society and implied that contesting this mechanism was an important strategy of change" (Ibid.). Hegemony in this Gramscian sense is never static and constantly in contestation, reflecting global as well as situated, localised, and contextual dynamics "with multiple tiers, where different configurations of masculinity are at work, and come into conflict" (p. 311). How the marketed Gamer identity claims ownership over videogames, and its hegemony in that arena, is maintained through a hostile exclusion of femininity. It seeks to only include girls and women with the strictest behavioural caveats.
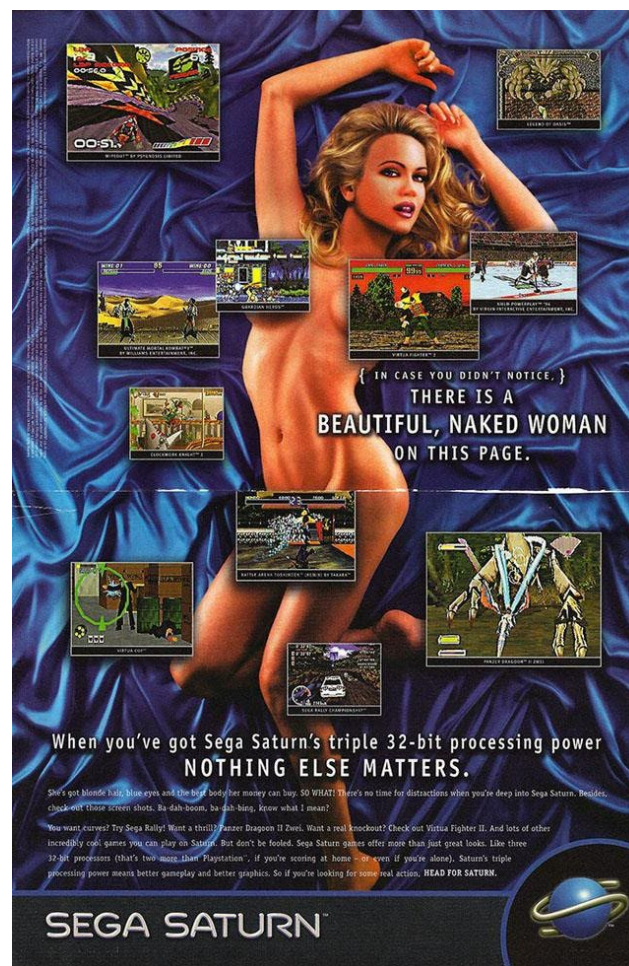
Figure 6: Advert for the Sega Saturn (1996). Image sourced from
http://www.genderads.com/styled-15/photos-81/files/page99-1052-full.jpg

Since the 'Gamer' identity marketing campaigns increasingly reimagined its core audience demographic as young hardcore-cool-as-geeky-underdog boys and men, the masculine recoding of the medium caused many others who had been playing videogames to feel estranged from the medium. Consequently, various feminist scholars have historicised and problematised the marketed default Gamer identity. This includes how this imagined community has become increasingly hostile to feminism, femininity, women, non-binary, transgender, queer, and gender-nonconforming people , the limited roles afforded to (non)participation, and far-reaching impacts across the heavily male-dominated sphere of videogames (Jenson & de Castell, 2010; Shaw, 2010a; Vossen, 2018). I discuss the impact of this Gamer identity and responses to it further below.

2.1.3. Gaming Culture, Publics, and Counterpublics

Different definitions of videogame/gaming culture exist across the literature, but many present an understanding of the culture as closely tied to the default Gamer identity. Seeking to distinguish the default Gamer identity from the videogame/gaming culture, an existential-materialist focus on lived experience added to assemblage theory (as outlined in the previous chapter) offers a lens through which we might challenge and broaden our understanding of videogames and gaming. Like the subtle but pragmatic shifts required to use different terms to describe 'players', 'gamers', and 'Gamers', here I want to unpack videogame/gaming culture as an umbrella term for various fields that include dominant gaming publics (tied to the default Gamer identity) and gaming counterpublics.

In this thesis, I take videogame/gaming culture, like all cultures, to be co-produced at the nexus between 'the self' and interactions with 'Others' in specific communities of practice (Chang, 2008, p. 21). Within and across each community, individuals hold multiple macro and micro group affiliations (Ibid., pp. 22-23). In one's co-produced sense of identity and social affiliation, different intersecting identities, tied to concepts such as sexuality, race, and gender, contribute to degrees and modes of group membership. Claiming an identity, such as 'Gamer' or even 'Gamer Girl', shifts depending on different social and environmental contexts, fluctuating with unique life circumstances (p. 22). Subcommunities band together around shared identities, such as 'Gaymer' communities for LGBTQ+ players (Shaw, 2017, p. 157). However, communities are "not simply formed around identifiers or group membership" (Ibid., p. 156). Players also develop subcommunities based on shared preferences for videogame genres (First Person Shooters [FPS] or Real Time Strategy [RTS]), console brands (PlayStation or Xbox), and platforms (Massively Multiplayer Online [MMO]). While these imagined communities (Anderson, 1990) gather around a sense of shared identities or attachments, like the people that comprise these collectives, these communities are never static or homogenous.

For the purpose of this research, I seek to detangle videogame/gaming culture from dominant gaming publics, considering those publics as hegemonic formations often presumed to represent gaming culture writ large. In this thesis, I use the terms of hypermasculine, hegemonic, and dominant gaming publics drawn from what Salter and Blodgett's call the "new gaming public" (2012). Their 'gaming public' helps to describe how popular gaming is associated with the one ideal constructed

by the hypermasculine Gamer identity. I consider videogame/gaming culture as an umbrella term that includes of a wider plethora of participants and practices. In doing so, I use this concept of dominant gaming publics to distinguish an idea representing mainstream gaming against other possible understandings which have always included more diverse participants.

Drawing on Michael Jackson's approach outlined in the previous chapter, I seek to develop an understanding here of people's lived relationship to videogames that can map heightened tensions between individuals who are continually pitted against one popular image of the default Gamer. This thesis thus contributes to the growing feminist literature on the role of videogames/gaming in culture by calling attention to tensions between the dominance of hypermasculine gaming publics and alternative counterpublics.

In sum, I use the term videogame/gaming culture to house a wide range of participants that speaks to a multiplicity of individuals, identities, affiliations, communities, and shared spaces, including advocate and women-centric communities and spaces. In this way, I aim to highlight the role of videogames *in* culture rather than a culture of videogames removed from wider culture. As one of many contested fields, dominant gaming publics do not adequately represent the culture of videogames. On the other hand, dominant gaming publics therefore refers to a hegemonic public understanding which is also a site of contestation over who are or are not deemed to represent videogames.

2.2. Flashpoints and (Post-)Gamer Tensions

The section below plots three notable flashpoints used as case studies to demonstrate the contentious history of gendered discourses in dominant gaming publics and prominence within them of popular misogyny mobilised online. For many women, femme-presenting, and marginalised groups, these flashpoints (among various others) have marked online harassment as the rule rather than the exception in what is generally seen to be mainstream videogaming culture. The following flashpoints (Dickwolves in 2010, Beat Up Sarkeesian in 2012, and Gamergate in 2014) exemplify the way reactionary identity politics are amplified online around videogames and exemplify the commonplace defensive rhetoric and behaviours that continue to police a hegemonic Gamer identity and assert a public image of gaming culture as a male-domain. It is crucial here to not only view these flashpoints on a timeline, but to recognise that they are still ongoing and significantly continue to impact the videogame community as well as wider online culture. Many of these flashpoints demonstrate how hypermasculine dominant gaming publics discourages gendered discourses, rejecting as 'outlandish', and even 'offensive', to suggest ideas like safe spaces where harassment is banned, and diversity in the production and play of games. Due to this ongoing hostility, the section below describes how dominant gaming publics maintains hegemonic power affecting gender-minority and gender-nonconforming participants. These flashpoints thus exemplify how dominant gaming publics have become shaped by heightened tensions regarding in-group membership defined by an idealised Gamer identity.

2.2.1. 2010– Dickwolves

In 2010, Penny Arcade's 'Dickwolves' controversy brought greater attention to the normalisation of what Emma A. Jane calls 'rapeglish' (2017, p. 17), in which references to sexual violence are treated simply as normative Gamer 'trash talk'. When critiquing the use of rapeglish in gaming, groups of sexual assault victims, women, and allies faced severe backlash in the form of online abuse instigated by a vocal minority who identified as Penny Arcade supporters. This vocal minority justified their online abuse claiming that they were within their rights, and that it lay within Penny Arcade's rights, to make rape jokes, and thus simply 'defending free speech'. Documenting the Dickwolves controversy, Salter and Blodgett (2012) outline how those gaming publics' hypermasculine discourses overtly privileged masculinity over femininity and discouraged people from engaging in feminist discourse on gender within the videogame community.

A dominant masthead in mainstream gaming culture, Penny Arcade takes pride in their offensive and 'edgy' humour. The two male creators, often referred to by their public personas 'Gabe' and 'Tycho', maintain a popular webcomic and blog. The Penny Arcade brand later expanded into podcasts, videogames, and one of the largest pop culture and videogame conventions 'Penny Arcade Expo' (PAX) (Salter & Blodgett, 2012, p. 405). In 2010, Penny Arcade published a series of comics using a rape joke as the punchline, provoking cultural disputes about normative subcultural use of rapeglish (Ibid., p. 401). In response to the comic, one person blogged (Shaker, 2010):

> Unlike Gabe killing Tycho so he doesn't have to share a videogame, a slave being raped is a real thing that happens in the world every day. I don't find this 'joke' funny because, unlike characters cartoonishly killing each other repeatedly and coming back to life, just as in videogames, rape isn't a central feature of (most) games – at least in the actual gameplay, totally aside from the language used by players.

In turn, readers resonating with the commentary shared their own experiences of (not)coping with the normalisation of rapeglish. As another commented (Sydera, 2010):

> I'm a former *WoW* player, and when I decided to quit, the rape jokes that my guild continually employed in and out of raids, on vent and on chat, weighed heavily on my decision. […] It is my thought that the reason this cartoon thought a rape joke would be funny is the pervasive use of 'rape' among *WoW* players to mean something other than rape.

Commentators such as these noted the casual use of 'rape' to express victory over another player imagined as part of normal Gamer vernacular. Two days later, Gabe and Tycho published another webcomic that mocked the commentary, misinterpreting these discussions. In response to the gendered discourses, Penny Arcade offered a backhanded apology expressing that they were sorry "for the rapists that their comic had encouraged" (cited in Salter & Blodgett, 2012, p. 406). Penny Arcade instead embraced the Dickwolves controversy as part of their brand of edgy humour, continuing to make light of 'trigger warnings' and dismissing safe spaces as laughable. In turn, the Dickwolves controversy fostered a heighten online environment hostile to gendered discourses, perpetuating a rape culture that trivialised sexual assault as well as reinforcing the notion of videogames and the online sphere as a boy's club.
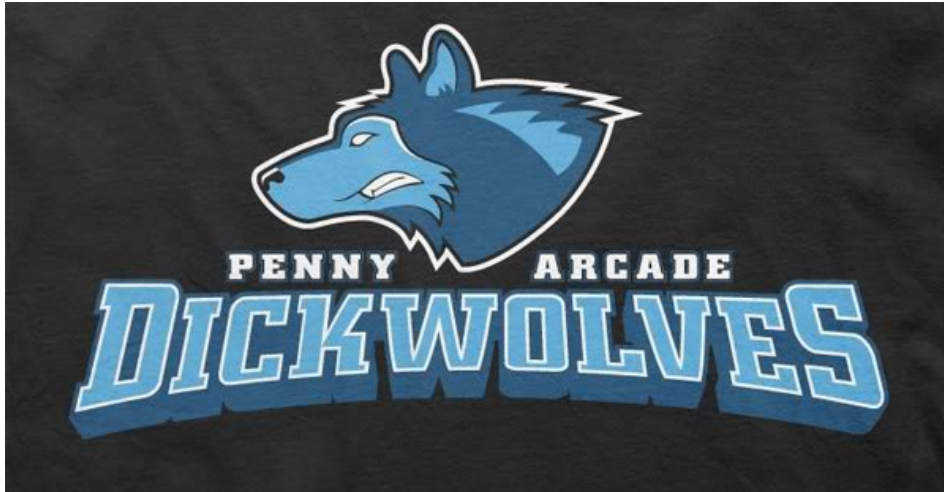
Figure 7: Dickwolves logo printed on Penny Arcade Expo official merchandise. Image sourced from https://www.kotaku.com.au/2013/09/penny-arcade-extends-olive-branch-apologizes-for-dickwolves-fallout/

The following year, Penny Arcade sold team Dickwolves t-shirts as official merchandising for Penny Arcade Expo (PAX). The official PAX merchandise printed a 'Dickwolves' sports team logo on t-shirts (see figure 7), presenting iconography suggesting an "implicit team-spirit endorsement of rape as a joke, if not as an outright action" (Salter & Blodgett, 2012, p. 407). In protest, Courtney Stanton blogged about her decision to boycott the event (2011) and designed her own 'Dickwolves Survivors Guild' t-shirts (see figure 8), donating the profits to charities supporting victim-survivors of sexual assault. Penny Arcade supporters banded together under the hashtag '#TeamRape' while harassing anti-rape advocates. Numerous threats were made to women, including Stanton, who complained about the Dickwolves comics and merchandise.

Figure 8: Dickwolves Survivor's Guild logo printed on t-shirts, fundraising for charity.
Image sourced from
https://www.giantbomb.com/a/uploads/scale_small/0/6329/1696556-67teq.jpg

Once again, Penny Arcade publicly mocked the boycott, and the '#TeamRape' supporters continued to rally behind free speech discourses while fostering a woman-hostile online environment. Dan Golding and Leena van Deventer summarised this attitude as: *"Free speech is okay for me, but not for you! Shut up or I'll put your life in danger by posting your home address on Twitter"* (2016, p. 99, emphasis in original). To contextualise this free speech rhetoric further, Emma A. Jane has unpacked how libertarian sentiments emerged alongside the invention of the internet (2017, p. 5), summarised as: "Free speech is good; regulation is bad; rape threats are better than censorship; intervention = totalitarianism" (2017, p. 108). The online abuse hurled towards sexual assault victim-survivors, women, and allies during the Dickwolves controversy demonstrated a clear double-standard that

marked the territory of dominant gaming publics and identified the gendered discourse of some powerful gatekeepers. Under a free speech rhetoric, dominant gaming publics claimed that it was within their rights to dictate what topics are (rape jokes) or are not (feminist discourses on gender) acceptable in videogame and online discourses, meanwhile aggressively silencing dissent using online abuse tactics.

In summary, the Dickwolves controversy highlights how dominant gaming publics threaten a harsh reprisal for anyone who dares to speak out against mainstream doctrines, conversations, and for politics that diverge from what is deemed by acceptable on their own terms. Not only have dominant gaming publics fostered an increasingly woman-hostile climate online, but it has also further divided the videogame community into teams: the 'true' (male) Gamers (dominant gaming publics) versus Others (not male) perceived as intruders and invaders (what I am calling the gaming counterpublics).

2.2.2. 2012– Beat Up Sarkeesian

In 2009, Anita Sarkeesian launched a not-for-profit YouTube channel called *Feminist Frequency*. Sarkeesian created *Feminist Frequency* with the aim to share feminist theory in an accessible format to a broader audience (Golding & van Deventer, 2016, p. 103). Her video essays used feminist ideas as a lens to understand pop culture in a similar approach to the work she concurrently produced for her Master's thesis (her degree was awarded in 2010) writing in the area of feminist media studies. For instance, one of her earlier videos applied the Bechdel test to films (Ibid. 2016, p.

104). However, Sarkeesian faced an intensified barrage of online abuse when she turned her interest towards unpacking the representation of women in videogames.

In 2012, Sarkeesian uploaded a video essay series called 'Tropes vs. Women in Video Games' (Stuart, 2014). In May, she started a Kickerstarter crowdfunding campaign to help fund the six-part video series, asking for a modest $6000 to cover production costs (Golding & van Deventer, p. 107). In less than 24 hours the Kickstarter was fully funded. However, those who were stridently opposed to the idea that videogames could be understood with a feminist lens swarmed against Sarkeesian online in a more organised manner than she had previously faced. Golding and van Deventer archived examples of the threats Sarkeesian received during this time (2016, p. 108):

> i hope you get cancer :)
>
> I would totally rape Anita Sarkeesian
>
> The only place for women is in chains in my kitchen… sluts.
>
> I'll donate $50 if you make me a sandwich
>
> I'LL RAPE YOU AND PUT YOUR HEAD ON A STICK IF YOU EVER TOUCH MY VIDEOGAMES!

Among the mass of rape and death threats directed at Sarkeesian, various people also photoshopped and sent images to Sarkeesian depicting her being raped by videogame characters. Another person developed and uploaded a flash videogame called *Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian* where players could bruise and bloody a picture of her face with a mouse click (see figure 9).
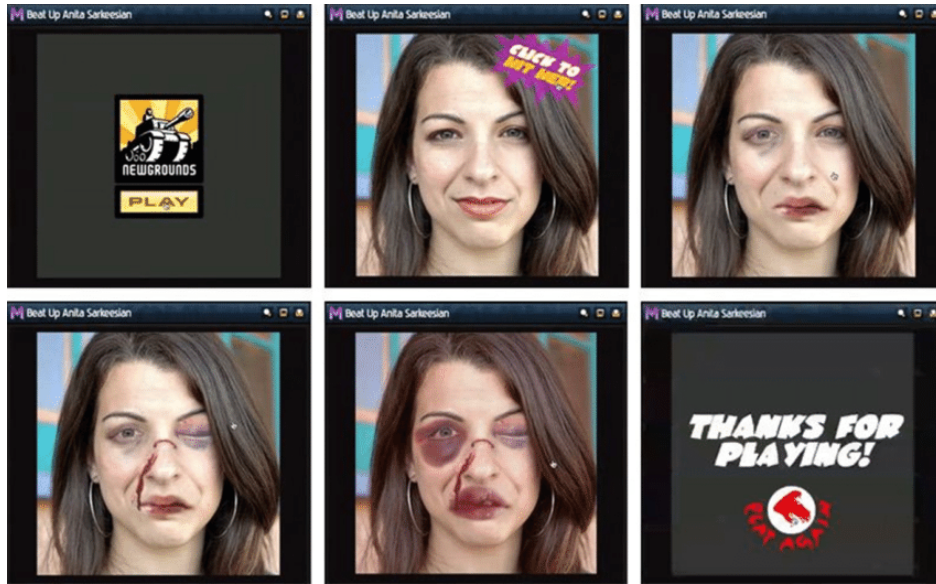
Figure 9: Stills from the flash game *Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian.* Image sourced from
https://feministfrequency.com/2012/07/01/image-based-harassment-and-visualmisogyny

The online harassment of visible and vocal women in the public fields entangled with videogames also exemplifies some more widespread patterns of gendered digital abuse. In 2015, the UN Broadband Commission reported research which showed that 73 percent of girls and women had witnessed or experienced online violence (2015, p. 2). The survey reported that women are 27 times more likely to be abused than men online, with men being 61 percent of perpetrators, and young women aged 18 and 24 at particular risk (Ibid., p. 15). While many people experience online harassment, the data suggests that online harassment is a heavily gendered problem skewed towards targeting women.

While surveys have shown that men and women in Australia were just as likely to report experiencing digital abuse (about one in six people), women were much more likely to experience *sexual harassment* (Powel & Henry, 2015, p. 1): one in five women reported experiencing sexual harassment online and sent sexually explicit

messages, such as rape threats or 'dick pics' (unsolicited semi-nude or nude photographs). Women were also more likely to have "told the person to stop" (f=42%, m=33%), changed their online details or profile settings (f=24%, m=16%), left the site or turned off their device (f=24%, m=17%), as a result of their experience" (Ibid., p. 3). Such findings indicate how women's experiences of sexual harassment online often results in a heavier burden that stretches on after the event.

As with the Dickwolves controversy, dominant gaming publics used online abuse to silence feminist discourses on gender. Indeed, when Sarkeesian spoke out about the harassment she was experiencing, the harassment got worse (Golding & van Deventer, 2015, p. 109). Dominant gaming publics described Sarkeesian as a 'professional victim' to dismiss her experiences while continuing to claim that she deserved the abuse for 'ruining' videogames. Often employing and resembling wider libertarian free speech discourses, these gaming publics similarly justify their use of digital abuse tactics against vocal women (seen to be 'professional victims') in the attempt to aggressively silence and exclude gendered discourses from videogames. That Sarkeesian became one of the primary targets during Gamergate similarly adds weight to the importance of understanding digital abuse as a heavily gendered contemporary crisis.

2.2.3. 2014– Gamergate

In 2014, heated tensions between Gamer and post-Gamer stakeholders combusted into an unprecedented outpour of gendered, racial, and homophobic hate online. Gaining widespread media coverage, Gamergate seemed to mark a moment for

many when digital abuse and cyberhate against minorities to be no longer the exception but the rule. Gamergate targeted women, gender nonconforming, and femme-presenting people, as well as prominent online feminist voices on an unprecedented scale (Jane, 2017, p. 21). A vocal minority who gains privilege from maintaining the hypermasculine hegemony of dominant gaming publics had positioned themselves as vehement devotees to 'true' videogames, treating what are often defined as 'hardcore' games as the only 'real' videogames as direct opposition to the counterpublics' calls for diversification.

Gamergate was first whipped into a frenzy with the public 'slut-shaming' of independent game developer Zoë Quinn. This was instigated by Quinn's scorned ex-boyfriend, Eron Gjoni, who had explicitly gone on record explaining that his primary goal was to destroy Quinn's life. In an interview with *Boston Magazine* (Jason, 2015), Gjoni admitted that he had "painstakingly crafted" what is now known as 'The Zoë Post' to "publicly humiliate" Quinn and maximise the pain he could potentially inflict. Gjoni meticulously wrote and edited multiple drafts, sowing more antagonism into his writing with the aim of drawing in spiteful readers who would resonate with "a voice of a bitter ex-boyfriend." Gjoni edited The Zoë Post until he was at least "80% sure" that Quinn would be harassed as a result. As the catalyst for Gamergate, I specifically highlight Gjoni's avowals that his explicit goal was to destroy his ex-partner Quinn's life because we must understand Gamergate as a new form of domestic abuse/violence tied to an increasingly entanglement of digital communication with ordinary lifeworlds.

Part of Gjoni's revenge plot was to disseminate The Zoë Post across internet forums, such as 4Chan, known for having coordinated attacks against Quinn in the past. In the previous year, 4Channers had targeted Quinn for developing a free-to-play innovative award-winning videogame titled *Depression Quest* (2013) about managing mental health (Golding and van Deventer, 2016, p. 135). Confronting their limited ideas of what constituted 'gameplay' (Golding & van Deventer, 2016, pp. 136-137), these 4Channers expressed disgust at *Depression Quest* "not being a real game" (Hernandez, 2013). Its innovation was instead taken as a personal attack against what 4Channers, also claiming to be the rightful defenders of videogames, had viewed as 'real' videogames. As Sal Humphreys argues, these attacks relied on a belief that diversifying the medium in such ways would also somehow 'ruin' and 'take away' their other videogame titles too (2019, p. 836).

On 15 August 2014, Gjoni posted his carefully crafted 9,425-word rant, The Zoë Post, about his and Quinn's tumultuous yet brief relationship. In The Zoë Post, Gjoni claimed that Quinn had cheated on him with five others and provided a speculative list of Quinn's paramours, including the names of videogame journalists. From this, readers wove a conspiracy theory suggesting that Quinn had sex with the journalists in exchange for favourable reviews of *Depression Quest* (Chess & Shaw, 2015, p. 212) which became seen as evidence of a widespread feminist conspiracy behind the recent progressive shifts in gaming as if they were being 'pushed' into videogames by 'outsiders' like Quinn and Sarkeesian (Ibid., p. 209). This triggered outrage against the perceived invasion of videogame culture by 'political

correctness' amongst those who viewed both the development of non-hardcore AAA games and the support of minorities as 'forced diversity'.

For those who already reviled *Depression Quest*, the fanciful theory that Quinn 'exchanged sex for favourable reviews' was treated as if it were the only conclusion which made sense (Golding & van Deventer, 2016, p. 141). In short, the general 'Quinnspiracy' rationale became based on the following kinds of emotionally charged opinions: *'I hate Depression Quest! Nobody could actually believe that it was a good videogame? Impossible! It's not even a REAL videogame!'* With such a categorical view of what could and couldn't count as a 'real' videogame (for which the only 'good' and therefore 'true' videogames are strictly 'hardcore'), Quinn was not just creating free-to-play videogames that offended their militant ideals about what videogames *should* be, but demonstrated that producers like Quinn would resort to sleeping to the top of the industry *to destroy their videogames*.

Not one of Gjoni's listed speculative paramours ever wrote a review for *Depression Quest*. Even though Gjoni's accusations against Quinn were very quickly proven to be falsified (Golding & van Deventer, 2016, p. 141), the core belief in an underground sex scandal and that 'Social Justice Warriors' (commonly shortened to 'SJW', a derogatory term used to describe feminists) were conspiring to ruin videogames remained unshaken. Mobilised on IRC chat rooms, dominant gaming publics gathered again under the banner of Gamergate, planning a harassment campaign they claimed was a crusade in defence of 'ethics in videogame journalism' (shortened and broadened to 'ethics in videogames').

Gamergate supporters deployed terms such as 'marginalisation' to describe how they – 'the (true) Gamers' – perceived themselves to be under attack by social justice/feminism (Humphreys, 2019). "When you expose a problem you pose a problem," as Sara Ahmed writes, and "it might then be assumed that the problem would go away if you would just stop talking about or if you went away" (2017, p. 37). Those who Gamergaters deemed to be problems were the SJWs/feminist critics/the videogaming counterpublic represented by perceived 'Others' (as defined against the default Gamer identity). The problem was those who were exposing – what they did not accept were problems – in videogames' lack of diversity, through their increased visibility. On Quinn's Wikipedia page, one person changed Quinn's death date to "soon" (Golding & van Deventer, 2016, p. 142). Others leaked nude images of Quinn, circulated revenge porn, and sent the images to Quinn's family members. Gjoni also joined various online discussion boards, releasing information about Quinn's location to aid in organising strikes. Arguably, terms like 'trolling' don't adequately capture the level of vitriol addressed to Quinn, or the graphic details of death and rape threats levelled at her. For example, one person wrote to Quinn (Jason, 2016):

> If I ever see you are doing a pannel [sic] at an event I am going to, I will literally kill you. You are lower than shit and deserve to be hurt, maimed, killed, and finally, graced with my piss on your rotting corpse a thousand times over.

Another wrote (Golding & van Deventer, 2016, p. 145):

> Next time she shows up at a conference […] we give her a crippling injury that's never going to fully heal […] a good solid injury to the knees. I'd say a brain damage, but we don't want to make it so she ends up too retarded to fear us.

Particularly troubling is how many of these actors seemed to be having *fun* while enacting abuse and spouting rapeglish (Jane, 2017, p. 22). In the highly organised blood sports of online abuse campaigns, these actors also stand to benefit from being seen "trashing their targets in the most over-the-top manner possible" (Ibid.). Benefits "associated with in-group cohesion" are accrued from "scapegoating and taboo humour" (where '"hateplay, signviolence, and recreational nastiness" transform into key modes of engagement signalling in-group subcultural capital among trolling communities (Ibid.). Within a week of The Zoë Post, Gamergate actors rapidly expanded their targets to include anyone who they viewed to be enemies of videogames, such as Sarkeesian, videogame developer Brianna Wu, and other SJWs (extended from feminists to become a label for anyone who complained about Gamergate's abuse).

In the following months, Gamergate enacted a massive, decentralised swarm of criminal activity, including stalking, doxing (releasing personal information, such as home addresses), and swatting (making false 'prank call' reports to the police to send armed forces to a victim's location, sometimes resulting in victim's deaths [Brice-Saddler, Selk & Rosenberg, 2019]). Gamergaters send rape threats, death threats, and bomb threats *en masse*, primarily targeting women, gender non-conforming groups, and those who spoke out against them or about their experiences of abuse. One person made a massacre threat closely referencing The Montreal Massacre of 1989 to force Sarkeesian to cancel her seminar at the Utah State University's Centre for Women and Gender Studies (Robertson, 2014). Fostering a climate of fear, Gamergate pushed waves of players, journalists, and

developers to abandon videogames or else retreat from participating in more visible public spheres.

As critics like Quinn, Sarkeesian, and Wu had become more prominent, included in the industry, and influential through crowd-funding their own projects, some hardcore Gamers saw their very presence as an attack on videogames and Gamers themselves. These voices rallied under the new hashtag #Gamergate as a representation of dominant gaming publics. This role was used to justify their use of no holds barred tactics, this time reappropriating the libertarian free speech rhetoric into the phrase 'ethics in videogames'. Gamergate's 'ethics in videogames' proponents continued to base their claims about 'unethical conduct' on Quinn's supposed sex scandal and the claim that it somehow revealed a clandestine feminist conspiracy wherein SJWs were plotting to destroy videogames. In other words, Gamergate's claim to be safeguarding 'ethics in videogames' presumes that 'feminism is ruining videogames'.

In some earlier responses to the emergence of Gamergate, a handful of commentators remarked on Gamergaters' staunch sense of entitlement in claiming to be representing 'true' – conflated with all – videogames, similarly seen in previous flashpoints. From this observation, commentators such as Leigh Alexander (2014a) and Dan Golding (2014) wrote think pieces that shared similar sentiments, arguing for the deconstruction of the Gamer identity. "The gamer as an identity feels like it is under assault, and so it should," wrote Golding (2014, n.p.):

> Though the 'consumer king' gamer will continue to be targeted and exploited while their profitability as a demographic outweighs their toxicity, the traditional gamer identity is now culturally irrelevant. […] 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. […] I am convinced that this marks the end. We are finished here. From now on, there are no more gamers – only players.

As exemplified by the above except, gaming counterpublics advocated a push for the post-Gamer turn. However, dominant gaming publics misconstrued the poststructuralist 'deconstruction' of identity, treating the post-Gamer turn as if it called for the 'destruction' of those who *identified* as gamers themselves – continuing to conflate videogame practice (players), identification (gamers), and representation (Gamers).

Gamergate is thus one of various anti-feminist flashpoints in an already extensive history of digital abuse and online harassment towards women and gender minorities (Shaw, 2014b, pp. 274-275), and the hegemonic masculinity shaping the everyday experiences of marginalised players and convinces many potential players that gaming is not for them (Chess & Shaw, 2015, pp. 209-210). The emergence of Gamergate merely reflects a wider problem of systemic sexism pervasive in the games industry and dominant gaming cultures. As gaming cultures became largely male dominated, over time sexism and misogyny have been normalised to become almost unremarkable.

2.3. Conclusion

In sum, the post-Gamer turn proposes that videogames should serve to represent all players instead of a singular imagined audience. Specifically, the imagined Gamer identity designed by marketing campaigns in the mid-1980s that sought to produce an impression of videogames as a cool and desirable product to boys and young men. In other words, detaching the default Gamer identity from the medium of videogames can better serve and represent all players of videogames as well as those who identify as gamers themselves irrespective of how well they fit or do not fit into the limited default Gamer identity category. Mapping the literature and flashpoints above demonstrates the productivity of making clearer distinctions between 'players' (to practice), 'gamers' (to identify), and 'Gamers' (to represent), which have otherwise become regularly conflated. Likewise, I aim to detangle dominant gaming publics attached to the hegemonic Gamer identity from the wider culture of videogames, to better recognise the importance of counterpublics and countercultures that have always included a more diverse range of players and their contributions to gaming.

This chapter thus provides background and context for the following three chapters engaging with lifeworlds that are assembled with contemporary videogames. While the internet did not invent misogyny, racism, or homophobia (Shaw, 2014b, p. 275; Humphreys, 2019, p. 837), flashpoints such as those outlined above exemplify how the internet can amplify hate (Jane, 2018). Increasingly entangled with the digital, such ongoing flashpoints have cultivated a heighten climate of fear more intensely felt by those who are rendered as 'Other' (Cross, 2014;

Golding & van Deventer, 2016; Harvey, 2021, p. 5). Within an increasingly hostile digitally entangled environment, marginalised groups must carefully navigate both online and offline spaces. As other research has also demonstrated, women players often deploy intricate coping strategies in attempts to create more enjoyable or safer gaming experiences (Cote, 2017) and to find ways to feel that they are able to go about their day-to-day lives unimpeded by the 'Gamer' discourse of others. Dominant gaming publics' maintenance of hegemony not only significantly impacts the videogame community but continues to shape the perception of online spaces as a male-domain and vice versa. My explorations of (not)coping for this thesis draws from this context, observing the increasing hypervigilance among many women, gender-nonconforming, and other marginalised groups of people who must carefully manage their digitally entangled lifeworlds.

For some, videogames had become a place where they could continue to escape from mainstream hegemonic masculinity (Consalvo, 2003; Connell, 2016) while enacting "private, escapist power fantasies" (Alexander, 2014a, n.p.). In dominant gaming publics, young men could embrace their underdog status while also ignoring the progressive politics which had impacted to a greater or lesser degree on almost every other element of public life. One of the key challenges for activists and scholars is to recontextualise the naturalisation of gaming as a male dominated sphere. Destabilising the hierarchical binary thinking of 'us' (Gamers) and 'them' (effectively anyone else who isn't young and male – women, but also non-white, and genderqueer players) – opens up gaming to greater participation.

Chapter 3 | Intersubjective Lifeworlds

Videogames in Relationship Conflicts

[W]omen play in spite of barriers to entry.

(T.L. Taylor, 2006, p. 123)

This chapter explores how women's gaming approaches, (de)attachments, and practices in their everyday intimate lives can reflect wider contemporary feminist resilience discourses about 'leaning in' and 'leaning out' of male-dominated fields. My analysis draws inspiration from Angela McRobbie's use of the figure of the 'perfect' woman to critique contemporary 'leadership feminism' politics of resilience and the popular responses she terms 'perfect-imperfect-resilience' (2020). Drawing from semi-structured interviews with seven women who played videogames with their partners, this chapter develops a more multifaceted understanding about women's gaming lifeworlds and their continued participation in gaming despite barriers. Examining intersubjective lifeworlds highlights the social relations on women's play, showcasing how relationship dynamics and romantic ties between couples can play an important role in shaping gaming lifeworlds – women's approaches, (de)attachments, and practices related to gaming. This argument challenges the assumption that women's choices regarding videogame play can be simply a free choice, as well as assumed divisions between the public/private, the online/offline, and the personal/political.

Despite women's (not)coping strategies using technological affordances (Cote, 2017), the foreboding sense of becoming-environmental threat (Massumi, 2015) imposed by dominant gaming publics (Salter & Blodgett, 2012) continues to impact women's gaming lifeworlds. Many women have increasingly become reconfigured towards a sense of harm as simply inevitable for 'choosing' to participate in shared gaming spaces. In attempts to navigate an increasingly woman-hostile digital domain, women must carefully manage their online environments as Amanda C. Cote (2017), Alison Harvey (2021), and Emma A. Jane (2017) have all carefully documented. Facing the amplified visibility of popular misogyny online, women remain caught up in a state of cautious negotiations concerning their involvement in digital gaming.

The onus placed on women to simply develop better coping strategies to play videogames reflects wider societal structures facilitating rape cultures that place the burden of ensuring safety onto victims rather than perpetrators (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Women have often found ways to continue playing videogames, despite witnessing, experiencing, and the becoming-environmental threat of digital abuse, online harassment, and hostile misogyny. However, the increasing ordinariness of women's digital coping strategies developed in response to this visibility highlight the unfairly heavy burden placed on women who want to play videogames and the limited affordances governing their (non)participation.

Various scholars have argued that the popular interventions focusing on new entry points critically overlook the vast number of women who already and have always played videogames (Taylor, 2006, pp. 93-99; Bergstrom, 2019; Harvey, 2021).

Problematically, in response to the perceived gender divide in gaming these approaches often treat the main problem to be overcome as 'female's natural lack of interest' in videogames (Taylor, 2006, p. 93). Even in the context of becoming-environmental threat I am discussing here, as the above excerpt from T.L. Taylor suggests, many women continue – *as they always have* – to play videogames.

In this chapter I will, first, outline the academic literature on videogames and relationships. Then I will map the critiques of new entry point interventions that severely overlook the many women who play and create games, and how they fail to address embodied precarity. In the academic background section, I will outline feminist critiques of entry point interventions that continue to circulate the widespread narratives about 'the absence' of women in games. Then, the section maps the emerging research on women's coping strategies, that has better addressed the experiences of precarity faced by women in games. The literature below on women's coping strategies demonstrates the limited modes of participation afforded to women in male-dominated videogame spaces. This chapter builds from and contributes to this emerging area of feminist games research on coping strategies, expanding into examining (not)coping as a dynamic that crosses over into women's romantic relationships, the intimacy of homes, and private lives.

After providing the academic background and context, I then outline the theoretical framework for this chapter. Inspired by McRobbie's critiques using the figure of the 'perfect', I develop this theoretical lens to examine the affective structures of 'leaning in' and 'leaning out' to describe a more flexible consideration

of women's shifting (non)participation. In this section, I build on McRobbie's critiques of the politics of resilience in contemporary feminism. In doing so, I use 'lean in' and 'lean out' to describe the double-bind and the limited modes of engagement afforded for women's (non)participation in gaming. Before turning to the analysis of results, I detail the methods used to collect the interview data for the findings presented in this chapter. From speaking with women about their lived experiences, I found that participants often described intersubjective and romantic relationship struggles to have influenced a sense of 'leaning in' and/or 'leaning out' away from gaming. Overall, this chapter seeks to emphasise the role of intersubjectivity in women's gaming lifeworlds to develop a broader and more flexible account of women's (dis)engagement that evolves on a *continuum* of playing and not, coping and not, that is otherwise unaccounted for by the focus on developing new entry points.

3.1. Academic Background

3.1.1. Videogames and Romantic Relationships

The research on videogames and social relationships in the field of game studies overall tends to look at online multiplayer games (Taylor, 2006; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; Williams et al., 2006; Chee et al., 2006; Ducheneaut et al., 2007; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014b; Carter et al., 2016), parents and children videogame play in familial domestic arrangements (Horst, 2008; Aarsand & Aronsson, 2009; Chambers, 2012; Enevold, 2014; Harvey, 2015; Mavoa et al., 2017; Pearce et al., 2021), and (video)game communities (Pearce, 2009; Huvila et al., 2010; Gray, 2012;

Kim, 2014; Consalvo & Begy, 2015; Mäyrä, 2015; Carter et al., 2016; Zimmerman, 2017; Mortensen, 2018). From game studies, there is also some notable work published on the themes of romance and love in videogames. This literature includes the edited collection, *Game Love: Essays on Play and Affection* (Enevold & MacCallum-Stewart, 2015), with contributions exploring 'experiencing and creating love in games', 'expressions of love beyond the gaming text', 'alternative representations of love in games', and 'bad love' or what Lauren Berlant would call 'cruel optimism' or 'cruel attachments' (2012). Work focusing on game design also appears in the edited collection, *Digital Love: Romance and Sexuality in Games* (McDonald, 2017), exploring 'romance in single-player, role-playing games' and 'designing romance games'. This area of the literature takes into consideration the topic of love and romance as themes emerging in videogames. However, research on couple's play (and other family play dynamics outside of parents and children play relations) is comparatively nascent.

Currently, most games research on adult couple's videogame play has appeared in the field of psychology. This has included studies of the ways videogames might increase male 'aggression' and contribute to relationship conflicts (Coyne et al., 2012), correlations between frequent 'violent' (content) videogame use and negative couple attachment behaviour (Smith, 2013), and the phenomenon of 'Gamer Widows' caused by a partner's gaming 'addiction' (Northrup & Shumway, 2014). Such research is primarily concerned with 'the cause and effects' of addiction, consuming violent content, and aggressive behaviour in

relation to videogame use and how it may negatively impact people in romantic relationships.

However, Christopher J. Ferguson's meta-analytic review of the trending publication bias on videogame violence effects has determined that most of this literature has "not provided compelling support to indicate either a correlational or causal relationship between violent game play and actual aggressive behaviour" (2007, p. 480). Ferguson argues that many researchers studying videogames have become "more concerned with 'proving' the presence of effects, rather than testing theory in a methodologically precise manner" (Ibid., p. 481) uncritically following news outlets' promotion of media violence (p. 471). While it is tempting to look for 'scapegoat' answers to complex problems when tragedies such as the Columbine High School Shooting occur, Ferguson insists that we must not become "side-tracked by a priori hypotheses that may distract the scientific community and the general public from the real biological, social and family influences on violent behaviour" (p. 481). Subsequently, Ferguson's and his co-author's study on videogames and aggression instead suggests that "family violence and innate aggression as predictors of violent crime were a better fit to the data than was exposure to videogame violence" (2008, p. 311). The overall games research in psychology often seeks to confirm negative effects rather than reflexively questioning public assumptions.

Likewise, Anthony M. Bean, Rune K. L. Nielsen, Antonius J. Van Rooij, and Christopher J. Ferguson have cautioned against the push to pathologize videogames and classify a new 'gaming disorder' that has largely been spurred by

cycles of moral panics concerning new media and anxious parent groups (2017, p. 4). The negative perception of videogame play as 'unproductive' or a 'bad use of time' has often lead to the misinterpretation of high engagement play, which is otherwise considered to be 'healthy' (Charlton, 2002, cited in Bean et al., 2017, p. 25). Indeed, most videogame players can balance expected social roles outside videogames with those inside (Przybylski et al., 2016). Even in extreme levels of playing, some videogame players are encumbered with certain problems, although these are generally not directly related to their actual gaming (Chan & Rabinowitz, 2006). At present, "the potential for the misuse of diagnostic categories related to videogame addiction is high" and raises significant concerns about how it could promote abusive practices toward minors (Bean et al., 2017, pp. 24-25).

As I will consider further in a later chapter, videogame addiction or gaming disorders have so far been locked into substance abuse or gambling disorder metaphors, primarily drawing on literature and frameworks of alcoholism and drug dependency (Ibid., p. 5). In turn, these moral panics detract from the efforts to understand videogame use as an everyday and even normative practice that may "go awry for some individuals as many other behaviours can" (p. 6). Like the publication bias which more-often seeks to confirm videogame violence effects, the literature on gaming addiction seems to provide greater insight into the socio-cultural devaluation of videogames, new media moral panics, and parent's anxiety, than an understanding of the ordinary experiences of videogame play.

In game studies, there are a few notable studies on romantic couple's videogame play examining people's lived experiences. This more nascent area of

the literature includes Kelly Bergstrom's exploration of how romantic couples use Massively Multiplayer Online (MMOs) games as part of their shared leisure time (2009). In another mixed-methods study by Rabindra A. Ratan, Nicholas Taylor, Jameson Hogan, Tracy Kennedy, and Dmitri Williams, when the authors investigated the gender divide in *League of Legends* players, they found that females who play with a male partner often focus on supporting their partner's advancement, not their own (2015, p. 348). The authors suggested that further research was needed to document and intervene into these current situations "if female players are ever to stand apart from their male gatekeepers" (Ibid., p. 458). Meanwhile, the literature on adult couples and their gaming practices is still emerging in the field. But since this chapter seeks to further examine gender dynamics and women's (non)participation in gaming, I have sought to draw here instead on feminist games scholar's critiques of new entry point interventions.

3.1.2. New Entry Point Interventions

The pink and purple girl games movement (cf. Chess, 2017) of the 1990s and early 2000s exemplified the increase in both industry and scholarly focus on new entry point interventions designed to address the deficit image of women in gaming. However, various feminist scholars that came later critiqued the underlying assumptions of entry points which insinuate the problem of the gender divide as 'feminine lack' (Taylor, 2006, p. 93; Bergstrom, 2019; Harvey, 2021). That is, the essentialist notion that 'females' are inherently 'lacking' when it comes to videogames (or STEM fields more broadly). Due to their sex, gender essentialist

assumptions claim that girls and women are naturally disinterested and generally 'bad' at playing videogames (Taylor, 2006, p. 101). On the other hand, girls and women who are interested in or 'good' at videogames (or other masculine-coded activities) are treated as exceptions to the rule, determined to simply be 'not like other girls' (Harvey, 2021, pp. 7-8). Addressing girls and women as if they require extra incentive, encouragement, or accommodation, can problematically reinforce gender essentialist assumptions of 'feminine lack' (Jenson & de Castell, 2010, cited in Harvey, 2021, p. 4), further maintaining a gender binary and creating new problems, as I outline below.

The discourse on improving entry points continues to imagine that girls and women play differently from boys and men. Firstly, promoting entry points regularly assumes that girls and women are only interested in stereotypically feminine-coded objects, interests, and activities, such as the colour pink, playing with dolls, and fashion (Bergstrom, 2019, p. 842). Secondly, tailoring videogames towards socio-cultural preconceptions about 'what girls/women want' limits the range of play offered to them (Taylor, 2006, p. 102). Thirdly, many pink/purple videogames centre on themes of care and domestic activities, reproducing traditional heteronormative gender roles based on a false binary between femininity and masculinity (Ibid., p. 99). Fourthly, these interventions assume that girls/women simply lack interest in existing videogame titles but would become interested in other videogames with the right amount of encouragement – treating play as a matter of personal choice without recognising other barriers (Bergstrom, 2019, p. 842). Consequently, these

approaches have created "a devastating cycle of invisibility" for women in gaming, as T.L. Taylor explains (2006, p. 113, emphasis in original):

> [W]hen the issue of gender is finally put on the table, more often than not it is a service of reifying imagined difference rather than trying to unpack more complex formulations of femininity and masculinity. The question often becomes: "Well, we all know that women don't really want direct competition or fighting games, so what can we make for them? What does a woman's game look like?" It is as if suddenly the entire experiences of women *who right now do play*, of women who *have played for years*, are hidden off in a corner lest they overly complicate out notions about what "real" women and men take pleasure in. And, rather than trying to understand how those women may tell us something about paths into gaming or how we might learn something for future design, they are seen as the oddballs, the nonmainstream, the exceptions. There is a devastating cycle of invisibility at work here, one in which game designers, companies, and sometimes even players themselves render an entire demographic as tangential. This move, to marginalise women and to not imagine them as a *core* demographic, in turn helps enact design decisions and structural barriers that create the conditions for disenfranchisement.

As such, new entry point interventions built on widespread narratives of 'feminine lack' continue to render the core demographic of women – who already play and have played videogames for many years – invisible and tangential.

3.1.2.1. Limits of New Entry Points

In response to such interventions, Kelly Bergstrom (2019) points to a gap in the literature on 'former players' who have left gaming or moved to other games, and 'non-players' who never began playing in the first place. As Bergstrom identifies, the growing body of interventionist literature has primarily concentrated on how women might be encouraged 'enough' to join "rather than investigate why someone might ultimately leave" (Ibid., p. 841). Treating women's play (or non-play) as simply 'a choice' implies that leisure activities are choices freely given (p. 842). Drawing from

critical feminist theory and leisure studies, Bergstrom argues that the constructed gender norms related to leisure activities influence women's decision-making processes about whether playing videogames is or isn't 'for' them (p. 846). In other words, where women are disinterested in videogames it is not simply 'because they are women' but because *social expectations* impact what people imagine are or are not 'appropriate' leisure activities 'for' women.

Bridging leisure studies and game studies, Bergstrom applies Duane W. Crawford and Geoffrey Godbey's sociological framework to suggest other potential barriers to women's interest in gaming, such as 'intrapersonal', 'interpersonal', and 'structural' barriers (1987, pp. 122–124, cited in Bergstrom, 2019/2017, p. 843). These barries may include whether someone does or does not evaluate playing videogames as an 'appropriate use' of their leisure time (intrapersonal), joint leisurely decisions about gaming made between romantic couples (interpersonal), or if someone can or cannot afford buying a console or gaming systems to play (structural). In these ways, Crawford and Godbey's expanded model on barriers to leisure activities "refutes the idea that non/participation is exclusively a 'choice' based [on] one's level of interest in an activity" (p. 843). Bergstrom's critiques and exploration of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural barriers to women's participation provides greater insight into the gaps in the literature created from the limitations of focusing on popular entry point interventions.

3.1.2.2. Limits of Coping Strategies

As I have already outlined, the increased hostility faced by women in gaming is well-documented (Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Golding & van Deventer, 2016; Humphreys, 2019). However, there is little research that examines how women cope with these becoming-environmental threats. Leading this area of research, Cote has investigated women's coping strategies deployed during moments of online gaming (2017). Drawing from in-depth interviews with female players, Cote reported five main coping strategies that women use in the attempt to create more enjoyable online gaming experiences (Ibid, p. 137):

1. Leaving online gaming,
2. Avoiding playing with strangers,
3. Camouflaging their gender,
4. Deploying their skill and experience, or
5. Adopting an aggressive persona.

Some of these coping strategies have severe limitations and can carry unintended negative consequences. For instance, camouflage and avoidance tactics can also obscure women's contributions to online spaces and gaming. In doing so, they inadvertently sustain the construction of online spaces as domains 'for men' which feeds into harassment as women continue to be seen as 'intruders' (p. 137). Cote's findings on women's responses to coping with harassment in online gaming in many ways overlap with findings from research on women's responses to harassment in the workplace. Cote makes this argument herself, noting that in the workplace, women's four main responses to harassment include (Cortina & Wasti, 2005, p. 182, cited in Cote, 2017, p. 150):

1. Advocacy seeking – recruiting formal support from organisational authorities,
2. Social coping – mobilising emotional support and advice from trusted others,
3. Avoidance/denial – avoiding the harassing situation physically (e.g., avoiding the harasser's workstation) or cognitively (e.g., denying the seriousness of the situation), and
4. Confrontation/negotiation – directly requesting or insisting that the offensive behaviour cease.

Compared to the workplace, Cote observed that the women she had spoken to about online harassment did not claim to have regularly sought advocacy and support or reported instances of online harassment to related organisational authorities. In order to build better online gaming community practices, Cote recommended videogame companies to invest in developing greater structural support for players to provide avenues for them to report negative interactions, instances of harassment, and request further assistance (2017, p. 150). In response to harassment in online gaming, Cote's research makes an important call for videogame's organisational authorities to recognise and address the burden of women's coping strategies.

3.1.2.3. Limits of 'The Absence of Women' Discourses

Harvey's research on the experiences of women in games higher education provides a compelling account of how feminine lack discourses have influenced women's affective structures of coping (2021). When interviewing women studying games, Harvey found that these students regularly felt a need to fight back against risks of becoming seen as 'lacking'. In attempts to 'fit in' the male-dominated field, women searched for ways to counter-position themselves against 'feminine lack' discourses,

sustained by the widespread narratives of 'the absence of women' in videogames (Ibid., p. 6). Therefore, 'fitting in' to gaming for women required certain 'personal sacrifices' in the forms of affective and practical coping strategies. Interviewees in Harvey's study described four main affective contours of coping deployed in response to the risks of potentially being seen as 'lacking' due to their gender (pp. 7-12):

1. Deploying narratives of exceptionalism,
2. (Mis)alignment with the default identity of a game student subject position,
3. 'Getting on with it' by obscuring or isolating elements of their identity as a form of agentic resilience, or
4. Refusal to 'fit in' or to 'get on with it'.

Each coping strategy articulated a cost or toll that these women were required to endure for their participation (p. 12). On the other hand, many of Harvey's interviewees spoke positively about alternative women-centred spaces because "encouragement, acceptance, kindness, respect and safety" was afforded for them (p. 13). Rather than struggling to 'survive' a woman-hostile environment, advocate spaces provided women 'safer refuges', where they could instead 'thrive' since they did not feel the need to first (and continue to) prove themselves as 'not lacking'. Harvey's useful expansion of coping strategies to include broader affective contours of coping demonstrates the broader continuum of women's experiences of embodied precarity and (not)coping within the still-exclusionary cultures of videogames.

3.1.2.4. Affective Structure of (Not)Coping

Cote and Harvey both observed that women's coping strategies were skilfully deployed but temporary solutions while attempting to navigate woman-hostile environments, and constituted a significantly unfair burden. My own arguments in this chapter also build on the research documenting barriers, structural discrimination, and harassment faced by women in gaming, and I will supplement this with Cote and Harvey's work on coping strategies. My own aim here is to extend their analysis of these affective contours towards the analysis of different 'offline' gaming spaces and relationship dynamics.

While Cote's research examined coping strategies used during moments of online gaming, my research seeks to further undo the often-presumed barrier between in-game and out-of-game situations in talking about everyday practices and affective networks. Therefore, I want to focus more on 'offline' spaces and relationships, such as women who play 'couch co-op' videogames with their partners in order to 'not have to deal with [harassment/ unwanted attention from] strangers online'. In doing so, I examine the ways that affective structures of (not)coping and existential-material conditions reconfigure women's gaming lifeworlds in response to precarity.

3.2. Theoretical Framework

In the last decade, many popular feminist discourses have encouraged women to either '*Lean in*' (Sanberg, 2013, cited in McRobbie, 2020, p. 14) towards or '*Lean out*' (Shevinsky, 2015) of male-dominated workplaces. In the context of the literature on

coping discussed above, my analysis of interview findings in this chapter draws inspiration from McRobbie's theoretical account of the figure of the perfect to critique contemporary feminist politics of resilience (2020). I combine McRobbie's framework with Elissa Shevinsky's edited collection, *Lean Out: The Struggle for Gender Equality in Tech and Start-Up Culture* (2015), to develop an understanding of the affective structures of 'Lean In' and 'Lean Out' as they apply to women's lived experience of videogames.

McRobbie outlines and critiques two trends in contemporary feminist discourse, 'leadership resilience' and 'perfect-imperfect-resilience' (shortened to *p-i-r*) where both may seem to present (often young) women 'life advice' on how to navigate male-dominated workplaces but continue to prescribe gendered scripts. Both 'leadership feminism', as captured by 'lean in', as well as the replies of perfect-imperfect-resilience (*p-i-r*), evoke the image of perfect womanhood. Leadership feminism evokes the perfect as a goal, claiming that women only need to learn how to better 'game' the workplace, work hard enough, smile more, and stay positive to 'have it all' (p. 43). The image of the successful woman who 'has it all' promises women the same fulfilment from their careers as men, on the condition that women simply 'lean in'. Success is rendered as 'measurable', and failure a performance indicator of 'mismanaged lives' (Brown, 2005, cited in McRobbie, 2020, p. 17). In this way, personal sacrifices are treated as free choices, and as a matter of expecting certain costs for the sake of success.

Perfect-imperfect-resilience responds to 'lean in' and the goal of the perfect by suggesting that women should embrace their imperfections instead. *P-i-r*

proposes that "we must learn to love ourselves as we are" (p. 59). Rather than aim for perfection, *p-i-r* advocates for more 'ordinary' values where it's fine for women to just be 'OK' (p. 56). Women only need to be kinder to themselves, to embrace their flaws, and understand that, for example, it's 'good enough' to 'just be a mum' without also having the perfect 'yummy mummy' body. McRobbie writes (p. 56):

> Resilience is deployed here to reinforce the pro-family stance of the work-life balance. Resilience techniques help women to step back from hard-edge leadership feminism, thereby finding self-esteem as a woman without being pressured or 'bullied' by the perfect'.

Responding to the 'bullying' effects of the figure of unattainable perfection, *p-i-r* promises women that the good life can be achieved through women's self-acceptance. According to this discourse, not all women can pursue illustrious corporate careers but that they can still find happiness in the home. Returning towards the domestic, *p-i-r* reinforces the traditional idea that caring for one's children is 'still an admirable goal' for the modern woman. *P-i-r* responds to women's quests for the good life differently, but still suggests that the answer remains in how one should best manage the self.

While their responses diverge, both leadership resilience and *p-i-r* discourses conjure an image of the perfect woman. Both continue to use 'the perfect' to produce gendered scripts defining womanhood and what a woman 'should be'. Troublingly, these affective structures of resilience can *feel* both feminist and political (McRobbie, 2008), circulating through what Lauren Berlant terms an 'intimate public' (2008). An intimate public in these terms conveys a particular set of desires and affective modes of belonging based on the fantasies of feminine sameness; an

understanding of 'women's culture' that seeks to manage ambivalence and "a creative will to survive that attends to everyday situations while imaging conditions of flourishing within and beyond them" (Ibid., p. 5). Intimate spheres "*feel* like ethical places based on the sense of capacious emotional continuity they circulate, which seems to derive from an ongoing potential for relief from the hard, cold world" (p. 6, emphasis in original). In these ways, resilience discourses provide a vocabulary for (young) women to acknowledge the continuing effects of patriarchal domination, however, "without aiming to dismantle or even profoundly disrupt the prevailing gender regime" (McRobbie, 2020, p. 56). Instead, they work to depoliticise and render contemporary feminism more palatable for advertisers, consumer culture, and state powers (Ibid., p. 61). Or as Berlant argues, the intimate publics of 'women's culture' creates a "common sphere of people attached to each other by a *sense* that there is a common emotional world available to those individuals who have more than survived social negativity by making an aesthetic and spiritual scene that generates *relief from the political*" (2008, p. 10, emphasis in original). Ultimately, resilience discourses manifest a bridge between feminism and capitalism, rather than making demands for reparation, social change, or equality/equity. In turn, gendered emancipation rests on individual women as a personal choice.

Here, I want to link McRobbie's argument to the specific discussion of women's roles in videogame and tech industries raised in the edited collection *Lean Out: The Struggle for Gender Equality in Tech and Start-Up Culture* (Shevinsky, 2015). In another response to the idea of 'lean in' leadership feminism, Shevinsky's 'lean out' describes and recognises the inevitable costs to women of working in woman-hostile

environment of videogames. anna anthropy's chapter 'But What If It's Killing You?' opens with the provocation (2015, p. 147, emphasis in original):

> It is very trendy these days to talk about encouraging women to get into tech. But who is this encouragement designed to benefit? Is it for the women? What does it take before industry veterans walk away from the field of work that they love?

The above questions posed by anthropy reflect on the burden of difference and representation faced by women in the videogame industry. Often, the personal sacrifices women's labour involves are simply expected as 'part of the work'. After anthropy had "made a career out of encouraging marginalised people to get excited about games, to carve a space for themselves in games culture" she could not "truthfully tell" a room full of women, people of colour, and queer people "to subject themselves to the ugliness that existed for marginalised people in games." She "could not ask them to accept" the abuse that she had endured (p. 149). Lean out thus claims that it is 'not a failure' if women choose to lean out, or leave the woman-hostile videogame industry, but that these are modes of survival.

Building a theoretical framework from the critiques above, I want to apply the language of 'lean in' and 'lean out' to describe themes emerging from interviewees' accounts of how they negotiate and navigate gaming. I observe that the affective structures of 'lean in' and 'lean out' offered to women are reduced to a choice. Beyond the consideration of male-dominated workplaces in the above texts, my findings from speaking with women who played videogames with their partners demonstrate how the (re)orientations of 'leaning in' and 'leaning out' continue to shape women's everyday lives and intimate relationship dynamics. Drawing on the

analysis of interview data presented further below, I want to suggest that 'leaning in' and 'leaning out' illustrate the limited affordances of women's participation in gaming. In doing so, this aspect of my research contributes to the game studies literature on women's coping, while seeking to further challenge the divisions between the online/offline, public/private, and workplace/domestic spheres.

3.3. Method

The findings presented in this chapter draw from eight semi-structured in-depth interviews with seven self-identified women who played videogames with their partners. These interviews were conducted in 2016, and were initially collected for and to some extent utilised within a previous research project.[4] For this chapter I have returned to and re-examined those interview transcriptions. Acknowledging that this is methodologically unusual, I want to reflect here on the choice to return to data collected for another purpose, and interviews conducted within a different research framework.

In 2016, I was investigating the phenomenon of 'Gamer Girlfriends', examining the affective labour performed by women in relation to playing videogames with their partners. Returning to these transcripts here I want to bring a greater appreciation of the depth, complexity, and richness of the lived experiences of gaming shared with me in these interviews. In my different analysis of these interviews for this current research project, I also seek to challenge the assumed

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[4] The research and recruitment methods for these interviews were approved by the UNSW Human Ethics Committee, HC Number HC16628.

prime objectivity of data and findings observed from research. Returning to those transcripts and describing a uniquely different set of core findings from the same dataset, I am necessarily highlighting the limitations of any approach that aims to capture data as known within a specific research project. In turn, returning to these interviews has also led me to consider how such a reconsideration of transcripts can help to lessen the overall burden on participants asked to give up their personal time to participate in academic research. Finally, revisiting those interview transcripts has provided an opportunity for me as researcher to engage more deeply with these women's accounts of their lived experiences of videogames, as well as critically practice a more rigorous and reflexive approach to research and knowledge production.

These interviewees were recruited through an online survey circulated on my own social media networks, such as Facebook, and with permission on the 'WiDGET' a 'women in games and tech' group. The recruitment survey called for research participants who were women who played videogames with their partners. To lessen the risks of intentional data manipulation or digital harassment from anti-feminist groups (Chess & Shaw, 2015), I had limited the online recruitment survey to my personal networks as an extra precaution. The survey offered multiple choice answers as well as optional textboxes to include more descriptive and 'other' answers. I used these survey responses to tailor my questions for interviews. 58 participants responded to the recruitment survey with 46 participants providing consent and contact details to be recruited to participate in an interview.

Out of the 46 respondents, potential interviewees were narrowed down to 23 respondents who lived in Sydney and were available to have a face-to-face interview. Out of the 23 respondents, I invited twelve respondents for an interview. I had chosen these twelve potential interviewees to represent a balance between age ranges and gamer/non-gamer identification. Out of the twelve invited interviews, eight interviews were conducted with seven participants (one interviewee, Revan, returned for a second short interview with follow up questions). Depending on the participant's availability, interviews took between 20-minutes and 90-minutes. I had used a semi-structured (Spradley, 1979) approach to conducting interviews (see table 1), allowing greater room for participants to be explorative in their answers (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). These semi-structured interviews were guided by a laddering technique (Raynolds & Gutman, 1988), where I would ask questions such as "why is this important to you?" to encourage participants to reflect more deeply on their experiences and develop meaningful chains of thought.

Q1.	What is your age?
Q2.	How would you describe yourself?
Q3.	How many relationships have you played videogames with a partner? How long were/have you been together? Have/do you live together?
Q4.	Do you consider your partner/ former partner(s) to be 'gamers'?
Q5.	Did you play videogames before being in a relationship with your gaming partner/s?
Q6.	Have you play videogames without your partner/s? Can you describe a moment of gaming without your partner (perhaps a gaming moment that was particularly enjoyable such as your favourite game, or something you found frustrating, or even just the last videogame you played)?
Q7.	Do you think of yourself as 'a gamer'? Why/why not?

Q8.	How did you discover gaming? Who introduced you to videogames? Do you remember an early or formative experience that has shaped your gaming practices and/or gamer identity/non-identity?
Q9.	Can you describe how you and your partner play together?
Q10.	Do you have disagreements over gaming in your relationship?
Q11.	Do you share similarities in gaming habits and playstyles?
Q12.	Do you play more competitive or cooperate games with your partner?
Q13.	Do you feel expected to take on particular 'roles' (within a game)? What? Where? How?
Q14.	What gaming platforms have you owned? Are any of these shared with your partner?
Q15.	Do you play games with other friends or family?
Q16.	Do you think your 'gamer' (non)identity is important to your partner? How do you know and why did you come to this conclusion?
Q17.	Would you like to share anything else with me about your experiences of gaming with your partner/s? (I am interested in anything that happened that you thought was interesting).

Table 1: Semi-structured interview guiding questions.

To develop a sense of greater trust and openness, I welcomed participants to ask me any questions before, during, and after interviews, including any questions they wanted to know about me and my research. [5] I explained to the interviewees how I would use pseudonyms to distinguish between their answers while guaranteeing their confidentiality and anonymity. I offered participants that opportunity to nominate preferred pseudonyms, named after videogame characters. All personally identifying information was removed from transcripts. Interviews were documented with an audio recorder application on a mobile phone with the consent of interviewees. [6]

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[5] A couple of participants (Bianca and Shepard) were curious about my mixed-race appearance and used that opportunity to ask me about my ethnicity, discussing the topic of race in relation to gaming culture in a more informal manner together afterwards.

[6] A total of 465 minutes of interviews were recorded and transcribed into more than 68,600 words.

	AGE	ETHNICITY	GAMER IDENTITY	GAMING RELATIONSHIPS	LIVING WITH CURRENT PARTNER
REVAN	24	"Australian"	Yes	2 Men; 1 Woman	No
JESSIE	24	"White/Caucasian"	No/Sometimes	2 Men;	Yes
SHEPARD	29	"White/Caucasian"	No/Sometimes	1 Man	Yes
BIANCA	29	"East Asian"	Yes	1 Man	Yes
D.VA	26	"Cantonese"	Yes/Sometimes	2 Men	Yes
PIPER	26	"White/Caucasian"	No	1 Man	No
ELLIE	24	"White/Caucasian"	Yes	2 Men; 1 Woman	Yes

Table 2: Participants.

Understanding the limitations to who can or cannot more easily claim the Gamer identity (Shaw, 2011), as discussed in the previous chapter, in designing the recruitment and questions for these interviews I used a more post-structuralist – 'post-Gamer' – approach. I explicitly stated in the recruitment survey that participants did not have to identify as 'a gamer' to be included in the research project. Five interviewees reported that they played videogames 'just as much' or 'more than' their current male partners. Importantly, this included women who did not identify or only sometimes identified as 'gamers' themselves (Jessie, Shepard, D.Va, and Piper).[7]

All seven interviewees (see table 2) were currently in relationships that involved dating a male 'gamer' partner (as described by interviewees). At the time, all interviewees were in their 20s, ranging between 24 and 29 years of age. This is in contrast to the fact that 40.4% of survey respondents were between 31-50 years old.

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[7] D.Va reported "no/sometimes" in her survey response but asked to change her answer during our interview. Furthermore, all those who did identify as gamers added caveats.

The focus on younger women in interviews was not part of my research design. Instead, other survey participants who were invited but declined an interview were women above the age of 30 and unable to make the time to come in. No interviewees had children, and none were married, although most (five) lived with their partners. The two interviewees who were not living with their current partner (Revan and Piper) spent "a few nights every week" over at their partner's place.

All interviewees discussed gaming as a way they spent time together and bonded with their partners. Gaming as a couple mostly consisted of 'couch co-op' gaming or sitting near each other in the same room while one partner or both played (different) videogames. Some interviewees described how they had played online games with their partners in long-distance relationships. Those interviewees shared generally positive sentiments towards online gaming with their partners, describing it having been an important way they were able to spend time 'being' together while living apart. In their past relationships with other women, Revan and Ellie expressed to have had overall positive experiences playing games together. Similarly, they had generally positive experiences playing games with their current partners, spending a greater amount of time during the interview describing negative experiences in past relationships. While I had intended to talk about gaming in relationships, after the first two interviews I started to notice that this had coincidentally offered a kind of 'safe space' for many of these women where they were 'allowed to vent' about their relationship struggles.[8] Given the opportunity to 'vent', some participants

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[8] All interviewees spoke with me about their relationship struggles (either in their current or a past relationship), except Piper who only reported positive experiences for herself, but who had observed problems in many of her friends' relationships.

expressed their appreciation for the interview experience as an opportunity to consider how their relationship dynamics involved experiences of gaming more deeply, reflecting that they had "never thought about it in that way before."

3.4. 'Lean In' and 'Lean Out'

Exploring conflicts between couples relative to their gaming habits, as I examine here, demonstrates how the accounts of women's evolving (dis)engagement in relation to gaming cannot sufficiently be captured within a scope that is limited to discussions about girl's and women's barriers to entry. Established research on coping strategies suggest that women's participation can be obfuscated when deploying tactics camouflaging their gender to avoid online harassment and unwanted attention (Cote, 2017, p. 145), therefore making it difficult to witness and see women fully represented in the public eye. Conducting in-depth interviews and speaking with women about how they negotiate play with romantic partners helps to paint a more complex and complicated picture of their gaming lifeworlds. I thus highlight how the role of intersubjectivity in romantic ties can also impact women's shifting (dis)engagement in relation to gaming – the differing, complicated, and sometimes conflicting ways that women might sometimes lean towards and/or away from aspects of gaming and attach or detach from videogame assemblages. I also note how this dynamic can contribute to bonding with their significant other as well as contribute to discords in their intimate relationships.

3.4.1. 'Lean In'

Compared to couples who mostly played together, ongoing arguments in relationships about one partner 'gaming too much' while the other partner felt like a 'Gamer Widow' (a sense of losing a partner to gaming, see also Northrup & Shumway, 2014) seemed to only be an issue when one person more often played without the other. On multiple occasions, Jessie and Bianca had raised complaints with their boyfriends, asking them to play less games so that they could spend more time together, whereas D.Va's boyfriend had complained, asking her to play less to spend more time with him. Piper described how she knew many female friends where their boyfriend's gaming was a point of conflict, but that it wasn't an issue in her relationship because she and her boyfriend only ever played videogames together. As I explore below, one of the clearest takeaways from these interviews could suggest that couples should aim to converge their gaming and play together. However, I argue that the different kinds of images of the 'perfect' woman and imagined relationship ideals can also affect how such conflicts between couples might happen.

3.4.1.1. Jessie and James

Jessie (24) lived together with her boyfriend James in the city. Jessie didn't consider herself 'a gamer' but saw gaming as one of her various hobbies. She explained how she likewise wouldn't call herself 'a baker' but enjoyed baking. However, Jessie sometimes felt pressured to 'lean in' to gaming because she saw James as a gamer. "I feel that if I'd had no interest in games, and adamantly said 'I'm not a gamer', there

is no way we'd be in a relationship because that's his whole life. Know what I mean?" she said. I asked Jessie to further unpack her feelings about becoming pressured to play games, which she responded:[9]

> In general, that pressure to play games, I kinda do still feel that with James and gaming is kind of his entire world: he plays *Dungeons & Dragons* at least twice a week, more often three times a week; we play boardgames; he's playing videogames whenever he can. Most of the time it's like 'yeah, it's a hobby' it's good, I'll get onboard, and we'll do things together which works out – we often have fun with it. But sometimes it's 'you are picking games over me.'

Jessie's attachment to gaming as *"a hobby"* clashed with how she perceived James' attachment to gaming as *"his whole life."* If gaming was his whole life, then there wouldn't be enough room for Jessie too. While Jessie described how sometimes gaming was 'good' when it seemed like a hobby – wanting to "get onboard" as a shared hobby – sometimes, she felt that she had to compete with James' *more-than-a-hobby* commitments to gaming. The issue seemed to be about how James' time was spent, and particularly how much time was dedicated to gaming compared to Jessie.

In speaking with Jessie, she continued to return to how James' gaming schedule also came into conflict with the ability to schedule their lives together. For instance, Jessie explained how it took over a year before James changed *Dungeons & Dragons* nights from "Wednesday and Thursday" to "Monday and Thursday." "It was difficult to live with someone without seeing them for two days" she complained. "Just relationship-wise as well, it's just not where I wanted to be, and I told him that."

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[9] I've used 'games' rather than 'videogames' here to better include not only the playing of digital games but also boardgames and tabletop games.

Taking over a year to move *Dungeons & Dragons* indicated to Jessie that, in their relationship "games come first, and *if the opportunity arises*, then cool, we'll go for it." Since she felt like gaming was sometimes more important to James than her needs, Jessie overall felt pressured to *play more games* to maintain their relationship.

One partner's encouragement for the other partner to play (more) games can also be discussed as pressure to 'lean in' to games. Whenever Jessie showed "the mildest bit of interest," James would immediately purchase and set up the game for them either to play it together or Jessie to play through it herself. She believed this to be "a really nice gesture" but she also suspected that his enthusiasm was also perhaps a way – even without James realising it himself – that he was trying to merge their interests so that he could play more games. Jessie expressed to me that she thought that, at some level, James was unwittingly acting on the belief that if he could successfully encourage Jessie to become more of an idealised 'Gamer Girlfriend', then he could also spend more time with Jessie without sacrificing his gaming.

On one occasion, James created a 'Girlfriend Avatar' of Jessie. What I term 'Girlfriend Avatar' describes the practice of a partner customising their player-avatars to resemble their girlfriend. While Jessie perceived this as an attempt to 'include' her in James' gaming, the Girlfriend Avatar also evoked fluctuating mixed emotions for her. As Jessie explains,

> In *Destiny* he made a character that looks exactly like me and that was weird because I think that was like part of him 'I'm playing games without Jessie so like I'll include her somehow?' But it's weird, it's definitely weird.
>
> It was sort of like a three-tier wave of emotions of the first one being like 'what the fuck, that's really weird, I'm going to die repetitively at your hand'. The second one was like 'actually no, that's kind of flattering, like she's pretty cool

looking'. Then the third one was like 'no, you're controlling me and it's super weird'. And I just sort of fluctuate between the three.

James' recreation of Jessie's likeness as an attempt to better 'include' her in (his) gaming, suggested to Jessie that her representational inclusion had likely manifested from James' guilt. Rather than feeling more included, she suspected that James' Girlfriend Avatar came from a place of guilt over 'choosing' to play games instead of 'what he should be doing' in her opinion; that is, spending more time with her.

Evidently, relationship goals can shape how couples feel about each other's gaming practices. While these examples illustrate how Jessie sometimes felt pressured to play (more) games, I suggest that they can also describe how images of an idealised relationship comes into play: what a relationship 'should be' as imagined as societal ideals, how an individual understands their own wants and needs, as well as how one partner tries to consider or interpret the other's wants and needs. For instance, Jessie fluctuated between feeling that she wants to, or should, be 'a supportive girlfriend' (to get onboard), but then at other times feeling pressured to play (more) games for the sake of maintaining a relationship with James when it also felt like he was sometimes 'picking games' over her.

3.4.1.2. Bianca and Sylvando

Bianca (29) and her boyfriend Sylvando were both avid gamers, lifelong players, and working in the games industry. They first met each other as colleagues working together, where Bianca was the only woman hired at the games studio. In her

attempts to be included in a male-dominated workplace, Bianca "downplayed" her femininity, wanting to be "one of the guys." As she explains,

> The whole office was mostly guys. Actually, I was the only girl. Um, they were fine, there was no prejudice or anything. I guess, in a way, I try to be less girly around them. Maybe, not even in the way I dress but – not that I'm that feminine to begin with anyway – I don't try harder to talk about games. I've always liked talking about games, so it's not like I'm trying to be someone else. And, of course, I'd like if there were more girls in the office, that'd probably make us appear more normal, if you know what I mean? We do exist. Like normal female gamers.

> I don't think they'd question my competence if I dressed more feminine. Maybe I just don't want attention that way. Not that people flirt with me but I'd just rather they not think of me as a girl. I have talked about that with my boyfriend. I say, 'oh yeah, I think I'm like one of the guys in the office' and he tells me that 'no, that's not true, they'll always see you as a girl.' Whereas I don't feel that way. But he seems to think that, you know, no matter how I act, he says, 'I am still a girl, they're gonna see me that way. You'll never really be one of the guys.'

No matter how Bianca downplayed her femininity, Sylvando insisted that she would 'always be seen as a girl' and could never truly be 'one of the guys.' In response to her negative perception of 'Fake Gamer Girls' (that is, female players assumed to be feigning 'true' interest in games 'for the attention'), Bianca didn't want to have 'that kind of attention'. Consequently, wanting to be seen as a "normal female gamer," Bianca felt uncomfortable about the risks that she might be perceived as 'lacking' in her performance as a gamer, and dedication or skills as a games worker, if others came to 'think of her as a girl'.

For Bianca and Sylvando, videogames were a large part of both their lives, individually and as a couple. However, Bianca noted that Sylvando still considered himself "more of a Gamer" than her, because, as she explained it, "maybe he plays more of the hardcore games. You know the cool games like, the ones you associate

with Gamers nowadays." Bianca described to me that when she played games together with Sylvando she often felt as if she had to impress him, but this caused other frictions:

> Maybe I'm not healing properly, he tells me to stand back and heal the team. Whereas I like, you know, jumping into the action and attacking. Which kind of 'defeats the purpose' he reckons, 'cause I just end up dying and no-one gets healed. But I try and do a good job at both. […] Whatever, I'll just play it my style. […]
>
> Sometimes it is nicer to play games without him because I feel like I have to impress him – not that I don't feel like I don't have to impress other people on a team, like if we're talking about *Overwatch*. But if he's there, like, he knows I'm not as good as him at games – I still like to try and not be such a failure.

The imagined prescribed roles for how a player 'heals properly' in hand with how Bianca wanted to impress Sylvando (and other team members) conflicted with what she found to be more fun playstyles. Despite those pressures, Bianca ultimately resisted. In this example, we can observe how one partner can pressure the other partner to conform with normative hardcore gaming rather than support their enjoyment. When playing with her boyfriend, Bianca often felt pressured to play competitively rather than to just have fun, because, as a self-professed hardcore Gamer, Sylvando played to win. The friction between Bianca and Sylvando playstyles demonstrate how the default Gamer identity establishes hardcore gaming as one highly rigid mode of competitive play as if this were the only 'correct' way to play a game (cf. Paul, 2018). In such ways, the image of the default Gamer continues to define, regulate, and limit a wider range of different, more experimental, and more enjoyable playstyles during couple's play. Moreover, Sylvando, pressured Bianca to 'lean in' towards playing more competitively so that she wasn't "such a failure." In

turn, sometimes Bianca found it "nicer to play games without" Sylvando, despite also wanting to be playing (more) games together with him.

Bianca further described how the image of 'what people do in relationships' also seemed to be 'pressuring' her desire to spend more time and playing (more) games together with Sylvando. While she and Sylvando had been dating and living together for a while, this was her first relationship, whereas Sylvando had been in other relationships before. Bianca felt that she was "still trying to figure out how to be in a relationship." In Sylvando's past relationships with 'non-gamers', gaming has often been a point of conflict. Bianca believed that also being 'a gamer' was one of the reasons why Sylvando was initially attracted to her. Similarly, Bianca felt that "[she couldn't] imagine [herself] dating someone who doesn't play games." However, Sylvando and Bianca still argued about 'not spending enough time together' because Sylando was perceived as 'choosing' to play games instead. In response to this complaint, Sylvando had told to her "just do [her] own thing" and "just let [him] play games." As Bianca explains,

> He does like it when I do my own thing, 'cause it takes the pressure off him. Cause we have had an argument before where he pretty much says 'just do your own thing, just let me play my games. I don't – you don't stick to me every moment of the day.' Which, you know, is cool; we're both pretty independent.
>
> He was just telling me to get my own hobbies, which I had. It's part of me – just feels like if we're in the same room together, why should I act single when I have a boyfriend? But I'm getting used to it. Like, when you get in a relationship, you kind of lose yourself a bit. So, it's nice to kind of just go back to the things I used to do when I was single; playing my own games or just going to my room and playing on my DS; and he's happy doing whatever.
>
> There are times when he goes back to Cairns for a couple of weeks to see his family and when I'm by myself I tend to just do a lot of things that I don't do when he's here, whether it's play a lot of games, or watching movies I like, or planning trips for myself. Like maybe I just realise that when he's around I kind of put all that to one side and I don't know why. I do focus on myself more when he's not around and it's nice. […] Cause if he's not around, then I don't

really have an excuse to not do my own thing. If he's not around, I can't think 'oh, you know, why aren't we doing this together?' There's none of that. I have no choice. […] Yeah, there's just no pressure to do anything together. He certainly doesn't feel that pressure.

The image of 'being in a relationship' established different expectations for Bianca to 'being single'. In picturing what it meant to 'be in a relationship', Bianca felt that she and Sylvando 'should be' spending more time together as a couple. When he wasn't around, on the other hand, there was "no pressure [on her] to do anything together" while Sylvando didn't seem to be 'as pressured' to begin with. In some ways, Bianca and Sylvando's frictions about playing or not playing together reflect their differing expectations of relationships more generally. That is, pressures within and around gaming are continuous with the rest of their life together.

Bianca identified as 'a gamer' and played just as often as her 'gamer boyfriend'. However, Sylvando still considered himself to be more of 'a gamer' than Bianca because he played more typically 'hardcore' computer games like *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*). On the other hand, Bianca preferred asynchronous handheld games that she could pause, save, and putdown at any given time. For example, she enjoyed playing Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs) which used turn-based mechanics. In battle sequences for JRPGs, such as *Dragon Quest,* non-player character (NPC) opponents dance on the spot waiting until the player enters their actions. Meanwhile, Massively Multiplayer Online (MMOs) games like *World of Warcraft* centre around more social and team-based activities, such as raiding in guilds. Able to pause asynchronous gaming, Bianca could more readily accommodate the potential needs or wants of her boyfriend, if or whenever they came up. If Sylvando needed her to stop playing a game, she could easily put it

down. Therefore, Bianca believed that her preference for asynchronous gaming also created opportunities to give her boyfriend more attention. Meanwhile, she felt that Sylvando couldn't give her the same consideration when playing games such as *World of Warcraft*.

When Jessie and Bianca argued with their boyfriends, in both cases, both boyfriends – in one way or another – seemed to suggest that the solution was not playing less games, but that Jessie and Bianca should play *more* games. Overall, both Jessie and Bianca believed that they were 'more considerate' to their boyfriends than their boyfriends were to them. Both described certain personal compromises or sacrifices they had made for their boyfriends for the sake of their relationship. Bianca and Jessie spoke about how they often searched to create and facilitate more ways to spend time together with their boyfriend when it seemed as if he was unwilling to make the same kinds of compromises or sacrifices to play less. Jessie and Bianca shared the feeling that their partners didn't reciprocate similar efforts to maintain their relationship, but instead 'chose to play games' over them.

Notably, the games that their boyfriends had 'chosen over' Jessie and Bianca were *Dungeons & Dragons* and *World of Warcraft*. These were games that James and Sylvando, respectively, had been playing over multiple years with, in each case, a consistent friend group. For both Jessie and James, and Bianca and Sylvando, conflicts thus arose between commitments to the long durée of gaming with an established friendship circle and commitments to the long durée of romantic relationships. Ever since graduating high school, James would meet with a particular group of friends, two to three times a week, to play ongoing campaigns of *Dungeons*

& Dragons for several hours. When James was playing *Destiny*, moreover, he was also playing with members from his *Dungeons & Dragons* crew. Similarly, Sylvando played *World of Warcraft*, raiding with friends he had played since high school, and guild members, over long sessions every weekend. Both *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns as well as *World of Warcraft* raids require each member's commitment to playing together on a regular basis, sometimes over the course of multiple months or even multiple years. As both James and Sylvando had consistently played with the same friend group for five to ten years, these gaming practices also involved a significant relationship commitment.

Previously, both Jessie and Bianca had made attempts to join their boyfriend's gaming sessions. Jessie had tried playing *Dungeons & Dragons* with James and his friends, and Bianca had tried playing *World of Warcraft* with Sylvando and his friends. Both women viewed this as a compromise they had made in trying to spend more time with their boyfriends. However, both Jessie and Bianca eventually gave up after they found the experience unenjoyable. For one, it can be difficult to enter an established friendship circle, having to learn new social dynamics, while at the same time learning to how to play as a newcomer. It's easy to feel like an outsider or even a burden, 'slowing down' the group or 'letting down' the team. Trying to play a game together with a partner and their friends can also feel like a personal sacrifice made in trying to spend more time with a partner who's seemingly unwilling to sacrifice the time they spend playing games. A partner's feelings can turn towards greater resentment when it does not seem as if the other partner is willing to compromise or dedicate more time to being together if it does not also involve games.

On the other hand, one partner seemingly 'choosing games' over 'their partner' can also been seen as a shorthand for tensions between one partner seemingly 'choosing their friendships' over 'their romantic relationship'. From this perspective, similar tensions regularly appear in 'non-gaming' relationships as well. Treating the situation as if James and Sylvando were caught between choosing games or choosing their partners ignores the extensive social entanglements involved in their gaming rituals as a social ritual. These conflicts presented in gaming relationships cannot simply be reduced as a choice between 'games' (as an object, hobby, and leisure activity) and their partners (and their romantic relationship). Choosing not to play a game like *Dungeons & Dragons* or *World of Warcraft* can feel like breaking promise made in the commitment to a consistent friendship circle, letting those friends, friendships, and 'the team' down. Those partners could resent requests that seemingly demand them to choose between longstanding friendship circles or their romantic relationship. Ultimately, the longue durée of bonding and commitment required to play games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and *World of Warcraft* most effectively, can operate in significant tension with the longue durée of bonding and commitment of a romantic relationship.

3.4.1.3. Piper and Nick

PhD candidate Piper (26), and her boyfriend, Nick, also a PhD candidate, studied at the same university. While they officially lived apart, she spent a few nights each week over at Nick's place. When spending time together, they often played games as a shared activity. Piper didn't identify as 'a gamer'. I asked her if this was related to her

gender identity. She believed that Nick would not identify either, thinking that their academic studies were a much greater aspect of their lives. Piper further explained how she didn't view gender as an obstacle in her life, confident in her ability to "hold [her] own." As Piper explains,

> I've definitely always been very independent as a person. I don't see gender as an obstacle to anything. I mean I am a pretty strong feminist in terms of like, I'm interested in feminist theory, and I definitely am against sexism, and that kind of thing.
>
> I've never been the kind of girl who needs a guy to do anything for them or can't hold my own in an argument. You know, I've got friends who are guys, I can be one of the boys as well. I've never been a very girly-girl but I'm not really a true tomboy either. So, I guess I see myself as sort of in the middle.

On a spectrum of feminine and masculine gender performative signifiers, Piper viewed herself as 'in the middle' – as neither "a very girly-girl" nor "a true tomboy." She believed that she could therefore find enjoyment in both feminine and masculine coded interests, activities, and practices. She felt comfortable dressing in what she perceived to be a more feminine style, but also believed she could, at once, be "one of the boys." Meanwhile, she had often heard from her non-player "girl-friends" dating 'gamer boyfriends' that they had "big fights" about gaming as a recurring issue in their relationships. However, Piper reported to me that gaming wasn't an issue for her relationship because Piper and Nick only ever played games together. As Piper explains,

> We don't ever have a problem 'cause we only ever play together. Whereas my friends who do have a problem, it's 'cause the guy constantly plays by himself. In fact, I don't think she's ever played with him, and they've been together for years. So, the problem is that he spends a huge amount of his time doing it, and sometimes she doesn't mind because she's got other things to do. But if it's getting out of hand, like, if he's really obsessed with a game, she starts to get annoyed. So, it's just not a problem for me because we only ever play together.

> If my boyfriend wanted to play constantly in my presence, I would be angry, and I wouldn't be happy about it. But because we either compromise or have similar interests [it's not a problem]. I've had a lot of experience with the girl-friend who has to fight all the time against a guy who is obsessed with gaming, and that's usually because the girlfriend has no interest in gaming or because they have comparatively little interest in gaming, so they just don't have similar – they don't want to spend the same amount of time doing it, so that creates all kinds of problems. And then, you know, you have to nag and have rules, and everyone gets angry. I've never experienced that, but I've seen that with a lot of friends.

In observing how conflicts regularly occurred in her friend's (non-player and gamer boyfriend) relationships, Piper believed that one partner's gaming could sometimes create tensions, but also suggested that problems happened when the other partner never played or showed interest in games. Essentially, Piper felt that gaming wasn't an issue in her own relationship because she and her boyfriend shared those interests or compromised.

One of the most obvious ways to read these findings would be to suggest that couples experience problems in their gaming relationships if their gaming rhythms don't converge. In other words, gaming wasn't reported to be a site of conflict if both partners mostly played games together. Unlike Jessie, who felt pressured to lean in to play more games and become more like the idealised trope of the 'Gamer Girlfriend', Piper felt that she and Nick were able to "meet each other in the middle," treating gaming as "a bonus hobby" rather than the basis of their relationship. Conversely, Jessie imagined that if she stopped playing games or adamantly told James that she had no interest in games, they wouldn't be in a relationship at all because it was "his entire world." In many ways, while Piper does speak to leaning in towards gaming in her relationship with Nick to ensure that it remained a shared activity, unlike Jessie, this was possible because games played a different role in the

relationships. Overall, Piper didn't feel pressured to play more games or become more of a 'Gamer Girlfriend'. Nick's relationship to games had no obvious primacy over Piper's.

Piper clarified to me that Nick was not meant to play without her because she didn't want to miss out on following the game's narrative. Piper and Nick often played through videogames like *Fallout* and *Skyrim* while taking turns, sharing the controller. One time Nick accidentally lost their horse in *Skyrim* while she wasn't there, and so "he went around the whole of *Skyrim* trying to find a horse that looked like our horse so that I wouldn't know." When she found out, Piper had told Nick that "oh, it's really nice that you went to all that trouble, but you shouldn't have been playing without me!" Co-playing and ensuring that games remained a shared activity in their relationship was important for Piper, and she expected to continue being included.

Like James' Girlfriend Avatar of Jessie in *Destiny*, Piper and Nick usually created their player-avatars to resemble Piper. Unlike Jessie, Piper and Nick's Girlfriend Avatars made them both feel that she was more included in their gaming, particularly in games where Piper would want Nick to play more of the action sequences while she spectated. As Piper explains,

> If we can create characters, we usually create them to look like me. Um, just because I think he feels like I feel more included if it's me, which is true. We have made one that looked like him once but usually it's me. He seems to like it, and I like it as well 'cause I'm always 'let's get me a new outfit!' and I'm like 'I want a dog, let's get a dog!'
>
> I guess I feel like I'm rooting for us more. Like if he's playing, like with *Fallout*, I usually let him do more of the playing because there's a lot more shooting, and things jump out at you at any time, and I find it a bit stressful. So, if he's playing as me, I feel like I'm in the game, and he's obviously directing me, so I feel like I'm watching something happening to me. So, I do feel more

included, because you know […] I'm like 'oh you killed me! Don't let me die!'
I think it just makes it more fun for both of us.

The distinctions observed between Piper's positive experiences of the use of a Girlfriend Avatar and Jessie's "three tier waves" of mixed emotions, can indicate how problems typically occurred when partners weren't in fact playing the game together. Even though Jessie felt that James' Girlfriend Avatar in *Destiny* indicated that he was trying to better include her, it was his avatar rather than theirs. She wasn't playing or spectating *Destiny* together with him. In the end, Jessie wasn't included either as a co-player or as a spectator where she could follow the game's storyline.

Despite *Destiny's* social functions as a massively multiplayer online (MMO) game that connects players over the internet, *Destiny* does not as easily afford the same kinds of continued couch co-op controller swapping or spectatorship that characterised Piper and Nick's playthroughs of open world roleplaying games (RPG). Just as Jessie and Bianca's sense of exclusion from the team gameplay of their boyfriends was linked in part to the structure of those games, the difference between Jessie and Piper's relations to these avatars that resembled them, was partly build in the games. Put simply, Jessie and James weren't sharing the controller like Piper and Nick, but one crucial reason for this is due to the differing affordances for couch co-op play or spectatorship offered by MMOs, such as *Destiny,* and RPGs, such as *Skyrim* and *Fallout*. These differences suggest that game researchers might better attend to the material, structural, and environmental affordances offered by different game titles when discussing the potential existential conditions for 'inclusion' of women players more broadly.

3.4.2. 'Lean Out'

To reiterate, while the most noticeable thread across these interviews clearly demonstrates how couples argued about their gaming habits when they didn't play together, here I want to raise a question rather than suggest a solution. Instead of recommending that couples should simply continue trying to 'better converge' their gaming habits with one another, I propose a different kind of interpretation that can also be examined from these results. When women spoke with me about when they felt pressured to 'play more games' or 'play less games', I argue here that their accounts simultaneously invoke idealised fantasies of the 'Gamer Girlfriend' (see figure 10) and the image of the perfect 'Well-Rounded Woman' operating in hand with societal ideas about idealised relationships and the good life. What kind of *woman* should I be? What kind of *girlfriend/partner* should I be? What should my *relationship* be like? How should I be *living my life*? I suggest that these kinds of images of the perfect woman(hood) and ideal(ised) relationships also help to explain what could cause the conflicts and accords between couples relative to their gaming practices.
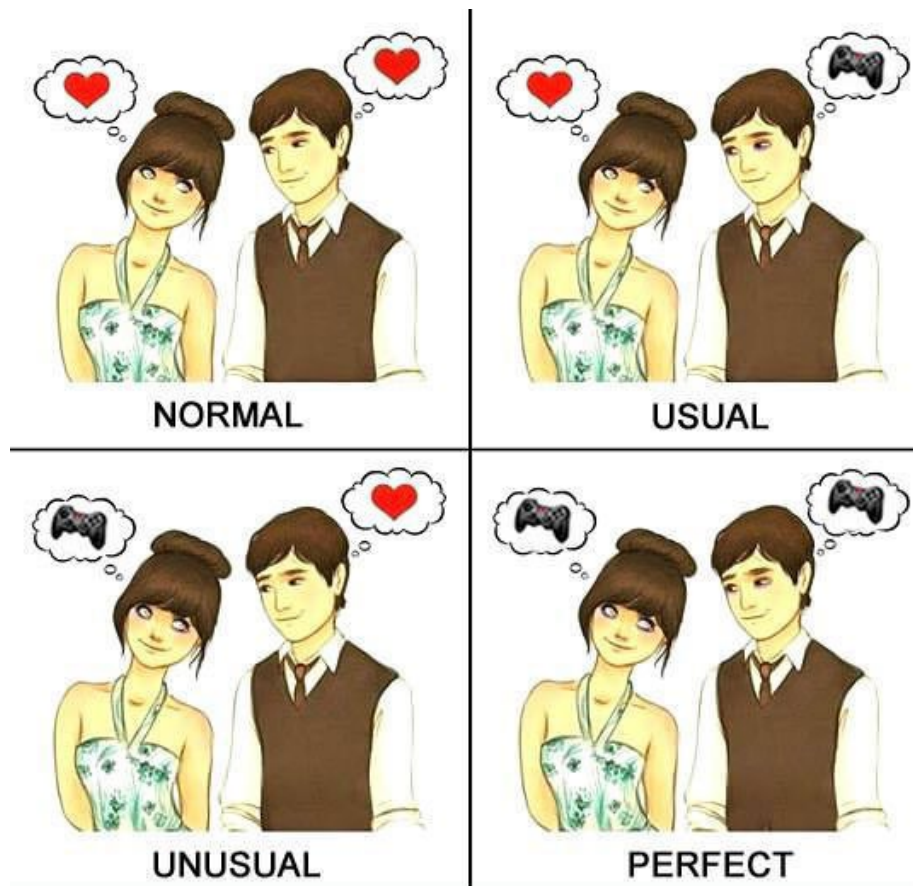
Figure 10: Illustration of a heterosexual couple, depicting the 'perfect couple' as both being interested in games. Imaged sourced from
https://www.pinterest.com.au/pin/514325219914789186/

3.4.2.1. Shepard and Conrad

Since Shepard (29) began living together with her boyfriend, game developer Conrad, Shepard had become "the bigger gamer" in their household. Shepard explained to me how she "didn't have a lot of games growing up" because her "family wasn't wealthy." While she had played on a Nintendo 64 "ten years after everyone else," moving in with Conrad meant she had greater access to modern videogames and new consoles that were previously unavailable to her due to financial barriers. Meanwhile, Conrad was often too busy with his work making games to play as many games. Shepard explained to me that, ironically, "everyone in the games industry

never gets the time to play much anymore because they're always trying to meet project deadlines." Conrad initially had suggested to Shepard that she should play some more videogames to resolve issues related to their diverging sleeping patterns. Conrad would sleep in, while Shepard was an early riser. She told him that she was "bored with nothing to really do but wait around for him to get up" on the weekends. At Conrad's suggestion, she had since used that time to play videogames.

Rather than conflicts appearing in their relationship about one partner 'gaming too much', Shepard felt that being 'a gamer' conflicted with wider societal ideals of being 'a perfect well-rounded woman'. As Shepard explains,

> I make clay animation, you know, I like tech stuff, I build like, building websites, and messing around with code and stuff. I do boxing. I do yoga. I do toastmasters. But I feel like there are all these other parts of my identity that, I guess, I'm trying to be a magical well-rounded human being and I feel like that just being a gamer doesn't give me that well-roundedness of being the perfect woman in society.

For Shepard, the image of perfect womanhood and the Gamer identity were incompatible. Attachment to the image of being "the perfect woman," in McRobbie's terms, promised Shepard "the good life" (Berlant, 2012). Wanting to be a 'well-rounded' woman, Shepard stressed she had various other interests, hobbies, and activities beyond gaming. While she played videogames, she also made clay animation, built websites, messed around with code, and she practiced boxing, yoga, and toastmasters. Consequently, Shepard did not (or only sometimes) identify as a gamer because the Gamer identity didn't afford her a sense of idealised well-rounded womanhood. Despite playing more often than her 'gamer boyfriend', the

Gamer identity could not adequately describe how Shepard saw herself, who she wanted to be, or what she wanted to achieve in life.

Outside of watching TV and movies together, most of Shepard and Conrad's shared activities revolved around games "in different derivatives." As she explains,

> We don't actually do a lot of stuff outside of the house, which is really a bit sad. […] I just feel like I need to be more of an adult, and you know, go to dinner, go to the theatre. I don't know, I think he just doesn't really like leaving the house and I'm like I just want to do stuff with my life. I want to leave the house, I want to go to the movies, and he just doesn't.

Shepard's imagined ideals about adult dating practices worked in hand with the ways she wanted to be and become a more perfect well-rounded woman. While Conrad didn't seem to be interested in leaving the house, going out to dinner, out to the theatre, or out to the movies, and so on, Shepard viewed such activities as part of what it meant to be adults in a relationship. In turn, a conflict for Shepard in her relationship with Conrad emerged from the tensions between Shepard's attachment to her picture of the good life and Conrad's detachment from that image and comparatively greater attachment to living a more domestically bounded lifestyle. Shepard's accounts provide examples of societal scripts attached to the promised good life and how the figure of the perfect woman, images of adulthood, and idealised relationships can create conflicts in gaming relationships.

3.4.2.2. D.Va and Hanzo

Scientist D.Va (26) and boyfriend, PhD Candidate Hanzo, lived together with their dog Winston. D.Va regularly played videogames, generally a few to several hours every day. On the other hand, Hanzo was often "too stressed out" from his research

and teaching to play games as much as he used to play with D.Va, needing to relax and winddown in other ways. D.Va believed that Hanzo identified as 'a gamer', while she had initially responded on the recruitment survey that she did not identify as one. However, during our interview she wanted to change her response to claim the gamer identity for herself too. She generally didn't tell other people that she's 'a gamer' because she didn't want to 'have to deal with others' questioning her 'Gamer cred' as a female player. In response to harassment, D.Va always muted herself when playing online games. More generally, D.Va also avoided talking about videogames with other people in her everyday life, even decidedly keeping her interest in gaming a secret from one of her male 'Gamer' co-workers because she didn't want to have to argue with him about his problematic views on 'Fake Gamer Girls'. Muting herself allows D.Va to avoid having to "deal with" other people or with unwanted interactions. In situations where she was unable to use technological affordances to camouflage her gender, she instead avoided talking about videogames.

D.Va's relation to *Overwatch* is exemplary. She first became interested in playing this game when a woman she followed on Instagram spoke positively about it. D.Va then researched *Overwatch* fan forums on Reddit threads to investigate the gaming community before trying it out. She was pleasantly surprised to find that *Overwatch* seemed to have a more inclusive community that was more welcoming towards female players. In particular, D.Va admired how Blizzard, as a company, responded to the player community. For D.Va, Blizzard seemed to care about diversity, inclusion, and making genuine efforts to ensure that *Overwatch* maintained a friendlier community for all players.

It sometimes bothered Hanzo when D.Va was ignoring him and neglecting her share of the household chores when playing videogames. She generally agreed with Hanzo, believing that she should be better prioritising Hanzo and his happiness, their relationship, and the cleanliness of their shared living environment, especially if playing games was becoming a negative impact on these aspects of their lives. As D.Va explains,

> We are physically on the same couch, but we are doing two different things. I know that gets to Hanzo a bit now 'cause he wants like more attention […] but you can totally see it from his perspective, it's like you have your person that you really like sitting there and they're not paying attention to you, but I like games more, sooooo [both laugh].
>
> We tend to see eye to eye on a lot of things, so I do agree with him that a clean house ranks above gaming because it's like, it's how you live dude, it should be clean. […] Oh god okay, my dishes have not been washed in like four days, they're just like sitting in the sink, 'cause I don't want to and cause I'm playing games.
>
> I should ease up on my gaming to make sure that my partner feels happy, 'cause I feel like that should be my main goal is to make him happy, and if this is obviously impacting it then I should cut down. […] But it ebbs and flows. So, there are moments when I'm like not into gaming and there are moments when I'm really into it. […] I retaliate sometimes is because it's like […] I'm an adult, or […] I know I'm a human, so I can make choices for myself.

In reflecting on her own gaming rituals, D.Va contemplated questions regarding what a relationship should be, believing that her "main goal" as a partner should be making make sure that her partner was happy. If her gaming was negatively impacting Hanzo's happiness, she believed that to be – and wanting to be – 'a good partner' meant that she should "ease up" on her gaming. Overall, D.Va's gaming varied in line with the "ebbs and flows" of certain life circumstances. For instance, sometimes D.VA believed she "retaliated" by playing more often, pushing back against the pressures to not play games. However, D.Va understood that Hanzo, as

her partner, would ultimately respect her agency and her abilities as an adult – as a human being – to be able to make her own decisions and life choices.

In evoking her own image of the good life, D.Va expressed the belief that shared maintenance of her and Hanzo's home environment should be prioritised because this was a core aspect of 'how someone lives'. Similarly, speaking to the image of what it meant to be 'a good partner', D.Va stressed that her actions (and her gaming) should not be negatively impacting her partner's happiness. However, she also stressed that a good partner should also respect the other's autonomy as an inalienable human right. Therefore, D.Va defined the good life as bound up with people's agency and respect for how one decides to live their own (version of the good) life, while remaining accountable for their actions and impact on others.

3.4.2.3. Ellie and Joel; Ellie and Tommy

Librarian Ellie (24) met her current partner, Joel, through mutual friends at an arcade. Striking up a conversation, Ellie and Joel first bonded over "hating people who play games" and their shared concerns about "toxicity" in gaming culture. After Gamergate, Ellie and Joel had become increasingly disenfranchised, "both kind of ready to throw it all in at that stage," and were strongly considering leaving gaming altogether. As Ellie explains,

> I remember just talking about this issue with him and how we were both kind of ready to throw it all in at that stage. But then that kind of developing further than that, of trying to find – 'cause I remember trying really hard even back then to find the redeeming factor of it all, 'cause it is something that I have like invested so much time in or like so much of my life in. I don't really know other like ways of doing it rather than only playing boardgames with people. […] I guess reading – that's the other thing I do a lot of – it's not really the most

social activity. Yeah, but it did lead to being like you know, 'What is something humane that you do enjoy playing? What have you historically played?'

Ellie remembered "trying really hard […] to find the redeeming factor of it all." Leaning out, Ellie still struggled to leave. Ellie had "invested so much time," or rather "so much of her life" in games. Although Ellie and Joel first connected through their mutual disillusionment with the culture, their conversation turned towards the search to find more "humane" games. When Ellie found out that Joel had not yet played games that she enjoyed such as *The Chaos Engine*, *Binding of Isaac*, *Don't Starve* and *Don't Starve Together*, Ellie offered Joel a list of various (more humane) games to play, suggesting that they "could play them together." As this developed into a relationship, Ellie and Joel not only have played videogames together since; they "also play a lot of boardgames and tabletop gaming together" as well. Both Ellie and Joel were "gamers, in so far that [they were] deeply invested in games but that [they] would also be the first ones to decry the culture." For Ellie "the problem isn't (video)games; the problem is the culture."

Although Ellie and Joel didn't end up "throwing it all in" after meeting each other, Ellie spoke with me about how she had stopped playing *League of Legends* (LoL) a few years earlier due to harassment. During a past relationship, Ellie had felt pressured to play and continue playing *League of Legends* with her then boyfriend, Tommy, and their housemates, despite finding the experience "deeply unpleasant." The number of people in their household also closely corresponded with the number of players in a *League of Legends* team. Overlayed with the social entanglements of the household dynamic, Ellie felt obliged to play *League of*

Legends to support the others and to cope with harassment, until she reached a breaking point. As Ellie explains,

> Often just feeling like I had to play because there were four people living together and that was enough people to play with only like one random coming onto the team, and feeling like I had to keep playing. But then feeling like I was letting everyone down 'cause, you know, no matter what lane I was on, I was terrible.
>
> So, I guess people kind of getting – it wasn't always my partner as well – that's the problem with the house dynamic. It always kind of felt like it was this collective shaming almost. But it wasn't as bad as being yelled at or being like 'you can't play!' kind of thing. But kind of, like, feeling obliged to do it and finding it deeply unpleasant when I did.
>
> But I still wanted to be able to play with people altogether. And, yeah, people not defending me when someone's putting you on blast from the other team or saying how shit you are from the other team.
>
> But yeah, with that, I always felt like it was on me for not being more open about how much I didn't want to play *LoL*, you know? So, I think it was a bit of both. They could have been nicer to me and maybe, as a partner, Tommy could have directly defended me a little bit more.
>
> But yeah, in saying that. At the end of the day, it got to a point where I was, like 'I'm just not gonna play this game anymore. I'll just sit and watch. I'd rather you play with strangers and me get some enjoyment out of watching it than feeling like I was being – yeah.' So yeah, it was conflict – and not – from that. Or it would just put be more of a general strain than a conflict in that situation.

Since neither Ellie's then boyfriend, Tommy, nor her housemates ever defended her when she experienced harassment from other players, she felt this to almost be like a form of "collective shaming." When Tommy and their friends could have supported her, their silence contributed towards normalising the harassment. Their collective silence made the harassment to be acceptable, or at least not remarkable, making it more difficult for Ellie to feel like she should or even could be calling out the harassment she was experiencing. Despite wanting to play with Tommy and her housemates, eventually Ellie quit playing *League of Legends* with them, refusing to cope.

In response to online harassment, Ellie, like D.Va, also never used headsets while playing online. Ellie observed that reading in-game text channels tended to be "not as horrible" or at least meant that it was "easier to distance" herself from problematic players. Using technological affordances, Ellie also sought out online multiplayer games that did not require co-ordinating with other people over voice chat, such as *Journey* and *Don't Starve Together*. Like D.Va, Ellie similarly discussed with me the ways she would carefully research a videogame's reputation beforehand and investigated how welcoming its community seemed towards diverse players. Ellie searched widely to find "humane" games to avoid online harassment, but furthermore, after witnessing Gamergate, she believed that if she kept playing any videogame the playing of more "humane" games was an ethical duty if she wanted to consider herself to be "a good person." Ellie continued to refuse to cope once with harassment after Gamergate, not only by being more selective about games she played but because she "trusted Joel to have [her] back," reporting that she never felt pressured to keep playing a game she wasn't enjoying anymore when they were gaming together.

3.4.2.4. Revan and Nox; Revan and Rand

Student, Revan (24), met her current boyfriend, Nox, on a dating site where they had first bonded over their shared love of retro videogames. Revan considered gaming more as "a stable constant" in their relationship than "an important part of" their relationship. Revan viewed gaming as a foundation of the relationship, suggesting that if she didn't play games, they probably wouldn't be in a relationship. However,

unlike Jessie, who worried that James' wouldn't be in a relationship with her if she adamantly told him she had no interest in games because it was "his entire world," Revan believed that she and Nox's shared interests were crucial since she felt that they would have little to talk about, but that they shared multiple interests beyond gaming. Consequently, while Revan described being 'a gamer' as fundamental to her relationship with Nox, Revan didn't feel pressured to play (more) games since gaming was one of many shared activities. Likewise, Revan believed that Nox would never think of her as his 'Gamer Girlfriend' in the same way she would never call him her 'Gamer Boyfriend'.

Revan believed that videogames would not be the problem in relationships where people argued about games, but that wider relationship problems caused the conflicts related to videogames between couples. To illustrate her point, Revan described to me problems from when she was in a previous "crappy relationship" and her negative experiences of playing computer games together with her then boyfriend, Rand. If Revan and Rand were playing games together like *World of Warcraft*, he expected her to "help out and donate" all her in-game items, money, and other rewards to him. After Rand introduced Revan to a new computer game, she "got better pretty quickly" to Rand's contempt. If she ever beat him or won a game too quickly, he would punish her with "the silent treatment." As Revan explains,

> He'd get the shits with me and ignore me for a couple hours if I'd beat him. I would feel like I would try to not kick his ass as quickly, as I did sometimes in, like, *Age of Mythology*. Or I'd purposely not choose the race of folks that I'm good at. I'd be like "oh yeah, variety!" but yeah, it wasn't really variety at all. It was, like, I'd better – I'll handicap myself, so I don't win immediately.

> I really didn't want to play videogames with people for a while after that and so I mostly just retreated to playing some single player stuff. I was on the PC

back when I was seeing my first shitty partner, then I was like 'I don't want to be on the computer ever again' and so I'd play videogames on consoles from, like, a late teen era.

When she was dating Rand, Revan felt pressured to hold herself back from playing well or else she would be "stonewalled" by her boyfriend. When playing competitively with him, she had felt that she had to "not win immediately." After that relationship, she "retreated" to single-player handheld console games. As I have argued elsewhere, how Revan felt pressured to hold herself back and be self-sacrificing reflects heteronormative societal ideals that represent women as weaker than, if not subservient to, their male counterparts (Butt, 2016a). In many ways, this example further illustrates how women's (dis)engagement in relation to gaming can be significantly shaped by their lived experiences of playing with their partners in ways which aren't sufficiently captured by a focus on entry points. Revan's experiences of playing with Rand significantly informed how she leant away from multiplayer and computer games.

3.5. Conclusion

Discussing the role of gaming in their romantic relationships, these would often recount how they felt pulled towards and/or away from gaming. The women's stories presented in this chapter help to demonstrate how the affective dimensions of (not)coping can shape and reshape women's unfolding gaming lifeworlds. Revan "retreated" to single-player games in the same ways that Ellie stopped playing *League of Legends*. Despite leaning out in response to past negative experiences, they also described to me how they found different and more enjoyable ways to keep

gaming. The affective structures of leaning in and/or leaning out problematically reduce women's (non)participation to a choice. Treating women's (non)participation as a choice cannot adequately capture the wider range of tensions and pressures associated with women's evolving (non)participation.

The presentation of lean in and lean out offers women gendered scripts that can also highlight the limited affordances of their (non)participation in gaming. For instance, the image of the idealised Gamer Girlfriend can pressure women to play more videogames. Meanwhile, the hardcore Gamer identity can pressure women to play videogames in more competitive but less enjoyable ways. Conversely, the image of the perfect well-rounded woman 'who has it all' can pressure women to lean out of the Gamer identity which demands that being a 'Gamer' must be a characteristic that distinguishes 'Gamer Girls' from other 'normal' women. Rather than quantifying gender and gaming, my research demonstrates that the complexities of gendered relations, dynamics, and identities are continuously and contingently produced in relation to, during, and within – rather than objectively or externally determining – videogame play.

Research on women's coping strategies and the affective dimensions of (not)coping help to explain how many women continue to play despite barriers, carefully managing their environments, often in ways that also camouflage their gender and obscure their contributions to gaming. In response to negative experiences, women did not necessarily leave, exit, or throw the proverbial towel in altogether. Instead, gaming evolved into different kinds of play. Often these women moved towards forms of gaming and participation that would be more difficult to

witness. Compared to the literature's wider focus on women's 'entry' (and to a much lesser degree 'exit') points, drawing from interviewee's descriptions of their lived experiences, as outlined above, demonstrates how the (not)coping affective structures of 'leaning in' and 'leaning out' can provide a more nuanced and flexible framework to help game researchers develop a fuller, more complex, and reflexively critical account of women's (non)participation and evolving (dis)engagement towards and/or away from gaming within their everyday lifeworlds.

While I have found leaning in and leaning out to be a useful framework here, once again, it is not my intention to premise a particular approach, but rather argue for a wider set of approaches. However, there is a need to highlight how social context shapes gaming before and during moments of play, and the ways that play is continued to be embedded in concepts of leisure and domesticity that, furthermore, challenge assumptions that all (non)participation is founded on free agency. Social relations, such as romantic partners, mediate, generate, and significantly influence gaming practices. Solely focusing on videogames as the primary text of games research not only fails to make a full account of gaming but also critically misrepresents experiences of play.

Chapter 4 | Intoxicated Lifeworlds

Videogames in Drunk Spaces

> In many ways, drinking 'remains a point of political, legal, and social conflict'
> (Gusfield, 1987, p. 87), and the same can be said about games.
>
> (Olli Sotamaa & Jaakko Stenros, 2016, p. 88)

Game studies academics gathered at the pub down the road from the campus to ritually celebrate the conclusion of the conference. My mentor carefully balanced 10 Jägermeister shots on a round sticky black plastic tray, corralling me and a few colleagues to throw back and drink together the herbaceously, molassey, aniseedy liquor. The five of us raised two shot glasses to the air and with one small shot glass held pierced between thumb index fingers in each hand we toasted to my first conference presentation. One of my friends, another student who also presented earlier that day, had already gone home before the social drinks. "You should tell her that she's missing out on the most important part of the conference" my mentor advised. He went on to explain how attending post-conference drinks were even more important than the conference; it's an opportunity to develop networks that can open future invitations, collaborations, and jobs.

The post-conference social drinks offer an informal space where other academics can give further in-depth feedback on your work without the constraints of allocated questions and discussion time. When students and early career researchers drink with senior scholars in the field, the embodied practice of

'becoming-drunk' (Ferrer-Best, 2018) together helps to break down power hierarchies. When game researchers become-drunk together, we can become more easily visible as colleagues sharing similar interests. The shared chemical alterations while drinking alcohol act as a gentle reminder of our shared bodily functions – bodies that we might otherwise too easily forget when we treat academic conferences as a gathering of minds rather than bodies (Butt et al., 2018). Academic search committees assume that applicants have developed a professional network. Drinking with academics to establish networks is not an explicit prerequisite but many informal academic networking social events often involve drinking. At campus seminars, cheese platters and wine are served. Departments organise Friday drinks to welcome the weekend. "You can be a world leading scholar" my mentor said to me, "but it's also about if colleagues enjoy hanging out with you. There can be two prospective applicants with similar CVs, but I'd rather give someone a job if I actually like working with them because you're going to have to see each other every day." He then tasked me with making sure that the invited keynote always had a drink in hand for the rest of the evening.

At other post-conference drinks, I seek out 'my people'. I create academic networks, develop connections with scholars, mentors, and fellow postgraduate students. We drink together in luxurious scenes. Walking with champagne flutes around castle grounds in Dundee. Lounging with cocktails in the summer evening sun in Turin. Sitting with cold half-litre cans of Suntory Highball along riverbanks in downtown Kyoto. Shared moments of drinking together have solidified important friendships to exist outside and alongside our work. Social drinks have provided an

opportunity for me to speak with scholars whose work I greatly admire and who, in turn, imparted invaluable wisdom about navigating academia.

As I establish myself as a feminist/diversity games researcher, I have noticed at post-conference drinks how some colleagues would speak to me about 'why they don't do feminist/diversity research'. I don't raise the topic, but it still seems to follow me around post-conference drinks. I don't think these colleagues are seeking to challenge or critique feminist/diversity work. Instead, it feels as if they're seeking my forgiveness. To the white men, who felt like it wasn't their place, I tell them that I believe that all bodies are intersectional, and that feminist/diversity work is therefore everybody's work that is for everyone. To the women and non-binary folk, who felt like they 'didn't want to be pigeonholed' because the subject was already so much an everyday aspect of their lives, I tell them that I believe that being able to do the research they want to do *is* the point of feminism too. I'm intrigued to regularly find myself in these confessional booths during post-conference drinks. It reminds me of when Ashley Brown played as a Priest character class in *World of Warcraft* and found that her interviews often turned into Catholic confessions (2013, p. 87). Such conversations rarely emerge during conferences themselves; confessionals feel too personal for a Q&A in front of everyone else.

One similar occasion, on my way back to the conference hotel in the early hours of the morning, I bumped into a peer who looked white as a sheet. I asked him if he's seen a ghost. He told me that he had just witnessed a famous game studies scholar sing karaoke. My peer said that it was "a slightly traumatic experience" for him because he was "too sober" for the situation. Students witnessing more senior

game academics becoming-drunk may challenge institutionalised hierarchies, but it can also be uncomfortable to be sober around drunkenness. Through the differences in embodied chemical states, sharing a drunk space with others becoming-drunk while an individual remains sober can emphasise the divergence of people's experiences. Attending academic social events, such as the post-conference drinks, offers networking opportunities that are integral for game research students and early career scholars. Drinking with peers and more senior scholars helps to create the necessary connections, both formal and informal, that can help to better support their research as well as their future careers. Fear of missing out, known colloquially as 'FOMO' (Milyavskaya et al., 2018), not only captures a sense of wishing that one could be there in social events and celebrations, but in an academic context FOMO can also speak to a certain pressure to attend – if not also drink with others – as these events become more closely tied with potential employment opportunities. Correspondingly, joy of missing out, or 'JOMO' (Misener, 2019), expresses the feelings of contentment from staying in and disconnectedness as a form of 'self-care' (see Chapter 5).

For many, videogames and alcohol are part of their intersubjective webs of social relationships. As this chapter's epigraph from Olli Sotamaa and Jaakko Stenros suggests, both videogames and alcohol, respectively, tend to stir moral controversy – being especially imagined as disruptions to the social. Yet, for many, alcohol and videogames are both part of the various material artifacts, rituals, and embodied practices that make up their ordinary social lifeworlds. In a similar manner to the ways that women's coping strategies (see Chapter 3) emphasise the affective networks

influencing their (non)participation in gaming, even if individuals remain sober at social drinks these attendees still engage with others becoming-drunk in ways that can influence their (non)participation. A drunken atmosphere can feel intoxicating, or it can feel sobering. These are contingent on these intersubjective relationships in the shared proximity to other's becoming-drunk and contextualised by the configuration of the social drunk space.

Rather than treating alcohol and videogames as objects of risk, we must observe how their social fields are contested and contingent or else we "remain doomed to view the topic through a narrow lens of moral finger pointing" (Thurnell-Read, 2016, p. 3). To treat videogames as part of (rather than separate from) everyday life, this chapter's consideration of intoxicated lifeworlds brings greater attention to a gap in the literature where game studies has yet to sufficiently explore how the social configuration of drunk spaces shapes people's (non)participation in gaming, and how people's (non)participation in gaming shapes the social configuration of those drunk gaming spaces.

Through ethnographic participant-observation and site analysis, this chapter examines the assemblages of different drunk spaces relative to videogames. In response to problems associated with drunken behaviour at offline public, industry, and academic social events relative to videogames (such as eSport tournaments, pop culture conventions, game developer conference satellite parties, post-game jam celebrations, and game studies post-conference drinks), rather than appealing for either tolerance or abolition of these drunk spaces, this chapter argues that the way drinking is practiced, situated, and organised can be disassembled,

reassembled, and move beyond the exclusionary configurations. In doing so, we might better include a greater range of participants, improve people's capacity to enjoy these socials, and, importantly, feel a sense of belonging and safety while attending.

Gaming cultures and drinking cultures are entwined in many people's everyday lives. And recognising this mean recognising we cannot study games and gaming as if they were culturally discrete. Videogames and gaming practices are important aspects of culture, but they do not precede culture. Consequently, I contend that game studies must attend to the continuities between games and culture and how overlapping cultural practices such as drinking can shape people's sense of belonging in gaming and those drinking social scenes. The drunk spaces occupied and created, relative to gaming, constitute an easily overlooked area of inquiry when game research becomes bounded by the central investigation of play, players, and the creation of play.

This chapter emphasises the continuity with drunk spaces that remains a significant aspect of many people's gaming lifeworlds and explores some of the ways social drinking practices impact people's experiences of inclusion and exclusion in videogames. To develop a better understanding of the drinking cultures of gaming culture, this chapter argues that game and cultural researchers must historicise and attend the 'peripheral' fields beyond (and related to but not superseded by) videogames. In making this argument, I seek to challenge commonplace assumptions that gaming cultures and communities are formed out of their relationship to the 'unique' medium, and the consequential disciplinary rigidity of

game studies. Instead, this chapter is not about how gaming creates these scenes, or how these scenes only appear because videogames are involved, but it examines how other (drinking) cultures inform and are shaped by (and continue to shape) a much longer lineage of social and cultural (drinking and assembly) practices.

4.1. Academic Background

Cross-culturally, a wide range of social, celebratory, and professional events serve alcohol. In Western cultures, drinking alcohol is closely tied to socio-cultural signposts for notable life events (birthdays, weddings, and funerals), as well as more quotidian rhythms of the everyday (informal social calls, meetups, and group gatherings) (Valverde, 1998). However, the role of drunk spaces in the cultures of videogames has yet to be addressed in the academic literature. This section maps some of the key academic literature on drinking cultures to contextualise the findings below and highlight their potential contribution to the field of game studies. It provides additional academic background on drinking cultures to bridge the gap between the discrete fields of games and critical drug studies. While there is no research yet published on the social drinking scenes of gaming culture itself, surveying the wealth of academic literature from critical drug studies helps to build a better understanding of the gendered and socio-cultural roles of alcohol consumption in people's social lifeworlds. Thus, this chapter adds to the contributions of this thesis by providing a foundation for approaching drunk spaces and the role they play in constituting gaming culture, seeking to promote a greater

diversity of approaches in the field and, in particular, a greater appreciation of the continuities between videogame and 'non-videogame cultures'.

To take drinking, like videogames, as part of what makes up the materiality of the world, I am less interested here in looking at how alcohol or videogames might disrupt the social. Therefore, this chapter departs from the aims of addiction studies, health research, law enforcement, or government officials to curtail drinking (Holmila, 1995). Instead, this research draws from feminist and sociological research in the field of critical drug studies (Hunt & Antin, 2019). In doing so, this chapter considers our existential-material entanglements through a sociological lens to examine how intoxicated lifeworlds can generate different ways for the self to relate to videogames, to drinking, and to Others.

4.1.1. Alcohol and Videogames in Addiction Studies

Most research relevant to the intersection between videogames and alcohol is published in the field of addiction studies. However, this literature is overwhelmingly preoccupied with the problem of alcohol dependency and concerns about people, especially youths and children, becoming 'addicted' to videogames. Various scholars have conducted psychological experiments testing to find whether there are any correlations between alcohol dependency and internet gaming addiction (Han et al., 2015; Na et al., 2017), as well as the impact of alcohol content depicted within videogames and their possible association with alcohol use among young people (Cranwell et al., 2016). Arguably, the tendency to pathologize alcohol and videogames speak to public assumptions about their consumption as immoral,

unproductive, or disruptive to social norms. The moral lens through which alcohol and videogames tend to be viewed encourages a narrow understanding of how they play a role in society. Rather than making claims about whether people *should* or *should not* play videogames, this focus is widely understood to be unproductive in the discipline of game studies, where researchers seek instead to develop a better understanding about how – or perhaps why – people play. Therefore, the morally deterministic approach of addiction studies is closely linked to its orientation to psychology and clashes with the sociological epistemological frameworks of game studies.

4.1.2. Alcohol and Videogames in Game Studies

Despite the central role that drinking plays in many sites of gaming culture, little research has been published in the field game studies on the topic of drinking and alcohol. Bringing attention to this gap, Olli Sotamaa & Jaakko Stenros (2016), explored the playfulness of drinking games as, indeed, games that are worthy of attention too. Meanwhile, others have studied the depiction of alcohol represented within specific videogame titles, such as the sound effects of alcohol (Smucker, 2018). From the field of human-computer-interaction, Aliya Iskenderova, Florian Weidner, and Wolfgang Broll (2017) explored the influence of alcohol on cybersickness while participants used virtual reality head mounded displays. Meanwhile, adjacent to drinking but on the theme of embodied consumption, Agata Waszkiewicz's forthcoming publication is set to bridge the gap between the two interdisciplinary fields of game and critical food studies. In this emerging area,

scholars such as Luke van Ryn (2020) have explored food politics, survival, and sustainability in the videogame series *Don't Starve*. To date, however, research bridging the gap between game and critical drug studies is still nascent. Likewise, there does not yet seem to be sociological research on the particular drinking cultures *of* gaming itself, which is this chapter's object of analysis.

4.1.3. Alcohol in Critical Drug Studies

Compared to addiction studies, critical drug studies and game studies share similar epistemologies and therefore more compatible research agendas. While addiction studies use methods from psychology and health sciences, the interdisciplinary field of critical drug studies takes approaches from the humanities and the social sciences in many of the same ways as game studies. In critical drug studies, sociologists, anthropologists, and cultural theorists explore alcohol and people's use of "conscious altering substances" as "a long-standing universal human theme" since, it is broadly accepted, the early Bronze ages (Hunt & Antin 2019, p. 72). Here, it is also possible to understand alcohol itself as a leisure technology, like videogames.

Although intoxication does have a psychologically embodied and consciousness-altering component, critical drug studies depart from addiction studies in treating drinking as "inextricably conjoined with the social and collective part of drinking practices" (Partanen, 1991, p. 223) rather than addressing its potential disruption of the social. While the drinking cultures of gaming culture is in need of research, reviewing the established literature from critical drug studies offers a rich historical understanding of drinking cultures that might extend our thinking

about the role of alcohol in gaming culture. Taking up this suggestion, this chapter considers drinking as a part of conventional social practices.

When studying how people drink socially, we necessarily also study the socio-cultural behaviours relating to drunkenness, including considering what is deemed acceptable when sober. Examining non-industrialized societies, Craig MacAndrew and Robert B. Edgerton observed how "over the course of socialization, people learn what their society 'knows' about drunkenness; and accepting and acting upon the understandings thus imparted to them, they become the living confirmation of their society's teachings" (1969, p. 88). In other words, becoming-drunk or being around drunkenness in social settings not only demonstrates what is acceptable drunken behaviour, but also its distinction from appropriate sober behaviour. The culturally sanctioned limits of drunkenness can also operate as a form of 'time out' (Partanen, 1991, p. 224). In other words, drinking as a 'time out' enacts "a state of societally sanctioned freedom from otherwise enforceable demands that persons comply with conventional properties" (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969, p. 89). Nevertheless, those designated leisurely 'booze zones' that mark a 'time out' remain bound within societal standards of acceptable drunken behaviour (Ibid., p.71).

Drinking helps people to unwind, de-stress, relax, be more open, bolster confidence in oneself, and feel more agreeable. Scholars have often described alcohol as a "medium of sociability" (Partanen, 1991, p. 221) and an important mechanism for "encouraging commensality" (Hunt & Antin, 2019, p. 72). Sociologists emphasise the social nature of drinking and the importance of drinking for enhancing sociality for the reasons outlined above, but also the influence of each

social setting on the meanings formed, approved, or disproved for drunken related behaviour (Ibid., p. 73). In sum, the meaning of drinking never occurs in a cultural vacuum. Rather, drinking is framed by particular contexts, including social settings, and sets of anticipated and unexpected consequences situated in embodied and communally shared practices.

When games research centres the study of play, players, or the creation of play, it risks distinguishing videogames as separate from everyday embodied lived experiences. I propose that examining the drinking cultures of gaming cultures that is either overlooked or taken-for-granted in the literature highlights and challenges the discipline's rigidity. For game researchers, drinking could be easily viewed as an adjacent subject matter, rather than a fundamental aspect of people's lived experiences of videogames. Incorporating the established literature from critical drug studies and approaching drinking as part of people's everyday practices – often tied with a sense of sociality – provides a useful framework for considering in/appropriate drunken/sober behaviour in these shared gaming-centred drunk spaces. The intersection between drinking cultures and gaming culture, also offers a way to carefully examine the question of diversity in gaming, necessarily addressing the gender divide often reported on in the field, but also locating it in existential-material terms. Different assemblages of videogames with drunk spaces afford forms of participation and social inclusion for some people that become further privileged over others. The people privileged in this way are usually men since drinking alcohol has become associated with masculinity and is generally viewed as a key part of male-bonding practices, while women's drinking remains more heavily stigmatised.

4.1.4. Alcohol and Gender in Critical Drug Studies

Without any direct reference to videogame cultures, various studies examine the socio-cultural relationship between gender and drinking. The field of critical drug studies has predominantly attended to the drinking practices of men and masculinity, with little research published on women and feminine drinking practices (Ferrer-Best, 2018; Hunt & Antin, 2019; Brown & Gregg, 2012). This gap reflects the sociocultural values which frequently associate practices of drinking alcohol with men and masculinity. In many ways, drinking heavily is even seen as 'men being *more* masculine' (Bales, 1962, p. 185) because it normatively affirms masculinity through drinking's association with other male bonding practices, such as watching sports together (Hunt & Antin, 2019, p. 70). Drinking is viewed as masculine, not only via the practice of drinking alcohol, but because men's drinking relates to other behaviours considered to be masculine (Iwamoto et al., 2011). Behaviours relating to men's drinking are even often regarded as simply 'men just being men' (Ostergaard, 2007). While more women than ever consume alcohol and women's and men's drinking patterns are increasingly converging (Christie-Mizell & Peralta, 2009; McCabe, 2002), practices of drinking are still heavily ladened with gender. When drinking, "different norms of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour operate for women and men" (Hunt & Antin, 2019, p. 72). While it is becoming more acceptable for women to drink alcohol in many social contexts, women's drinking remains more widely stigmatised than men's (Griffin, 2009).

Critical drug studies locates a range of academic literature attending to the intersections of gender and drinking cultures. However, there remains a need to

bridge the gap between critical drug studies and the field of game studies in discussions about gendering of drinking cultures within gaming culture. Therefore, this chapter asks: What are the gender dynamics at play in gaming and drinking spaces? What is the cultural product of the intersection of gaming culture and drinking cultures? To answer these questions, this chapter draws on the theoretical framework of feminist critical drug studies.

4.2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks of feminist critical drug studies observes the social practices of 'doing drugs' as social reproductions of 'doing gender' (Measham, 2002). Here, I am aware that I am treating 'drugs' in the broadest sense of the term, which includes alcohol, as a 'consciousness-altering substance'. This theoretical framework also draws from Judith Butler's post-structuralist accounts of gender performativity (1990), precarious bodies, and performative theory of assemblies (2015). As outlined in thesis introduction gender performativity explains how gender is performed along a spectrum of masculine and feminine signifiers. In this way, practices relating to drinking alcohol do not transcend gender but are part of the socio-cultural constitution and reproduction of gender regimes. In building a better understanding of the socio-cultural gendering of drinking alcohol in general, we can better understand how hegemonic gaming publics reproduce and privilege the one dominant configuration of social drunk spaces as hypermasculine.

In approaching these questions in this chapter, I combine theories of networked affect (Paasonen, et al., 2015) with competing 'assemblage' theories to

examine the dynamic interconnections between non-human actants, such as alcohol and spaces utilised for its consumption, and human actors. Butler's ideas on precarity extend networked affect and assemblage theories by paying closer attention to the existential-material role of embodiment in performative assemblies. I draw from across these theories to explore the particular type of drunk spaces and assemblages associated with hypermasculine behaviours that render embodied precarity.

I also borrow in this chapter from Francesca Ferrer-Best's (2018) theorisation of 'becoming-drunk' to describe the processes of intoxication as an existential-materialist 'becoming'. Drawing from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of 'lines of flight', Ferrer-Best describes how the different possible combinations involved in a person-drink assemblage "facilitate alternative ways of relation to the self" and can "yield generative, de-stratifying outcomes" (2018, pp. xiv-27). That is to say, 'becoming-drunk' describes a reconfiguration of lifeworlds, transforming the self into something that is "less a coherent subject form and more like a rhizomatic, collection of things, identities and thoughts" (Ibid., p. 27) mediated by the consumption of conscious altering substances while dynamically connected to a multitude of agents for both human actors and in-human actants. In a similar way to Ferrer-Best's descriptions of shifting person-drink assemblages, I consider the role of alcohol as a reconfiguration of people's gaming lifeworlds; a reconfiguration of the self, reshaping people's (dis)engagement with videogames and gaming cultures.

4.3. Method

This chapter gathered ethnographic research from 30 months of participant observation (May 2017 – December 2019), attending over 30 drunk space venues and social events related to videogames and gaming through public, social, professional, and industry scenes. The research does not draw from a strict ethnographic method, traditionally defined to be conducted over a bounded period immersed within a scene with the researcher journaling fieldwork observations in a diary. Instead, it comprised a patchwork of field photography, fieldnotes, unstructured interviews, and informal conversations in situ, supplemented by digital media archival and memory work representing gaming as a scenic life. During this research, as well as observing interactions in these drunk spaces, I would speak to other attendees, event organisers, venue security guards, and local bar owners. With people's consent, some unstructured interviews were recorded with a mobile application, although whether or not conversations could be recorded was dependant on a range of factors, such as noisy environments or the more casual nature of an interaction. A mobile phone was used for "jotting notes" during observations to later "act as trigger of material and assist recalling events that happened" (Riches & Parry, 2020, p. 651). Using the phone's built-in camera also afforded the opportunity for events to be recorded "in multiple modalities" (Yin, 2011, p. 161). Consequently, the combination of photographs, fieldnotes, interviews, and other sources, such as searching online media archives reporting on the events I had attended, helped me to later recall or retrieve additional details.

Most of this ethnographic participant observation was conducted in Australia, except for the week of GDC 2018 in San Francisco. The drunk spaces in which I participated included those coordinated by or overlapping with eSport tournaments, game developer conferences, popular videogame conventions, game jams, and industry networking events. From this participation I will single out two main sites and scenes for my discussion in this chapter: "Intel Extreme Masters" (IEM) 2017, the international *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (CS:GO) eSports championship in Sydney, and "Game Developer Conference" (GDC) 2018, the annual largest international videogames industry gathering in San Francisco. These two sites have been chosen as exemplary, particularly since they both have claimed to be the 'premier' and largest event of their kinds (IEM as the largest eSports event in Australia, and GDC as the largest annual international conference for game developers).

I have not explicitly mentioned each drinking event I attended over the 30 months in the findings below. However, each event shaped important aspects of my analysis here. For example, my later attendance at "The *Overwatch* League" 2018 tournament at the Star Casino led me to notice divergent eSport experiences at different venues in Sydney, directly influenced my site analysis of IEM 2017 at the Qudos Bank Arena. In my account of the drunk space site analysis across the week at GDC 2018 in San Francisco, I have considered what I observed and experience there alongside other game industry drinking participant observation in Australia. These include the annual "Melbourne International Games Week" (MIGW), the largest games industry and videogame popular culture gathering in the Southern

hemisphere, as well as "Beer & Pixels," a monthly networking drinks for local game developers in Sydney. Although I have included some incidents and conversations from these other events, I decided to focus in particular on the industry party scene at GDC 2018, since the local developer community in Australia is relatively small and "everyone knows everyone". In doing so, I have "shifted and blended details" of people and places, following Catherine Driscoll's ethnographic approach, and provided pseudonyms to "make them less readily identifiable" by others in an otherwise close-knit community (2014, p. 12):

> Part of my ethical commitment to all the [people] I mention here […] is that I conceal their identities, both in order to have them talk more openly to me and because there's no reason they should be attached by publication to their opinions and situations at this time in their lives.

This ethical commitment also extends to a recognition of my position as researcher who had navigated those male-dominated spaces and scenes as a young woman of mixed race. Specifically, I understand that being a young woman of colour sometimes granted me certain levels of intimacy and access to information from other young people, women, and people of colour attendees. At the same time, my (non)participation also marked certain embodied boundaries and expressions of belonging and exclusion in relation to each drunk space.

To avoid potential informant hostility, shunning, and cold-shouldering from other scene members (especially in a field with which I, as a game researcher, am intimately entangled), I employed three key strategies, as outlined by Catherine Palmer: "snowballing through gatekeepers, my own visible consumption of alcohol, and transparency about the purpose of the research and my presence in the field"

(2010, p. 426). For women researching male-dominated subcultures, as a deliberate ethnographic strategy, Palmer (2010, p. 426) and Gabby Riches (2016, p. 103) claimed that their visible consumption of alcohol was more important for granting them access to the field and garnering trust from participants than negotiating with gatekeepers. Many members of Beer & Pixels became my friends who would later introduce me to other industry members at MIGW and GDC, "vouching for me" and my research. During GDC 2018, friends I met through Beer & Pixels regularly introduced me with an explanation of my work to other industry people. Each time I was introduced at this time, these contacts would outline my research interests, provide a character reference, and promote my recently published article on *Florence*. Without these game developer friendship circles which meant I was regularly asked if I had planned to attend events, and invited to join these connections in attending, I would have not reached the same level of access in these social scenes, let alone manage to "be in the know" about when and where industry social events were happening.

As a shared practice within the game developer scene, like researchers studying other drinking scenes such as Riches (2016), Palmer (2010), and Patti Lynne Donze (2010), in order to fit in, build rapport, immerse in social practices, and gain confidence to talk with strangers, I chose to moderately consume alcohol at industry parties and networking events. However, I didn't consume alcohol at eSport tournaments, staying more on the outside of those scenes because I felt like much more of an outsider already. As Thomas Wilson explains, alcohol is one way which researchers "gain confidence, trust, information, and access to wider networks

through and with the use of alcohol" (2015, p. 6) in different drinking spaces. Drinking alcohol necessarily became part of this research practice and an aspect of my participant observation. Exemplarily, I spent extensive time with Beer & Pixels regulars, frequently drinking together and "shouting" others (Australianism for buying a round of drinks) while at the pub. I was similarly invited to participate in their in-group drinking traditions, lining up either tequila or Patron XO coffee liquor shots at the bar. I participated in similar drinking practices at other industry networking parties, offering to buy participants a drink which both worked as an incentive and compensation for their time (Riches, 2016, p. 103). In highly intoxicated social environments where women were mostly absent, like Palmer (2010, p. 433) I still sometimes had to "trade off," manage, or accept sexist discourses and hostility.

Overall, the choice to drink alcohol during participant observation and ethnography, enables a "brutal belonging" for women researchers (Overell, 2014, cited in Riches 2016, p. 104) immersed in the affective qualities and ritualistic practices in which scene members engage. Such accounts demonstrate "the importance of engaging in the behaviours and practices within the field, even if it muddies the boundaries and roles between researcher and participant" (Riches, 2016, p. 104). Since drinking is a heavily "performative sensual practice" (Ibid., p. 104), this practice means that I have used my body as a tool of inquiry. Out of some of the messiness, busyness, and ephemerality of intoxicated lifeworlds, I aimed to engage with aspects of the entanglement between games and culture which might "otherwise be intangible or inaccessible" (p. 104). Consequently, for the following analysis, what I have called "The Weekend Parables" are organised less as 'case

studies' and more as shifting points of focus, seeking to balance in my ethnographic account a "recognition of difference" and "generic dimensions" (Driscoll, 2014, p. 14) of the body-space relationships described in the drunk space and scene analyses.

4.4. The Weekend Parables

At offline videogame public, industry, and academic social events, a dominant drinking culture at the heart of these gaming cultures can pressure attendees to drink alcohol to mark and generate the co-presence of participants. In-groups are affirmed through a performative assembly (Butler, 2015) enacted in the embodied communal consumption of alcohol. In turn, drinking practices work to reaffirm people's existential-material capacities to feel unsafe and precarious, or feel safe and included. In other words, drinking can heighten feelings of a sense of belonging or alienation in the scene – feelings that can also rapidly shift or become mixed emotions for attendees and absentees. Through the performative assembly of drinking together, the communal consumption of alcohol continues to drive an embodied wedge between those who are seen to be 'included', people (particularly young men) who conform to (implicitly masculine) drinking practices, and those who are 'not included' (everyone else).

4.4.1. IEM 2017: 'Sculling Shoeys' at eSports

Figure 11: Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) 2017. Image sourced from
https://www.intelextrememasters.com/blog/2017/05/inaugural-intel-extreme-masters-in-
sydney-attracts-7000-fans-on-each-event-day-nearly-8-million-unique-viewers-online/

The Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) 2017 event in Sydney flooded the Qudos Bank

Arena with 7000 eSport fans on both event days. The championship trophy – an

embossed silver plate that was the circumference of a car wheel – stood proudly

centre stage. Two rows of five gaming computers were aligned on each side of the

trophy to seat the competing eSport teams. The finalists represented the United

States (OpTic), China (ViCi), Europe (FaZe), Brazil (SK), two teams from Denmark

(Astralis and North), and two teams from Australia (Chiefs and Renegades). These

eight teams went head-to-head for a prize pool of $200,000, playing matches of

Valve's classic 'hardcore' videogame, the multiplayer First-Person Shooter (FPS)

Counter-Strike Global Offensive (CS:GO). Electric blue and neon pink stage lights

swirled overhead, amalgamating into blended ombres and violet hues. Rather than

colours which would otherwise signify the bisexual pride flag, here they represented

Gamer colour schemes that commonly appeared in extravagant gaming setups.

Figure 12: "Best Colour Scheme!" Image sourced from
https://www.pinterest.com.au/pin/418060777911819019/

Above the arena stage, massive screens displayed live streams of the event.

Warming up the Sydney crowd, the on-stage host and master of ceremonies, OJ

Borg, announced:

> There's been a long history of rivalry – sporting rivalry – between the fabulous
> country of Australia and the United Kingdom. Something called The Ashes.
> Heard of The Ashes? I don't totally know what it means but I think it translates
> into Spanish as 'whale's vagina' or something, but it is a fabulous sporting
> rivalry. Two teams are going to go head-to-head. If you've not seen this so far,
> let's just set it up for you.

He played on the assumption that the Gamer audience might not be (or care to be)

aware of other sports beyond eSports, referencing a line from the Will Ferrell film

Anchorman, whose buffoonish character stated that he believed that San Diego

translated into "a whale's vagina" while attempting to impress a love interest. The in-joke was a sort of playful wink to the audience, identifying and addressing the demographic of young men in their 20s and 30s who would be more likely to similarly know and be able to quote the 2004 film. Then the overhead display screens cut to a pre-recorded video of the U.K. and Australian *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (CS:GO) team leaders explaining The Ashes and the plan to replicate a tongue-in-cheek sporting rivalry between Australia and the United Kingdom at IEM 2017:

> **Henry:** So, coming up we've got a new series, an idea we've had to replicate The Ashes.
>
> **Chad:** It's a rivalry between Australia and U.K. in cricket but we have quite a rich history and sport between us and the United Kingdom.
>
> **Henry:** It's going to be *Counter-Strike* Team U.K. led by me, up against Chad Birchills' embarrassing squad of Australian *Counter-Strike* players. And we're hoping that we can actually have a fantastic game here and show who the most dominant side is.
>
> **Chad:** I've managed to scrape together three of the current Renegades players […], and me and Sniper as the old dogs – we're basically bringing back the Vox seminal unit to wreck Henry.
>
> **Henry:** We have Yanko, former professional Serbian player, Moses, one of those legendary American 1.6 players, and I've brought in two special professional players as well.
>
> **Chad:** The other team, they like have absolutely no chance to beat us. We have three players who are current professionals.
>
> **Henry:** My team, lots of experience. We played in these shows, much as before. We always win. And the Australians, they very rarely get to play on the big stage. We've all done this before and it's going to be quite a simple victory for Team Henry G.
>
> **Chad:** Henry's always talking smack about the easy skin days where we managed to, uh, to lose to his noob team back then but that was just a gimmick, so I gave him something to be proud about.
>
> **Henry:** This will be the biggest game of his career and I've got a feeling that this should go just as badly.
>
> **Chad:** Henry's come out here talking a lot of f*cking trash this sh*t from the U.K. on his little boat over here.

> **Henry:** You're going to embarrass yourself in front of your home nation, we're gonna f*ck you in your own backyard.

> **Chad:** Him, Yanko, Moses, are all washed up pieces of sh*t that we're gonna f*cking destroy.

> **Henry:** Your family, I hope they're watching coz it's been one of the most disappointing things you've ever done.

> **Chad:** See U.K. is f*cking dead Henry, you piece of sh*t. I'm coming for you; I'm coming for you yank. I'm gonna destroy your f*cking families and send your *sses back to Europe. F*ck off.

The audience welcomed the Team U.K. onstage with boos. Team leader, Henry, wore aviator sunglasses and a backwards cap (signifiers of a 'douche bag', slang for an obnoxious person, especially when worn indoors) – cheekily leaning into his role playing the antagonist. Then, the crowd roared with a standing ovation as Team Australia entered the stadium, singing along to the soundtrack of the Australian national anthem, placing hands over hearts. Team leader, Chad, sported the Australian flag as a cape, holding a sneaker above his head in one hand while the other hi-fived audiences along the red carpet.

Figure 13: Team Australia entering the stadium. Screenshot taken at 00:48 from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7gxsGYGkoM&t=48s

While both teams were logging into the computer network, one of the commentators from the U.K. sassed the Australian team, saying that "they're so hungover they can't actually connect yet. Good job boys, very proud of you." "SHOEY! SHOEY! SHOEY!" chanted the crowd. Before the match, each team huddled in a circle, arms hugging each other's shoulders. After the pep talk from their respective team leaders, the players returned to their gaming chairs and bumped fists with their teammates. Slice! The first warm-up round of knives-only rules goes to the Australians. Bang! Headshot! The professional player's proficiency at *Counter-Strike* was utterly mesmerising to watch.[10] Half an hour later, the Australian's remained firmly in the lead: twelve-to-four. "So far, so good for the Australians playing on Australian soil, and for the U.K. it's a sad and sorry affair, just like their weather!" the host remarked. The crowd clapped, hands raised above heads, stomping their feet and shaking the arena floor in anticipation of Australia's imminent victory.

During the intermission, I took a lap around the stadium concourse. I came across merchandise stands displaying sports jersey style shirts emblazoned with 'Intel Extreme Masters Sydney' and various competing eSport teams' logos, food stands selling hot chips and meat pies, and bars serving alcohol and offering 4-cup beer holders. Scoping out the other attendees, I appeared to be one of a handful of women, if not the only woman, who attended alone. The few women in attendance

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[10] In my late teens and early 20s, I used to play *Counter-Strike* with friends at LAN cafes, but we would mostly mess around in-game. Rather than playing competitively, my friends and I would play in 'less serious' and 'more experimental' ways. We would try to see if we could balance our avatars on top of each other, split into teams that would either be 'running after' or 'protecting' the chickens (that were only found on a specific map), or agree to add 'knives-only + kneel-only' rules.

were either coupled with partners, as evidenced by their body language such as holding hands, attending with a larger group of male friends, as suggested by the way that they stood and walked together in a cluster, or staff working at display booths in the foyer. In the mindset of 'going to work', I had thrown on a navy dress that I might have put on to speak at a pop culture convention. However, at the arena, I felt like I had accidentally worn white to a heavy metal concert. I was an outsider. I took out a pen and notebook, not just to record fieldnotes but, using these objects as props, to visibly signal to others a reason for why I was attending, especially as a woman, without an escort.

I came across a couple who had dressed and painted their faces in the red and white flag of Denmark (see figure 14). Asking to take a photograph of them turned into an opportunity to ask if they would be willing to speak with me further. Confirming that Natasha and Henry were married and both Australians, I asked why they decided to dress up in these matching colours. "We wouldn't do this if we were just watching from home but being here is just different, I dunno it's hard to describe" Henry explained. "Yeah, like there's an amazing light show, and the crowd's energy is just so infectious, it's like a big party" responded Natasha. The couple explained to me how they were fans of the Danish team Astralis, past champions and favourites to win the cup, and wanted to get into the full swing of festivities by showing their team support. They also expressed to me that they wanted to travel to Denmark sometime in the future because it seemed "like a really nice country." Natasha and Henry didn't follow any other sports, but "as gamers" the eSports tournament offered them an opportunity to practice "what sport fans get to do." For the couple, dressing

up was not only to display their affiliation as fans of 'their' team, but also, by embodying the imagined practices of sport spectators, they sought to celebrate the event as a sport-themed gathering "for Gamers."

Figure 14: Australian fans of the Danish team Astralis at IEM 2017. Taken on iPhone.

With an hour remaining before the second match, I made my way back to the media pass access balcony. Even from the slightly removed area reserved to the left of the arena stage I could feel the unbridled rambunctious energy emanating from the crowd. Liquored emotions, movements, and sensations of bodies in the state Ferrer-Best terms "becoming-drunk" (2018, p. 28) created an intoxicating atmosphere of heightened affect contagion (Riches, 2016, p. 109). Groups of urban 'jackaroos' (a national image of young men working on a sheep or cattle station in outback Australia) wore matching cork hats and swathed Southern Cross flags as capes. "Aussie Aussie Aussie!" bellowed the host into a microphone. "Oi Oi Oi!" 7000

eSport spectators roared in unison, fists punching the air. Chanting together materialised the looser affiliations of the crowd in proximity into a cohesive body confined to a shared space (King, 1997, p. 857). Throughout the event, the crowd chanted "Aussie! Oi!" in frequent repetition, even when no Australian teams were playing, to the extent that I began to suspect that the audience wasn't familiar with any other sports chants.

Figure 15: Three fans at IEM 2017, two drinking beer, wearing cork hats, and Australian
flags as capes. Screenshot taken at 00:18 from
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTzT3xIC8kU

The camera panned over the crowd, zooming in on a young man standing on his seat who slogged back a 'shoey'. With both hands, he brought a black sneaker up to his mouth, raising elbows above his shoulders as he exaggeratedly leans back to drink from the shoe. The audience hollers, applauds, and cheers him on. A bit of beer trickles down his front, marking his t-shirt with a darkened wet patch below his neckline. This (person I will refer to here as) 'Shoey Guy' (one of many shoe drinking attendees across the event) wore official merchandise for the Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) 2017 championship, a t-shirt adorned with iconography of the Sydney Opera

House in cobalt blue accents on faded white. As he finished drinking beer out of his shoe, he flexed both biceps and cried out "YEAAHHHHH!" triumphantly. The sound of his voice intermingled with the arena's boisterous cacophony. To the left of Shoey Guy, another mate took a gulp of dark liquid from a clear plastic cup and raised it with a nod in a cheers motion toward the camera, left hand pointing at Shoey Guy. To the right, another mate standing on his seat jumped into Shoey Guy's arms to be cradled, right arm around the Shoey Guy's neck with the other hand throwing rock 'n' roll devil horns to the ceiling.

Figure 16: A young man doing a 'shoey' at IEM 2017 while the crowd cheers him on.
Image sourced from https://www.kotaku.com.au/2021/01/iem-melbourne-returns-for-2021-but-itll-be-online-only/

While I wasn't partaking in the drinking myself, fans' drunken behaviour at this event was as much a crucial part of the entertainment as watching the athletes compete. As Thomas A. Workman finds is also true for fraternity drinking cultures, those who drink to get drunk are viewed as entertainers, and those simply drinking as the

audience (2001, p. 433). Social practices of excessive drinking transformed the audience into spectacle.

Figure 17: Australian team Renegades doing shoeys at ESL One Cologne Grand Finals 2017: "We're going to do a little demonstration now. Boys, you know how it's done. Alright fellas, let's share the shoey sequence – three, two, one." Screenshot taken at 00:18 from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHSLbdcKWJo

Within the emerging eSports spectatorship scene, the valorisation and celebration of excessive drinking is part of an embodied masculine 'Gamer' identity that noticeably cites the drunken antics traditionally associated with football fans' "hooliganism" (King, 1997). Like football fans at games, male fans at eSport tournaments have created imaginary masculine and national boundaries by which they have affirmed their identities (Ibid., p. 576), producing a social understanding of what it means to be recognised in this scene as young Australian 'Gamer' men. The Astralis fans and married couple are also invoking such practices, although not in a way that fits the image of sports hooliganism.

In looking at the broader literature on nationalism and identity, combined with scholarship on 'geek/nerd' Gamer masculinities (outlined further below), we can see how eSport fans imagine themselves to be transgressing 'geek' stereotypes by performing overtly clichéd 'jock' masculinities. Post-modernist analysis understands fans' hooliganism as a practice which constructs imagined boundaries in order to break them (King, 1997). Although, as I argue, even if eSport fans are creating those imagined boundaries to enjoy breaking them, they create and affirm those categories (national identity and geek/jock masculinities) rather than escape them. How attendees' set of drinking practices and behaviours are meaningful, continues to be informed by the pre-existing social construction of the arena's space. The imagined community, and iteration of the Gamer identity presented at IEM 2017, is not only shaped by fans' relationship to videogames but also by the social coding of the shared drunk space. How spaces are coded and socially constructed, partly precedes the Gamer audience (Lefebvre, 1974/1991). In the same ways that, for example, parkour 'traceurs' can reimagine the urban landscape as a playground, all social spaces can be transformed (de Souza e Silva & Hjorth, 2009). In turn, how fans constitute their fandom and gender identity in the arena responds to ongoing social co-construction of that shared space.

4.4.1.1.   Hooliganism and Imagined Communities

In my above descriptions of IEM 2017, one emerging theme was a nationalism that came in hand with fan's drinking practices. Anthony King offers an insightful understanding of "hooliganism" as a form of "cultural postmodernism," arguing that

football fans construct imagined categories in order to breach them (1997, p. 567). For King this is "postmodern" in the sense that football fans believe themselves to be transgressing categories of masculinity and nationalism that are strongly linked to modernity. In many ways, King's analysis of football fan's hooliganism can be easily transferred to eSport fan's social practices. Drawing on George L. Mosse's work on nineteenth century bourgeois respectability (1985 as cited in King, 1997, pp. 579-580), King outlines how the masculinity and nationalism of football fans' hooliganism is opposed to such respectability and this social stability. As Mosse argues, bourgeois respectability operated on the binary distinction between 'normal' and 'abnormal' (1985, p. 10). Respectability was important because men's 'fitness' (in the Darwinian sense) was seen as the means for securing the nation. Bourgeois respectability discourses divided the world into normal and abnormal, designed to ensure the production of 'fit' males and "insulate the nation's manhood from potentially disastrous (sexual) pollution" (King, 1997, p. 580). As King unpacks further, the Rationalist Enlightenment philosophy divided the 'mind', coded as superior and masculine, from the 'body', coded as inferior and feminine (1997, p. 581). Manhood was constituted as a need to protect one's masculinity from the conceived uncontrollable mess of dangerous femininity. Therefore, the 'normal' man repressed his libidinal desires, a master in control of his passions. In contrast, abnormal referred to indulgent practices and those who indulged in their appetites, rendering himself as ineffective to defend the nation from 'Other' (races and individuals marked as abnormal) threats. National boundaries constituted a discrete social entity populated by 'normal' men (and women) a wherein 'strong manhood'

was needed to defend against external and internal threats. In such ways, the historical construction of masculine and national identities is closely entwined.

These concepts of masculinity and nationalism can be removed from positivist notions that regard nationalism as objectively connecting a people to the state, and positioning nationalism not connected to the state as false. If nationalism was only evident in a positivist context, then using these concepts to understand the social practices of fans would be dubious (Ibid., 581). However, Benedict Anderson's concept of the 'imagined community' offers a way to separate the terms nation and nationalism from that positivity. As Anderson proposes (1990, p. 15),

> All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness but by the style in which they are imagined.

Taking up Anderson's definition, nationalism can be examined as a style of imagining that informs social relations and practices. Both masculinity and nationalism exist in the imaginations of the people who articulate these concepts. However, they are no less real because they continue to determine the meaning of social practices and therefore social reality (King, 1997, p. 582).

Hooliganism involves the creation and affirmation of rules and categories in order that there be an exciting liminal space for excess beyond these categories (p. 579). In the "chaos", fan's pleasures are derived from believing in their categorical transgressions. Fan's excessive drunken practices, the visceral pressures of crowds, and the bodily sensations heightened by alcohol, work to critically constitute their fandom. In other words, fans' excessive drinking, aggression, and hooliganism derive

pleasures from imagining that they are transgressing bourgeois categories of 'normal' manhood. Even if fans aren't really transgressing such boundaries, they take pleasure in imagining that they are. For instance, when fans collectively "booed" and raised their middle fingers (see figure 18), the host, belly laughing, playfully scolded the audience saying, "Behave, Sydney! Behave!" reaffirming fans enjoyment derived from the belief that their antics are a form of social rule breaking.

Figure 18: Crowd at IEM 2017 'giving the finger'. Screenshot taken at 03:26 from
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfeBz8c8fok

Rather than simply constructing normal/abnormal boundaries of bourgeois respectability in order to break them, I want to suggest that eSport fans are producing a different contextual layer of meaning at these games. Specifically, IEM fans are both re-enacting and challenging a narrative that there is a persistent contestation between seemingly hegemonic 'jock' and alternative 'geek/nerd' masculinities. As a site-specific reiteration of normal/abnormal masculinity in the eSports arena, the pleasures of hooliganism at IEM 2017 come primarily from

breaking the imagined categorisation of 'geek/nerd' masculinities represented in popular media stereotypes as young men who are bullied and dominated by jock masculinities (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 10). To repeat for emphasis: while these jock/geek categories are imagined, they are no less real because they continue to determine the meaning of social practices and therefore social reality. In observing eSport fan's drunken social practices, we can also see a close relationship between such expressions of masculinity and the defence of a hegemonic Gamer culture.

4.4.1.2. Jock/Geek Gamer Identities

The persistent media stereotypes and the cultural trope of geeks/nerds as young male social outcasts, and 'losers' who are unsuccessful with women, have significantly influenced the outsider mentality that is deeply embedded into geek/nerd identity politics (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 201). Many of the mediums and genres associated with geek cultures, including comic books and videogames, are often shut out from traditional definitions of literary value and characterised by association with adolescence and escapism (Ibid., p. 11). "Protectiveness of these mediums thus comes with the territory of geekdom" explain Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett (2017, p. 11). When these mediums come under attack, such as the attempts to regulate or censor violence in videogames, "geeks have been their defenders" (Ibid.). As a collective of vigilant combatants, geekdom is noticeably defined by its highly rigid gatekeeping practices, especially shielding itself against perceived outsiders (Vossen, 2018, pp. 21-27).

In mainstream public culture, videogames are at best viewed as a trivial waste of time predominantly appealing to children and prepubescent teenage boys; at worst, videogames are used as a favourite media scapegoat to blame for violent mass shootings (Mortensen, 2018, pp. 797-798). "Disregarding the fact that digital games in the last 15–20 years have become ubiquitous" as Torill Elvira Mortensen argues, this popular discourse on games "created an image of gamers as either aggressive killers in training, addicted to the mind-controlling power of games, or socially inept losers" (2018, p. 798). Considering the presumed 'marginal' cultural position of videogames, Mortensen argues that the hostilities of Gamergate were heightened because those who had already identified themselves with the default Gamer identity "had been trained to be defensive" by this discourse. Gamergate exemplifies the hostile defensiveness against perceived threats to geek culture.

In making this argument, Mortensen examined how the leisure-centred aggressive swarm-like behaviours of Gamergaters can be compared to hooliganism, highlighting the parallels with sports hooligans' passionate relationship to the teams they follow (p. 789), the shared defensive language permeated with a hypermasculine machismo tone (p. 796), and how the imagined community served as a bonding experience for these young geeky men (p. 797). Akin to the stadium for football fans, many supporters imagined the online Gamergate community as a home. While aggressively defending videogames with 'no holds barred tactics', Gamergate also provided a space where these young 'geeky' men could perform a commitment to their fandom, affirm their masculinity, and create a strong sense of belonging to an imagined brotherhood.

The repeated chanting of "Aussie! Oi!" and the drinking of 'shoeys' take up clichés of sporting success (it's the winner who drinks from a shoe) and allude to both drunken sports fandom and thus sports hooliganism. In such ways, eSport fans construct and embody an imagined category of 'jock' sports culture as 'Gamers'. The Gamer identity, as a form of what Celia Pearce terms "fictive ethnicity," is an identity adopted around an imaginary homeland (2008, p. 162). The presence of flags, national colours, and stereotypical nationalist signifiers (such as cork hats) symbolically work to represent eSport fans as a nation. Chanting "Aussie! Oi!" united the polyphony of fans' ceremonial orations as a church choir vocalising in harmony. The performative act of 'sculling' (Australian slang for quickly finishing a beer in a single draught) a shoey manifests an image of youthful Australian masculinity that can be easily recognised and reproduced by other college and university aged men.

These iconic drinking practices provide overtly identifiable scripts that young men can perform to demonstrate their loyalty to the fandom and brotherhood. Such fans are also specially primed to defend their community against anticipated claims that eSports are trivial or lesser or 'not legitimate' sports. The imagined transgression of the jock/geeks distinction also represents this anxiety about eSports not being seen as a 'real sport' that can affirm men's masculinity as other sports do. Like the internet itself (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 8), excessive drinking practices in eSports arenas provide a shared space for young geeky men to affirm their masculinity and manhood through performative aggression without the need for the physical attributes aligned with images of corporeal male power (Taylor, 2012, p. 116). However, in resisting this jock/geek distinction, the IEM attendees only seemed to

work to further reinforce the hegemonic masculine 'Gamer' identity when they might also have challenged it.

4.4.1.3.   Embodied and Performative Assemblies

Highly visible identifiers become especially important for those who imagine themselves to be geeky Gamers and are anxious to affirm their in-group affiliation and masculinity. Media (as in the range of mediators for visual, auditorial, and sensorial reproductions) holds a crucial role in representing, and therefore profoundly shaping (if not constituting), what is and who are defined and recognised as embodying a group identity, in other words, 'who' are and are not 'the people' (Butler, 2015, p. 19). As Butler explains, 'media' is not just a means for reporting who the people claim to be, or simply assisting in that definition, or making it possible to share that definition; *media is the stuff of self-constitution*, the site of the hegemonic struggle over who 'we' are (2015, p. 20). 'The people' are not just produced by their vocalised claims, but also by the conditions of possibility of their appearance. In other words, "the signifying effect of the assembly, its legitimation effect, can function precisely through orchestrated enactments and orchestrated media coverage, reducing and framing the circulation of the 'popular' as a strategy of self-legitimation" (Ibid., p. 19). At IEM 2017, the importance of being represented to the experience of group identity was particularly clear. The crowd's synchronised movements provided a spectacle of embodied mass motions for the camera to capture, in lieu of the athletes' sitting at gaming desks on stage who were comparatively stationary. When cameras panned over the audience, IEM fans

reacted, performing more overt and heightened acts of hooliganism and group cohesion. These acts were exemplified by shoeys, cheering (and cheersing), chanting, and synchronised movements (such as 'the Mexican wave' and 'giving the finger'). Butler writes that "the gathering signifies in excess of what is said, and that mode of signification is a concerted bodily enactment, a plural form of performativity" (p. 8). That is, the message of embodied cohesion articulates that the crowd is united in their fandom through a performative assembly, working as a team in tandem with the athletes and the media.

All assemblies are embodied and performative. Performative, in the Butlerian sense (2015), as distinct from performance or to simply put on an act, means that it produces and reproduces identities and how we understand them socio-culturally as both contingent and stable entities. Before 'the people' as a collective could explain their reasons for why they have gathered, embodied assemblies signify persistence for that group in the claim that "*we* are here," an assertion of plural existence (Ibid., p. 16). Simultaneously, embodied assemblies unwittingly refer to those who are *not* included (p. 4). Most notably at IEM 2017, those who were not present were groups of women and unaccompanied women.

4.4.1.4.   Normative Gender Roles

In male-dominated youth music scenes and leisure subcultures, girls and women are often relegated to the gendered labels of 'girlfriends' or (some version of) 'rocker chicks' (McRobbie & Garber, 2006). Participation for women in these youth subcultures are thus defined by two limited categories primarily based on their

sexual availability. In these scenes, girlfriends are also believed to carry lesser subcultural authenticity principally because of their presumed lower independent commitment to the scene, viewed more as a sexual attachment to their male-counterparts, while the men they are with are assumed to be the genuine fans (Donze, 2010, p. 279). Thus this 'girlfriend' figure's membership is always tentative and dependent on the male she is with, "easily resulting in her expulsion from the group, depending on the state of her relationship with the boys" (McRobbie & Garber, 2006, pp. 183-184). These categories, that translate into the field of videogames as 'Gamer Girlfriends' and 'Gamer Girls' (as I suggested in the previous chapter), offer a limited and intensely regulated mode of inclusion in the male-dominated scene which manifests more visibly in the gendered embodied gathering of the IEM 2017 eSports arena.

Indeed, as an expression of Australian national pride (and an image of Gamers represented as a nation of Gamers united first and foremost by their fandom), the shoey as a signifier of in-group belonging is not equally available for everyone. If a woman performs a shoey, she may either be viewed as 'one of the boys' or as 'trying too hard'. While fans' pleasures derived from imagining shoeys as transgressive, significantly depend on the idea that excessive drinking is a form of rule breaking (as affirmed by IEM banning shoeys in 2018 to fans' outcries and protests [see figure 19]) such performative communal drinking practices, remain heavily gendered. While they are an exaggerated display of Australian masculinity, shoeys do not necessarily transgress boundaries between masculinity (coded as normal) and femininity (coded as abnormal). Arguably, shoeys work to reconstruct bourgeois

'respectability' as feminine and the Australian/Gamer identity as masculine. For instance, shoeys can also be thought as transgressive if fans believe that the practice offends delicate 'respectable' feminine sensibilities. Despite the imagined division between nerd/jock masculinities recreated at IEM 2017, fans' anxieties to enact jock masculinity continues to imagine normal/abnormal masculinity in terms that are strictly opposed to femininity. Again, this binary reinforces the idea that the legion of Gamers is a brotherhood defined and defended by young men who are hostile to outsiders who threaten their sense of being a strong nation.

Figure 19: Crowd at IEM 2018 raising their shoes in protest of the shoey ban.
Screenshot taken at 00:36 from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VSTTw54MQQ

As exemplified at IEM 2017, men's gender identity (like women's) is highly regulated and limited by the imagined nerd/jock binary because it continues to position femininity as Other. As Raewyn Connell outlines, the concept of hegemonic masculinity looks at the ways that there are multiple masculinities that are always in contestation, fighting to achieve and maintain the hegemonic dominant position

(2016). Imagined tensions between nerd/jock masculinity reproduces cultural scripts that men are trained to be defenders of their nation; in this case, the nation of Gamers.

Nerd masculinity may hold rather powerful claims to dominance, especially in the realms of pop culture and other spaces associated with gaming, compared to seemingly dated notions of jock masculinity. In some ways, it can be questionable to consider nerd masculinity (especially how it manifested at IEM) as the 'alternative'. "Once tormented by jocks and 'normal kids', (male) nerds are now on the top of the social food chain. Yet, such nerds still see themselves as marginalised; defensive. […] In ascending to a place of social dominance, without an accompanying egalitarianism or noblesse oblige, have nerds become the new schoolyard bullies?" Katherine Cross questions (2015, p. 71). For instance, when the success of men like Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerburg has risen the status of Silicon Valley to mainstream dominance (Shevinsky, 2015, p. 9), the hobbies and skills of gamers, geeks, and nerds, "which once led them to be targeted for abuse, could now be markers of an affirmative identity of cool game-changing lords of technology who would both save and inherit the Earth" (Cross, 2015, p. 82).

Drawing on Connell's distinctions between 'conquistador masculinity' and the masculinity of the 'counting-house', Cross examines how (male) nerds imagine themselves as "better, worthier kinds of men […] because they are clever and not physically violent" (Ibid., p. 77). As Cross points out, women, racial and sexual minorities are welcome in gaming on condition that "they do not challenge the core narratives of the fictive ethnicity: that it is meritocratic, that (male) nerds were bullied

and overcame it by joining this affinity group of Gamers, that one must forever be on the lookout for 'censors' – be they Christian conservatives or feminists – and that Gamers are smarter, better people who are more tolerant than other male-dominated groups because they are clever" (p. 80). Indeed, again and again, feminist women are attacked by so-called nerdy men that identify with the Gamer as a fictive ethnicity because they believe them to be "the snooty popular girls picking on them in high school for being gaming nerds, and who are now neophytes storming in to ruin their hobby" (p. 81). The mentality that nerds, geeks, and gamers have a shared identity that must be placed above all others, bands them together in an ideology of avenging their "childhood traumas," an ideology and identity that Cross notes gives "license to all manner of toxic behaviours," including feeding "on ongoing inequalities" (p. 83).

Despite IEM fan's attempts to reimagine themselves as nerds who can also 'do sports' like jocks, multiplying masculinity into nerd/jock categorical rivalries continues to restrict a limited mode of gender expression at IEM for all attendees. Through masculine binaries that construct an 'us' versus 'them' between nerd/jocks, eSport fans constitute their fandom through a team-based competition between these imagined communities. Rather than further pluralising categories of masculinity, however, I argue that closer engagement with poststructuralism's more fluid conceptions of gender and identity is needed to address the gender inequalities in eSport communities and fan spectatorship.

The tendency to typologize masculinity into categories such as jock/nerd masculinities, as Andrea Waling argues, "sets masculinity up as the only expression

that men can legitimately engage in, thus reinforcing the notion that femininity (and by extension, androgyny) remains a less valued, and a less legitimate, expression of gender" (2019, p. 363). As a result, pushing for a singular mode of masculinity as the only expression of gender that men and boys can engage in, also works to erase forms of female and non-binary expressions of masculinity (Ibid.). However, poststructuralist perspectives consider how identity shapes and is shaped by the social world and theorises masculinity through deconstructing 'man' from 'masculinity' (see Sedgwick, 1996). In this way, a more fluid consideration of masculinity and femininity as a spectrum of performative signifiers (Butler, 1990/2011), not only highlights the severe limitations of the modes of belonging eSport fans present at IEM, but furthermore highlights how the gendering of the arena's drunk space also shapes what gender expressions are afforded for attendees.

4.4.1.5.   The Drunk Space of the (e)Sports Arena

Like drinking practices, drunk spaces are also coded and ladened with gender. As a communal male bonding practice, excessive drinking in the proximity of other men (in the greater absence of women), recasts the socially constructed drunk space of the IEM arena and the imagined Gamer community as a male domain. However, even before this specific group of the Gamer audience arrives at the site, the socially coded infrastructural and environmental drunk space of the arena creates an affective scaffolding. This affective scaffolding, which otherwise might be described as the existential-material affordances of the social space, precedes the 'Gamer'

audience and significantly influences their social drinking practices and, in turn, the limited gender expressions afforded to this embodied gathering.

For game studies to better address the gender disparity at eSports tournaments, it might well learn from critical drug studies' more complex understanding of how identities are shaped by the existing socio-cultural meanings embedded in the social drunk spaces of the sports arena. The above exploration of the social drinking practices of attendees at IEM highlights how the imagined rivalry between nerd/jock masculinities is accelerated by the specific drunk space assemblage of the sports arena. Indeed, the arena space can be reassembled to host a range of activities, including a range of different sports as well as a range of live music performances of different genres. However, the imagined rivalry between jocks and geeks means that hosting IEM in the arena will continue to recreate a particular geek/jock battle of masculinities.

4.4.2. GDC 2018: 'Kegs' at Industry Parties

In 2018, San Francisco's Moscone Centre hosted the annual Game Developers Conference (GDC), gathering close to 30,000 attendees from across the globe. To subsidise some of the costs, I created a crowdfunding campaign on GoFundMe and organised a media access pass. Preparing for the trip, I sought advice from personal and professional social networks, joining Australians and women at GDC private messaging groups. We exchanged U.S. mobile numbers in case someone was caught in an unsafe situation and needed to call for help, sharing a list of local emergency services contact numbers. Mantras for safety at the event were also

circulated, including to "make sure to take off badges outside," "don't walk alone at night," "it's a marathon, not a sprint," and "avoid The Tenderloin" (a high crime rate area on the cusp of the Moscone Centre). Along with the excitement of international travel and new experiences, my preparation for GDC was hypervigilance.

Figure 20: Selfie of GDC 2018 name badge with pronoun ribbons. Taken on iPhone.

Following a friend's advice to attend a pre-conference diversity seminar, I emailed the organisers who told me that I was welcome to come as a volunteer (to help with signing in participants and setting up the lunch table, but otherwise free to watch the talks and keynote). After the seminar, I asked Nico, (an indie game developer from Argentina and first time GDC attendee), and Douglas (an interactive media graduate student from the U.S. and third time GDC attendee), what they were each looking

forward to the most about the upcoming week. Nico was excited to demo their game on Monday evening at the 'Dutch Courage' social event, then later in the week at 'The Other Party' and 'That Party' but, having arrived at GDC back-to-back from the Train Jam, hadn't yet properly read the GDC conference schedule. Chuckling, Douglas explained how he'd mostly been looking forward to the diversity seminar, and therefore, similarly, hadn't studied the schedule either. While Nico returned to their AirBnB to rest and have an early night, Douglas and I headed over to the GDC welcome drinks.

4.4.2.1.   Are you going to That Party or The Other Party?

The Moscone Centre spanned multiple blocks, a glass building that waved green GDC 2018 flags from banners that peaked over the sidewalk. Entering the Moscone Centre, Douglas and I coincidentally bumped into Lewis (a game developer from the U.S. and GDC 14th time attendee). Douglas introduced us, explaining that he had met Lewis at one of the other diversity pre-conference seminars held a couple of years back. The three of us waved our GDC badges to the building security guards then took the travel escalators up to the third floor. However, even on the ground floor I could already hear the thunderous crowd competing with the noise of booming music. Moving to the back of the room, away from the speakers, we passed the pop-up bar before finding a suitable space to put down our bags. The pop-up bar served free beer bottles kept cold in ice buckets and promoted a new line of alcoholic Mountain Dew (see figure 21).

Figure 21: Alcoholic Mountain Dew served at GDC 2018 Social Mixer. Taken on iPhone.

Douglas, Lewis, and I clustered around one of the last available tables in the back corner of the lobby. Lewis offered to grab the three of us a round of drinks while Douglas and I saved the space. Cusping my ear to try and better hear our conversation over the loud music, I asked Douglas, "Is drinking at GDC very ingrained?" He responded,

> It is, totally, totally, totally. I think that impression seems pretty correct, yeah, that's supported by my experiences as well. I think that's what the experience is supposed to be. There's panels and expo floor and networking that you're supposed to be doing, like as a duty, […] but there's also like the social parties – there's dozens of them. You have you schedule what sessions you're going to; you have to schedule which parties you're going to in the night-time [laughs].

While GDC officially defines itself as the largest international game developers conference, for many attendees like Douglas, the *experience* of going to GDC has

also become heavily characterised as *a party scene*. For GDC 2018, nighty-four satellite parties and social events were scheduled, held in the six days between Sunday 18th and Friday 23rd of March (see figure 22). Except for the official GDC social mixers, most GDC satellite parties were hosted outside of the Moscone Centre, at bars, pubs, nightclubs, and warehouses in the local vicinity. However, these GDC satellite parties – a mix of exclusive and open invitation social events – were generally organised *for* the GDC attendees *in celebration of* GDC as the largest international meeting of game developers. Consequently, one widely recognised aspect of "the GDC experience" has become the heavy drinking culture constituted by the social party scene.
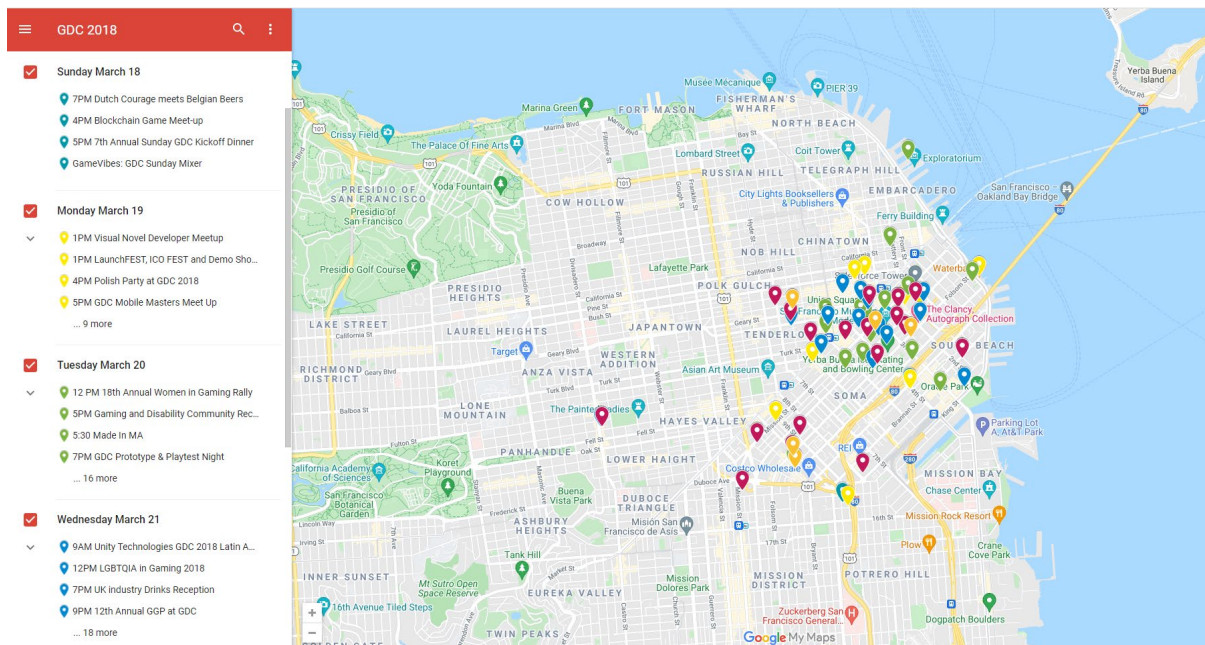
Figure 22: Map of San Francisco highlighting locations for GDC 2018 satellite parties and networking events https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1EsuZ-LnnRdprXL8f6STBWEhGO09imswL&ll=37.78479021067447%2C-122.41337865&z=14

Continuing our conversation, Douglas asked me if I had a ticket for That Party. Learning that I had not heard of That Party, he explained it as the main indie party for

the week, which was often sold out well in advance, listing The Other Party as the second most popular social event. Since I was a first timer and knowing I intended to report on the drinking cultures at GDC, Douglas offered me his ticket. While he had attended That Party consecutively over the last two years, commenting that "it's definitely worth going if you haven't before," Douglas had been contemplating whether he wanted to return. He explained,

> The thing that rubbed me wrong about it last year was that – and maybe this is why it can explain the genesis of The Other Party – because everyone knows about it and everyone tried to go to it, it's wildly popular. It's difficult to get in. […] You pay to get in. You pay for drinks. It seems like a heap of anxiety. It seems like something you should go to if you're one of the cool kids. Then, it's difficult to even get a ticket in the first place. People are lined up. It's really crowded. It's really intense and it feels more intense than what it should be. It's supposed to be an alternative experience and space in the context of GDC, and it's the most popular indie party.

The "cool kids" of the indie scene dictated the social party scene's "cool" economy. That Party had been supposed to offer an "alternative experience" to the mainstream, but the indie event had since become the main, most popular, and hardest to "get into" (thus seemingly most exclusive) social event at GDC. Consequently, the supposed alternative scene seemed to have increasingly become a stressful and anxiety ridden affair (even spawning The Other Party as a response). In many ways, That Party's indie "cool" and wide popularity reflect what Angela McRobbie proposes as "the decline of political culture in speeded up creative worlds" (2002, p. 516), insofar as it marks a commercialisation of indie "cool" as the scene of cultural tastemakers.

Lewis returned to the table carrying three Heinekens. After raising our cups with a round of cheersing "to free alcohol!" we each drank a first gulp in unison.

Rejoining the conversation, I asked Lewis for his opinions on the expectation of networking and drinking at GDC, to which he responded as follows:

> **Lewis:** A lot of networking after hours is traditionally at bars, or you know, at a few company workspaces, and they all have tabs or whatever. I wouldn't know if I'd go as far as to say that it's a part of the culture but that it is a pretty normalised thing, like "hey we have a keg here, come play games."
>
> **Douglas:** Yeah.
>
> **Lewis:** It's a little fratty. Yeah, I'm thinking about – there's a party that happens at Game Nests. It's a coworking space that happens in the city, where they throw a party every year. Oh, I know, it's the itch.io party.
>
> **Douglas:** Oh yeah, yeah. I have been to that one. It's cool.
>
> **Lewis:** And it has a keg in the middle, and they have games all around the perimeter of the room, and a couple of different rooms.

Douglas and Lewis described the different kinds of networking events at GDC as "recruitment, vanity, and indie parties," themes they had seen to typically appear in the industry. As examples to illustrate each, That Party typified the 'indie' party, while for 'recruitment' parties Douglas explained how he once "did an interview for Kojima […] at an open bar." Meanwhile, Lewis and Douglas understood 'vanity parties' this way:

> **Lewis:** Oh, I think like – kind of vanity – 'flaunting success' might be most accurate, and maybe a good example would be like, Gameloft.
>
> **Douglas:** Wait, who?
>
> **Lewis:** Gameloft? They had some bad press a couple of years back.
>
> **Douglas:** Oh yes, yes, yes, yes.
>
> **Lewis:** Did you hear about the kind of stuff? I was there.
>
> **Douglas:** Oh yeah. Oh certainly.
>
> **Lewis:** It was – they had a lot of topless women on stilts to like, interact with the game guys.
>
> **Douglas:** You were there at that party?
>
> **Lewis:** Oh yeah!

Douglas: Oh god! [laughs].

Lewis: Are you kidding? Oh yeah, I went to that. That was the big thing to do when I was at college still. I'm like "yeah sure, let's go to this" and it was like, "uh this is mildly uncomfortable." They weren't really recruiting anyone there; it was an open party. It was very opulent, very loud, and very showy.

Overall, most industry parties were sponsored, "heavily advertised PR events" for "whatever companies have the money for," as Douglas understood it, "putting money on free drinks". Lewis explained.

Douglas: Brings them value.

Lewis: It's sort of like a charity event using their surplus.

Douglas: Yeah, an end of year write-off.

Lewis: Probably more times than not, those parties fall into that category of 'showing-off' but are also a combination of "look how great Microsoft is – we can throw a party – come work for us please!"

Figure 23: Microsoft Xbox branded skateboard decks given away at GDC 2018. Taken on iPhone.

While these game industry party scenes diverged into different themes, as Lewis suggests above, the social drinking scene itself is a normative but not necessarily distinctive feature of the game industry's culture *per se*. Certainly, the variety of social drinking scenes in the games industry is to be expected of all many industries. In particular, the networked sociality extending across different party scenes in the games industry is a common feature appearing across all new creative industries, as I will explore below. Another distinctive thread in the above discussions, as signalled in the language of describing the drinking culture being a bit like a "college fraternity," suggests reasons for the limitations on women's inclusion in these scenes, which will also be explored further below.

4.4.2.2.   Network Sociality

The next day at the Moscone Centre, during the lunch break I bumped into Nico once again. Standing to the side of the hallway, Nico and I had witnessed a young man walk up to a group of three other older men, introduce himself, shaking their hands, and exchange business cards. With a look of pure bewilderment, Nico confessed that they had felt pressured to network at GDC while, at the same time, finding it "very difficult to find a reason or excuse" to initiate a conversation and meet new people. As they explained:

> **Nico:** I'm certainly not comfortable going up on my own. I actually feel like I'm wasting both my time and other people's time [laughs]. It's just how I feel, I'm not really sure. […] Maybe the reason that I'm here is because of peer pressure. I know that if I want to be someone and want to grow in this industry, I have to be someone who does this kind of stuff. […] I've spent so much time on my own, doing my own thing, and not having anyone help me really. Now that I see this bigger world where there are so many things and so many people to talk to. I'm overwhelmed. I dunno. I wasn't particularly trained to do this.

> **Mahli-Ann:** What are some of the benefits of networking?
>
> **Nico:** Well, the benefits of networking have been proven to me already because right now I actually have a fulltime job, and I've undertaken a few freelance jobs, and it all came to me through meeting new people and showing them my skills. I really don't know how they came to me; I cannot pinpoint the moment in which they happened. […] I think, right now, the pressure to make those things happen rather than just waiting for them – I have to gather the tools to do so.

The ways that Nico felt pressured to develop professional networks and build networking skills to succeed in the games industry mirrors what McRobbie describes as network sociality. According to McRobbie, the lingering impacts on new creative industries of their once close relations to popular youth dance/rave club cultures of the 1990s contributed to increasingly replace workplace democracy with network sociality (2002, p. 516). How youth dance/rave club cultures shaped these new creative industries is key to understanding the pressure on games workers to network through attending industry parties, since networking and partying become viewed as *part of the work* itself.

Writing in 2002, McRobbie argued for a recent acceleration in the creative industry's pace of work and employment and examined how multi-skilling and de-specialisation defined these creative fields' "second wave" (2002, p. 517). This second wave was aligned with what she called a neoliberalist model, governed by the values of individualisation, entrepreneurialism, and reliance on commercial sponsorship (Ibid., p. 516). Since the 1990s, previously small scale and independent micro-economies have increasingly become rapidly capitalised, subjected to intense commercial interest. As such, the expansion of these indie sectors also brought forth "a decisive break with past expectations of work" for a greater number of people (p.

517). This new creative labour has been treated as an important source for self-actualisation, where flexibility and dreams of upward mobility (especially for women, young people, and ethnic minorities) translates into holding down multiple projects at once (pp. 518-519). As one of these creative industries, although not one on which McRobbie herself focuses, the field of videogame production includes many of the same characteristics found across new creative labour's second wave.

According to McRobbie, the mass phenomenon of dance/rave club cultures meant that it was more widely participated in than more 'underground' and 'style driven' predecessors like the punk scene (pp. 519-520). In the 1990s, the self-generated economic activities that dance-party-rave organisation involved served as prototype for many trends and recurrent activities featured in the new creative field (p. 520):

> Find a cheap space, provide music, drinks, video, art installations, charge friends and others on the door, learn how to negotiate with police and local authorities and in the process become a club promoter and cultural entrepreneur.

What happens in the games industry in recent years is clearly paralleled in McRobbie's account of an indie DIY (Do-It-Yourself) ethos, warehouse parties, and ecstasy-ladened 'friendliness' of club sociality that gradually evolved into a "more hard-nosed networking" (p. 520). This new informal labour market had become increasingly modelled on the "wide web of contacts, 'zines', flyers, 'mates', grapevine and 'word of mouth' socialising" that is distinctively characteristic of dance/rave club cultures (p. 520). In turn, for a youthful sector of under 35s, "the intoxicating pleasures of leisure culture" also provided "a template for managing an identity in the world of

work" (p. 520). New creative workers are highly reliant on developing effective public relations, informal networking, and intense self-promotional strategies (p. 519) where individuals are treated as (rising) stars. Consequently, "the formula of organising music, dance, crowd, and space […] proved to give rise to 'transferable skills'" that resulted in the heightened values of multiskilling and thus despecialisation (p. 520). In this way, cultural entrepreneurialism marked the rise of the creative subcontractor and, consequently, the effective decline of the indies (p. 519).

Paying attention to the influence of dance/rave club cultures on new creative industries like gaming can help us develop a better understanding of how partying and networking, especially for indies, have become seen as a vital component of the work itself, rather than a separate leisure or even bonding activity. Compared to hobbyist game makers, indies are often aspiring game workers whose ultimate goals are to achieve 'mainstream' commercial success (Keogh, 2021). Interviews for mainstream jobs or subcontracts are often gained through informal and professional contacts – often through *friendships* – and these connections are often first made at industry parties and social gatherings. Consequently, the pressures for indies to develop 'networking skills', and to network, by attending game industry parties, has also blended those leisure activities into a form and significant aspect of new creative labour. In what Melissa Gregg has described as "work creep" produced by the intimacy and flexibility of creative labour (2011), the boundaries between work and leisure have become increasingly blurred. In many ways, attending industry parties is also a required demonstration of the game worker's commitment to creative

industry, displaying positive affective attachment to the work and the field, as well as a required demonstration of the game worker's identity – what it means to be recognised as a creative labourer is to be someone who loves the work and celebrates the videogame industry. For game workers, especially 'indie devs', *their work is their identity*.

4.4.2.3. Bars, Pubs, and Clubs

Figure 24: Game demo at The Other Party 2018: *You Must Be Over 18 To Enter* by Seemingly Pointless. Taken on iPhone.

Entering the nightclub, I was immediately overwhelmed by the electronic music blasting over the sound system, the bass thumping in my chest. Adjusting my eyes to the smoky haze and frenetic disco lights swirling across the dancefloor, I blinked

for a few moments before realising that there were videogame demos displayed around the room. Making my way upstairs to the balcony arena, I overheard a bloke yell over the pumping music "THIS PLACE IS SUCH A SAUSAGE FEST, HUH?" His observations weren't wrong. Most GDC attendees were noticeably young men in their 20s and 30s. Between GDC panels, long queues of men would form waiting to enter the male assigned bathrooms, sprawling across the foyer and interrupting foot traffic at the Moscone Centre. Meanwhile, no queues were required for people waiting to enter the adjacent female assigned bathrooms. This gender disparity was even more apparent at the nightclub.

Figure 25: The Other Party 2018 dance floor. Taken on iPhone.

A visibly intoxicated man wearing a suit, swayed with a drink in his lefthand, leaning his righthand above the head of a young woman who was cornered with her back pressed up against a pillar.[11] She was trapped between him, the pillar, and her demo table. She bent at the knees, politely smiling, nodding, trying to slink away from him as he towered over her. Sensing that his advances were unwelcome, I quickly intervened. To 'give her an out' from the situation, I introduced myself and asked if she could answer some questions about her game. When the man moved from earshot, I asked if Suzanna was okay. I remember that she looked like the embodiment of exhaustion. "Oh, he's just too drunk" Suzanna said, brushing it off.

4.4.2.4. Pick-Up Zones

Over the week, many women reported to have witnessed or experienced sexual harassment while "trying to do work." Drinking was often assumed to exacerbate such gendered hostility. Game designer Conrad explained, "I've seen a lot of prominent figures tweet who witnessed or have experienced hostile environments from having alcohol involved like, losing inhibitions sets a very hostile tone." Or as game artist Hayley expressed it, "when alcohol is involved, men will just excuse that kind of behaviour. They think it's acceptable because, like 'oh, he's just too drunk, he's not usually like that, he just needs to go home' and normalise the problem." During one industry party, Hayley reported having witnessed three incidents of sexual harassment, as well as intervening in a sexual assault. Troublingly, many

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[11] This is one example of my blending scenes to anonymise fellow participants. This particular incident did not happen in the nightclub at GDC, but I have chosen to merge it with this story to ensure the anonymity of the victim.

women generally expected to (not)cope with sexist discourses and sexual harassment at industry networking drinks. As game producer Sally tweeted,

> On three separate occasions […] random men with GDC badges would insert themselves in our conversations, asking inappropriate questions about our ages, if we had boyfriends, and trying to buy rounds of expensive drinks. My US friends were quick to tolerate and brush this off as normal behaviour at an industry event. At one formal event, I was seated next to a man – who sponsored the event – who loudly declared #metoo experiences were to be expected if you're a young attractive woman and mimed a blowjob to illustrate his point. The other men at the table said nothing. […] These are my peers and superiors? Get in the bin.
>
> The most troubling part of all these encounters was how unphased some of the American women around me were by it. They were uncomfortable, but they expected to be uncomfortable while working. […] What these men thought they could get away with in a work setting was disgusting. Burn it to the ground.
>
> Like, guys, if you're ever unsure if a woman is at an industry event to do work, just assume she is. Assume she doesn't want to exert the emotional energy to fend off your advances while keeping herself safe and then just walk into the sun.

Pressures to attend, network, and be sociable, can make it difficult for women to escape or protest uncomfortable interactions, sexism, and sexual harassment at industry social events. While participating in a male-dominated scene, women are often forced to accept sexism and sexist discourses (Palmer, 2010, p. 433). Once again, women's participation is presented as a binary choice (see Chapter 3): attend industry parties but expect unwanted advances from drunk men, or don't attend. Problematically displacing accountability from perpetrators, women continue to be burdened with the responsibility to develop more intricate coping strategies (e.g., never leave drinks unattended, travel in groups, carry a phone, don't wear revealing clothes, downplay femininity, learn self-defence, maintain hypervigilance, and so on, and so on, and so on) to manage their safety and environment (see Chapter 3; Cote, 2017; Harvey, 2021) because they've 'chosen' to participate in a male domain of

videogames. "Rape myths" support the claims that women render themselves "vulnerable" and experience tragedies because they have failed to adequately manage their environments and follow safety precautions (Ward, 1995). In this way, if a woman drinks and is sexually harassed or sexually assaulted at a party, she can be blamed for her "vulnerability" and experiences of tragedy (Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2020).

However, for many women, drinking and alcohol itself was not necessarily viewed to be the problem. As above, many women described the problem as men's drunken behaviour and the tendencies to use alcohol as an excuse for not holding perpetrators accountable. Some women even described drinking and alcohol as an enjoyable aspect and a useful tool for themselves at these social events. Tora explained how drinking helped ease her social anxiety and bolstered her confidence. Likewise, holding a drink in hand helped her feel more comfortable. Taking a sip from a drink, Tora felt like she could come across as "thinking deeply" about what others were saying, taking time to develop her responses "without an awkward pause" during conversations. Similarly, Tora used cigarettes as a "time out function," carving space away from the GDC crowds to decompress. She sometimes lit a cigarette as a way to signal to others (especially at an event like GDC where she constantly bumped into people she knew) a reason why they didn't "have to worry" about her as a woman standing outside alone, without coming across as "being antisocial." She considered herself to be "a social smoker" in that it allowed her to "take a time out" from the noise and crowds at social events.

Tora's experiences compare with other findings on women's drinking practices in male-dominated scenes. For women at heavy metal concerts, Gabby Riches finds that women's drinking practices help to produce a sense of subcultural belonging between women, men, and other women (2016, p. 99). When participating in male-dominated subcultural practices, drinking can increase adrenaline and confidence (Ibid., p. 102), as well as play an important role in cementing friendships (p. 110). The positive uses and pleasures that many women do derive from drinking alcohol complicates the discourses on women's drinking practices which remain heavily stigmatised (Ferrer-Best, 2018, p. 4), as well as displacing an equation between alcohol and male aggression (sexual or otherwise) that returns responsibility to male perpetrators even if they are drunk.

Something might be learned here from the differences between the gendering of other drunk spaces. Notably, compared to mainstream pubs, bars, and nightclubs, research on alternative heavy metal clubs often represents these as relatively "safe spaces" for women (Riches, 2016, p. 100). Since heavy metal venues are not coded as a "pick-up zone," women can more freely participate in embodied risk taking, aggressive moshing, and excessive drinking practices, without the perceived threats of being propositioned by male scene members (Riches, 2016, p. 100; Donze, 2010, p. 273). Instead, scene members collectively push back against the risks of the music venue becoming a "pick-up joint" because it would devalue their space: people (meaning real fans) should be there "for the music" or else they were "taking up space" (Donze, 2010, p. 272-276). This is not to deny that women's membership in metal subculture continues to be limited in other ways, such as being

categorised as either girlfriends or rocker chicks (Ibid., p. 260), but this does reveal that there are different ways gender and drunk space can assemble.

The social drunk space assemblage produces and shapes certain kinds of gendered drinking practices, relations, and exclusions. Even at seemingly 'more inclusive' indie parties at GDC, meaning those with more women attendees (like That Party) clearly involved gendered issues of women's sense of safety, partly because it was held at a warehouse. In place of the expectations that women be primed to rebuff unwanted advances from men at bars, pubs, and nightclubs (coded as pick-up zones), women had warned each other to take extra care. Whisper networks circulated their concerns about drugs (as a feature of rave/dance club scenes) and the risks of 'spiked drinks', 'date-rape drugs', and 'getting roofied' (associated with college/fraternity party cultures). The association of warehouse parties with dance/rave or college/fraternity party cultures thus influenced the ways that women reported a sense of hypervigilance and embodied precarity in those spaces. Reflected in their hypervigilance, women face a troubling double-bind. Since the drunk men are less likely to be held accountable by others for their actions while drunk, women must carefully manage their own safety. Meanwhile, the requirements for game developers to display their positive affect and attachment to the creative work (through the partying-as-networking), makes it further difficult for women to rebuff unwanted advances or call out sexual harassment in these work-as-leisure environments.

4.4.2.5. The Unparty

Subverting the norms I have outlined here, non-alcohol networking events have begun to proliferate, emerging in response to the dominant party scene at GDC. Both non-alcohol and alternative alcohol-included networking events can be defined as alternative scenes since they set aside a bounded space for more inclusive participation. Like most satellite parties, these alternative spaces are often external to the Moscone Centre but continue to coexist, challenge, and contribute to reconfiguring the industry partyscape at GDC.

In the same manner as official GDC 2018 social mixers, non-alcohol networking events, such as the "Cozy Alliances Tea Social" (hosted by "Pixelles," "I Need Diverse Games," and "Game Developers of Colour Expo") had been held within the Moscone Centre building. Providing an alternative experience to their "Wild Rumpus" parties at GDC 2015, Wild Rumpus presented "Mild Rumpus" at GDC 2018 (see figure 23), carving out areas within the Moscone Centre for attendees to play indie game demos and relax on artificial turf. Despite the widespread dominance of the party scene at GDC, breakfasts seemed to be the most popular timeslot allocated for meetings. Likewise, meeting over ice-cream at the Ghirardelli parlour up the road had become cherished as "The Osama Tradition," named after Muslim non-drinker and game designer Osama Dorias who popularised the trend.
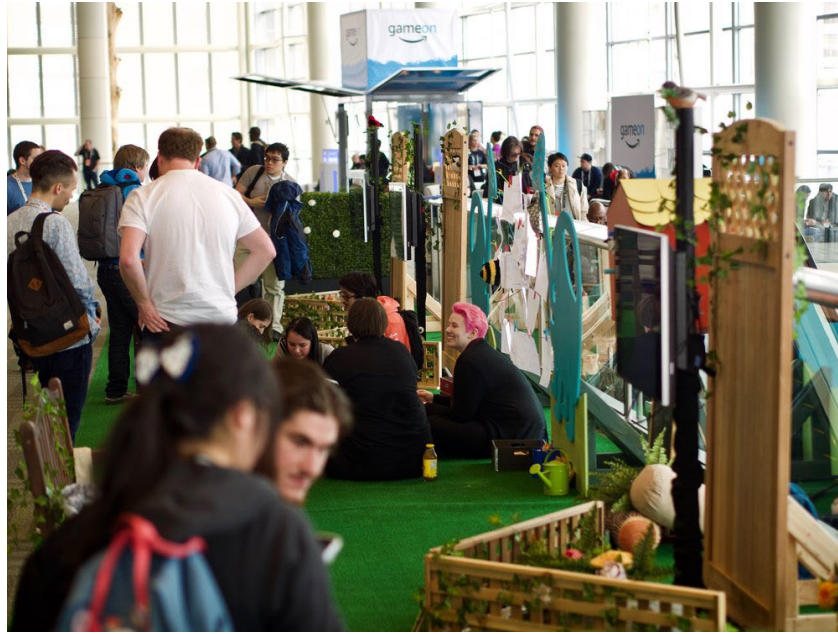
Figure 26: Mild Rumpus at GDC 2018. Image sourced from
https://secretlab.games/blog/2018/3/29/gdc-2018-wrap-up

The Cozy Alliances Tea Social defines their social activities as an alternative to networking in drunk spaces, aiming for more diverse participation, explicitly encouraging women and people of colour. Outside of the preconference diversity seminar, the Cozy Alliances Tea Social was the one event where there were a greater number of women and people of colour present, juxtaposed against the wider dominance of white male attendees at GDC 2018.

However, the need for more alternative scenes had also been motivated by other reasons. Lacking alternatives, Nico struggled with demoing a meditation game during satellite parties. As Nico recounted:

> **Nico:** Yeah, it was not the perfect place to showcase the game in such a noisy context with lots of sounds and noise coming from every sensory input that you can have, that you couldn't concentrate and appreciate the game for what it is. Some people could separate those things and they gave up more objective feedback. Some others were there for a few minutes and got frustrated because they couldn't appreciate it for what our game was about.

> […] Maybe some other kinds of spaces would be very welcome to certain parts of the industry that aim for a more tranquil experience.
>
> **Mahli-Ann:** Even the expo floor is still a pretty intense atmosphere, it doesn't seem like there are many alternative facilities.
>
> **Nico:** Most of what I've seen are gatherings that are in public spaces, […] they seem to be happening in bars and pubs and they tend to be noisy. For certain people that might work, for other people that are aiming for a different target that might be a bit of a conflict and a more complicated situation to handle. A satellite event that would work is actually an Art Jam organised by one of our friends. The idea is that we're going to go and draw stuff in groups of 25 people and have a picnic. It seems like a more peaceful experience, and it might be a good place to showcase our game in a space that isn't frenetic or noisy. It might be that we need more places and events like those – not even with the primary objective of come here and draw something or come here and play music – maybe just gatherings in less noisy places or any other objective than 'networking' but just meeting new people.

Some players clearly struggled to connect with Nico's mediation game due to the sensory overload of the bar environment, becoming frustrated and unable to fully appreciate it. However, "a more tranquil experience" was rarely offered at GDC. While Nico welcomed alternative gatherings at less frenetic and noisy environments, not necessarily to facilitate a more hardnose sense of "networking" but "just meeting new people," other attendees described the need for alternative scenes as tied to the primary function of GDC as a networking event.

Conrad described "The Unparty" as a networking event "for introverts." While the Cozy Alliances Tea Social statement of inclusion explicitly encouraged women and people of colour, Conrad was surprised to consider how other participants could consider The Unparty's role as an alternative space for diverse attendees beyond "introvert/extrovert" personality categories. Instead, Conrad described how The Unparty emerged as a pragmatic response to the difficulties of talking with other people at loud parties in order to network. As Conrad explained,

> I've just had a lot of experiences in going to loud parties with a lot of drinking and that sort of thing, not talking to anybody. Going to GDC is to talk to people and that made it difficult to do that. […] [Last year] we ended up meeting at a café, which moved to a hotel lobby because there were just so many people, and we had a great time.

> [This year, The Unparty] was in an art gallery space with paintings on the walls. It had a capacity for 150 people, and we got about 500+ RSVPs for the event. We had a sign-in sheet, which I haven't checked yet, but the space was pretty much full. There were all kinds of people there: indie developers, boardgame people, the Train Jam people came, my friends from Queer Space came.

Most attendees – if not all attendees – defined GDC, including GDC's satellite party scene, as an industry *networking* event. Most discussed the reason for attending GDC as "to network," sometimes conveying a sense that it was their *duty*. At the same time, most networking events at GDC were loud alcohol-fuelled parties at bars, pubs, nightclubs, and warehouses. Conrad described the "all kinds of people" represented at The Unparty as including "indie" and "boardgame" developers, as well as people from the "Train Jam" and "Queer Space," in a way that did not explicitly state the event was "for a more diverse" crowd.

The overwhelming atmosphere of loud party spaces and the popular dominance of That Party was like a gravitational force, constantly pulling attention towards its centrality throughout the week. As Conrad explained,

> Everyone one I talk to asks me "are you going to this party or that one?" and some people told me "I don't want to go to that. I'm only going because other people I know are going, I don't like that environment myself."

> People deliberately try to not have a party at the same time as That Party because so many people are going to it. Sometimes the other big parties can take so much space that it's hard to do other things.

The centrality of the party scene at GDC, exemplified by That Party, can "take so much space" away from other experiences and activities. Peripheral non-alcohol

gatherings thus disrupt the hegemonic dominance of GDC's party scene. So does the emergence of alternative parties themselves, although these can sometimes transform to become the renewed focal point of the scene, as the evolution of That Party demonstrated.

While Nico and Conrad omit the gendered aspects of this context in discussing alternative environments at GDC, such conversations continue to be gendered "by virtue of omission" (Ferrer-Best, 2018, p. 33). The spatial dimensions of industry events remain crucial to understanding their social gendering and the behaviours of attendees (cf. Riches & Parry, 2020, p. 648). Different curations of drunk spaces continue to reconfigure the videogame industry social scene. Seeking a greater range of participation, rather than replacing 'the heavily intoxicated party scene' with a 'non-alcohol less party scene' and/or continuing to carve out more inclusive spaces on the peripheries, I argue that we must more closely attend to how different drunk spaces are socio-culturally coded and their impact on promoting particular social scenes and reiterations of gendered hostility. As much as non-alcohol or peripheral social events, *alternative curations of drunk spaces* can significantly contribute to challenging and reshaping a more diverse social scene in the games industry.

What Ferrer-Best describes as women's careful curation of a drunk space, as with the example of hosting a house party (Ferrer-Best, 2018, p. 41), demonstrates how parties with alcohol can be reconfigured to negate gendered hostility as well as open more affective possibilities with the goal to generate more enjoyable participation. From in-depth interviews, Ferrer-Best recounted how women's party

planning expertly curated their drunk space: providing an exciting range of different mixers and alcohol, setting up a blender, arranging a circle of cushions on the living room floor, attaching translucent materials to windows to filter lighting through colours, spending weeks designing a music playlist, and carefully considering the invited guest lists to make the occasion a resounding success – resulting in hours of laughs, good chats, and dancing to Kate Bush – even if, sadly, "the blender did not survive" (2018, p. 41). Importantly, as Ferrer-Best notes, "it is no coincidence that […] these women's curation of drunk space relies on other women as integral parts of their drinking assemblages" (Ibid., p. 42). As she argues,

> This supports the idea that there is space for non-masculinised alcohol cultures to emerge and generate productive experiences and outcomes for the people involved. While this does not exclude men from partaking, it should work to elevate the visions and imaginaries for drunk space from people who do not fit into the dominant drinking discourses.

Women's expert curation of drunk spaces is indicative of the ways that drunk spaces themselves can transform to better include gendered diversity. Calling on us to rethink the essentialised relationships between alcohol and gendered hostility, closer attention to the productive dimensions of women's drinking practices can indicate potential methods for intervening in the masculine hegemony of the videogame's industry social scene.

Notably, women and people of colour were involved in curating and populating alternative scenes at GDC. Marie Foulston was the Wild/Mild Rumpus exhibition's lead curator. The Cozy Alliances Tea Social was organised by various women and people of colour advocate groups, such as Pixelles (lead by team directors Tanya Short, Rebecca Cohen Palacios, and Stephanie Fisher), I Need

Diverse Games (founded by Tanya DePass), and Game Devs of Color (their organising team consisting of Chris Algoo, Shawn Alexander Allen, Brian Carr, Brian Chung, GJ Lee, and Catt Small). Likewise, The UnParty was organised by Charles Hans Huang. While it was more apparent that these alternative non-drinking spaces were often curated and organised by women and people of colour, their involvement in curating and organising social events which included drinking seemed less evident. Some alternative spaces were stated to be created by 'diverse people' for 'diverse people'. Meanwhile, the dominant GDC party scene tended to be hosted by 'game developers' for 'game developers', which in turn, assumes the default central positioning of young white males.

4.5. Conclusion

In many ways, the social scenes of gaming resemble social scenes centred around other fields and industries. What are the perceivable differences between popular conventions such as "Comic Con" and "Penny Arcade Expo", if there are any salient differences at all? Does this question of difference matter? This provocation suggests that the existential-material conditions and continuities traversing boundaries of gaming lifeworlds challenges game studies' disciplinary rigidity in bounding its object of study as if games were distinct from other aspects of the lifeworld of players and workers. Rather, game researchers must pay more attention to those existential-material conditions and continuities.

Each drunk space examined in this chapter creates boundaries that mark belonging and exclusion. In celebration of videogames, embodied gatherings are

heavily performative, representing those who define 'we' while referring – unwittingly – to those who are not. Drinking together can foster a sense of togetherness, unity, shared experience in ways which can feel indescribable. At the same time, those assemblies points to those who aren't included, who don't feel sense a belonging, and also who don't attend. As presented in this chapter, the examination of different drinking social scenes demonstrates how the socio-cultural coded spatial dimensions of these drunk venues precede the arrival of the Gamer/ videogame industry audience and draw existential-material boundaries for inclusion and exclusion related to embodied precarity.

How the sports stadium becomes socio-culturally coded as a 'jock domain' helps to build an understanding of fans' drunken behaviours and performative masculine drinking practices at IEM 2017. Consequently, the (e)Sports arena's drunk space reproduces the imagined tensions between the Gamer as geek/nerd and jock masculinities and demarcating boundaries of belonging and exclusion. Akin to this reading of fan's drunken antics as a defensive display responding to the perceived risks of videogames being viewed as 'illegitimate', game researchers can often feel a similar chip on our own shoulders. Seeking to challenge videogames' perceived marginal position, game researchers too can be spurred to defend videogames in promoting why and how videogames are indeed a worthy and serious subject for research. Consequently, one motivation for studying the drinking cultures co-existing with gaming social scenes follows my call for game studies to take up its mantle of interdisciplinarity. This chapter makes a provocation for game researchers to better address the everyday 'peripheral' cultures that are not superseded by, but

rather, continue to significantly shape (non)participation in gaming culture, social scenes, and communities.

When I first reported on GDC 2018 for *Unwinnable* (Butt, 2018), I argued that the heavy drinking cultures were a symptom of poor working conditions in the games industry. Back then, I proposed that aspiring workers were pressured to drink to network to enter the industry, while established game workers would drink to cope with the poor working conditions of being in the industry. Drawing from McRobbie, this chapter instead suggests that those party cultures were a formative feature of new creative industries – party scenes characterising new creative industries, *not excluding* videogame production fields. Accordingly, examining the transformation of gaming lifeworlds coalescing with intoxicated lifeworlds demonstrates that it is necessary for game researchers to acknowledge how videogames can take a supporting or secondary role (Consalvo, 2017) in producing the social scenes of videogames.

Despite the dominance of the party scene at game industry gatherings, game researchers have so far overlooked these drunk spaces, likely because videogames themselves are not necessarily the focal point. Examining the communal consumption of alcohol decentres the videogame as the primary object of investigation because the ways which drunk spaces produce social scenes can also side-line the play, the players, and the creation of play. While at the same time, these communal drinking practices also manifest and 'make real' looser affiliations between people who otherwise define their gathering through a shared affective attachment to videogames.

Rather than simply removing alcohol from the videogame culture, I argue that the configuration of how drunk spaces are socio-culturally coded must be more closely considered to build a better understanding of how gendered hostility emerges in these spaces. In response to the question of diversity, recognising how the affective spatial dimension of each drunk space continues to produce both inclusion and exclusion is key to developing a more complex understanding of (non)participation which is needed to generate productive methods of intervention into gaming culture's hegemony. While organising alternative non-alcohol events can certainly be used as one successful method of intervention in the dominant drinking scene, moving away from heavily gendered venues – such as sport arenas (coded as jock masculinity domains), bars, pubs, and nightclubs (coded as "pick-up zones"), or warehouses (coded as part of the youth rave/dance club scenes associated with drug use) – is one way that carefully curating and reassembling *alternative drunk spaces* themselves can provide fruitful opportunities to disrupt, challenge, and reconfigure videogame's social scenes. These social drunk spaces are neither especially 'more intoxicated' nor 'more party' than other fields. But what I want to know is where's the videogame social scene equivalent to a debauched "girls' night out?"

Chapter 5 | Resilient Lifeworlds

Videogames in Self-Care Discourses

What does it mean to protest suffering, as distinct from acknowledging it?

(Susan Sontag, 2004, p. 36)

During Melbourne International Games Week (MIGW), the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) organised a series of Q&A sessions, offering students studying games in higher education the opportunity to speak with various professionals as part of the IGDA scholars' programme. Local game studio CEO, Steve, shared his experiences about working in the industry with us. Steve, with two other friends, started his own independent studio after negative experiences working in a large North American AAA game studio with hundreds of employees. Initially the independent studio had struggled financially, until "lucking out" by developing a successful videogame. Over the past decade, the studio of three friends who "did it all" had expanded into a moderately sized team of 30 (a relatively large size for an 'indie' studio in Australia). He explained how crunch time (see also Cote & Harris, 2021) remained necessary for the work, "something that just has to be done to meet deadlines." However, compared to working at AAA companies, putting in those extra hours felt "much more meaningful" and therefore "not as bad." Their studio's success was achieved through "sacrifices, hard work, and a lot of luck."

Steve felt that their greatest achievement was that the studio was "not just a team but a family." As an employer, Steve expressed how it was essential to him that his employees continued to find satisfaction in their work. Informal teambuilding activities, such as Friday night drinks, improved workplace relations – funnelling into increased productivity. Therefore, the team would ritually have dinner and drinks together every Friday after work. Seeking to sustain the team's morale during periods of crunch time, they would also order pizza into the office. More amicable workplace relations fostered within and outside of office hours meant that he and his employees could feel that their work contributed more meaningfully to the team-as-family. Consequently, they could better cope with the high-stress working conditions demanded by a job in the games industry. Happy workers were productive workers.

Above all else, Steve stressed, "make sure to maintain a work-life balance." After a pause, he shared with us that his fiancé had left him earlier that year. She left after he had "neglected their relationship" by spending too much time at the office. While grieving over the loss of his long-term relationship and experiencing burnout, Steve decided to purchase a motorcycle. "I just needed to do it for myself – I know it sounds like it was a mid-life crisis. But don't get burnout; take some time out for yourself. Self-care is really important," he urged the group of students. Unhappy workers are unproductive workers.

Over the week, the group of game students continued to meet with various industry figures and participate in a range of networking events scheduled by the IGDA scholars' programme. Each evening included dinners, which were then generally followed by an industry networking party. We were expected to attend

each event, as well as the Freeplay 'Parallels' showcase, Games Connect Asia Pacific (GCAP) developer conference, and Penny Arcade Expo Australia (PAX Aus). When the students had applied for the travel bursary, many scholarship recipients had not anticipated the additional workload. Quickly burnout, two students messaged the group chat on Thursday evening, explaining that they needed to take Friday morning off to "practice self-care." That evening, they had broken down in tears from exhaustion. They asked us if we could forward their apologies to the IGDA board representatives. The representative, disappointed, scolded the rest of the students, saying that it was "unacceptable and disrespectful." She accused the students of being too hungover to get out of bed and thus of "wasting the opportunities they were given."

One time at Beer & Pixels, I remember asking a group of regulars to share their thoughts on the suggestion to move the event away from the pub. Sandy responded, explaining that she "sweats a little bit every time someone mentions the idea." Liquor licencing laws mean that the venue security guards could remove and ban individuals who ever exhibited problematic behaviour. Without security guards, she "hated to think about what could've happened" for all the times they were needed. Following her point, Jason speculated that another potential problem was that "nobody would come if it wasn't at the pub." With a chuckle, Tom added, "I mean, yeah, like, who isn't here to drink to cope with being in games?" On that note, the four of us rallied towards the bar. "Here's to self-care!" we toasted.

Figure 27: Advert for Australian wine company Yellow Tail with the caption "Being wineful is mindful, right?" Snapshot taken from Facebook, 8 March 2019.

Curious about the prevalence of self-care discourses in this context, I surveyed 16 self-identified 'diversity workers' in game studies (Mejeur et al., 2021). The survey included two questions asking what forms of self-care respondents practiced and their feelings towards 'self-care'.[12] Survey respondents reported that their self-care practices included: not working after 9pm on a weeknight, taking lots of breaks,

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[12] This survey was conducted as part of a collaborative research project, as an extension of my own diversity work, partly associated with my past role as the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) 'Diversity Officer'. For that project, I worked with my successor, Cody Mejeur, and another member of the DiGRA Diversity Working Group, Alayna Cole.

reducing the number of hours in which they were taking on unpaid labour, not attending big conferences even if it would be 'good for their career' if it would 'break the bank' and 'probably just make them angry', feminist citational politics as a way to 'keep sane', routine, regular sleep, mindfulness and meditation, cooking comfort food, eating ice-cream (at least once a week), drinking lots of water, taking medication, going to therapy, playing with pets, spending quality time with family and friends, and also playing games.

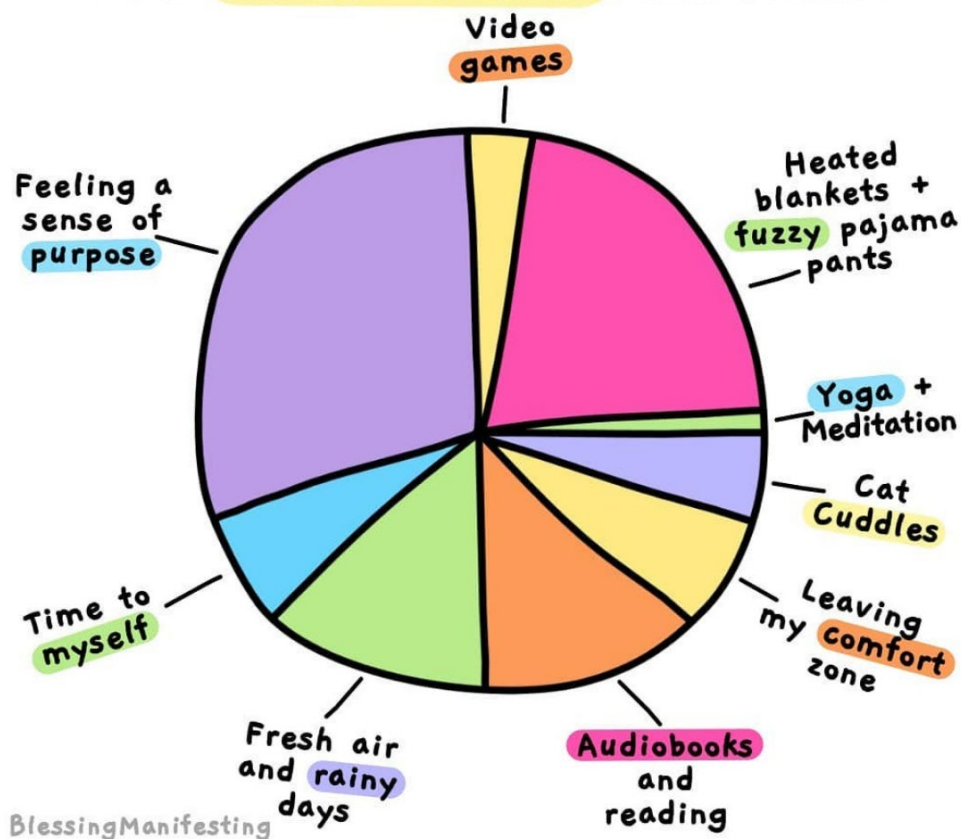Figure 28: Videogames as one slice of Blessing Manifesting's self-care pie chart.
Illustration reposted by Mary's Center with the caption: "#Selfcare is caring for ourselves.
A self-care circle includes anything that we deliberately do with our own well-being in mind. What's in your self-care circle?" Image sourced from
https://www.facebook.com/MarysCenterDC/photos/a.481069744399/10159024863714400/

One survey respondent viewed self-care to be 'essential', and another wrote that self-care was simply 'not an option' since they managed living with chronic pain. Others held more cynical views of self-care, believing that self-care had become 'a completely meaningless term that people use to justify literally any action' or expressing sentiments that self-care is 'a bullshit offloading of responsibility for community support'. Many expressed mixed feelings. One explained that self-care is 'necessary but cannot fix larger problems that necessitate it in the first place'. Many were frustrated by the more consumerist aspects, as 'one kind of self-care that many people seem to subscribe to'. The more consumerist form of self-care was typified by images of 'white ladies drinking wine and doing face masks' or the 'Treat Yo Self!' slogan from the comedy television series *Parks and Recreations*. However, 'hiding from a to-do list armed with a bath bomb doesn't cut it' as one person wrote.

Two respondents stressed the need to strike 'a balance' between different kinds of self-care practices; one respondent centred 'self-reflection, community building, and joy', and another considered 'good self-care' as what will 'make life better for future me'. There seemed to be a significant range of what constituted self-care practices, as well as wide-ranging views on and feelings towards the idea of 'self-care' more broadly. Although, as one respondent noted,

> Self-care is different for everyone, so I feel like everyone needs to find ways to cope with life, and if you can find ways to push through, you're caring for yourself. If people talk about self-care as one thing (like saying that it should always be baths and mindfulness and going for a run), it can be toxic. But we need to be able to enjoy our lives, and try to be the happiest versions of ourselves, so sure – I think we should strive for that. But it isn't easy.

Indeed, conditions of life present contingent conditions of embodied precarity. As I noted in the thesis introduction, embodied precarity is a shared condition. But it does not make everyone's lived experiences the same. In the broadest sense, self-care can seek to address people's need to find ways to cope with life. Self-care might look different for each person because embodied precarity is contingent.

Like the drunk spaces of 'offline' events, the prevalence of self-care discourses seemed to also follow me wherever I went during research for this thesis. Self-care discourses appeared at games industry and academic game studies conferences. They appeared at videogame feminist, advocacy, and women-centric spaces. They appeared offline and online. Notably, I found that conversations about player *online harassment* and industry *crunch culture* would frequently *conclude* with someone raising self-care. These self-care discourses commonly appeared on roundtables during videogame developer conferences, usually in response to discussions about (not)coping with the perceived inevitability of *crunch culture*. Self-care discourses also commonly appeared in women's and feminist advocacy circles, usually in response to discussions about precarious players (not)coping with the perceived inevitability of *online harassment*. The mantra of '(remember to) practice (enough) self-care' was one of the few – if not only – solutions.

Various games scholars have carefully documented the problems of both online harassment (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Golding & van Deventer, 2016; Jane, 2017; Vossen, 2018) and industry crunch culture (Consalvo, 2003; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2006; Vanderhoef & Curtin, 2015; Cote & Harris, 2021). While more research is needed, this chapter focuses on critiquing and unpacking the implications of

widespread self-care discourses in relation to those issues. To engage with the widespread phenomenon of self-care discourse, this analysis links my existential-material approach to discourse analysis, seeking to examine self-care discourses as an *affective regime that aims to regulate negative feelings and emotions*. Self-care discourses are neither a distinctive feature of gaming culture nor do they specifically emerge from videogames, players, and gaming communities. However, simply because these self-care discourses are widely featured in 'mainstream' culture does not make them any less important to understanding players, games developers, and gaming communities. Through closer examination of these self-care discourses, I argue that they problematically individualise notions of people's wellbeing while they simultaneously pull attention away from systemic change. While often a part of contemporary feminist discourses (Michaeli, 2017), the rhetoric of self-care seems to provide a vocabulary for people to address their embodied precarity without requesting significant structural or institutional change.

In this chapter, I will first unpack how self-care discourses are (*non)performative* in that they don't 'do' what they 'say'. Instead, arguably, they produce a social genre related to how we are expected to perform emotional literacy in response to (not)coping and embodied precarity. Self-care discourses can become empty signifiers produced through the repetition of self-importance without speaking to why or what that importance comes from. In this section, I further outline how self-care's non-performativity also resonates with the non-performativity of other terms, such as 'diversity' as described by Sara Ahmed (2012), and 'gameplay' as described by Graeme Kirkpatrick (2012). Considering the recitation of self-care as

an institutionalised speech act, I argue that self-care discourses signal the emotional literacy expressed by ideal neoliberalist subjects.

After this discussion, I will trace the etymological history of self-care, reviewing how two of the most prominent cultural thinkers and political activists of the 20th century, namely, Michel Foucault and Audre Lorde, redeveloped stoic frameworks of "care of the self" and "caring for the self" in the 1980s. Here, I also draw on Foucault's crucial distinction between "technologies of the self" (1988/1982) and (neo)liberalist biopolitics (2003/1976) to suggest that this distinction also reflects the gap between self-care as a non-performative holy mantra and "care of the self" as the ethics it invokes. While self-care continues to *feel* ethical without enacting the ethics it seems to suggest, I describe how this affective slip is produced through a process of what I term as a 'hermeneutic liquidation'. Another affective slip is also present in these discourses; that between self-care and the feminist rendition of "caring for the self" that it often cites. Turning to Lorde's celebrated essay 'A Burst of Life: Living with Cancer' (1984/2017) and unpacking the traditions of feminist 'love-politics' as a form of affective politics (Nash, 2011), I outline another crucial distinction between the feminist concept of 'self-love' and the contemporary rhetoric of self-care. Once again, the process of hermeneutic liquidation illustrates how self-care can *feel* political without enacting the politics it wants to invoke.

In response to self-care discourses and their acknowledgement of suffering (as an inevitability), the feminist framework of affective solidarity seeks to protest that suffering. Critiquing the feminist ethics of care, feminist affective solidarity is posed as a response to the slippages towards essentialising feminist epistemology, when

basing feminism on women's capacities for care that are qualities affiliated with domestic and childrearing roles. From examining the limitations of feminist empathy and care discourses, rather than propose a return to the frameworks of care described by Foucault and Lorde, I argue that the intervention to contemporary self-care discourses emerges from a refusal to cope that can be amplified through feminist affective solidarity. Overall, this chapter speaks to my provocation that game researchers must look at relations, continuities, and transformations of gaming lifeworlds – better including in our studies everyday aspects of lived experiences that may not be 'unique' to gaming culture but are no less important to understanding it simply because they are not an exclusive feature of videogames and play.

5.1. (Non)performative speech acts

What does the language of self-care produce? Emerging in the last decade in popular discourse, the rhetoric of self-care is regularly one of the few – if not only – solutions given to discussions about embodied precarity and the experience of (not)coping. In response to (not)coping and precarity, self-care was discussed in two prominent ways. Firstly, self-care was posed as the main – if not only – solution in response to precarious players and games workers speaking about (not)coping with (the perceived inevitability of) online harassment. Secondly, self-care was posed as the main – if not only – solution in response to games workers speaking about (not)coping with (the perceived inevitability of) precarious working conditions, such as unregulated crunch time in the games industry. Both AAA industry professionals and indie (independent) developers circulated this rhetoric of self-care. Recharging

to return to the charge, self-care discourses are consistent with institutionalised mental health and wellness regimes. As demonstrated in the anecdotes above, self-care refers to taking the necessary steps to ensure that one curbs the risks associated with potential unproductivity. One must take care of one's own overall wellbeing or risk prolonging the reduction to their capacities and livelihood from attrition. Self-care is posed as a solution responding to 'failures to cope' with the seemingly 'inevitable' – but contingent – harms of life.

In these discussions of self-care, there seems to be little description of what self-care involves beyond its being consistently coded as an inherently and an unquestionably 'good' and 'important' practice. The specific rhetoric of self-care critiqued here is thus the specific moments when the importance of self-care is claimed but lacks further discussions about what that self-care looks like or why self-care is meant to be important. Why is there sometimes an 'of-course-ness' about the importance of self-care here? Where does this value come from? What if this 'of-course-ness' in fact signifies the language of self-care as tautological? If the rhetoric of self-care is tautological, then what is the effect that it produces? Responding to people speaking about their struggles and a sense of (not)coping with inevitable harms, self-care is widely offered as a solution (and conclusion). However, self-care does not intervene in operations of powers but meditates them and, in turn, it may reinforce the inescapability of those operations of power.

Figure 29: Self-care reward stickers with the added caption "self-care is very important."
Image sourced from https://www.pinterest.com.au/pin/754493743798947461/

Here, I want to look at the discourse on its own terms. Discourse is not merely a study

of the uses of language but examines the social genre practices which produce

configurations of powers (Frow, 1980, p. 73). Foucauldian understandings of

discourse and semiotics interpret the modes of organisational structures produced

from their material institutions. In one way, institutions and their sense of stability can

signify *status quos* in their establishment of order: to be the instituted (*l'institué*) made into the state of the 'right' (*l'état de droit*) – doing things in the 'right' manner (Weber, 2001, p. xv). However, taking institutions as merely stable objects – as "artifacts-of-order" – ignores accounts of instituting (*l'instituant*) "in the sense of founding, creating, breaking with an old order and creating a new one" as Samuel Weber describes (2001, p. xv). In other words, the procedure of instituting is how institutions come to represent a sense of stability and order in the first place. Therefore, discourse analysis describes not only the use of language and what words signify but, furthermore, unpacks the procedures of certain speech acts to understand how meaning is produced.

What is *non-performative* about self-care discourses? Drawing from Ahmed's critiques of institutionalised 'diversity' (2012), and Kirkpatrick's critiques of 'gameplay' as an empty signifier (2012), I propose that the rhetoric of self-care is a *non-performative* institutionalised speech act since it is open to interpretation in ways which can obscure the gulf between what the language of self-care is 'saying' and 'doing' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 55). Non-performative mantras describe how words can become detached from their former meaning yet retain a sense that it is *meant* to be important when they are mobilised. Instead of signalling the value of 'doing' self-care, I propose that the kind of speech acts I have cited above signal a normative social genre associated with emotional literacy produced in response to discussions about precarity and (not)coping.

What is *performative* about self-care discourses? Self-care discourses are *performative* in that they *produce* a genre for communication when we speak about

our everyday struggles. The repetition of the rhetoric endows the language of self-care with a sense of importance as a key mechanism for its own meaning-making. In other words, self-care is important, not only because we believe that the practice of self-care is important but also because we repeat the claim of its importance. In doing so, we find value from the repetition of this speech act. Therefore, despite the promise of self-care, the rhetoric of self-care is *non-performative* in that it does not offer significant solutions to people's experiences of (not)coping, but it is *performative* in that the speech act reproduces normative social conventions related to how the 'emotionally literate' are expected to use the rhetoric of self-care.

Ahmed's research *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012) observes how universities can institute diversity as a measurement tool, insisting that they believe that 'diversity is important', while actively concealing systemic inequalities within the university. Citing Rosemary Deem and Jenny Ozga, Ahmed notes how the institutionalised deployment of "'diversity' invokes difference but does not necessarily evoke commitment to action or redistributive justice" (1997, p. 33, cited in Ahmed, 2012, p. 53). When people are hired to *represent* diversity – as if it were a measurable quality of the university – those 'diversity workers' face the burden of difference when tasked to speak on behalf of the university. Like the institutionalisation of diversity, self-care can be similarly deployed to evoke a sense of a community caring about a person's wellbeing and mental health without needing to perform care work beyond restating the importance of self-care.

By comparison, Kirkpatrick's essay, 'Constitutive Tensions of Gaming's Field: UK gaming magazines and the formation of gaming culture 1981-1995' (2012),

posits that the term 'gameplay' is an otherwise empty signifier of cultural capital used as a marketing tool. As outlined earlier in Chapter 2, videogames used to be marketed towards families prior to the 1983 North American crash (also known as the Atari shock in Japan). Afterwards, videogame magazines adapted their advertisement strategies, targeting a new market of young teenage boys. Distancing the object of videogames from 'uncool' parental figures, magazines rebranded videogames to produce an image of a young hypermasculine 'Gamer' audience. In these magazines, Kirkpatrick found that the meaning of the term 'gameplay' was never explicitly defined. Instead, describing a videogame as having 'good gameplay' signalled to readers that hardcore playstyles were cool and desirable. Beyond the reviewer's consistent implication that good gameplay was *meant* to be cool and desirable, the meaning of the term was otherwise vague and rarely expanded upon. From this observation, Kirkpatrick argued that the term 'gameplay' instead worked to reinforce a hegemonic hardcore Gamer hierarchy. Similarly, I propose that the rhetoric of self-care can be viewed as an empty signifier: people rarely explain why self-care is to be valued as good and important, while the language of self-care suggests that its own goodness and importance should be self-evident.

The instituting of institutions, or what Wendy Chun describes as 'programmability' (2011), also describes the capacity of human and non-human agents to be programmed; programming the self as a technology as much as the potential to become programmed by other mechanisms. For example, in the past I have used 'Marley Spoon', an Australian meal-kit company that delivers fresh ingredients and 6-step easy-to-follow recipe cards. Each week I would choose from

a list of options for what recipes I wanted to cook and eat. Then, pre-portioned ingredients for making each meal would be organised into paper bags, boxed, and delivered to my door. This 'programming' streamlines the overall process of cooking. It reduces the amount of additional time and energy I might have otherwise spent figuring out what I want to eat, looking up recipes, shopping for ingredients, looking up further recipes to use up any leftovers, and so forth. From a phenomenological stance, routines are the programming of practices in a manner to become ordinary and mundane – a functioning 'program' is designed to recede into the background of everyday life.

We can also see this kind of programmability in media rituals and playing videogames. During the first Sydney lockdown in 2020, playing *Animal Crossing: New Horizon* created a morning routine in my household. The game uses a real-time calendar system that reflects the procession of time and days in the 'real world' in-game, incentivising players to engage with their village and villagers on a regular basis and complete sets of daily tasks. Over those months in lockdown, each morning after breakfast, my partner would spectate my play of *Animal Crossing*, sitting on the couch together for a few hours before I went to work on my thesis. Then in the evenings after dinner, we watched a couple of episodes of *The Wire* together with our housemates before heading to bed. We often discussed how those media rituals had created routines in our lives that significantly helped us to "keep sane" during strict lockdown. Likewise, over multiple months in 2021, I would set aside Sundays as my 'self-care day' to play videogames with the self-imposed rules of 'no socialising' and 'no work'. Carving out Sundays to play *Red Dead Redemption 2* in

this way also helped me to not feel as guilty about being 'unproductive' – pushing back against the anxious sinking feelings that "I should (always) be writing." When I skipped my Sunday self-care day, I often found that I would start feeling burnout mid-week.

In another way, we might also examine the programmability in the free 'self-care' mobile game app *The Guardians: Unite the Realms*. Developed by the Affective Computing group at MIT Media Lab, *The Guardians* is designed to make "doing good things for yourself as addictive as a videogame" (Siegel, 2020, n.p.). The game is modelled after character collection games like *Pokémon* and *Skylanders*. However, rather than inciting players to spend money on microtransactions, *The Guardians* encourages players to "spend effort on yourself. If you want to progress in the game, you have to invest in your own well-being" (Ibid.). Interviewing *The Guardians'* lead platform engineer, Craig Ferguson, journalist Nikki Siegel reports (2020, n.p.):

> When you load the game, a big button glows and bounces in the upper left-hand corner of the screen, reading "new adventure available." This is essentially a good-for-you button, because each adventure is focused around the phenomenon of "behavioural activation." Behavioural activation is a proven therapy that can be used casually or clinically for depression. It gets people to partake in positive experiences rather than spending time doing the things that reinforce their own damaging behaviours. And there are dozens of options to choose from. Some suggested adventures are practical, such as knocking things off your to-do list that might otherwise cause anxiety: Manage finances. Vacuum. Do Laundry. Others help you grow: Watch an online class. Write a poem. Read a classic. And others help you stay active: Spend time in nature. Learn a new dance. Or, my personal favourite, Jazzercise for 20 minutes. You are also completely free to make up your own adventure, and repeat it whenever you'd like.

Here, we can observe the ways that some of the premises of *The Guardians* draws on notions of programmability but transmutes them into terms of psychological 'behavioural activation'. Externalising a 'reward system' that incentives the

completion of various self-care tasks, *The Guardians* thus 'gamifies' our programmability in order to motivate practices of self-care (cf. Deterding, 2012).
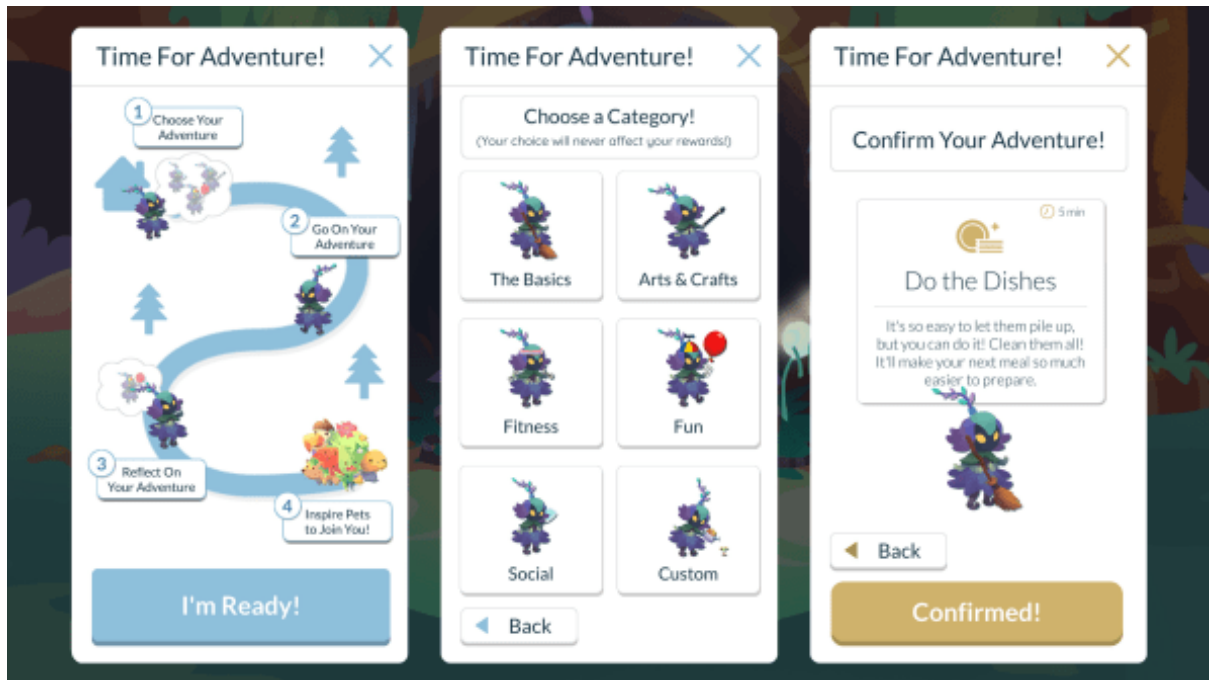
Figure 30: Screenshot of *The Guardians: Unite the Realms*. Image sourced from http://www.hotsaucedrops.com/self-care-as-a-video-game/

How institutions come to signify a sense of stability in the first place is often taken-for-granted because they create a sense of order through instituting routines and procedures to become ordinary. "When things become institutional, they recede" Ahmed suggests, "to institutionalize x is for x to become routine or ordinary such that x becomes part of the background for those who are part of an institution" (2012, p. 21).

Conversely, it is the moments when a program 'breaks' or ceases to function that the program itself is more easily recognised, revealing the 'codes' that enabled former working seamlessness (cf. Merleau-Ponty, cited in Farman, 2015, pp. 52-55; Heidegger, cited in Harman, 2002; Husserl, cited in Ahmed, 2012, pp. 21-22). When

people talk about (not)coping with online harassment or crunch culture, the 'failure' to cope also speaks to the failures of the systems. Indeed, the rhetoric of self-care seeks to respond to failures to cope, breaking points, and snaps, since (not)coping points to system failures. Here, I seek to challenge the assumptions of self-care's establishment of institutional stability by questioning how the value of self-care is deemed to be self-evident as a response or solution to (not)coping.

More closely examining self-care's taken-for-granted 'of-course-ness', I propose that self-care discourses work as an institutional speech act (Austin, 1976, p. 6, cited in Ahmed, 2012, pp. 51-56; Puwar, 2004, p. 1, cited in Ahmed, 2012, pp. 51-56). As an institutional speech act, the language of self-care reproduces a social genre. As a social genre, the repetition of self-care acts as an expression of defining what an appropriate response is to say when someone is speaking about (not)coping with online harassment or (not)coping with crunch culture.

"Resilience is marked as a therapeutic space" observes Angela McRobbie, "which comes to dominate discourses of both popular media and public health as they come into play around question of young people, and […] mental health today" (2020, pp. 53-54). In its dominant repetition in popular and public health discourse, saying that "self-care is important" might not simply be speaking about the value of self-care, but rather, demonstrates how the *response* of self-care is valued as a social convention.

Recognising the functions of self-care as a social convention, I suggest that the language of self-care carries a three-fold performance of emotional literacy that displaces care work and accountability from institutions onto individuals. Firstly, the

speech act demonstrates emotional literacy of the social genre. Self-care expresses an appropriate response to someone when talking about (not)coping. Secondly, the speech act works to rearticulate the self as an ideal neoliberal subject who is at the same time self-sufficient and 'in-touch' their own feelings. Thirdly, this speech act also evokes feminist resilience discourses, specifically *'perfect-imperfect-resilience'* (as outlined in Chapter 3; McRobbie, 2021, p. 56). That is, the language of self-care offers a vocabulary for people to address their struggles and historical subjugation without demanding reparation or institutional change.

Overall, if the circulation of self-care discourses tautologically signifies its own self-importance, then we must also consider how the language of self-care is mobilised to signify and reproduce a genre of conventional speech through its repetition. Speech acts are performative in that they always produce meaning, even if the meaning produced is not what it 'says' that it 'does' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 58). If the repetition of 'self-care' offered as a solution regularly short-circuits conversations about (not)coping, what if, instead, we were to sit a bit longer with the discomfort of speaking about those ongoing struggles? What else could be found from these discussions about (not)coping if the rhetoric of self-care was not treated as a conclusion? There is a discomfort in experiencing or bearing witness to negative feelings and mixed emotions. But we must challenge the widespread assumption that all instances of negative feelings and mixed emotions are simply or necessarily 'bad' and 'unproductive'. Despite their discomfort, they do not always need to be pushed away, pushed down, or pushed aside.

5.2. Care of the Self and Caring for the Self

Contemporary discourses of self-care seem to revolve around the themes of inevitability and (not)coping: self-care is seen as a necessity for games workers to cope with the inevitability of exhaustion from precarious and high-pressure working conditions, and a necessity for precarious players to cope with the inevitability of online harassment in gaming. I am not critiquing people's practices of self-care, but I am concerned with how this discourse of self-care can indicate cultural and industry wide problems. How people frequently discuss self-care supports the need that we must address these problems as they have very real – sometimes invisible – consequences for everyone participating in games.

To think further about the language of self-care, in this section I revisit the ways Foucault and Lorde differently inspired renewed interest in "care of the self" as an ethics to "know thyself," and "caring for the self" as feminist political activism, in the 1980s. Reflecting on Foucault and Lorde's ideas, I argue that the holy mantra of contemporary self-care discourses compresses and confounds the original imperatives invoked in "care of the self" and "caring for the self." This compression, which I term hermeneutic liquidation, describes the processes that produce an affective slip between the social genre of self-care discourses and ethical-political frameworks outlined by "care of the self" and "caring for the self." Problematically, this affective slip in the institutionalised neoliberalist rhetoric of self-care offers people an intimate engagement that *feels* ethical and political without enacting the ethics or social justice that it seems to promise.

5.2.1. Crunch Culture, Biopolitics, and Technologies of the Self

Between 1976 to 1984, Foucault turned his interest in governmentality from the emergence of liberalism and biopolitics in the 20th century towards what he called the "technologies of the self" (also called "care of the self" or "practices of the self"). During a series of lectures held at the Collège de France, and seminars given in the U.S., Foucault developed and then expanded upon the technologies of the self, themes which would also later appear in the third volume of The History of Sexuality, *The Care of The Self* (1988).

In his influential 1976 seminar 'Society Must Be Defended', the biopowers of governmentality defining (neo)liberalism are contrasted against the ethical framework of care of the self that Foucault later presented in 1982.[13] Foucault expresses concerns here about a new form of power emerging in the late 19th and early 20th century. The former sovereign powers to "take life or let live" of monarchs ruling over their *subjects* are supplemented, as Foucault describes it, by new modes of biopower that governing a *population* to "make live and let die" (1976/2003, pp. 239-241). Biopower's aim is to manage a population to increase economic production. As an extension of institutional powers, self-care discourses aim to preserve and increase the 'emotional wellbeing' and 'mental health' of the population for the sake of capital. According to the World Health Organisation (2018, n.p.),

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[13] To be sure, Foucault was talking about 'liberalism' and did not use the term 'neoliberalism'. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis, I also acknowledge that 'neoliberalism' as it is used in this thesis follows the current popular conflation of 'neoliberalism' as an economic model with 'neoliberalist sentiment'.

> Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realises [their] own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to [their] community.

From the increased capacity to be a (more) productive member, the ideal of mental health is defined around ideas of resilient individuals. Likewise, the notion of 'community' used in this instance, describes the collective capacity of a population's productivity (compared to other ideas such as a collective capacity of people to transform society). A relevant example, from which we can take cues for understanding the function of discourse on self-care in the videogame industry, is the way discourse on work-life balance in academia fails to address *systemic* change and "the causal factors of imbalance between work and life [which] are unlikely to achieve their stated aims" (Saltmarsh & Randell-Moon, 2015, p. 665).

Sue Saltmarsh and Holly Randell-Moon argue that "work–life balance policy discourse diverts attention away from external and systemic drivers of work–life imbalance, and instead constitutes academic workers as posing risks to the institution's productivity and competitiveness" (2015, p. 665). Drawing from a comprehensive review of work-life balance policy statements of all Australian universities, Saltmarsh and Randell-Moon observes that (Ibid.):

> the work of managing what is constituted as human risks to the organization is relegated to employee's obligation or duty to self-govern their own happiness, good health, family, and social responsibilities in reciprocation of the institutional promotion of workplace flexibility, academic innovation, and creativity.

They argue that these work–life balance policies seek to discipline and "responsibilize" the "incalculable humanity" of these workers (Saltmarsh & Randell-Moon, 2015, p. 665). That is, disciplining and responsibilizing "the embodied,

affective, relational, and social dimensions of their lives beyond work" (Ibid.). In other words, rather than changing the institution and conditions that give rise to embodied precarity, work-life balance policies in higher education place the responsibility of well-being onto individual workers.

Building on these ideas, I want to suggest that the rhetoric of self-care can be critiqued as a biopolitical extension of institutional powers into the governmentality of the everyday private lives of games workers, disciplining these workers to self-govern their wellbeing for the productivity of the games industry. In turn, self-care discourses suggest that the onus of labour rests on those who are rendered precarious, rather than seeking to address the institutional systems and failures that create the need for self-care in the first place. We can also clearly see the rhetoric of self-care that reinforces the neoliberalist sentiments of responsibilization in CEO Steve's discussions in the chapter's opening anecdote. In the creative project-based work of videogame development, Steve believed that some level of crunch time was required to meet deadlines. However, the workplace intimacy fostered through a team-as-family dynamic made the work more meaningful. In turn, Steve claimed that the perceived inevitability of crunch was thus also more manageable. Looking at the games industry, Amanda Cote and Brandon Harris' propose that 'good crunch versus bad crunch' discourses, such as this, are forms of cruel optimism (2021). Drawing on critical discourse analysis of industry trade press and conference presentations, Cote and Harris argue that the idea of tolerable crunch "prevents the games industry from imaging how to produce games without any crunch" (Ibid., p.

1). In a similar manner, I want to argue that self-care discourses perpetuate the imagined inevitability of crunch in the games industry.

Drawing on Lauren Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism', Cote and Harris argue that the valorisation of 'good crunch' reproduces "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realisation is discovered either to be *im*possible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic" (2011, p. 24, cited in Cote & Harris, 2021, p. 2, emphasis in original). In other words, the responses to developer's concerns tend to be discussed "in terms of managing overtime or providing fair compensation rather than in terms of preventing crunch practices as a whole" (Cote & Harris, 2021, p. 2). When CEO Steve spoke about his own experiences of burnout and the importance of avoiding it, he similarly deployed the rhetoric of self-care. While good crunch discourses partly consider institutional and workplace management and, for example, offer compensation to workers for extended periods of overtime, self-care discourses shift the conversation back towards the responsibility of individual workers to manage themselves.

When used by game developers, the discourse of self-care replicates a facet of those academic 'work-life balance' policies. The potential ill-effects of work-life imbalance becomes a risk to productivity and, thus, a risk to institutions. In creative industries such as games development, flexible working hours, the decentralization of the work site, and deriving pleasure from the work, contribute towards making workers feel more responsible for their fluctuating productivity and displaces responsibility of work-related stress from institutions onto individuals. When self-care is treated as an institutionalised holy mantra, it is at one level weaponized as a

disciplining tool, redirecting discontent away from capitalism by framing it through neoliberalist ideology. Self-care discourses can impel workers to push themselves to exhaustion, presenting self-care as a bandage solution, while it simultaneously condemns workers for not developing enough self-contentment through practicing adequate amounts of self-care.

Technologies of the self – the notion of the self as *project* and *techne* – has existed since late antiquity. However, the ways that we conceive of the self have significantly changed. Rather than the commonplace assumption that we each have an inner self that can be revealed, the stoics conceived the self as something *produced*, and never entirely in isolation even though their ideas about self production differ from later ideas about socialisation.[14] For Foucault, since Western societies inherited Christian hermeneutics of the self "we are more inclined to see taking care of ourselves as an immorality, as a means of escape from all possible rules" (p. 22). But for the stoics well before this adoption, the self as project consisted in Greek as *epimelestbai sautou* meaning "to take care of yourself," "the concern with self," "to be concerned, to take care of yourself" (p. 19).

As Foucault observes, when we are now asked "what is the important moral principle in ancient philosophy?" the immediate answer is not *epimelestbai sautou* "to take care of yourself" but the Delphic principal, *gnothi seauton* ("know yourself" or "know thyself") (Ibid.). The Delphic principle "know thyself" was meant to be technical advice, a rule to be observed, rather than an abstract principal concerning

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[14] Contemporary poststructuralist feminist understandings of identity, such as Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, similarly posit the self as produced and socially constructed.

life. On the other hand, taking care of oneself constituted not only a principal but a social practice. Meanwhile, "know thyself" meant "do not suppose yourself to be a god" (Ibid.).[15] It was the principal of needing to take care of the self that "brought the Delphic maxim into operation" (p. 20). Since inheriting "Christian morality which makes self-renunciation the condition for salvation […] to know oneself was paradoxically the way to self-renunciation" (p. 22). Consequently, the order of operations between the *life project* of taking care of the self and – what thus gave rise to – the *advice* to know thyself became *inverted*. Therefore, the life project converted to knowing how the self could become selfless.

Foucault notes that Socrates regarded the importance of his "invitation to others to occupy themselves with themselves […] because in teaching people to occupy themselves with themselves, he teaches them to occupy themselves with the city" (Ibid.). As Foucault demonstrates with another example from Epicurus (p. 21),

> Epicurus writes that it is never too early, never too late, to occupy oneself with one's soul. One should philosophize when one is young and also when one is old. It was a task to be carried on throughout life. Teachings about everyday life were organized around taking care of oneself in order to help every member of the group with the mutual work of salvation.

The principal activity of taking care of the self was to worry about your soul (p. 25). Within this (pp. 25-26),

> the effort of the soul to know itself is the principle on which just political action can be founded. […] Knowing oneself becomes the object of the quest of concern for self. Being occupied with oneself and political activities are linked.

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[15] Perhaps rapper IceCube's "check yo' self before you wreck yo' self" is another modern variation.

Care of the self was a project about *crafting* the self as a form of both socially networked and philosophical practice. In other words (p. 27),

> the theme of taking care of oneself was not abstract advice but a widespread activity, a network of obligations and services to the soul. […] This was an active leisure – to study, to read, to prepare for misfortune or death. It was a meditation and a preparation.

In these ways, the self was understood to be produced through practices and relations to the social and political.

Calls to self-care can *feel* like a moral imperative – it *feels* ethical. However, I suggest that contemporary self-care discourses have become removed from the ethical frameworks that might seem to ground them. The project of *crafting* the self (to flourish) calls on people's capacity to engage in the social production of the self. Instead, the institutionalisation of self-care calls on people's capacity to maintain and boost productivity. In turn, self-care proposes the self as a site of self-regulation which aims to detach the self from social and political life.

Self-care seems to suggest that humans can safeguard themselves from the inevitable harms of participating in (and contributing to) production. The language of self-care as used by CEO Steve, describes a version of the self as the ideal neoliberal subject: emotionally literate and self-sufficient. To best serve the community-as-population, self-care encourages the development of emotionally proficient and self-reliant individuals, highly adept at coping with the stresses of life. The institutionalised rhetoric of self-care wants to produce '*functioning*' members (not '*flourishing*' per se), transmuting an ethics of care framework into a work ethic.

While taking care of the self has since been conflated with the more well-known stoic maxim to know thyself, Foucault believed that the conflation between care of the self and know thyself was misleading (1982/1988, p. 22). Likewise, I also seek to problematise the conflation of the contemporary rhetoric of self-care with an ethics of care. Rather than producing and transforming the self, the society, and the world, self-care seeks to regulate emotions to serve the maintenance of social order, increase productivity, and preserve the status quo. Consequently, negative emotions are curbed before they can turn towards broken systemic, structural, or institutional powers. If someone's wellbeing is diminished – producing negative feelings, feeling impeded, or feeling obstructed – self-care discourses perceive the individual person's failure to cope as a measure of a mismanaged life – they only failed to practice (enough) self-care.

Gesturing to Foucauldian hermeneutics, what I call a hermeneutic liquidation describes the historical processes that produce etymological affective slips. This hermeneutic liquidation can help to describe how the rhetoric self-care draws affect from its etymology. Self-care's hermeneutic liquidation erases care of the self's ethical framework to produce this affective slip. Therefore, self-care can still *feel* ethical without enacting an ethics it seems to suggest. Through processes of hermeneutic liquidation, the rhetoric of self-care keeps some of the affective pulp originating from a former universal maxim but disposes of the ethical frameworks that animate care of the self as a moral imperative.

This affective slip is similarly reflected between the ways that self-care was preached to games students during workshops at Melbourne International Games

Week (MIGW), who were then scolded later in the same week when two of them missed a morning session of workshops, as they needed to "practice self-care." In that instance, self-care was only considered to be important for the work *so long as it never stopped the work*. This claim was not made directly but was instead embedded within the board representative's dismissal of the students' claim that they were practicing self-care with the counterclaim that they were hungover. Even in this case, when partying is also part of the work for game developers (especially important for 'indie devs' seeking to enter the industry, as outlined in the previous chapter), this responsibilization further includes the demands of taking care of the self to ensure that one is not 'too hungover' to attend workshops in the morning. Although presented as a series of '(work-)opportunities' given to the game students, the highly scheduled week of MIGW continues to reflect the intense forms of crunch placed on game workers in the industry. When burnout inevitably occurred, the fault was not overscheduling (or other conditions that created burnout, such as the potential for hangovers tied to the industry party culture) but the individual students themselves for failing to have effectively manage themselves.

5.2.2. Online Harassment, A Burst of Light, and Self-Love

Self-care's hermeneutic liquidation can also be seen as depoliticising Lorde's calls upon the personal as a site of political resistance in "caring for the self." When women and social justice activists say, "self-care is not selfish," this feminist mantra is either a direct or indirect reference to Lorde's seminal 1984 essay 'A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer'. Lorde's essay offers an editorial on the stoics' care of the self, noting

that caring for the self is a particularly necessary form of self-preservation for bodies of difference. Rather than promoting self-reliance and resilience, caring for the self describes a sense of self-preservation as a *life-affirming* project: jettisoning the myth of omnipotence and embracing life's uncertainty. Lorde writes, "caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (1984/2017, n.p.). As "an act of political warfare," caring for the self is defined as a feminist call-to-arms. If the State fails or refuses to adequately care for all bodies of difference (because of systemic sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, classism, and so on), caring for the self as a body of difference acts to affirm that people who are Othered are *worth* being cared for.

Caring for the self *as a body of difference* builds on a feminist understanding of the personal as an embodied site of political resistance. As Lorde illustrates, the U.S. government cutting one hundred and five million dollars of funding from cancer research "gives yet another meaning to the personal as the political" (Ibid.) Following Lorde's second cancer diagnosis, fighting for her life on multiple embodied fronts, caring for the self *as a body of difference* is described as a life-affirming project that resists hegemonic powers of historical subjugation (not a resilience to maintain hegemony). As Lorde writes (Ibid., emphasis added),

> I am surrounded within my external living by ample examples of the struggle for life going on inside me. […] Cancer itself has an anonymous face. When we are visibly dying of cancer, it is sometimes easier to turn away from the particular experience into the sadness of loss, and when we are surviving, it is sometimes easier to deny that experience. But those of us who live our battles in the flesh must know ourselves as our strongest weapon in the most gallant struggle of our lives.
>
> Living with cancer has forced me to consciously *jettison the myth of omnipotence*, of believing – or loosely asserting – that I can do anything, along with any dangerous illusion of immortality. Neither of these unscrutinised

> defences are a solid base for either political activism or personal struggle. But in their place, another kind of power is growing, tempered and enduring, grounded within *the realities of what I am in fact doing*. An open-eyed assessment and appreciation of what I can and do accomplish, *using who I am* and *who I most wish myself to be*. To stretch as far as I can go and relish what is satisfying rather than what is sad. Building a strong and elegant pathway toward transition.
>
> I work, I love, I rest, I see and learn. And I report. These are my givens. Not sureties, but a firm belief that whether or not living them with joy prolongs my life, it certainly enables me to *pursue the objectives of that life with a deeper and more effective clarity*.

Survival can also make it easier to deny those experiences of struggles – forgetting that we are (not)coping. However, those with an embodied knowledge of survival, surviving hegemony, and historical subjugation, must know ourselves and embodied differences as "our strongest weapon" (Ibid.).

One critical form of resistance can come from understanding that one's life, a living of a life, ultimately is one's own life to be lived. As a queer woman of colour, the seemingly "anonymous face" of cancer, shared the same kinds of (in)visibility to Lorde as her embodied struggles for survival against sexism, racism, and homophobia. When systemic powers oppress and seek to eradicate Othered ways of living a life of embodied difference, Lorde observed how resistance against hegemony could emerge from "using who I am and who I most wish myself to be" (Ibid., n.p.). In many ways, Lorde's caring for the self collaborates with stoicism's care of the self as a life project in *crafting* the embodied self of difference. Since the self as project is *socially produced*, caring for the embodied self of difference can transform a society. Refusing to cope with hegemony, caring for the self also works to promote a care for all embodied differences. In this way, embracing the uncertainty of life is an act of resisting homogenisation.

Figure 31: Self-care for activists. Image sources from
https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/1155/3572/articles/SelfCare-Colored-1_1600x.png

The contemporary language of self-care can resonate with Lorde's caring for the self as a politics. We can observe this in the ways that the surveyed diversity workers in game studies critically reflected on self-care. Of importance, most survey respondents were also women, non-binary, and queer folk (Mejeur et al. 2021, p. 347). Within their descriptions of what self-care constituted, some respondents explicitly included practices such as feminist citational politics and community building. Furthermore, many often engaged and spoke about the need of self-care in terms of *survival*. Self-care treated as part of a feminist toolkit for *survival*, these discussions of self-care are conspicuously distinct from the notions of self-care that incorporate the rhetoric in ways that promote the personal development of resilience for the sake of productivity.

The practices of self-care by which women cope with online harassment is relative to other everyday practices of combating misogyny. Due to a history of systematic marginalisation of women in gaming, women must constantly 'game' the medium in a multitude of ways in order to participate, as discussed in previous chapters. As I have noted a few times before, for women, participation in gaming can feel as synonymous to (not)coping with the becoming-environmental threats of harassment. In the same veins of victim blaming and rape culture, the onus of being safe from harassment and sexual assault is placed onto women to be hypervigilant and to prepare for the worst. This occurs in lieu of holding perpetrators accountable for their actions as well as holding accountable the systems and cultures which enable and encourage the gamified harassment of women.

The holy mantra of self-care's institutionalised repetition lacks the important feminist critique of the divisions between the public and the private, and the political and the personal. On the other hand, caring for the self is a form of political warfare because it uses a feminist framework to deconstruct binary gendered divisions between the public and the private, and the personal and the political. The feminist framework demands that what are otherwise deemed 'private matters' – traditionally feminine-coded domestic and personal – be treated as public concerns (Fraser, 1990). Rather than maintaining an individual's emotional wellbeing to preserve hegemony and increase productivity, a body of difference fighting oppression is also the struggle to preserve embodied lives of difference. Preserving embodied lives of difference promotes a diversity of lifeworlds. Consequently, preserving the distinctness of embodied lifeworlds of difference – to live one's life of embodied

difference as one's own – acts to resist the State's biopower attempting to control, maintain, and regulate populations through institutionalised wellness regimes and normative sameness. Only by understanding the personal as political can caring for the self be a form of embodied resistance: a *survival* that challenges historical subjugation. Therefore, caring for the self demands, in fact, public action: systemic change, reparation, and social justice for the survival of precarious life.

For the "videogame-style" mobile app titled #*SelfCare*, game developer Brie Code and writer Eve Thomas' explained to *The Verge* that they had pursued the subject of self-care because "we and our colleagues have developed extensive self-care habits to survive" (Farokhmanesh, 2018, n.p.). Their own self-care habits of survival included "anything from knitting or journaling to setting up spaces that offer comfort" (Ibid.). As Code recognised (Ibid.),

> Women are working long hours, but we are still largely managing our households, too. And at work, women and other underrepresented people are facing unconscious – and blatantly conscious – bias and hitting glass ceilings. Our performance evaluations focus on our personalities and not our results, and we're expected to pick up office housework and do emotional labour for our colleagues and then perhaps we are told we are too emotional. We're exhausted. And we're now faced with the prospect of internet harassment if we make it through all this and do become successful.

Reflecting on the social gendered roles that assumes emotional labour and care work to be *women's work*, Code recounts the particular sense of exhaustion that women working in the games industry commonly experience.

Figure 32: Homemaker Barb blogs that "Playing video games has been shown to help reduce stress without causing fatigue. Which makes it the perfect activity for homemakers. We are always looking for a quick way to reset during the day without passing out. All videogames can be considered a form of escapism. And if used in moderation can be extremely helpful in giving yourself a mental reset. I personally use gaming as a reward to myself for getting work goals done on time. It has actually helped increase my productivity." Image sourced from https://making-it-home.net/gaming-healthy-self-care-for-homemakers/

Not only do women generally shoulder the brunt of child-rearing and domestic labour in the home, but they are also generally expected to carry most of the emotional labour in a workplace. Coining the term 'emotional labour' in the influential text, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983/2012), sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild considers this labour to be part of a powerful yet otherwise invisible 'emotional system'. Emotional labour *managed* and *produced* emotions, emerging between people's exchanges with others in both their private and public life.

One of the consequences of the 'invisibility' of emotional labour is that the work and service is often merged with a worker's identity. As Hochschild writes (Ibid., p. 2, emphasis in original),

> How can the flight attendant tell when her job is done? A service has been produced; the customer seems content. In the case of the flight attendant, the *emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself*, in a way that loving or hating wallpaper is not a part of producing wallpaper. Seeming to "love the job" becomes part of the job; and actually trying to love it, and to enjoy the customers, helps the worker in this effort.

Like the flight attendants and the customer service roles that Hochschild provides as case studies, Code notes above that it is a woman's *personality* which is used to measure her work performance in the games industry. To borrow Hochschild's turn of phrase: *How can a games worker tell if her job is done?* Since her work performance is evaluated by her personality, she must continuously manage and produce positive emotions in the workplace. Since new creative labour views partying and networking *as work* (see Chapter 4; McRobbie, 2002), she must continue to perform positive attachment and celebrate her work, videogames, and

(being in) the games industry. In the games industry, a woman achieving success also means that she will likely face online harassment. Despite this, she must continue to love what she does because the *vocation* of creative labour calls for *passionate* workers.

Figure 33: Screenshots of the mobile game *#SelfCare*. Images sourced from
https://www.theverge.com/2018/8/12/17661824/selfcare-app-tru-love-game

In #SelfCare, rather than "bug you to constantly check in," the game "greets you with encouragement each time you open it" (Farokhmanesh, 2018, n.p.). In this world "you are allowed to stay in bed and ignore your phone. Maybe consider drawing a tarot card from a stack on the floor, or try some breathing exercises instead" (Ibid.). One activity in *#SelfCare* is piecing together words like "unfollow" or "overslept" by dragging letter blocks. Another task is petting your virtual cat by rubbing the screen. The goal of the game "isn't to win or achieve a high score, but rather reflect on your own needs and take a beat" (Ibid.). As it seeks to help someone to take time to embrace the self, journalist Megan Farokhmanesh describes *#SelfCare* as a "digital companion" (2018, n.p.). In these ways, *#SelfCare* draws from a feminist framework that conceives self-care as a practice of survival, further gesturing to ideas that are drawn from feminist love-politics and self-love.

In a similar vein to the feminist ethics of caring for the self, feminist love-politics' concept of 'self-love' is posed as a social justice project. Love-politics marks our feminist traditions of "transforming love from the personal into a theory of social justice" (Nash, 2011, p. 2). While love-politics often draws from and characterises second-wave feminism, these themes are seen in contemporary feminist of colour scholarship, such as the work of bell hooks, Gwendolyn Pough, Traci West, Patricia Hill Collins, and Chela Sandoval.

In one way, feminist love-politics' promotion of self-love can read as a resistance ethics of self-evaluation, "claiming, embracing, and restoring the wounded Black female self" (Ibid., 2011, p. 3). As Collins captures "loving Black people […] in a society that is so dependent on hating Blackness constitutes a highly

rebellious act" (2004, p. 250). However, departing from the interpretation of love-politics as a form of self-evaluation, Jennifer C. Nash argues that love-politics' pleas for love make "a significant call for ordering the self and transcending the self [… as] a strategy for remaking the self and for moving beyond the limitations of selfhood" (2011, p. 3).

Drawing on Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Jose Muñoz, and Ann Cvetkovich, Nash describes love-politics as a form of *affective politics* that departs from the identity politics of intersectionality affiliated (and increasingly imagined as synonymous) with Black feminist work (Ibid., pp. 3-5). Taking up Ahmed's provocation and inviting us to ask, "how do emotions work to align some subjects with some others and against other others? How do emotions move between bodies?" (2004, p. 118, cited in Nash, 2011, p. 3), Nash uses the term *affective politics* to describe "how bodies are organised around intensities, longings, desires, temporalities, repulsions, curiosities, fatigues, optimism, and how these affects produce political movements (or sometimes inertias)" (2011, p. 3).

Regarding love-politics as a form of *affective politics*, Nash proposes that self-love's project – to embrace oneself and one's own differences – intervenes into the fundamental fear of difference, and in its place promotes a love of difference (Ibid., p.11). Self-love posed as a mission to love oneself for one's own differences guides the mission "to orient the self *toward* difference even in the face of fear or anxiety" (p. 11, emphasis in original). Therefore, love-politics takes on the feminist project of caring for the self as "an affective reconfiguration of public feelings" that are rooted in a "radical ethics of care" (Jordan, 2003, p. 272, cited in Nash, 2011, p. 14). As an

affective politics, love-politics' project of self-love challenges the divisions between private and public feelings. Therefore, the intersubjective transformation within the collective work of caring for the self's embodied difference can also transcend the illusions of selfhood, identity, and emotions as bounded to the personal and the private.

5.3. Affective Solidarity

Feminist affective solidarity provides a compelling critique of feminist frameworks that are founded on (women's naturalised capacity for) empathy and care (traditionally associated with childrearing and domestic labour). Clearing a pathway through the common trappings of popular self-care discourses, affective solidarity draws on a range of affects – rage, frustration, the desire for connection – to amplify the refusals to cope as a vehicle for change. Departing from the illusions of shared sameness, identities, harms, or experiences which can anchor feminist transformation to 'womanhood' and politics of identity, Claire Hemmings (2012) outlines how affective solidarity presents a different mode of engagement that can better animate and sustain feminist social justice movements. "Moving beyond empathy as a privileged way of connecting with others" Hemmings argues, "the difference between 'womanhood' and 'feminism' is critical for a universal yet non-essential understanding of what motives gendered change" (2012, p. 147).

Shifting feminist transformation away from a basis in identity politics and marginality, Hemmings draws on Elspeth Probyn's concept of 'feminist reflexivity' (1993, cited in Hemmings, 2012, p. 148) to point towards affective dissonance

between the ontological and epistemological accounts of existence and politics inspiring alternative knowledges and politics as the critical moment that must first happen to energise and generate socio-political transformation. In other words, when something about the world feels unfair or unjust, a moment of affective dissonance must first happen before realising that a call for intervention is needed.

Describing Probyn's account of feminist reflexivity, Hemmings writes that "reflection on the lack of fit between our own sense of being and the world's judgements upon us constitutes a kind of feminist reflexivity, *a negotiation of the difference* between whom one feels oneself to be and the conditions of possibility for a liveable life" (1993, p.16, cited in Hemmings, 2012, p. 149, emphasis in original). Feminist theory finds its *raison d'être* in theorising the world in this way, since experience is "anything but a given or natural category" (Hemmings, 2012, p. 149). In turn, feminist epistemology critically stresses the importance of intersubjectivity and relationality, as well as the experience of possibilities and limits, in making an account of what it is to be feminists and become feminists in the world.

Hemmings explores how feminist political transformation can be seen emerging through the lens of affect because "in order to know differently we have to feel differently" (Ibid., p. 150). The move from individual experiences of affective dissonance towards a collective capacity for feminist solidarity is precisely found in the relationship between ontology and epistemology *as a relationship* (pp. 150-151). Engaged with a feminist ethics of care, the slip between feminist empathy and women's capacities for care risks encouraging a sentimental attachment rather than genuine engagement with another's concerns (pp. 151-152). The expectation of

empathetic reciprocity furthermore fails to recognise differences in onto-epistemological relationships, instead casting the nonreciprocity of empathy as an indication that the problem is an individual experience (p. 152).

Moving away from the risks of 'womanhood', and gender-essentialism presented in empathy-based feminist frameworks of care, "bearing witness" evokes the ethical responsibility of self-reflexivity (p. 153). However, "what a focus on empathy fails to address," writes Hemmings (p. 154, emphasis in original):

> is the *enjoyment* of authority and judgement that remains with the one who empathises, all the more prized for its deflection through a discourse of care. To imagine a return to a subject who witnesses rather than is already embroiled within a complex intersubjectivity is thus also to entertain a projective fantasy that continues to domesticate the rawness of global inequality.

Consequently, one's commitment to equality (to be treated the same as everyone else) can work to naturalise the conditions of one's own existence, including the limits of one's empathy. One critical danger emerging from the limits of empathy and expectations of empathetic reciprocation recognisably stems from *privilege*. Rather than founding a feminist epistemology on the fantasy of sameness, shared experiences, and therefore seeking equal treatment, affective solidarity emphasises the recognition of difference through the central theme of *struggles* (p. 155) in a manner that is "yet thoroughly cognisant of power and privilege" (p. 154). Affective solidarity therefore grounds feminist epistemology "in the *partial perspectives* of marginal subjects as a counter to the 'god's eye view' of objectivist approaches" (pp. 155-156, emphasis in original). However, rather than specifically describing the

female experience, "the difference between women's knowledge and feminist knowledge hinges on the question of struggle" (p. 156).

When I think about the problems that occur when we base our understanding of feminism on preconceived notions of 'womanhood' and fantasies of shared sameness, one specific example immediately springs to mind. During the first Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) international conference that I attended as an Honours student in 2016, I remember a panel that opened with the assertion that "we may look like a panel of white feminists, but we are more intersectional than what we look like." To follow her opening statement, I expected to hear that some panellists were 'white passing' or 'mixed race', like me. To my surprise, she revealed that "we are women of mixed ages. Some of us are queer and come from working class backgrounds. We come from diverse nationalities and have travelled here from many different parts of the world, such as America, Canada, and the U.K." I was somewhat confused about how this meant that they were therefore 'not a panel of white feminists' as she claimed. But I came to this panel already feeling guilty and embarrassed.

Earlier that week, I had failed to perform positive affect when I received their feedback on my work. During my presentation, one of these senior feminist games scholars had suggested to me that my paper on Gamergate "needs to be more rigorous" and that I should "add more theory." In that moment, I failed to properly engage with her advice, only mustering enough energy to give a firm "thank you," without a smile. She looked a little surprised and taken aback because I had been sharp with her. My message conveyed an emphatic *full stop*. While her comment did

not sit well with me, I was not sure exactly why I felt mixed emotions. My mind was preoccupied elsewhere, worrying if I had securely locked down my accounts to dampen (the knowingly imminent) harassment from Gamergate.[16] I felt utterly drained. In this context, when I came to hear their panel, I believed that I should give them the benefit of the doubt. In the hope of learning, I opened myself up to listen to them. Perhaps I simply misunderstood why they were not a panel of white feminists.

After the panel's opening statements, the next slide presented Yoko Ono's lyrics: "Women are the N-[racial slur removed] of the world." Again, I sorely struggled to comprehend what was happening in front of me. They explained to the audience that Ono's lyrics showcased that "women are, in fact, the most oppressed minority." Racism and sexism were not only comparable, but women were the 'most oppressed'. Following as it did their opening statement, they seemed to be suggesting that women were 'more oppressed' than people of colour, even if they were white.

I felt an incredibly tense atmosphere washing over the room. Twisting and squirming in my seat, I struggled to pay attention for the rest of the session. Afterwards, an audience member complained during the Q&A segment:

Audience:	Did you really have to use the racial slur?
Panellist:	It's not your place to talk about this, you're a white man. It's what our whole presentation was just about.
Audience:	Okay. But I've been messaging with my partner who is a woman of colour, can I read out what she's said?

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[16] Then, of course, my prediction that following my talk I would receive harassment from Gamergate was proved to be accurate.

Panellist:	Fine.
Audience:	She wants to tell you that she's very upset to hear that you have used this word and is shocked that this has happened at an international academic conference.
Panellist:	We didn't say it, Yoko Ono said it.
Audience:	It's not her word to use either, she's not Black?
Panellist:	You're only saying any of this to be a white knight and look like a good ally.

As if it were by divine intervention, fire alarms started blaring, ending the panel session abruptly. Ear-splitting low-pitched honks bounced off the concrete walls and ceilings, echoing throughout the corridors. Congregating outside the building, I remembered that the number of people of colour attending the conference could have easily been counted on one hand.

When people of colour inhabit a sea of whiteness, Ahmed writes that "we might become even more aware of whiteness as wearing when we leave the spaces of whiteness" (2012, p. 36). In other words, when whiteness is instituted, its repetition makes it expected, and thus whiteness recedes into the background (Ibid., p. 38). We might come to forget the heavy weight of surviving whiteness, the invisible weariness of being an 'Other' in these hegemonic white spaces. When we expect to (not)cope, we can forget that we are (not)coping. It takes a 'snap' and 'break' to realise what we have been (not)coping with.

On my journey home to Sydney, I had set aside some space and time to investigate my mixed feelings about the panellist's earlier comments that I should "add more theory." What does the act of telling a young woman of colour, presenting on the topic of Gamergate, that her work needs "more theory" to be "more rigorous"? Refusing to give her the benefit of the doubt again, I deliberated on her

words. On the plane, I drafted a blog and then later posted it to my Tumblr (Butt, 2016b):

CONSTRICTING KNOWLEDGE: 'MORE RIGOUR', TONE POLICING AND WHITE FEMINISM IN GAME STUDIES

[M]y work and what I care about usually revolves around looking at identity politics in regards to gaming and gaming culture guided by an intersectional feminist sensibility. My training is in philosophy, so I'm most comfortable with argumentative and theoretically heavy work. But I've spent the last year trying to unravel these tendencies, so as to shape a more inclusive trajectory of research. I've extended myself from my arm-chair ponderings into ethnography and experimented with my writing to garner a more diverse reading audience. Diversity work is not an intellectual exercise and I see academic traditions as often inhibiting to these objectives. I don't mean that we all should 'popularise' academic research, but that it's important to note that sometimes we are limiting ourselves in problematic ways if we only consider the white and masculine institutionalised understandings of 'rigour' as the be all and end all of what constitutes 'good academic work'.

[E]very philosophy student at one point studies epistemology, and so I've had the privilege of being trained to think about the limitations of 'objectivity' (I align with the school of thought that there are 'degrees of truth'), but the point I would like to draw here is the superficial dichotomy of 'objective' against 'emotional' and tensions of 'truth'. Women (Fassler, 2015), people of colour (Sinclair, 2015) and feminists (Thorpe, 2016) and their experiences of pain and mistreatment are consistently dismissed as being 'overly emotional'. It's such a common reaction that there's even a term for people telling women and POC's to be 'less emotional': 'tone policing' (See Geek Feminism).

I am particularly tired of being told to make my work 'more theoretical' (trust me, the theory is always there, even if I've chosen to make it unpronounced so as to focus on something more important). I realise there's meant to be a role of 'guiding' a younger academic to improve her work – but these 'make it more rigorous' suggestions are extremely unhelpful and upholds institutionalised whiteness and hegemonic masculinity. Like suggestions of 'more nuance' (Healy, 2017), 'more rigour' works on the cross-section of 'connoisseur' elitism and restrictive ideas of 'knowledge production'. 'More rigour' can be asked by anyone regardless of the quality or style of research in question – you can always ask someone to be 'more rigorous'. 'More rigour' is a positioning of a senior to dominate a lesser scholar – it acts to serve nothing but to establish a violent power dynamic. As women and POCs are already socially dismissed as incapable of 'being objective' from being 'overly emotional', I observe the 'more theory, nuance, and rigour' criticisms as another form of discouraging and policing women and people of colour in academia.

So, I presented a paper at DiGRA about Vivian James (Gamergate's avatar) co-authored with my supervisor. I had been terrified to present this, since I am fully aware of the reaction Gamergate has had to women, feminism, and to criticisms made against their 'movement'. So, I went into this knowing I was

going to step on some big angry toes. Furthermore, being a WOC feminist games studies scholar meant that I would eventually pop up on Gamergate's radar. Depressingly, being a target was inevitable (after briefly uploading the paper, it was dogpiled by Gamergaters: http://imgur.com/a/TB5nP).

It was the second paper I had to present at DiGRA, back-to-back, without caffeine and wicked jet lag. During question time, a well-established feminist scholar suggested to add 'more theory' so as to give the paper 'more substance'. Exhausted (physically and emotionally), all I could muster was a firm 'thank you'. [I] was a little shocked that someone who promotes feminist game studies glossed over the fact that she was talking down to a young woman of colour presenting a paper criticising Gamergate. I felt the months of affective labour of preparing for a Gamergate paper reduced into merely being another 'intellectual exercise' of academia.

Moreover, relying extensively on theory is only one approach to feminism. One of my favourite scholars once said that she was excited to see us in game studies moving beyond 'the feminist paper' and how young scholars were integrating feminism as simply second nature. Producing feminist work doesn't always have to be [explicitly] reliant on feminist theory – it boxes in the work feminism aims to do, by maintaining a singular (rather white and classist) ideal of feminism.

We are well aware of the toxic masculinity of gaming and the devaluing of feminist work by wider academia (Chess & Shaw, 2015). Those who want to make game studies a welcoming space for diverse voices need to be more thoughtful and reflexive of the institutionalised racism and sexism structuring academic practices. *New and diverse voices need to be given the room to explore what it means to be 'new' and 'diverse' – they immediately stop being 'new' and 'diverse' voices when they are required to be indoctrinated into traditional and hegemonic styles of knowledge production.*

(๑°▿°)*

Here, I found it productive to allow myself to feel my mixed emotions, staying with the discomfort. With this, I want to highlight the ways that mixed emotions are not simply 'mismanaged feelings' and challenge the assumption that they may either indicate a failure to keep emotions 'under control' or failure to 'know' (and 'reveal') one's own true 'inner' feelings. Beyond the dominant emotional 'hot' responses (Bondi, 2005, p. 234), mixed emotions make an important acknowledgement of a greater complexity of feelings, the ongoing processes of emotions, the obfuscated or unexpressed emotions, and the conflicting dimensions of emotions.

Understanding mixed emotions in these ways, further supports the position that social justice should not be based on 'emotional reciprocation' or 'having the right feelings'. As Ahmed writes (2004/2014, p. 195),

> [W]e must challenge the view that justice is about having the right feelings, and being the right subject. Justice is not about having 'good character'. Not only does this model work to conceal the power relations at stake in definitions what is good-in-itself, but it also works to individualise, personalise, and privatise the social relation of (in)justice. Character is, after all, an effect rather than a ground of social life. Emotions then cannot be installed as the 'truth' of injustice, partly as they do not simply belong to subjects.

Considering the limitations of feminist care discourses based on the fantasies of shared sameness, such as shared hurt and harms, the framework of affective solidarity promotes the values of the "different ways of knowing and different knowledge as ways of surviving in the world" (Hemmings, 2012, p. 157). The delineation of affective solidarity invites feminists "to integrate an account of experience that is dynamic rather than essentialising [… and] to imagine a politics that begins from experiences of discomfort without generalising these as shared by all subjects or as the basis of transcendence of difference" (Ibid.).

Hemmings proposes that this activity held greater potential to sustain a more reflexive politicisation as it informs (p. 158),

> a productive basis from which to seek solidarity with others, not based in a shared identity or on a presumption about how the other feels, but on also feeling the desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort, and against the odds.

Departing from essentialising notions of 'womanhood' or the 'female experience', then, the critical potency of affective solidarity is rather traced through the onto-epistemological relationship that instigates affective dissonance – mixed emotions

and mixed feelings. Such affective dissonance can give rise to discomfort in the transitions between the liminality of (not)coping that can shift towards seeking for affective solidarity in the refusal to cope.

Following from feminist affective solidarity's critiques of the limitations of feminist empathy and care discourses, I propose that the needed intervention into self-care discourse is not a replacement of self-care with an ethics of care. Certainly, in the last couple of years, feminist self-care discourses have already increasingly described the necessity of self-care practices as a communal practice of care, or else rendered it simply as a post-feminist consumerist affair of 'treating oneself' to bath bombs and facemasks. My interest here is not in calling for a return to the frameworks outlined in Foucault's care of the self revived from the stoics, or a return to Lorde's caring for the self. These frameworks can also be productive but, instead, I want to make a further contribution by emphasising the importance of sitting with the discomfort of (not)coping, our mixed emotions/feelings, and the unresolved liminality of suspension between the affective states of coping, not coping, and the refusal to cope. Through embracing life's uncertainties, the moments where we feel the affective transformation of (not)coping – feeling mixed emotions when something unfair and unjust is offered as inevitable – the refusal to cope can open a door on a world of possibilities. In other words, the emotional work of complaint work can animate and sustain social-political transformation.

5.4. Conclusion

Practices of self-care often respond to embodied precarity, searching for ways to cope with the uncertainty of life. Like women skilfully deploying digital coping strategies (see Chapter 3; Cote, 2017), contemporary self-care discourses offer (including but not exclusive to) precarious players and games workers a temporary solution to ongoing systemic problems. The rhetoric of self-care provides a vocabulary for those people to address their experiences of precarity and (not)coping (gesturing back to feminist resilience discourses: see Chapter 3; McRobbie, 2020) and the risks of failing to cope (including but not exclusively) with online harassment and crunch culture.

Concerningly, 'choosing' to participate in the gaming community or creative industry often treats online harassment and crunch culture as if they were experiences that are simply to be expected. Consequently, self-care risks reaffirming online harassment and crunch culture as inevitable consequences of being included, reducing a painful situation to a choice: either choose to participate and cope with online harassment/crunch culture, or if they 'can't handle it', don't participate.

In many ways, self-care increasingly displaces the responsibility for ensuring safety and wellbeing from institutions onto individuals, overburdening the people who suffer or struggle (especially those who already are rendered the most precarious) with the duty of finding more sufficient or effective amounts of self-care coping strategies. The tautology inherent in self-care's self-importance, in the way the rhetoric regularly claims self-care's importance while rarely – if ever – expanding

upon how or why it is, institutes self-care discourses as a normative way to discuss (and therefore swiftly dismiss) people's reports and concerns about (not)coping and precarity. Consequently, the non-performativity and blame-shifting of self-care discourses, which can abruptly conclude conversations about (not)coping, aim to turn away negative emotions before they can reach the oppressive systems, institutions, and powers generating those negative feelings in the first place. By drawing affects from the former ethical and feminist political frameworks, self-care can *feel* ethical and radical without enacting ethics or politics that it seems to be invoking. Looking at the processes of hermeneutic liquidation helps to develop an understanding of affective slips, explaining how those affects can remain without the frameworks that are meant to mobilise them.

Meanwhile, those who are not or are less impacted by those things that produce a need for 'self-care', can become seen as an index of 'successful living' in their productive contributions to capital. They are so often the images of individual resilience that is presumed achievable by adequality practicing (enough) self-care. In turn, this makes it easier to dismiss the protests and experiences of those who are most impacted, merely signalling a personal failure of mismanaged lives/emotions. Indeed, how reactionary language of fragility popularly used to readily dismiss protests (e.g., "so easily offended" and "generation snowflake"), perceives the problem to be caused as if it were by an underdevelopment of resilience. Before testimonials are given a fair hearing, seemingly 'non-resilient protestors' are deemed to be undeserving of fair hearings. Testimonials, complaints, and protests are not

heard when they are imagined to simply be 'complaining' about 'their own failures' to cope (cf. Ahmed, 2021, p. 3).

These discourses are also important to feminist and diversity work(ers) in game studies. In response to the pitfalls of feminist care discourses, affective solidarity proposes that feminist epistemology and knowledge – necessary for socio-political transformation – hinges on the question of *struggles*. The recognition of the universality of struggles is simultaneously, to reiterate, thoroughly cognisant of power and privilege. While self-care discourses are not exclusive to gaming culture, this chapter demonstrated how everyday struggles continue to significantly shape people's gaming lifeworlds.

This chapter contributes to the thesis' overall provocation that game researchers must more closely inspect their subject's everyday continuities which cannot be bounded within a formalised discipline subject or methodological specificity often limited to the central study of play, players, and the creation of play. Ultimately, we must pay closer attention to the struggles of (not)coping and how it shapes people's gaming lifeworlds. Embodied precarity is contingent, and thus the conditions giving rise to the need of self-care is contingent on these experiences of embodied precarity. Self-care seeks to manage emotions in ways which does recognise (not)coping and suffering. However, the recognition of suffering in self-care discourses can still work to maintain that singular configuration of gaming lifeworlds that perceives online harassment and crunch culture as inevitable. Rather than view them as simply inevitable, we must protest that suffering.

Chapter 6 | Conclusion

Videogames in Culture

> As researchers we all have embodied, cultural and social lives and feelings
> that we don't leave at the door when we do our research.
>
> (Sal Humphreys, 2019, p. 15)

As the chapter epigraph suggests, research can never be untethered from the researcher. In many ways, this thesis is an ode to the ordinariness of (not)coping in my own lifeworld – the various struggles that formed the affective dimensions of living – and the ways that those ongoing struggles shape how I relate to Others relative to how I (dis)engage with videogames and the field of game studies. To expand on the above epigraph, Sal Humphreys describes the silences and gaps produced by those research and researcher entanglements as follows (2019, pp. 14-15; emphasis added):

> As a researcher in an MMOG, dealing with constant homophobic commentary from various player cultures that I have participated in has also been challenging and ultimately caused me to switch out of some games. You start to ask yourself why you aren't researching something else, less personally offensive and confronting. Something that won't induce more disillusionment and cynicism in your own personal view of the world and people. *As researchers we all have embodied, cultural and social lives and feelings that we don't leave at the door when we do our research*. I haven't written about this previously in my research for the very reason that the insights into some gamer cultures have convinced me that it would attract adverse attention. I don't want to argue with the trolls about how they are "just playing" when it is still offensive to me. I don't want to be made to feel that I am weak or prudish because I hate the trash talk. I don't want to excuse some of the things I witness in gamer culture, but I also don't want to make myself a target by calling it out. So there has been a silence, a gap, in my publications.

Here, Humphreys articulates some of the very pressing and sticky questions about what it means and what it costs to be a feminist game researcher. What has it meant or cost for me to do this research? For one, as other feminist 'diversity workers' in game studies have described (Mejeur et al., 2021, p. 351),

> Honestly, [I feel] tired. I worry that I'm not doing enough constantly and sometimes the whole thing feels like a Sisyphean task. [...] Not only is the boulder rolling back down the hill, sometimes there's actively people on the other side of the boulder trying to push it back down over you.

Feminist diversity workers in game studies are often those who are deemed to embody diversity and Otherness in the field (Ibid., p. 347). For these game scholars, the emotional and affective labour (cf. Hardt, 1999) of diversity work can feel like you're routinely "banging your head against a brick wall" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 175).

Feminist researchers in games studies, media studies, and internet studies regularly set forth on their projects knowing a weighty sense of tired inevitability; that we will face the same kinds of sexism, harassment, and abuse that we are researching about. Since we research this area, we know that we will be targeted *because* we are researching this subject area. We understand that we will endure the same sexism, harassment, and abuse that we research *because we are feminist game researchers*. So, the pressing question that came with doing feminist games research, one that I ask myself with rather depressing frequency: is it all worth it? As Humphreys asks herself too, why not research something else? "Something less personally offensive and confronting?" To repeat for emphasis, "something that won't induce more disillusionment and cynicism in your own personal view of the world and people?" (2019, pp. 14-15).

During my undergraduate studies, I worked at the local EB Games retail store. While I was on shift, standing behind the counter in uniform, I remember an interaction with a man, who had asked me "do you actually play videogames?" "No, I just work here" I responded in jest but with utmost conviction. My store manager swiftly jumped in to reassure the customer that I was joking, explaining to him that "she's actually a big nerd." Although my manager quickly broke the façade, how stunned the customer was at that moment, blinking and lost for words, is a memory that still makes me smile at my own cheek.

My claim that I didn't play videogames but simply worked at a videogame store was meant to be seen as – let's say – a *spirited* response. I was tired of feeling that I had to constantly prove myself, as a woman, that I was a 'real Gamer'. These random 'Gamer cred' pop quizzes seemed to only be regularly imposed on some – often girls and women – who had to constantly prove their 'legitimacy' to the male gatekeepers that we were genuinely committed to gaming. That our commitment was attached in *the right ways* so that they would allow us into their believed ownership of the proverbial boy's club. It never mattered how many times I might have responded in earnest. Past experiences proved that sincerity would never be enough. Being asked whether you 'actually play videogames?' is a way of "being made into a stranger, of not being at home in a category that gives residence to others" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 177). Therefore, the incessant questioning of play and commitment is a pointed and frequent reminder that we don't belong. To be questioned is a way of being held up; the questioning makes us *questionable*.

I have framed my study of gaming lifeworlds with an existential-materialist focus on affective networks, precarity, and (not)coping. In these ways, I have sought to bring greater attention to how the tensions in relation to resistances against videogames are significant to understanding videogames in culture. Gaming culture is defined by the people that have their backs pressed up against the gateways, thresholds, and margins – not solely those who are at the forefront of dominant gaming publics. Many players do not identify with the default Gamer identity and struggle with fitting into the limited category. However, these players have always participated in gaming's counterpublics and publics, which are, indeed, not removed from the culture of videogames.

In this conclusion, I will revisit my research questions and summarise the significance of the findings. I outline the ways each lifeworld chapter has explored how (not)coping, relations, conflicts, power struggles, and precarity can transform gaming lifeworlds. Then I highlight my original contribution to knowledge and its subsequent implications. From my research, I suggest that gaming lifeworlds presents a model for researchers to study the powers dynamics, continuities, and persistence of world environments when looking at videogames in culture. Before providing my concluding remarks, I reflect on the limitations of my work, how my own experiences of embodied precarity have shaped my research, and discuss opportunities to guide future feminist, media, and games cultural research. There have been silences and gaps in my work but these silences and gaps also stress that we need more feminist games research.

6.1. Summary

This research emerged from a question – treating (the work of) diversity as a questioning – that aimed to address a problem identified as 'the lack of diversity in gaming culture'. To guide these questions relating to diversity (work) as a mode of feminist questioning, I have drawn from Judith Butler's insights on precarity and precarious bodies (2015). Butler's understanding of embodied precarity challenges popular new entry point interventions which might otherwise seek to merely *quantify* diversity, accessibility, inclusion, and participation. Widespread narratives implying 'the absence' (or lack) of marginalised people in games fail to account for how those marginalised people must seek ways to (not)cope while participating in hegemonic gaming spaces. This research provides an account for people's experiences of embodied precarity when they participate in environments of gaming which continue to be hostile to them. Embodied precarity examines how players and workers who are Othered *feel* about their circumstances and the *material* conditions (infrastructures and environments) that give rise to *existential* conditions ([not]coping, hypervigilance, stress, burnout, and so on). Rather than investigating a problem more widely identified as 'the lack of diversity', my approach critiques those underlying assumptions of 'lacking'. Instead, the existential-materialist focus on embodied precarity and experiences of (not)coping points toward an examination of the contested sites, power struggles, and mechanisms of hegemony and oppression.

To reiterate, this research has thus asked: *How are people (not)coping against and within hegemonic gaming publics? How are gaming lifeworlds transformed by*

conflicts, (not)coping, and precarity? To answer these questions, I have used qualitative mixed methods to gather empirical data combining in-depth semi-structured interviews (Chapter 3), participant observation (Chapter 4), and discourse analysis (Chapter 5). I drew on my own first-hand experiences as well as stories from research participants about what it was like to (not)cope and resist against and within the hegemony of dominant gaming publics. Recognising that all research approaches necessarily demonstrate certain limitations, using mixed methods helped develop a more multifaceted understanding of lived experiences and the ways that conflicts, (not)coping, and embodied precarity might transform gaming lifeworlds.

The presentation of empirical and qualitative dimensions of this research thus contributes to the existing literature in game studies by providing new accounts of lived experiences of being assembled with videogames, as well as different ways to tell those stories. I report on some of the more disregarded and taken-for-granted subjects, as well as examine different ways to understand subjugation as intersectional. With what I also have described as an existential-materialist approach, I have sought to draw my feminist critiques from a sense of affective solidarity (see Chapter 5; Hemmings, 2012). It aligns with the views that embodied precarity, (not)coping, and lived experiences are experienced differently, even if these existential-material conditions are shared conditions. As a feminist project, this thesis has focused on dynamic, systemic, and structural power relations. Employing Donna Haraway's feminist critique (1988) that challenges the assumption that knowledge production can be objective or completed, my research adds to the continued

collection of necessarily partial, situated, and contextual understanding of the world. For the purpose of this project, I have aimed to centre stories from people, scenes, and discourses, which are frequently treated as tangential to the field of videogames, producing an account that better includes them to promote their significance.

6.2. Contributions

My main contribution to knowledge is offering gaming lifeworlds as a model to study videogames in culture. In game studies, research methods are frequently configured around the central study of play, players, or the creation of play. Consequently, 'non-play', 'non-player identities', 'non-play relationships', and 'non-play centric spaces' are traditionally placed outside the scope of the field. Through the act of omission, subject areas that are deemed beyond the interest of game studies become dismissed, even if those aspects are closely entangled with videogame play and integral to gaming culture. The isolation of gaming from the lifeworlds that materialise videogames and puts them into practice risks essentialising particular characteristics of videogame assemblages and reify gaming culture.

Often, games research has reproduced the problematic reification of audience identity categories used by the industry. This has included games research that centres the hardcore Gamer stereotype, research that classifies player types (e.g., social players/competitive players, casual players/hardcore players), and research based on the assumption that, for instance, 'females' play differently from 'males' (i.e., Gamer Girls/Gamers [male default]). Studying the ways gaming lifeworlds transform through conflicts, (not)coping, and precarity helps build a more

complex and situated cultural understanding of videogames. In this, studying gaming lifeworlds might offer game researchers a useful and flexible approach that can better include the experiences, voices, communities, identities, and subjectivities, which are more often discounted in the literature as well as the games industry and public discourses.

In many ways, the work of feminist game scholars enriches the study of gaming lifeworlds as a contribution to knowledge. When I was an undergraduate, I remember the first reading that was assigned in my game studies reading group was the article 'What is Videogame Culture?' in which Shaw argues that (2010a, p. 416),

> Like any text, medium, or phenomenon there are a diversity of approaches and perspectives one might take. If we are going to study games within a framework of culture, however, we as scholars must draw on the concepts as well as the conflicts of cultural studies. We must be reflexive and critical of both our object of study and our methodologies. Defining gaming culture as something distinct and separate from a constructed mainstream culture encourages us to only study those who identify as gamers, rather than more dispersed gaming. That is, we should look at videogames in culture rather than games as culture.

Reading Shaw's provocation as an aspiring games scholar, that we should look at videogames in culture rather than as culture per se, felt like a complete paradigm shift for me. During the reading group discussion, a PhD student had asked, "but how would we even do something like that? Wouldn't that just be studying *everything*?" At the time, none of us knew how to answer this task. Ever since, I have ventured to consider the ways I might develop a response, feeling pulled toward Shaw's summons. The question "how can we study videogames in culture?" has thus mapped a journey and guided some notable aspects of this research project. It has

guided the ways I have designed the research, as well as the ways that I have experimented and self-reflexively used different approaches.

I suggest, gesturing to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, that the concept of lifeworlds might help us develop a more fluid and flexible understanding of the transformation of videogame assemblages as the world unfolds, rather than expanding a stratification of videogame assemblages, marking new territories, categories, or boundaries in seeking to better recognise their complexities. Examining how gaming lifeworlds can be transformed through conflicts provides an elastic and flexible model for games researchers to study videogames in culture rather than as culture per se.

Each core chapter has worked to decentre videogames as the primary research object in this cultural research on videogames. What I found to have emerged from the three lifeworld chapters can be described as three universal themes: how *time*, *space*, and *affect* can be – phenomenologically – experienced differently and therefore create conflicts that have the potential to transform gaming lifeworlds. Chapter 3 describes how couples negotiated to spend *time* together relates to how couples can experience *time* differently, creating conflicts that transform women's gaming lifeworlds. Chapter 4 describes the socio-cultural and heavily gendered negotiations of shared *space*, how it can be experienced differently, and how this created conflicts that transform gaming lifeworlds for both attendees (how many women regularly witnessed, experienced, and even expected sexual harassment) and absentees (the greater 'absence' of women, groups of women, or unaccompanied women in these scenes). Chapter 5 describes how

popular self-care discourses institute *affective* regimes as a conventional response to the discussions identifying certain conflicts; how the rhetoric of self-care regulates *emotions* and the ways that people might *feel* differently and offers a temporary solution that works to maintain one configuration of gaming lifeworlds where player online harassment and industry crunch culture is treated as inevitable.

For this research, a mixed method approach developed a richer, more multifaceted understanding of lived experiences, pragmatically addressing the limitations of all approaches. Observing how gaming lifeworlds transform through conflicts resulted in an exploration of how the universal themes of *time*, *space*, and *affect* unfolded in the world. Accordingly, I propose that studying the transformation of gaming lifeworlds in future research may be similarly guided through the broader universal themes of *time*, *space*, and *affect*. Rather than treating each chapter as bound to each universal theme, how conflicts between *time*, *space*, and *affect* traverse and transform lifeworlds points to the shifting and unravelling of a wide range of socio-cultural continuities.

I make this contribution to knowledge as one which emerges from a genealogy of feminist games scholarship. As I outlined in my thesis introduction, various feminist game scholars, such as T.L. Taylor (2006), Adrienne Shaw (2010), Torill E. Mortensen (2019), Mia Consalvo (2019), and Amanda A. Phillips (2020), have critiqued and challenged game studies' narrow scope and formalist approaches. They have stressed the need for game researchers to more closely look at the persistence of digitally and materially entangled environments. Likewise, we must continue following the continuities of player communities beyond their platforms.

More closely exploring the *continuities* of videogame assemblages in culture produces work that critiques game studies' narrow scope and disciplinary rigidity. Accordingly, my research on gaming lifeworlds has drawn from, developed, combined, and used a wide array of different theories and methods, comprising a variety of interdisciplinary fields across the social sciences and the humanities, including but not limited to cultural studies, media studies, gender studies, internet studies, critical drug studies, and philosophy.

In the conclusion of *Play Between Worlds*, Taylor stresses that there needs to be more games research using "nondichotomous models" (2006, p. 153). In my thesis, developing '(not)coping' promotes a greater recognition of the ways these fluctuating states do not emerge in a neat, linear, or deterministic manner. They are messy and transformative modes of becoming, sometimes mixed and conflicting, but always multiple, in-flux, infinitely cycling through (re)orientations as the world unfolds. (Not)coping is a term I coined, developed from Ahmed's work (2018), and used to acknowledge the liminality between the affective states of coping, not coping, and the refusal to cope. I have proposed that (not)coping illustrates the tensions and power struggles transforming gaming lifeworlds and that such an exploration can help games researchers explain how, why, when, where, and who becomes reoriented towards and/or away from certain videogame assemblages with more nuance and complexity that conceives (non)participation and (dis)engagement along an evolving continuum.

Studying videogames in relationship conflicts (Chapter 3), drunk spaces (Chapter 4), and self-care discourses (Chapter 5) illustrates the socio-cultural

continuities of temporal, spatial, and affective dimensions that produce and reproduce, new and familiar, relationship dynamics (Chapter 3), social space constructions (Chapter 4), and normative communication genres (Chapter 5). As I have suggested, examining socio-cultural *continuities* within the transformations of gaming lifeworlds is key to developing an understanding of the role of videogames in culture. *Continuities* are crucial to understanding videogames as assemblages. *Continuities* decentre videogames as the primary text. *Continuities* can make videogames seem unremarkable. But I believe that it is important to treat videogames as an ordinary and everyday part of life, where different videogame assemblages can transform all lifeworlds in the same manner that the shifting temporal, spatial, and affective dimensions of intersubjectivity in romantic relationships, intoxication in drunk spaces, and resilience narratives in self-care discourses can transform gaming lifeworlds.

6.3. Implications

My research challenges popular beliefs on videogames, play, and players, and can help us rethink common assumptions that are deeply entrenched in society. The stereotypical image of Gamers assumes that videogame players are predominantly boys and men – children, teenagers, or college/university aged young adults – to the extent that videogames are assumed to be 'for them'. Furthermore, playing videogames is typically imagined to be a solo activity where players can 'escape' from society. Some consequences that have resulted from these beliefs include the association of videogames with images of immaturity. It has fostered the accepted

male default position of players, which, in turn, treats the existence of female players as unusual and exceptional. Common beliefs also generally carve divisions between videogames and the social, as well as the real and the virtual. At once, these can seem to imply that there are no 'real consequences' in videogames, and view videogames as 'anti-social' or removed from 'politics' and 'mainstream' culture.

However, as I outlined in my Literature Review, research on videogames and players have already refuted many of those popular assumptions. For instance, the *Digital Australia Report 2018* had surveyed and found that more than two-thirds of the Australian population play videogames (67%), the majority of videogame players are adults over 18 years (77%), the average age of videogame players is 34 years, female videogame players count as approximately half of all players (46%), and nearly half of all senior citizens over 65 years (43%) play videogames (Brand et al., 2018, p. 6). Comparable statistics on videogame player demographics in Australia have been available for more than a decade, with earlier surveys also indicating that the vast majority of videogame players had played videogames with others (97%), either in the same room or on the internet (Brand et al., 2009, p. 6). According to these quantitative surveys, videogame players are not predominantly young children or teenagers, are not mostly played by boys and men, and players have been more often socially engaged than never playing videogames with others.

In some of the same ways that players more often engage in social forms of playing videogames than only playing alone, a considerable number of adult videogame players would also presumedly be people in relationships. In 2018, families with or without children represented most of the Australian households

(71%), while single person households represented a third (24%) of the population (Australian Institute of Family Studies, n.d.). According to the 2016 Census, there were 6,070,000 families in Australia – most of these families represented couples without children (37.8%) and couples with dependent children (36.8%) (Qu, 2020). While games research tends to study family configurations that focus on parents and children, the literature on adult couples' videogame play (or intergenerational families) is comparatively nascent. Adults playing or spectating videogames with another adult partner, either online or in the same room, would reasonably be experiences as common as parents' and children's videogame play. However, the ways that videogames have been generally viewed as children's play has likely contributed to the centrality of parent and children's relations in games research compared to looking at other family dynamics.

In hand with the reclusive image of Gamers, videogames' association with youths, domesticity, and leisure activities, has also likely contributed to the ways that the children and teen prohibited drunk spaces of professionalised videogame events and social scenes have been overlooked in the literature. The majority of Australians aged 14 years and over consume alcohol (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021), with three-fourths of adults aged 18 and over (76.6%) having consumed at least one full serving of alcohol in 2019 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019). Alcohol is largely viewed as an intrinsic part of Australian culture, playing a central role in most people's social lives (Reid, 2013). Drinking alcohol is viewed to be acceptable in "almost all social situations, from weddings to sports matches, and even at funerals or baby showers," and that "there are very few

occasions where drinking alcohol is not encouraged" (Ibid., p. 1). Both alcohol and videogames tend to stir moral controversies, which has informed a significant amount of the literature (outside of the fields of game studies and critical drug studies) that has primarily aimed to curtail 'problematic consumption'. However, both alcohol and videogames continue to be consumed by most adults in Australia, and are otherwise ordinary aspects of many people's social lives.

One of the more pressing issues resulting from the popular framing of videogames as a form of escapism – or the inference that videogame play is 'not real' – is reflected in staunch defence of the notion that videogames are inherently 'removed from politics' and might become 'contaminated' by the 'invasion' of political discourse. Self-care discourses are historically connected to feminism, and the contemporary marketing of 'self-care' products are commonly aimed at girls and women. Like the traditional Othering of femininity from the medium, videogames have become positioned as if they are diametrically opposed to feminist politics. Feminists and feminist ideas thus become treated as 'outsider' voices to videogames. Despite the pervasiveness of self-care discourses, the strong association of self-care with feminism might provide a further explanation of why, more generally, *feminist discourses* in relation to videogames (as well as feminist games research) has been a side canon – rather than the canon – in the field.

My research therefore helps us to rethink the history of videogames and players, as well as challenge dichotomies of game/not-game, by highlighting the importance of *continuities* and *relations* between game and not-game, game studies and not game studies. Game researchers need to inspect the continuities of socio-

cultural relations more closely, including how they inform people's evolving attachment to or detachment from videogame assemblages. Studying gaming lifeworlds encourages interdisciplinary flexibility and cross-contamination, cutting across a problematic bracketing of videogames when they are treated as distinct from an imagined 'mainstream' culture. The Othering of videogames from mainstream cultures impacts participation and play, in turn, constitutes a culture of videogames that is intensely animated by conflicts and struggles between perceived in-groups and outsiders (Shaw, 2010a). Rather than a descriptive account about videogames as culture per se, studying gaming lifeworlds and their transformations can offer researchers a critical lens to more closely investigate the existential-material conditions and continuities of videogames which highlights the ongoing tensions, conflicts, and power struggles of embodied precarity. The continuity of temporal, spatial, and affective dimensions of lifeworlds emphasises the different intensities of ordinary, embodied, intersubjective, and discursive entanglements that shape people's (non)participation, (dis)engagement, and (de)attachments moving towards and/or away from gaming publics, counterpublics, communities, culture, and affective networks, as well as humans, non-human lives, objects, and environments in the ecologies and assemblages of the world that includes connections and disconnections to videogames. Consequently, this research has suggested that studying the *ordinariness* rather than the exceptionality of videogames can be a more productive route for cultural researchers of videogames.

6.4. Reflections

Since I conducted my interviews and ethnographic fieldwork prior to COVID-19, my thesis makes several claims about the world before witnessing the impacts of the global pandemic. Undoubtedly, research studying gaming lifeworlds in the (foreseeable) future would be different to what my thesis has presented in many ways. However, by focusing on the persistence of world environments, relations, continuities, and precarity, many of the themes and findings presented in my research remain relevant – perhaps even magnified – in 2022. Nevertheless, the flexibility of gaming lifeworlds should offer a productive avenue for games researchers to more closely look at digital world entanglements, connections and disconnections in a web of social relations, and embodied precarity while living 'under these unprecedented times'. This is not to say that my research is without other limitations that also point to further opportunities where researchers could extend and build upon my work, as I will reflect on below.

Firstly, I have been limited to reading literature written in English, while there is a wealth of games research published in other languages.[17] Although I am fluent in speaking both English and Thai, I have only spoken to interviewees in English. Similarly, while I was born in Thailand, my research has mostly focused on Western societies (Australia and North America) since I live in Australia. Furthermore, time and financial limitations associated with studying a PhD and being a PhD student has

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[17] For instance, from serving as an executive board member of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), I am aware that the local chapter of DiGRA Japan has a notably large archive of games research published in Japanese.

limited the scope, location, and depth of my investigation. Despite circulating a recruitment survey in 2018, rather than conduct further interviews with people who played videogames with their partners and expanding the scope and sampling, I decided to return to the set of previous interviews that I had conducted in 2016. Along with the other considerations outlined in Chapter 3, I also took this approach to return to those set of interviews since I wanted to be certain that my PhD was completed on time.

The interviews conducted in 2016 and presented in Chapter 3 reflects women's stories in ways that might not reflect their current opinions or circumstances. I attempted to partly address this by highlighting the ways that my interviewees' accounts and opinions changed, shifted, and evolved during our conversations, accentuating the ways that their subjectivities and lifeworlds transformed. The time period also shaped our conversations. I spoke to these interviewees within the two years that followed Gamergate. But they were also conducted before Donald Trump had been elected president of the U.S., which has since marked particular transmutations of Gamergate into the rise of Alt-Right conservative politics (Vossen, 2018, p. 265). Presumably, speaking to the same interviewees today would produce different stories, even without the pandemic.

The relatively small sample of seven interviewees was also not particularly diverse in terms of socio-economic class, education, age, race, nationality, and location. For one, none of these couples had children. Four out of seven participants were white/Caucasian, and at the time, all were in their 20s. All women were either studying in higher education and/or were in stable employment. All were highly

educated and had either completed a tertiary degree and/or further pursuing postgraduate studies. All were Australian citizens living in Sydney. Furthermore, I only spoke with these women without speaking to their partners. Therefore, my research might only report 'one-side' of their relationships. Future research could consider if it would benefit from speaking with couples and observing their relationship dynamics playing videogames together. However, I suspect that these interviewees might not feel as if they could speak as freely about certain topics or share more critical views about their partner and their relationship conflicts, in the same ways as when only interviewing one partner, as I have done. If interviewees were interviewed in the same room or separately in the same study, participants might not feel comfortable to 'complain' or 'vent' about their relationship struggles. On reflection, it would be very difficult to ensure a participant's anonymity from their partners.

Notably, when speaking with D.Va about her gaming in her youth, she also asked me, "Oh, does *Neopets* count?" After I confirmed with her that I did indeed 'count' *Neopets*, D.Va sought to amend her earlier answer that she 'did not play videogames' during high school. Since I had already interviewed a couple of others before speaking with D.Va, I had not considered to ask follow up questions with those interviewees or ask them to reflect on what they 'counted' as videogames. Some of those interviewees who reported that they 'stopped playing' might – like D.Va – actually have continued to play as teenagers but played (video)games they assumed 'did not count'. How interviewees imagine if we, as game researchers, consider what is a game/not-game, directly impacts interviewees' reports to game

researchers. This stresses the need for game researchers to reflexively consider our definitions of (video)games to ensure that we include games and experiences of play that have regularly become viewed as 'lesser' or 'not real' (video)games and forms of play (e.g., 'casual games').

While it was a small sample, particularly limited in age range, I found that this limitation itself helped me to reflect more deeply on my interviewees' specific life circumstances, as a generation who were all teenagers in the 2000s. All of the women played videogames as primary school children (6-12 yrs). However, the women who reported to have 'stopped playing' in high school (13-17 yrs) were also less likely to identify as a gamer. Drawing from this unexpected but otherwise currently unsubstantiated finding, studying women's *personal lived histories* of playing videogames could be another potential area for further investigation. While my research sample size is too small to make broader claims, I suspect that further studies on women's gaming lived histories would make a valuable contribution to the field of game studies and related fields.

One way that game researchers could investigate women's lived histories of playing videogames may be to look at the limited affordances given for teenage girls and adult women to perform and affirm a sense of 'maturity' when playing videogames in the same ways that teenage boys might play 'more violent' videogames to perform and affirm a sense of 'maturity' tied to 'masculine' signifiers. Studies such as Kelly Bergstrom's (2019) have also emphasised the socio-cultural pressures on women and how they shape ideas on what constitutes 'a good use' of their leisure time, where videogames might not be imagined to be a leisure activity

that is (appropriate) 'for them'. Further research may also wish to include a consideration of the traditional domestic roles and responsibilities placed on women, and how those pressures can be reflected in the themes of 'care' characterising most videogames developed 'for girls' (cf. Chess, 2017). Do women 'stop/ do not playing videogames' or are they unsure if the (video)games they play 'count'? Do these girls and women 'stop playing videogames' (when they are teenagers) because they come to believe that gaming is not 'a good use' of their leisure time? How does gendered domestic responsibilities impact women's leisure time in relation to videogame play? Are women less afforded to express a sense of performing 'maturity' when playing videogames compared to teenage boys and young men?

Since some of the interviewees who 'stopped playing as teenagers' had also reported that they experienced motion sickness when playing first-person perspective videogames, there could be some ground to further investigate some of those topics, suggested above, in relation to motion sickness and technology use. Such findings, again, would need further research. However, I would hypothesise that some women's hesitancy to identify as a gamer and/or their experiences of motion sickness, could perhaps be related to the historical development of first-person ('hardcore' shooter) videogames in the 2000s. While I had intended to interview a broader age range of women and wanted to include a more diverse sample of participants, only interviewing women in their 20s, curiously, helped me to reflect more deeply on their generational specificity and the videogames that would have been available to them as teenagers.

When I attended the Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) 2017, I was surprised to feel such a powerful sense of alienation and estrangement – a culture shock. Feeling like a complete outsider, I thought that it would be difficult to 'enter' or become immersed into the scene without a (male) chaperone. While I thoroughly enjoyed spectating IEM 2017, I am unsure if I would attend another eSports tournament alone. Following IEM 2017, the next time I attended another eSports event I went with a male friend to watch The Overwatch League 2018 in Sydney. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, while not directly reported in greater depth, the considerable difference between those two experiences significantly shaped my analysis. Another way to build upon this research could be to study the specific localities and venues sites of eSport events and compare the ways that fan's embodied consumption and spectatorship practices emerged over a range of eSport event spaces. Rather than studying a global eSport scene, my research highlights an opportunity for researchers to explore more situated, national, local, and cultural contexts with the examinations of the ways that a specific eSport venue site is socio-culturally coded and gendered. What are the more situated and local socio-cultural practices of eSport fan spectatorship? How does a venue's infrastructure shape fan's behaviours and define the conditions of what gender expressions can be performed?

Figure 34: South Korea, eSport audience with paper fans and glowing headbands. Image sourced from https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/in-south-korea-the-crowd-goes-wild-for-competitive-gaming-1466497

Figure 35: South Korea, eSport audience with glow sticks. Image sourced from https://www.casino.org/blog/south-korea-where-gaming-is-more-than-a-hobby/

I conducted this fieldwork in my late 20s and gravitated towards spending more time with others in drinking scenes who were usually a closer age bracket to me. This meant that I spent more time with the 'older attendees' who were professionals or game teachers (in their late 20s or early 30s) than younger game students at Beer & Pixels. Most attendees at the Game Developer's Conference (GDC) satellite parties observably skewed towards a younger demographic. Future research may want to further investigate how into the games industry's drinking culture, in hand with the crunch culture, and how they have contributed to perpetuating a young and male dominated workforce. According to the International Game Developer Association's *Developer Satisfaction Survey 2021*, people 26-35 years of age constitute the greatest proportion of workers in the games industry (52%), most did not have children (75%), and women only represent one in ten (30%) (Weststar, 2021, p. 8). The 2017 survey also reported that slightly more respondents were married or partnered (50%) than single (44%) (Weststar et al., 2017, p. 8). Reflecting on my research and current statistics, I would surmise that the 'more senior' workers (over 35) leave the games industry to secure more stable employment (or work requiring less [overtime] hours with a comparable or higher income). I imagine that they transfer their skills and move into other (less precarious) tech fields. Presumably, people over 35 would need to better ensure that they can steadily support and spend time with their families, as well as care for children and/or elderly family members.

Traditionally, carer roles are more often performed by women (Horchschild, 1983/2012; Hardt, 1999). Even though men are contributing more than ever towards

child rearing and household chores, women still perform significantly more domestic labour, even if she works the same number – or more – hours than her male partner (Chemaly, 2016). The demographics of the games industry raises further questions relating to crunch and drinking cultures and how they could contribute to perpetuating a young male dominated workforce, who generally do not have carer responsibilities. It would be important to investigate these questions with a consideration of how the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the care burden of women and families (Power, 2020).

By the end of 2018, the prevalence of self-care discourses felt as if they constantly followed me across all my on- and offline environments. While I had already conducted a reasonable amount of fieldwork before COVID-19, heavy lockdown restrictions in Australia significantly limited my capacity to collect further empirical material. Accordingly, I was required to adjust my research to accommodate these necessary restrictions. Therefore, I turned towards discourse analysis in Chapter 5, presenting work less empirically driven overall than the two preceding lifeworld chapters. A substantial limitation here is that, as a method, discourse analysis is much less existential-materialist than what I envisioned for my thesis and what I have otherwise claimed my thesis to offer. However, needing to adjust to those limitations offered an opportunity for me to further experiment with the different ways of studying gaming lifeworlds. In turn, I considered the ways that discourses on embodied precarity and (not)coping could be another suitable area for this investigation.

Over the past three years, the global COVID-19 pandemic has noticeably influenced contemporary self-care discourses. Self-care discourses seem more prevalent than ever. But they have become centred on (not)coping with the 'ongoingness of ongoingness' relative to finding ways to live with lockdown restrictions and social distancing measures. At once, COVID-19 amplified the discussions on embodied precarity and (not)coping and has pulled greater focus away from talking about other aspects of embodied precarity and (not)coping. The relationship of self-care discourses as a conventional response to (not)coping with the perceived inevitability of online harassment and crunch culture might, in some ways, have become less conspicuous since our attention is drawn to COVID-19. But, perhaps now, we could more closely follow those self-care discourses around.

6.5. Complaint!

The task of mapping the dynamic and transformational energies of the forcefields and affects of lifeworlds is not to 'capture' lived experience. Rather, it contributes to the collection of feminist partial knowledges. In many ways, despite my use of its terminology in this thesis, this research has sought less to address 'gaps' in knowledge, but rather treats knowledge production as formed through an engagement with ongoing dialogues. To gesture to Foucault, when dominant doctrines and epistemes shift, they can pave ways for generating new ideas. At the same time, these paradigm shifts also limit an emergence of other ideas. Feminist understandings and appreciations of situated knowledges highlight the importance of looking at resistances to hegemony from counterpublics, and treating

counterpublics as a multiplicity emerging from, if not ideally representing, the multitudes, contradictions, and contestations within their communities.

When investigating resistance, feminist complaint work locates a problem. However, to be seen as "a complainer" can render the feminists that locate a problem as *"the location of a problem"* (Ahmed, 2021, p. 3, emphasis added). As Ahmed writes (Ibid., pp. 1-4),

> To be heard as complaining is not to be heard. To hear someone as complaining is an effective way of dismissing someone. You do not have to listen to the content of what she is saying if she is just complaining or always complaining.
>
> […] To hear with a feminist ear is to hear who is not heard, how we are not heard. If we are taught to tune out some people, then a feminist ear is an achievement. We become attuned to those who are tuned out, and we can be those, which means becoming attuned to ourselves can also be an achievement.

A feminist ear is attuned to hear complaint. To become attuned to *hearing* complaint is to listen to the different forms of its expression. Feminist knowledge can lead to transformation, but transformation can also lead to feminist knowledge (Ahmed, 2012, p. 173). Phenomenology is a reorientation, a shift of attitude: "the phenomenological attitude in reflection on the previous attitudes is thus a new style; a theoretical attitude is new in relation to what already exists because in reflecting on what exists, it withdraws from an immersion, such that an existence is transformed" (Ibid., p. 174). Feminist phenomenological work is thus a theoretical, reflexive, and critical reorientation, conscious of what recedes from view. It is a reorientation that is critical towards institutions to what comes up against them; coming up against the institutions allows their walls to become apparent. These walls do not appear for those who do not come up against them. Feminist complaint and diversity work

produces new knowledge about what institutions are like, but also how they can reproduce themselves, what they can become like and how they keep becoming alike. While the wall is a metaphor for immobility, the wall can move – walls do not disappear (p. 175). These walls might not be blocking a point of entry in gaming; some walls obstruct elsewhere.

Doing feminist complaint and diversity work is to encounter resistance and to counter that resistance (p. 175). When we are 'banging our heads against a wall', refusal to cope demands the transformation of that barrier. However, this can also involve an experience of hesitation, of not knowing what to do in these situations. As Ahmed acknowledges (pp. 167-177),

> There is a labour in having to respond to a situation that others are protected from, a situation that does not come up for those whose residence is assumed. Do you point it out? Do you say anything? Will you cause a problem by describing a problem? Past experience tells you that to make such a point is to become a sore point. Sometimes you let the moment pass because the consequences of not letting it pass are too difficult.
>
> […] Some have to 'insist' on belonging […] on what is simply given to others. Not only that, you are heard as insistent, or even as self-promotional, as insisting on your dues.
>
> […] We don't tend to notice the assistance given to those whose residence is assumed, those informal networks that are often behind arrivals into and occupations of institutional space. […] When assistance is assumed, insistence is not required.

My own hesitations, producing silences and gaps, are part of the nature of the entanglements of research and researcher: the stories I chose as exemplary, the stories and events that aren't reported. But these hesitations, these silences and gaps in my research, also matter. I have not described some of the more difficult aspects of conducting this research project emerging from the entanglements of researcher and the research. In recent years, I have started to leave some conference panels

early, skipping talks on the topic of online harassment. I left because it had increasingly felt too close to home. Now I also fear that I will be targeted because I have included this expression of vulnerability.

Based on Cartesian mind/body dichotomies, traditional scientific principles commonly expect researchers to shelve their own emotions in the research process (Bondi, 2005). Even if certain experiences have receded into the background of this thesis, the hesitations, silences, and gaps in my writing are sometimes revealed more acutely to me *because* they are hidden behind what has surfaced. I make this account for the stories that are unaccounted for in this thesis, which sometimes became too difficult to recount, because I also want to stress that when descriptions become hard, *we need descriptions* (p. 185). There are many stories and lived experiences that have not been shared in this thesis. But I have, nevertheless, written this thesis with those stories in mind. My provocation to future researchers is thus that we need more games research on the continuities in-between what doesn't otherwise surface because we still need those harder descriptions.

My own personal experiences of (not)coping certainly don't stop at having to just deal with – perhaps 'incidental' but commonplace – microaggressions as my earlier EB Games anecdote described. As an example of what can be seen as rather mundane male gatekeeping practices, the anecdote above describes the kind of textural familiarity of everyday sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ableism, and so on, that many must face throughout life, and the moments of resistance when we 'snap' and push back. Meanwhile, at some stage in the future, upon hearing that I

have a PhD in videogames, someone is going to ask me, "but do you actually play

videogames?" I look forward to their stunned expression.

bonerfart

How to spot a 'fake' gamer

- Frequently pronounces video games as "Blideo Bames"

- Will often say "I need help passing this level it's really hard" then when you look at their screen it's running Microsoft Excel 2007

- They invite you over to their place to check out their game collection and it's just every season of Frasier (still impressive)

- Their Xbox One is actually a series of tissue boxes glued together with the word "NINTEMDO" painted over it

- When you ask their favourite video game they respond by doing a series of skillful backflips, temporarily distracting you from having asked the question in the first place

- Keeps a secret diary with "I HATE VIDEO GAMES AND I NEVER PLAY THEM" written on every page

Figure 36: 'How to spot a fake gamer' meme. Image sourced from
https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1265883-gaming

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