

# The Gamer and “The Game”: Pick-up Artists from the Perspective of Game Studies

*Adrian Chen (BIT-GDD)*

*Macquarie University*

*Department of Media, Music, Communication and Cultural Studies*

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Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  \_\_\_\_\_

(Adrian Chen)

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## SUMMARY

This thesis advances the notion of a ‘gamer mode’, and argues it to be observable outside of videogame contexts. This is demonstrated via an analysis of online pick-up artist forums, comparing the attitudes and behaviours of those groups to the criteria enumerated in Juul’s (2005) ‘classic game model’. The gamer mode of engagement is characterised by the perception of traditional game-like constructs (Frank, 2012). These include rulesets, adversaries, win-states, and other features that make the mode identifiable by resemblance to the player ideal of ludological game criteria. Such perspectives are then shown to be exemplified by pick-up artists; groups of men whose description of their practice as ‘The Game’ is suggestive of an operative gamer mode. It is pertinent to this discussion that pick-up artistry is highly gendered. The practice consists of strategies intended to effectively manipulate women into sexual situations. This aspect is examined through conceptualisations of gaming as masculinised (Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007), contributing to explanation of discrepancies between men and women in identification as a gamer (Shaw, 2012). The radical possibilities of pick-up are also discussed in terms of the gamer mode. Following Connell’s (1995) work on contemporary masculinities, I analyse how pick-up artists’ responses to the gender order are or are not complicit in it. Pick-up has a potential to undermine the gender order in its expression of genuine male anxieties. Ultimately however, I conclude that pick-up lapses into leveraging of existing hegemonies, and that this occurs where it accords with the gamer mode. The gamer mode is thus argued not only to be observable, but also to facilitate a compliance with dominant social structures.

## INTRODUCTION

There is a stigma attached to games, gamers, and gaming. The idiomatic description of something as “just a game” is applied both to games themselves, and to matters of little consequence. To treat something as a game implies trivialisation, and this trivialisation extends to the form itself. Games have struggled to assert popular validity as a means of creative expression. Players of games are similarly characterised. The gamer is a stereotype that is resonant even among those who play games habitually while not themselves possessing its characteristics (Shaw, 2012). Proponents of games often respond defensively to these associations, citing examples of what they believe to be demonstrations of the medium’s potential (Golding, 2011). However, to adequately address this stigmatisation it is also necessary to reflect on why games may have justifiably attracted these views.

It is certainly not true that cultures surrounding games are undeserving of disdain. Games industries and enthusiast subcultures have problems that are made evident by examining the place of women within them. Women employees are a minority in the production of games, and there are gendered discrepancies in the categories of jobs held, with women disproportionately found in marketing, reception, and human resources roles (Dyer-Witheford & Sharman, 2005). The events of the GamerGate controversy in 2014 also exemplified failings with respect to the treatment of women in games. These events saw campaigns of harassment perpetuated in the name of gamers, and targeted primarily at women (Shaw & Chess, 2016).

Issues such as these are directly related to the gamer identity. For example, the demonstration of gamer credentials has been found to be a requirement of entry to the games industry (Johnson, 2014, p. 583). Even after employment is obtained, an androcentrism is maintained via certain expectations of play. In the case of GamerGate, status as a gamer was asserted as a unifying characteristic, partially in response to discussion of the irrelevance (and even detriment) of the gamer to the potential of the form (Alexander, 2014). Participants in GamerGate actually embraced the gamer identity, as they perceived the identity axes of its young, white, male stereotype to be under attack (Shaw & Chess, 2016).

The stereotype does not accurately portray the population of those who play games. Men and women both play videogames in comparable numbers, and the average game player is 35 years old (Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry, 2015). Yet despite these demographic realities, stereotypical perceptions of the gamer have persisted. Investigations have consequently attempted to determine how the gamer might be conceptualised as something other than one who plays games. Shaw makes one such attempt, by not making the assumption that play habits necessarily justify labelling an individual as a gamer (Shaw, 2012). She instead sought to examine whether people self-identified as a gamer, with particular interest in how this might vary dependent on axes such as race, gender, or sexuality. Amongst her findings were that the women in her study were less likely to identify themselves as a gamer (Shaw, 2012, p. 34). This occurred in spite of any actual play habits of the women in question. However, this lack of identification was not attributed to gender by the subjects. Instead, the nebulous stigma associated with the gamer was cited.

Shaw's work shows that the gamer should be conceived of in a way that is not synonymous with players of games. What remains implied however is that whatever is connoted by the gamer is wholly confined to videogames. Gamers are a separate set from game players, but it does not necessarily follow that they are a subset. It is therefore worth exploring whether the defining characteristics of the gamer can be collectively extricated from this context. Simultaneously, we can undertake the task that Shaw concludes to be necessary, of dealing with the "marginality of the medium" (Shaw, 2012, p. 39).

These motivations are what directs the attention of this thesis to a phenomenon known as pick-up artists. Pick-up is a practice consisting of strategies that are intended to assist men in the seduction of women. These strategies however are not as innocuous as this straightforward description may imply. The practice exhibits manipulative and objectifying tendencies, and at its most extreme advocates the assault of women. It is closely aligned with men's rights movements, who claim that men are disenfranchised more than, and by, women. What makes these groups of interest from a game studies perspective is that the practice of pick-up is referred to by its practitioners as 'The Game', or at times simply 'Game'. This is suggestive of the attitude with which pick-up artists

enact the practice, making them a suitable subject in which to look for the gamer. The gendered nature of pick-up also makes this examination suitable, given the aforementioned discrepancies in identification as a gamer. This is also not wholly motivated by pick-up artist terminology, as there are broader cultural associations at play. It is typical in ordinary parlance for game metaphors to be applied to courtship, whether in referring to sex as ‘scoring’, to foreplay as ‘second/third base’, or to promiscuous men as ‘players’.

It is the contention of this thesis that there are unexamined connotations to the gamer, that can be better understood via an examination of pick-up artists, and that can help to explain the stigma that is attached to games. The gamer disposition is often encouraged by videogames, but it does not exist exclusively with respect to them. By giving us the concept of the gamer, videogames have helped us to articulate something that already existed more broadly in culture.

In service of this investigation, a non-participant ethnographic observation of online pick-up artist forums was conducted. Four sites were included in this, namely *RSDNation*, Roosh V’s ‘*Game*’ subforum, *pick-up-artist-forum.com*, and the Reddit board *r/seduction*. Observation occurred over a six-month period, and an offline archive of discussion threads was built during this time. The purpose of this was to illustrate the communal rhetoric that exists among pick-up artists. A qualitative analysis is then applied, using the criteria of Juul’s (2005) classic game model. Pick-up is considered in comparison to each of these criteria in turn, to determine the extent to which pick-up artists perceive and enact their practice as a game.

This thesis draws on literature from game studies, as well as from various sociological investigations into pick-up artists and applicable gender frameworks. Chapter 1 will present a series of arguments explaining how gaming and the gamer can be identified in isolation from videogame contexts. This incorporates a reformulation of Frank’s (2012) notion of the gamer mode, which serves to concisely express certain characteristics of the gamer. Frank introduced the gamer mode to describe a player tendency regarding game goals, and to link this with the colloquial sense of gaming as denoting manipulation. This thesis expands on that usage to relate the gamer mode to perspectives espoused by ludology, that emphasise particular features of games such as interactivity. Ludological

stances are detailed, justifying subsequent use of the classic game model in analysis of the gamer mode amongst pick-up artists. An exposition is given of the concept of counterplay, and the gamer mode is argued to represent its antithesis. This is significant given the political nature of counterplay. The gamer is thus connected with exclusionary effects of ludological perspectives, and consequently with gender problems in videogame industries, texts, and subcultures.

Chapter 2 will provide a background on pick-up artists, detail literature that focuses specifically on them, and contextualise their existence within gender discourses. The structural organisation of the movement will be described, and the significance of their online congregation explained. Parallels between pick-up artists and the gamer stereotype will be described, as further justification for this thesis. The findings of existing literature concerning pick-up will be compared and contrasted with the ways its members are popularly understood. This is necessary as discussions of pick-up often fail to emphasise its expression of genuine anxieties experienced by men. Connell's (1995) discussions of masculinities are used as a lens by which to understand these experiences. Masculinities are shown to be variant, and operate in response to hegemonic standards of a contemporary gender order. In particular, Connell's concepts of protest and complicit masculinities will be applied to pick-up artists. Pick-up is shown to demonstrate radical potential in its expression of male dissatisfactions, yet it also accords with various hegemonies. This is unified with literature detailing the neoliberal trappings of the practice. It is argued that pick-up should not be mistaken as deviant, but instead seen as consistent with dominant social structures. Following from this, pick-up will be contextualised as part of the men's rights movement. The growth of that movement out of men's liberationists is relevant to discussion of the realities and possibilities of pick-up.

Chapter 3 will consist of the analysis of pick-up, in terms of the classic game model. Methodological considerations regarding the use of online forums will be detailed. The analysis is conducted in order to determine whether and how pick-up exemplifies the gamer mode. Each of the classic model's criteria will be sequentially detailed for the reader, and compared to the behaviour of pick-up artists. This communal behaviour cannot be reduced to a single expression. As such this thesis will also examine in what different contexts pick-up does or does not accord with the gamer mode.



Finally, conclusions will be presented, reflecting on the preceding analysis. The utility of the gamer mode concept is weighed, and the effect of its presence considered.

## CHAPTER 1 – GAMERS AND GAMING

### Gaming is a Specific Kind of Engagement

The words we use to describe an interaction with games are not neutral characterisations. When we want to state that a person is engaging with a game in a typical manner we either say they are ‘playing’ or, especially when we are discussing a videogame, we might say that they are ‘gaming’. Both of these carry connotations beyond the interaction they are intended to indicate. Malaby (2007) recognised this, imploring scholars to scrutinise the perniciousness of a reliance on ‘play’ as the default conceptualisation of game activity. Participation in a game does not necessarily involve the pleasurable feelings or separation from everyday life that are arguably implied by ‘play’ (Malaby, 2007, p. 96). In other words, a game need not be playful.

There has been some recognition of a similar discrepancy with regard to ‘gaming’. Frank (2012) for example identifies an undesired outcome, that players of games intended for training purposes will sometimes “game the game” (p. 118). Players will in certain scenarios exploit a game’s systems to achieve its formal goals, circumventing or ignoring the spirit of its educational purposes.

This is one of the few interrogations of the fact that ‘gaming’ implies a distinct mode of interaction, rather than synonymously describing what one does when playing or otherwise interacting with a game. It implies a manipulation, for exploitative purposes. I do not believe that this sense of the word is insignificant to the context that it is frequently deployed in; as an alternative to ‘playing’. Indeed, I argue that this sense of the word provides a hint for explaining the stigma attached to the gamer, understood as one who games.

Frank terms this attitude and tendency amongst players the “gamer mode” (2012, p. 119). This is a term I will adopt throughout this thesis. Malaby advocated for play to be recognised as a mode of experience, as opposed to a separable kind of human activity (2007, p. 102). So too should gaming be understood as a way of engaging with the world. I wish to make clear at this point my stance that enacting the gamer mode consists of more than purposeful manipulation of perceived game systems, though this is an important element. The term is used to describe a more general

disposition, that is frequently applicable to game contexts. Comparison with game models is useful in identifying the mode, but does not provide an exhaustive account of its features. I also note that despite my appreciation for Malaby's arguments, I use 'play', 'player', and 'playing' indiscriminately to refer to partaking in a game. This is because I am taking care to be deliberate when using the word 'gaming' (and associated forms), and this unfortunately limits my vocabulary.

## The Role of the Player

To delineate the gamer mode from other forms of engagement with games is to make an implicit claim about the nature of games themselves. For the gamer mode to be distinctive, alternative forms of engagement must exist. This challenges any attempt to construct a formal definition of what a game is, should that definition entail a specific teleological role for the player. The validity of such a definitional approach was debated prominently during the formative stages of game studies as a salient discipline. It was encompassed in what is known as the ludology-narratology debate.

Ludologists argued that while videogames should continue to be studied from the perspective of existing disciplines such as media studies or sociology, they are so important and exceptional that they also require a discipline of their own (Aarseth, 2001; Frasca, 2003). This exceptionalism was espoused in part via definitions of games that emphasised features commonly observed in traditional (non-digital) games. The most influential of these efforts is Juul's (2005) classic game model. In it, Juul proposes a set of six criteria by which games can be identified. He summarises these in the statement:

A game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable. (Juul, 2005, p. 36)

The role of the player is directly posited in two of these criteria; that they exert effort to achieve a particular outcome, and that they are invested in this outcome. An essential part of what makes

something a game is that its player tries to achieve its goal. The player is also in some way a factor in each of the other criteria. Defining the gamer mode in terms of the classic game model, we would say that its eponymous gamer is recognised by adherence to the player ideal that the model postulates.

This understanding of what a player's place is within a game invites consideration of what is occurring when these player motivations are not adhered to. Exploration of such contingencies is best served by the concept of counterplay.

Counterplay was first conceptualised by de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford (2005) as a form of political resistance to exploitative game structures. The authors detail how the game industry extracts labour from both its workers and from audiences, through a characterisation of "work as play" (de Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2005). A playful environment is fostered by game development studios in perks such as parties and lax dress codes, as well as through their association with pleasurable game products. This perception of playfulness serves to obscure work conditions that are frequently punishing, precarious, and not adequately financially compensated. Audiences meanwhile provide free labour through the use of authoring tools that are increasingly included in games. Players might design scenarios or create art assets that then contribute to the marketability of the game product. Monetary rewards are rarely exchanged for this contribution, which is instead incentivised because that creative production is viewed as an extension of the play experience. Counter-mobilisations of play then are those that disrupt this relationship. This could be accomplished for example by theming content of games in a way that is discordant with industry values. The authors describe this tension as a process, in which resistant action is captured and incorporated by industry, which in turn gives rise to new forms of counter-mobilisation (de Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2005).

The concept was later expanded on significantly by Apperley (2010). Here it is considered as a form of play that disregards whatever the player might be compelled to do by design. The scope of counterplay is broadened to encompass a variety of acts that do not accord with prescribed limits of player activity. This may involve exploration of glitches resulting from programming irregularities, use of in-game actions in an unanticipated manner, or leveraging of the situated nature of games (Apperley, 2010, p. 103). The challenge that counterplay poses to game definitions that rely on an

obedient player is evident in this formulation. Players are noted to exhibit motivations and behaviours other than those that serve to accomplish formal goals. Apperley in fact argues that counterplay facilitates a relationship in which the player is antagonistic to the game itself, stating it to be:

An antagonism that is considerably more high stakes than the player overcoming the simulated enemies, goals and challenges that the game provides, rather it is directed towards the ludic rules that govern the digital games configurations, processes, rhythms, spaces, and structures. (Apperley, 2010, pp. 102-103)

Manifestations of counterplay are thus antithetical to the gamer mode. Where counterplay is antagonistic, the gamer mode is amenable.

## The 'Actual' Game

It would be a strong claim to infer an existential threat resulting from definitional complications, to claim that many videogames are in fact not games at all. Yet this is precisely the position taken by some. One means of reconciling inconsistencies is to claim that when given structural features are not present, it indicates that we are discussing a different entity than a game. The ludological perspective has the counterintuitive effect of deeming many videogames to be “not games”, or as Juul more generously classifies some, “borderline cases” (2005, p. 28). While he is careful to stipulate that the model is not intended to be prescriptive, and that it does not describe the entirety of games (2005, p. 53), other ludologists are more cavalier. Eskelinen for example, in dismissing the value of Janet Murray’s interpretation of *Tetris* as an “enactment of the over tasked lives of Americans in the 1990s” (Murray, 1997, p. 144), states that:

Instead of studying the *actual game* [emphasis added] Murray tries to interpret its supposed content, or better yet, project her favourite content on to it; consequently we don’t learn anything of the features that make *Tetris* a game. (Eskelinen, 2001)

As this excerpt demonstrates, the distinction of games from non-games is linked with notions of legitimacy in focus of study. Where Eskelinen accuses Murray of ‘projecting’ something that does not exist, other scholars admit the presence of non-ludic content but argue against its value. Galloway for instance attributes the inclusion of “purely cinematic segments of a game” to “a fear of the uniqueness of video gaming” (2006, p. 11). This claim is made in the context of a discussion of the central role of ‘gameplay’ to the operation of games. For Galloway, this operator-machine relationship is necessary in such a way that its absence (and he concedes it is at times absent) is “nongamic” (2006, p. 12).

This perspective is far from consensus within the game studies discipline (Apperley & Jayemanne, 2012). It is however a significant and influential one. Keogh refers to this as part of “the purity complex of game studies” (2014, p. 15) in his argument against such tendencies. Keogh’s position is primarily that the desire for an essential ‘gameness’ has hampered the development of a robust critical vocabulary for discussing games. He states that ludologists are “right to see videogames as a remediation of games, but they are wrong to marginalise videogames’ remediation of audiovisual media” (Keogh, 2014, p. 10). My contention is that ludological approaches describe something other than what their proponents claim. They are useful not as apt taxonomies of what games are, but because they have the inadvertent effect of neatly articulating perceptions of the gamer mode. This is a separate issue to assessment of the validity of these models, nonetheless I expect the findings of this thesis to be of relevance to that debate. However I believe this relevance will result from an explication of damaging applications associated with the gamer mode, rather than from pragmatic concerns.

Formalist notions in game scholarship could be accepted with caveats and exceptions. We should after all, as Keogh states, grant recognition of some continuity of form between videogames and traditional games. Yet we should also consider the context and consequences of advancing frameworks that exclude particular games. There are reasons that we should be cautious of asserting a fundamental ludic essence of all games.

## Gamers

Firstly, we should consider how the ludological taxonomy of games aligns with exclusionary dynamics surrounding videogames. Some scholars have referenced this alignment in the context of what is referred to as the “Hegemony of Play” (Fron et al., 2007). *The Hegemony of Play* is a wide-ranging discussion of “technological, commercial and cultural power structures” (Fron et al., 2007, p. 1) pertaining to the videogame industry, and of how those structures have resulted in gender imbalances. This occurs through the portrayal of women in game texts, the predominance of masculinised themes in those texts, and the targeting of males in marketing efforts. The authors describe the gamer as a fictional persona that has evolved from increasingly narrow targeting of a core demographic. They argue the gamer to be “characterized by an adolescent male sensibility that . . . embraces highly stylized graphical violence, male fantasies of power and domination, hyper-sexualized, objectified depictions of women, and rampant racial stereotyping and discrimination” (Fron et al., 2007, p. 7).

Of particular interest to us is that the authors connect these hegemonies to the scholarly discourse. They state that market definitions have shaped the trajectory of game studies, and that while the classification efforts of researchers have been genuine, that “deeply embedded in these arguments have been inherent values of the video game industry that are not necessarily inherent qualities of games” (Fron et al., 2007, p. 2).

Indeed in looking outside of academia we find ludic fundamentalism not to be a novel approach, as ludologists argued. Rather it is the perspective that is privileged by default. This is evidenced in ethnographic research that seeks to portray how videogame play exists in the context of lived social settings. Thornham (2008, 2011) undertakes research observing how play manifests in several non-familial shared households over a number of years. In particular she focuses on the gendered dimension of observed interactions, in an effort to illustrate how gendered relations and identities are produced within play practices (Thornham, 2008, p. 127).

Amongst her findings we see demonstration of the gamer's high regard for the structural ludic features of videogames. Participants cite 'gameplay' and 'playability' as the foremost measure of a game's quality. In the words of one, "it's all about your gameplay, sod your graphics" (Thornham, 2011, p. 53). This position enables the assertion of superiority within the social space. The manner in which gameplay elicits pleasure is ambiguous, thus appreciation for this subjective quality is used to signify authority (Thornham, 2011, p. 53). It is also significant that this mode of appreciation is specifically masculinised. In privileging action, the player's relationship with the game becomes one of power and dominance. Male and female participants manifested different emphases on the establishment of control and on 'winning' in their relationships with games (Thornham, 2011, p. 50). The gamer mode is thus masculinised by its lesser availability to women in interaction with the world.

There is further evidence that the gamer's distinguishing of games from non-games is the consequence of a gendered marginality. 'Casual' games for example have been noted to be feminised and marginalised in an associated fashion, including by Juul himself (Juul, 2010, pp. 8-10; Vanderhoef, 2013). This is exemplified by the fact that 'casual games' is a somewhat incoherent category. Different casual games may bear very little resemblance to each other, and 'casual gamers' may in fact exhibit heavy investment in their play habits (Consalvo, 2009; Keogh, 2016). Casual games are instead defined by their exclusion from consideration as 'real' games.

Dovey and Kennedy note the range of this effect, stating:

What remains troubling is that within the industry itself, and also within the academic community, games which have attracted a more gender balanced playing audience, such as *Everquest* and *The Sims*, are frequently cited as deviations from the 'classic game model' (Juul, 2003), which implicitly works to reinforce the notion that these are not *really* games and their players are not *really* gamers. (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 37).

The implication here is that gender balance is in fact the cause for the status of exclusion assigned to some games by scholarship, industry, and gamers. Just as we should question whether the lesser rates of pay awarded to female-dominated occupations is truly the result of those occupations' utility



(Tong, 2009, pp. 122-123), so too should we question whether games with greater female audiences are deemed ‘non-games’ by virtue of their inherent structural elements.

Such distinctions are directed not only at games with more diverse audiences, but also those with diverse authors. This can be seen in discussion of independent, experimental games. Galloway’s (2006) concept of countergaming is illustrative here. Apperley states that countergaming should be viewed as a complementary concept to counterplay, with similar agendas enacted by game designers and artists rather than players (Apperley, 2010, p. 110). Galloway’s original formulation however argues that countergaming is an “unrealized project” (2006, p. 126). This is because he believes that “radical action” should manifest as reinvention within the scope of gameplay, rather than as he cites through visual representation and the de-emphasis of gameplay (Galloway, 2006, pp. 122-126). This fails to recognise how removal of ‘gameplay’ from games is itself a radical act. This is highlighted by exhortations from artists and critics to reject ludic conceptualisations in design, alongside recognition of marginalising effects (Brice, 2013; Kopas, 2012; Street, 2013).

We see then that in casual games as well as avant-garde production, marginalisation manifests through the denial of the ‘game’ label to texts, while being directed at femininity in authorship and audience. This implicates corresponding attempts at classification, as they may have undesirable and unintended impacts on the form.

These impacts are apparent in work that aims to specifically interrogate the gamer identity. Shaw (2012) for example attempts to investigate the connotations of gaming by assessing how and whether interviewees self-identify as a gamer, rather than imposing that label based on measurement of play habits. She is particularly interested in how this self-identification might be complicated by other axes of identity such as race, gender, or sexuality.

Shaw’s work operates in response to those who argue that playing videogames is something that people of all genders do, and thus that ‘gamers’ should be redefined to reflect this diversity, and to induce industry changes. Fron et al. for instance refer to the gamer interchangeably with the ‘hardcore gamer’, defined as “a particular type of person who plays particular types of games” (2007,

p. 7), yet still conclude that “We are all gamers” (2007, p. 9). By allowing interviewees to articulate for themselves the nature of their identification or non-identification with the term, Shaw provides greater insight into causes for reluctance.

A significant finding of the study is that “there was a definite correlation between gender and gamer identity” (Shaw, 2012, p. 34). Specifically, she found that male participants were more likely to identify as gamers than any other gender. However, gender was not explicitly cited as the reason for this alignment by those participants. Rather, it was attributed to various stigmas attached to gamers and to gaming. As one stated, “gamer has an image in my head and it’s Snickers and Mountain Dew and 3 o’clock in the morning” (Shaw, 2012, p. 38). Shaw concludes that those invested in the representation of marginalised groups “must deal directly with the marginality of the medium” (2012, p. 40), and indicates that this should be explored further in future research.

Shaw’s is an approach that would be more difficult to replicate today. This is due to the fact that identification as a gamer has accrued additional significance in the intervening period, as a result of the GamerGate events of 2014. The gamer identity was itself a salient point of contention that sustained these events. GamerGate was the culmination of a hostility to women in gamer culture (Consalvo, 2012), and represented tensions between self-identified gamers, and cultural changes resulting from a maturation of the videogame form (Shaw & Chess, 2016). It involved sustained harassment of figures perceived as representative of these changes, primarily women.

Two key elements of GamerGate are pertinent to this thesis. The first is that its supporters saw the gamer label as fundamental to their identity, and in need of defence. This followed from an article by writer Leigh Alexander declaring the label outdated, and that the attitudes it indicates are not concerned with the greatest potentials of videogames (Alexander, 2014). The second significant dimension is that the foremost target of harassment, games developer Zoë Quinn, produces games that fall outside of the classic game model. Her game *Depression Quest* (Quinn, 2013) belongs to the “hypertext fiction” genre that Juul specifically categorises as “Not Games” (Juul, 2005, p. 44). That her works could be represented as non-games was used by GamerGate participants as a justification for challenging her presence in the subcultural space. Simultaneously, Quinn was subject to

accusations and hostility regarding her sexual practices (Chess & Shaw, 2015). GamerGate thus exemplified the overlap of the gamer identity with the reactionary movements and gendered dynamics that are the focus of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 2 – PICK-UP ARTISTS

### What is Pick-up?

Pick-up is a culture and set of strategies to ostensibly help men more successfully seduce women. It is a decentralised practice, with many communities and organisations existing disparately, yet sharing many common methods, principles, and vocabularies. Instruction is disseminated via paid self-published texts, free amateur guides, and online videos. Participants gather to share and discuss their practice both online and off. These practitioners refer to themselves as pick-up artists, or more frequently simply as PUAs. Public awareness of pick-up has increased since the publication of the most well-known chronicle of PUA activity, Neil Strauss' *The Game* (2005). This exposé of pick-up artist culture introduced the concept to many, and spawned other media such as a reality television show starring PUAs who featured prominently in the book (Baker, 2013). The eponymous Game is the practice of pick-up itself, and is referred to in this way by participants. The term is used across all four sites examined as part of this research, and is common to the practice at large.

Since Strauss' book was published, pick-up has been more firmly established in public consciousness. Its rise has been accompanied by increased scrutiny, and consequent notoriety of the practice. Though initial responses may have conceived of the practice similarly to general dating guides, the more calculated nature of pick-up has since earned it a particular cultural conceptualisation. Journalistic coverage of pick-up usually frames it as negative or at least scandalous. It is usually acknowledged in the context of controversial actions by prominent advocates. In 2014 for example, an international activist campaign successfully worked to prevent Julien Blanc, a pick-up instructor, from entering a number of countries to give lessons (Travis, 2014). This occurred in response to strategies of Blanc's that included physically restraining women in what he calls the "choke opener". Blanc's visa was cancelled in Australia, with then Immigration Minister Scott Morrison commenting directly on the matter (Browne, 2014). In the same year, spree killer Elliot Rodger was found to have spent time in PUA communities. Coverage of this event emphasised the link between the misogynistic tendencies found in PUA communities, and the motivations

documented in the killer's manifesto (Woolf, 2014). Responses from pick-up forums were also publicised, with several PUAs claiming that implementation of Game could prevented the attack (Koziol, 2014). Similarly to Blanc, in 2016 Daryush 'Roosh' Valizadeh was denied a visa and denounced by several Australian politicians, alongside citation of his comments that rape should be legalised on private property (Hills, Christian, Macdonald, Hampton, & Tillett, 2016).

This chapter will build a more complex view of pick-up artists, and show why they are deserving of examination in terms of the gamer mode. It is not the intent of this thesis to dispute popular perceptions of pick-up artists. However, they do not sufficiently portray what motivates men to participate in pick-up. Being a pick-up artist involves more than a simple reception of instruction and subsequent misogynistic implementation, and this is exemplified in the online discussion forums that PUAs use. Users congregate in chat rooms and message boards to share tactics and experiences. Frequently observed topics relating to pick-up include the efficacy of various techniques, debates over hypothetical scenarios, solicitations of advice for handling specific courtship interactions, and perspectives on how to achieve self-improvement.

Experts and leaders in communities do exist by virtue of economic enterprise, such as the publishing of material and ownership of said forums. Valizadeh is one such leader. Nonetheless these social spaces are defined by a more collaborative approach. Pick-up is an evolving and experimental practice, and discussions aim to contest ideas and produce new consensuses. When expressing uncertainties, users are not seeking reference to the authority of published materials, but rather the consideration of a community. An encouraged activity is the sharing of 'field reports', which are ongoing diaries kept by ordinary users, chronicling their attempts at implementing pick-up and reflecting on their successes and failures.

Popular conceptualisations offer an important contextualisation in discussion of pick-up artists. They have the effect, however, of homogenising their attitudes and motivations. We should then examine the realities of men who participate in pick-up artist spaces, as well as how those men understand themselves. Men articulate their use of pick-up in a variety of ways, and the analyses offered in this thesis seek not to summarise these as singular, but to understand the frameworks within

which they operate. There are certainly significant problems in the interactions of PUAs with women. Yet the relationship between pick-up and misogyny is both deeper and more complex than a simple contemptuous objectification. As a totally male practice, it is thus necessary to analyse the pick-up phenomenon through an understanding of men's experience of their gender. For this, the field of masculinities provides the best lens.

## Masculinities

The masculinities sub-discipline of gender studies is indispensable in analysing the attitudes and behaviour of PUAs. Masculinities consists of the effort to describe the experiences of men in the gender order. It understands that masculinities are multiple, that men will construct and manifest this aspect of their identity in different ways, in coordination with other axes of identity such as race and class (Connell, 1995, p. 76). Sexual enactment is acknowledged as an important part of men's experiences, relevant given that pick-up is largely concerned with the procurement of sex.

Individual PUAs articulate a range of personal goals they hope to accomplish via the use of pick-up. Some find any communication with women to be difficult, and hope that instruction will allow them to circumvent this difficulty, or permanently eliminate it. Others may not have this problem, but desire to have sex more often, or with women who they perceive as unattainable. There are also men whose aim is to find a more permanent romantic partner, planning to use pick-up as a temporary means of courtship. Yet across these various motivations, there are commonalities. The rhetoric surrounding pick-up makes evident how these priorities come to be engendered in the men who possess them. PUAs overwhelmingly frame their not having accomplished their romantic and sexual goals as a failing that is intimately linked with their self-worth. Demonstrations of heterosexual prowess must be enacted as a measure of one's manhood, and value is attached to that manhood.

The anxieties that pick-up purports to remedy are viewed by PUAs as a standard feature of contemporary male experience. Frequent reference is made to the typicality of the 'Average Frustrated Chump' (AFC), which many men state themselves to be upon entry to pick-up spaces. This

acronym neatly illustrates the aspirational pressures PUAs experience as acting upon their masculinity. 'Frustration' here refers to a man's inability to have as much sex as he desires. The dissatisfaction of the AFC is thus normalised, yet also portrayed as contemptible (Almog & Kaplan, 2015, pp. 7-8). These anxieties are best understood by drawing on scholarship done on masculinities.

Of particular applicability is Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is the set of ideals that are predominantly attributed to men in a gender order. These might include demonstrations of strength, control, and relationships to or over actual women (Connell, 1995, p. 83). These characteristics need not be realised by any individual man, but men experience and construct their manhood in relation to them. Masculine hegemony is not a uniform or totalising force, and even within single cultural settings, different men will respond to pressures with a variety of expressions. Yet some response is inevitable, as the pressures of hegemonic masculinity cannot be ignored. In Connell's words, "'Hegemonic masculinity' is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position that it always contestable" (Connell, 1995, p. 76). It is thus our task to interpret responses to hegemony, and identify contestation where it occurs.

In many ways, pick-up relies on a leveraging of masculine behaviours. Frequent reference is made to the necessity of behaving as an 'alpha male', and of neutralising threats from other 'alpha' men. The tactics espoused by pick-up are thus not universal interpersonal insights, but a set of patterns for interaction that are reliant on specific statuses and responses of men and women within a gender order. The behaviours that are instructed, and results that are expected to be elicited from these behaviours, depend on the male positionality of users.

Potential harms to women are only occasionally acknowledged by PUAs. Strauss for example admits the possibility of pick-up engendering misogynistic attitudes in an inadvertent and unconcerned way.

Simply by defining oneself as a PUA – a title earned solely by the responses of women – one becomes doomed to derive his entire self-esteem and identity from the attention of the

opposite sex, not unlike a comedian's relationship to audience members. If they don't laugh, you're not funny. So, as self-esteem defence mechanisms, some PUAs developed misogynistic tendencies in the process of learning. (Strauss, 2005, p. 350)

However, research done on pick-up strategies shows that the process described here is inaccurate. Evidence suggests that to claim misogyny is resultant from the experience of employing pick-up is in fact an inversion of the relationship. Use of pick-up strategies may or may not itself constitute sexist behaviour, yet the nature of the practice is indicative of sexist tendencies among participants. Studies have indicated that sexist attitudes are predictive of the "aggressive courtship strategies" employed in pick-up (J. Hall & Canterberry, 2011). An interest in and willingness to use the strategies that Game puts forth is thus not incidental to its inherent framing of women as sexual objects.

There is in some PUA discourse a recognition of problems faced by women, in relation to the practice. Perceived courtship habits of women are occasionally attributed to the challenges they face as a result of gendered violence and discrimination, e.g. "the woman places her survival itself in great danger by having sex" (Mystery, 2005, p. 12). An initial reluctance or hostility from women is stated to be necessary for them to protect themselves. There is not, however, any recognition that PUAs risk inflicting these harms, with persistence in the face of "last minute resistance" being encouraged (Mystery, 2005, p. 203). They also do not dedicate their efforts to remedying those problems faced by women, instead merely devising means of circumventing their consequences.

Despite these tendencies, there are ways in which pick-up can be seen as containing a subversive potential. Connell's reformulation of Alfred Adler's 'protest masculinity' (or 'the masculine protest') is of interest here. This is a possible response to hegemonic masculinity, and describes a collective trend wherein men who in some ways do not embody hegemonic masculine standards embrace this dissonance, while simultaneously attempting to assert gender dominance in other ways. Connell gives the example of a man who has no problem with his wife earning more money than he does, partially as a result of working-class statuses, yet not entirely rejecting hegemony as seen via homophobic attitudes (Connell, 1995, p. 109). Such men are attempting to reformulate masculinity, such that they accord with its ideal. There is no standard developmental path



to protest masculinities, though Connell sees them resulting from “a claim to power where there are no real resources for power” (Connell, 1995, p. 111). They will thus vary in their differences and complicities. As such, the collective effect is that hegemonic masculinity is challenged on various fronts.

These notions have been corroborated by work from other disciplinary perspectives. It is demonstrated through research encompassing multiple studies that the manhood men seek to possess is both tenuous and elusive (Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008). It is not automatically achieved, nor is it certainly kept once achieved, requiring repeated affirmation. Manhood is thus a precarious status, where womanhood by comparison is not. Men are forced to continually prove their manhood, and are subject to anxieties from the denial of validation. This may result in the enacting of harmful male-typed behaviours, such as physical violence (Vandello et al., 2008, p. 1325). The precarity of manhood is observed across multiple cultures, and helps to explain how and why protest masculinities arise.

In the course of this thesis, I will determine how PUAs accord with and subvert standards of masculinity. I will assess how pick-up should be understood as a response to hegemony. The men in pick-up are subordinated under hegemonic masculinity. They do not meet its ideal, and are unified by anxieties resulting from it. There is a potential to the practice in its expression of genuine anxieties experienced by men, and their attempt to assert their manhood regardless. Whether it possesses the capacity to harness this dissatisfaction into a subversion of idealised standards of masculinity is less clear.

The possibility of viewing pick-up through the lens of gaming provides an additional tension along these lines. Adler’s original formulation of protest masculinity argued that children were inherently feminised by a lack of physical strength (Stepansky, 2012, p. 62). Games can similarly be feminised negatively through statuses of idleness and juvenility (Kücklich, 2005). They are also in this sense positioned in diametric opposition to work, and thus with masculine ‘breadwinner’ imperatives (Connell, 1995, p. 90). Yet men are also increasingly afforded claims to power by the economic relevance of technology. The working environments of information technology increasingly

penalise femininity and impose a gendered labour on women (Joshi & Kuhn, 2005; Smith, 2013).

These facts contextualise the embrace of the gamer identity and hostility towards women witnessed in GamerGate. Pick-up meanwhile operates under a spectre of sexual inadequacy. Many PUAs are drawn to the practice in an attempt to ameliorate anxieties resulting from their perceived unmanliness regarding sexual proof and initiation, threatening their masculinity. This gender inadequacy thus makes significant the close proximity of pick-up cultures to expressly misogynistic attitudes, such as those advanced by Valizadeh.

Though PUAs are separated from hegemonic masculinity, it is questionable whether they can be seen as resisting it, or are more complicit. Protest masculinities, though virulently masculine in some respects, do “the dirty work of sexual politics” (Connell, 1995, p. 115) by pairing these actions with forms of resistance. More complicit masculinities might do less to claim the potency attached to male supremacy, but in nonetheless accepting the privilege of their gender arguably do less to challenge patriarchy. The question of complicity is thus critical in assessing the role of game structures and the gamer mode in culture.

## Resemblance to the Gamer

The public attention attracted by pick-up is sensational, though not inaccurate. It simply represents the extremes of views found within the culture. Perhaps predictably, PUAs conceive of themselves differently from their portrayal in attention paid by the public sphere. Though it is externally characterised by its most prominent figures, PUA communities internally hold the assumption that their population lacks those personalities’ distinctive bravado. Instead, the internal PUA stereotype is best likened to that of the ‘nerd’. Strauss for example says of his entry into pick-up culture:

Now my social life was monopolized by a caliber of nerd I’d never associated with before. I was in the game to have more women in my life, not men. And though the community was all about women, it was also completely devoid of them. (Strauss, 2005, p. 129)

Even prior to the analysis of the next chapter, it is easy to see pick-up artists as reminiscent of the gamer. As well as noted preconceptions of youth, whiteness, and maleness, literature that seeks to articulate the gamer stereotype notes it to be geeky, asocial, aggressive, obsessive, and childish (Cote, 2015; de Grove, Courtois, & Van Looy, 2015; Shaw, 2013). While it is unreasonable to suggest that all men in pick-up could be described this way, the characterisation is significant to discussion of PUAs. In the observations of my research, PUAs frequently admit to being asocial, and cite difficulties in interacting with people in general, as well as with women. The embrace of this characterisation is not however uniformly self-deprecating. It also portrays PUAs as adept in certain ways, and as suffering from particular perceived injustices.

In an examination of a male-dominated online community, Kendall (2000) discusses how the nerd exists within defaults of whiteness, maleness and heterosexuality. Despite the lack of bodily recognition that results from digital interaction, interaction based on these dominant identities is presumed and performed (Kendall, 2000, p. 260). As with the gamer, this is not to claim that all people who might be identified or self-identify with that label must possess those characteristics. It does, however, establish presumptions against which individuals must negotiate their actions. This follows Hall's assertion that identity is constructed in relation to a constitutive outside (1996, p. 7).

The demographic alignment is heightened for pick-up. Pick-up not only operates within identity frameworks, but is actively aware of identity by virtue of its subject matter. Identity is inevitably a salient issue in communities that are explicitly focused on gender relations. Genuine participation concedes likely facts about the participant. They are assumed to act from a position of maleness and heterosexuality, and to possess a lacking sexual prowess. Though there is some variation from these defaults among participants, they are significant as an illustration of how PUAs understand themselves. Pick-up is seen as a practice implemented out of necessity. It is generally agreed that if peers within the community were attractive, charismatic, or highly functional, then they would have no need for Game in the first place.

Race too is a factor in communities' interactions, though it is less often discussed in a self-aware manner. Techniques espoused do not acknowledge race, catering to a universalised male ideal,

and in doing so operate under an assumption of whiteness. This does not mean that there are not non-white PUAs. On the contrary, there appear to be a significant number of non-white PUAs, but the ideology of the practice posits men as biologically-determined entities via their gender (Denes, 2011). This biological determinism effaces social experiences of race. Other research has noted for example a disproportionate number of Asian men involved in pick-up, but noted that these demographics are not mirrored at the leadership level (O'Neill, 2015, p. 11). This is significant given how the nerd stereotype has been noted to interact with perceptions of gender to enforce a marginalisation of Asian men (Huynh & Woo, 2014). Occasionally, discussion threads arise in which the implementation of pick-up from particular racial perspectives is considered, such as in discussion of “Black Man Game Options”. This is usually done to highlight difficulties experienced by non-white men, such as different levels of receptiveness from women, or possible increased dangers in behaving at the boundaries of social acceptability. However, peer responses mostly consider these observations to be aberrant. Instead, failure is attributed to the existence of ‘limiting beliefs’ that prevent the PUA from accomplishing their goals. Variation in experience across racial lines is believed to be made irrelevant by a universal potential.

PUAs invoke the nerd characterisation through an association with technology. Popular responses to pick-up also focus on their use of digital technologies to disseminate their views (Koziol, 2014; Woolf, 2014). This is in part an inevitability, as pick-up has achieved its level of popularity within a time when online access and social media tools are widespread and unexceptional. As Nielsen (2013, pp. 174-175) warns, it is important in examination of new media and its context not to attribute behaviour in a way that is technologically deterministic. We must also be careful of generalising conclusions from observations of online activity to non-digital realms. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to state that the ability to share information in a way not dependent on physical location facilitated the growth of pick-up. It is also notable that men in pick-up have a particular affinity for the use of technology. Frequent mention is made of the typicality of information technology workers in pick-up communities. This is corroborated in texts such as *The Game*, as well as in other scholarly explorations (Schuermans & Monaghan, 2015, pp. 9-10; Strauss, 2005, p. 287).

As in Kendall's study, this characterisation is deployed in complimentary and derogatory fashions simultaneously. It is perceived to indicate an affinity for the calculated approaches provided by pick-up, and a capacity for instrumentality that supposedly derives from the male gender. This is characteristic of technomascularity, the association of men with technical expertise at the expense of empathetic ability (Johnson, 2014, p. 581). It is of note that pick-up itself is referred to by PUAs as 'technology'. Technomascularity is a particularly relevant concept to this thesis given the technological status of videogames. Though it increasingly makes a claim to power via technology's economic relevance, technomascularity is still perceived as a subordinated form of masculinity, lacking an idealised heterosexual prowess (Connell, 1995, pp. 55-56). Men in pick-up perceive this subordinated masculinity as the cost inadvertently incurred for their ability with 'technology', and corresponding capacity for logic. Interestingly the negative conclusions here may be supported by some preliminary investigation showing that male identification as a gamer may diminish desirability for dating in the eyes of women (Swearingen, 2013). Despite ways in which they do or do not reflect realities, these self-characterisations all relate to the ways in which PUAs negotiate their masculinity.

## Deference to Dominance

Finally, it should be noted that distinctive logics can be observed in the operation of PUA culture. There is little literature focusing directly on pick-up, but what there is consistently discerns an alignment with dominant social structures. Evident in much of pick-up are worldviews that extend beyond the scope of gender relations and courtship interactions. In these, we can observe a deference to other distinct forces of hegemony, besides masculinity. Nonetheless, each of these interacts with the gender element in some way.

O'Neill (2015) has discussed how pick-up enacts consumeristic patterns, resulting from its place within neoliberal capitalism. Her intent is to counter portrayals of pick-up that pathologise its participants. She is careful to state that this is not done as a means of exculpating PUAs from criticism. The danger in characterising pick-up as deviant and individuated is that we risk distancing it

from social forces and structures that are in fact dominant. O'Neill argues that pick-up is in fact a consistent reconfiguration of intimacy under current social structures (2015, p. 2).

Much of the way PUAs describe the world is framed in terms of economies and market logics. Pick-up in general promotes the notion that participants cannot expect results from the practice without significant investment (O'Neill, 2015, pp. 5-6). A likely motivator of this belief is that leaders in pick-up artist communities have an interest in selling their products to more novice participants. Where they exist, hierarchies are established by economic enterprise. Forums are usually owned and operated by organisations or solo entrepreneurs that aim to sell instructional material. There is also a perception of a zero-sum balance to romantic interactions. Other men are framed as competitors for the romantic attention of women, who are assessed as commodities of varying value. One discussion thread for example argued Asian women to be a "bargain deal", as they are claimed to be desirable to a smaller pool of competitors.

These tendencies are especially interesting considered alongside assertions that the economic context within which pick-up takes place is directly relevant to the practice. The efficacy of pick-up has been found to vary dependent on the economic circumstances in which it occurs. Specifically, women in countries with more robust systems of social security are found to be more immune to the strategies of pick-up (Baker, 2013). This is stated to be due to social services rendering women less potentially reliant on male partners. Though such claims have not been investigated scientifically, they do accord with findings that women who hold sexist beliefs are more receptive to "aggressive courtship strategies" (J. Hall & Canterberry, 2011), and that sexism can influence women's perception of care versus paternalistic control (Moya, Glick, Expósito, de Lemus, & Hart, 2007). It is in any case significant as a belief held within pick-up artist communities. Men who wish to employ the practice are incentivised to support neoliberal social structures. Pick-up depends on the potential for men to leverage material benefits afforded to them by their gender.

Given this, it is unsurprising that PUAs also favour perspectives of evolutionary psychology, that legitimate male gender dominance. The stereotype of the asocial PUA has already been noted. Pick-up is also however a literally asocial activity, in the sense that much of it considers social and

cultural phenomena to be negotiable, incidental constructs. PUAs privilege biological responses as being in some way expressive of truths that override, for example, verbal communication (Denes, 2011). The practice is justified in this way, with many PUAs believing that they operate externally to sociocultural forces that dictate the behaviour of others.

The attribution of gendered behaviours to inherent sexual differences between men and women has a relevant history. The biological essentialisms that pick-up promotes are reminiscent of those that facilitated the rise of men's rights movements. These movements are adjacent to pick-up, with their ideas being espoused in shared spaces. Mid-twentieth century feminist discourse posited 'sex role theory', which described perceived biological tendencies of men and women (Connell, 1979). Men and women ostensibly enact 'roles', or sets of behaviours that were argued to be harmful and restrictive. These behaviours however were conceived as static, and not elicited in response to actual contexts. The perspective thus later gave way to the concept of gender relations, and notions of gender as socially constructed (Messner, 1998, p. 258). At the time of its popularity however, sex role theory was used to recruit men into projects of gender justice. 'Men's liberation' movements emphasised the harms done to men by the male sex role as a means of appealing to men by way of potential freedoms (Messner, 1998, p. 261). The result however was that the harms of sex roles were equivocated between men and women. Segments of men's liberation evolved into men's rights, who argued that the greater rigidity of the male sex role meant that men in fact suffer more than women (Messner, 1998, p. 265). This absents recognition of institutional power or privileges of men. Men's rights activists continue to exist today, and are almost exclusively concerned with the reversal of feminist gains.

While the overlap with men's rights does not encompass the entirety of pick-up, it is a significant relationship that should not be ignored. The *RedPill* movement for example popularly advances the "sexual strategy" of pick-up in the context of a men's rights discourse (Reddit, 2016). Additionally, there exists the potential for particular insights in acknowledging communities that exist at ideological extremes. While three of the four forums analysed in this research could be described as more moderate, one fits the description of men's rights. This is the 'Game' subforum of the Roosh V

forum, a site owned by the aforementioned Daryush Valizadeh. While the ‘Game’ subforum is dedicated to the practice, it is otherwise concerned with the interests and ideas promoted by Valizadeh in his books and on his website. The ‘Game’ subforum subsequently incorporates a regressive politics by proximity.

Valizadeh and his relationship to his community are interesting as he attempts to distance himself from its typical characterisations. He does not for example identify himself with the ‘pick-up artist’ label (Washko, 2015, p. 26). This is despite his authorship of a series of books dedicated to assessing the variable efficacy of the practice in different locales. As noted, the pick-up section of his forum is titled ‘Game’, and users employ the same terminology found in other PUA spaces. It is also the first, most prominent of the contained subforums. This serves as a reminder that the overlaps in question are not always best observed in literal self-identification. There have also been intriguing interactions between this community and gaming culture. The GamerGate events were a conduit for various ideological mobilisations against a perceived common enemy, namely those attempting to enact progressive changes (Shaw & Chess, 2016). Following GamerGate, Valizadeh established a (now defunct) videogame focused website, *Reaxxion*. The site was intended to host “a safe space for heterosexual males who play video games” (Valizadeh, 2014). This was an opportunistic attempt to spread values associated with an anti-progressive stance, something that Valizadeh freely admits (Washko, 2015, p. 23). He also freely admits to a disinterest in videogames, stating that he facilitated their discussion in service of promoting his own interests (Washko, 2015, p. 24). These facts are particularly significant in the context of challenges presented to women by participating in gaming spaces, as discussed in the previous chapter. Valizadeh’s opportunism and disregard for the form apparently did not warrant the gatekeeping often perpetrated in the name of the gamer identity. Though he did not explicitly acknowledge the connection, Valizadeh may have been justified in recognising a compatibility between gamer communities and his own.



## CHAPTER 3 – THE GAMER MODE IN PICK-UP ARTIST FORUMS

Pick-up is consistently referred to as ‘The Game’ by its adherents. Despite this, there has been limited study investigating or even acknowledging the conceptualisation of pick-up as a game. Almog and Kaplan (2015) are a rare example of scholarly attention given to this use of the game metaphor. However, in this case game studies literature is referenced only superficially. The authors argue that the use of gaming logics is apparent in PUAs’ creation of alternate personas, and in the perception of the practice as separated from reality. Stereotypical presumptions about both videogames and gamers are invoked, for example videogame play is uncritically characterised as a practice of young men, in place of recognition of distinctions between game players and gamers (Almog & Kaplan, 2015, p. 18). Assertions such as those from Juul are also accepted without appraisal (Almog & Kaplan, 2015, p. 13).

Informed by analysis of dedicated online forums, this chapter will conduct a reading of the communal discourse of pick-up through the lens of Juul’s (2005) ‘classic game model’. This model provides six criteria that games are stated to possess, and each of these will be discussed. While it is not the only attempt to construct formal criteria for games (Fullerton, 2008; Hunicke, LeBlanc, & Zubek, 2004), Juul’s is the most influential. As seen in Almog and Kaplan’s use (2015, p. 13), it is cited as an authority on what games are, rather than a questionable view of what they are considered to be by some. I argue that the model allows us to identify the perspective of the ‘gamer mode’, a mode of engagement that need not be applied to videogames. I will demonstrate how various sentiments held by pick-up artists accord with Juul’s criteria. Following this, I suggest that it is in its adherence to the gamer mode that pick-up is most lacking as a constructive alternative to the systems that produce the anxieties of the men that participate.

Chapter 1 demonstrated reasons to associate ludological perspectives with attitudes that exist within gamer cultures. While debate over the model is well-trodden, it has proved resilient, and its flaws are often acknowledged while being stated to not detract from its productiveness. I intend by demonstration of the association between ludological models, of which the classic game model is taken as exemplary, and damaging effects of hegemonic masculinity, to illustrate a greater imperative

for movement away from what the model represents. Its observations, as with masculinised conceptions of the world, are not naturally derived but constructed as the result of social forces. Furthermore, Frank's original formulation of the gamer mode expresses the concept ludologically, e.g. "a situation where players treat the wargame only as a game" (Frank, 2012, p. 120). It is therefore consistent to conduct analysis in terms of the classic model while attempting an expansion of the gamer mode concept.

Coherent application of the classic game model's criteria is a problematic task, as they arguably contain many flaws, overlaps, and inconsistencies. This is the result of the ambitious scope of the model's construction. Juul is attempting to incorporate millennia of activities into the definition, as well as many videogames (2005, p. 23), while simultaneously claiming that videogames challenge the model (2005, p. 53). As noted in Chapter 1, he begs the question by beginning with assumptions that various games are or are not games, and subsequently testing the criteria against these assumptions (2005, p. 28). He also constructs the criteria from a synthesis of previous literature that attempts such categorisation, as well as from his own assertions (2005, p. 29). By virtue of the time of writing, this means that it includes much scholarship that existed before videogames, despite the intended focus. Thus it is pertinent to remember that this analysis examines the presence of these criteria in the perspective of pick-up artists, that need not be consistent.

## Methodological considerations

My research consisted of a non-participant, ethnographic observation of four online pick-up artist forums. Specifically, the sites *RSDNation*, Roosh V's 'Game' subforum, *pick-up-artist-forum.com*, and the Reddit board *r/seduction* were examined. These four were selected from a wider shortlist, for their large and active memberships. Observation of all sites was conducted daily over a period of six months, and in the case of *pick-up-artist-forum.com* required the creation of a free account to permit full access. An offsite archive of relevant discussion thread webpages was built during this time, for later analysis. Discussion threads were never posted in as part of this research. Though participants

can generally not be linked to offline identities, usernames are omitted from quotations to further ensure protection of anonymity.

This research restricted examination to congregation in online forums, in lieu of physical meetings attended by pick-up artists. This was done for several reasons. The limited existing research on pick-up artists has tended to examine localised communities (Clift, 2007; O'Neill, 2015; Schuurmans & Monaghan, 2015). While valuable, this approach neglects the significant congregation that occurs in publicly accessible online spaces. It also circumvents and thus effaces features of the online environment, such as its anonymised nature.

I characterise my work as ethnographic according to principles outlined by Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis & Tacchi (2016). An effort was made to access forums and experience pick-up culture in a similar manner to the thousands of anonymous users who constitute their membership. This respect for the everyday nature of digital environments works towards capturing “worlds that might otherwise be invisible” (Pink et al., 2016, p. 13). Forums facilitate a less demanding participation in and familiarity with PUA culture, without necessitating integration into a local community. Indeed many users were observed easily employing the language of pick-up and having recorded years of presence on sites, despite low post counts (numeric measures of active participation). My research thus sought to emulate this style of engagement. The gamer mode of engagement I argue exists broadly in culture. I do not claim the phenomenon to be a feature of pick-up exclusively, rather pick-up is used as an illustrative example and means of elucidating the phenomenon. Thus it is not useful or necessary to examine the experience of those who are more deeply embedded in the culture, as those who congregate in physical settings would be.

As noted, leadership dynamics are less pronounced in online settings. In conducting my observation across multiple forums, my intent is that the rhetoric of pick-up be examined distinctly from any specific text or personality. In doing so, I follow work done on digital ethnographic practice that emphasises the importance of viewing such spaces as a dynamic sociality (Postill & Pink, 2012). Though pick-up is often referred to as ‘the seduction community’ (Almog & Kaplan, 2015; O'Neill, 2015; Schuurmans & Monaghan, 2015), I deliberately avoid indiscriminate use of the term

‘community’ as this can imply continuities that do not necessarily exist. By comparing activity across four sites, I encompass variation that exists within pick-up, as it should not be understood as a monolithic entity. Different communities within pick-up favour different techniques and ideologies. Roosh V’s forum for example tended to align with its owner’s politics, including advocacy for patriarchy, whereas the Reddit board could be described as more moderate. Nonetheless, users on all sites were found to make common use of the ‘Game’ terminology that inspired investigation.

## Analysis

### 1. Rules

The existence of rules is the first and one of the most important of Juul’s criteria. In his view, rules describe what the players may do within the scope of the game, to realise its objectives (Juul, 2005, p. 37). They must be clearly agreed upon by all participants. Where disagreement occurs between players, it is stated that the game activity cannot be sustained, i.e. “the game must be paused” (Juul, 2005, p. 37).

Counterplay actions in videogames complicate rule-based definitions such as this one. Reynolds (2010) for instance explicates the concept of ‘virtual-world naturalism’, wherein players of a game are motivated to explore the possibilities of its code in ways that its designers never intended or even realised was possible. He gives the example of the ‘Minus World’ in *Super Mario Bros.*, a visually strange glitched environment. Reaching this space involves actions that are difficult to understand within the framework of ‘rules’, as it “was not part of the game’s creators’ intentions, though it does arise from the code they produced” (Reynolds, 2010).

In what could be construed as an attempt to anticipate the challenges presented by counterplay, Juul makes the statement that in the case of digital games, “The rules of any given game can be compared to a piece of software that needs hardware to actually be played” (2005, p. 38). This is a sudden and different formulation of the concept, that makes rules more akin to physical constraints than agreed-upon formalities. A digital game’s software dictates much of its operation,

such as the display of images on a screen, that are not encompassed by what are thought of as the game's rules. Rules under the classic game model then are understood not only as what must be done to sustain the game, but what it is possible to do.

The rhetoric of pick-up demonstrates a rules-based conceptualisation, in ways that accord with these descriptions. The Game of pick-up, and the 'ruleset' that pertains to it, is referred to as a system that exists independently of its perception. This is most apparent in the fact that adeptness as a player is attributed to men who are not themselves part of these communities. Forum participants described the actions of other men with phrases such as "[he] has good game", "he has natural game", and other similar constructions. This is despite those men not being followers of the guidance offered by pick-up. This fits with the description of rules as external, inevitable constraints. Men either are or are not proficient at the game. The intended purpose of cognizance is to increase performance, not to admit participation. This perspective also disallows the potential for ambiguity, as the rules follow, as Denes (2011) discusses, from immutable biological truths.

Accordingly, pick-up also demonstrates an assumption of similar causal factors across different contexts. Appeals to one's fellows for advice illustrates the belief that the behaviour of women is reducible to a consistent set of actions. Scenarios are described with the expectation that other PUAs will be able to identify why a woman is acting in a certain way, and how best to manoeuvre around this. For instance, one post contained SMS transcripts from communication with a woman who had seemingly become disinterested with the poster, asking "on which part did I go wrong". Similar topics are typical of these forums. Instead of a range of human motivations, including the specific realities of people's life histories, thoughts, and contexts, women's behaviour is understood as falling within a comprehensive framework. The masculinised perspective of pick-up artists is meanwhile seen as an objective appraisal of observable structures.

These notions of rules as applicable to the practice of pick-up are emblematic of its lack of ambition in terms of constructing new realities. PUAs do not recognise social phenomena as created by the actions of people. Rather it is an external construct that is perceived as limited and known. They believe that the only way to increase satisfaction is within the status quo. As such, no attempt is

made to bring about a social context that is beneficial to all genders. Though women's behaviour was occasionally noted as informed by inequities, e.g. "meeting in a public place [. . .] is for her own safety", the discourse of pick-up never reflected an interest in social movements, reforms, etc. that might alleviate these. Instead, an engagement as enacted from their position as men leads to an exploitation of afforded privileges under current systems of gender relations. The more moderate sites sought only to navigate these systems in a complicit manner, while the more extreme advocated a return to historical contexts that maximised men's benefits, e.g. "bring back patriarchy". A lack of recognition of how these standards are constructed thus reinforces hegemonic ideals. PUAs exemplify the gamer mode in their belief that they can only operate within existing rulesets.

While this attitude was dominant, it was not totalising. Juul states that "Rules are designed to be above discussion" (2005, p. 31). Yet discussion of this kind did occur, not concerning what the rules ought to be, but what they were. This collaborative approach to knowledge seeking represented the activity's greatest potential, as it was in this contestation that opposition to harmful stances was most likely to be asserted. For example, this was seen in a 'field report' of a user that recounted their implementation of pick-up, in which they used 'negs', backhanded compliments intended to undermine a woman's confidence. A response stated, "Negging? That's not seduction buddy", followed by a series of conflicting perspectives on what the practice is constituted by. Notably this resistance to acts of degradation was not based in claims of what should be done morally, but what was effective, empirically. In another instance, PUAs debated the use of "neuro-linguistic programming", a form of communication said to induce a subconscious, hypnotic manipulation. In this case moral questions were explicitly posed, such as "Is it right to communicate directly with a person's emotions without allowing them the opportunity to filter the communication through conscious language processing?". Nonetheless, arguments for and against its implementation were premised on conflicting claims of what actually occurs when NLP is used. The most empathetic conversations manifested in contexts of not accepting given accounts of perceived rules.

## 2. Variable, Quantifiable Outcome

Secondly, Juul states that the rules of a game must provide different possible outcomes, and that these states must be quantifiable (2005, p. 38). In other words, it must be clearly discernible when the player has reached a state in which they can be said to have ‘won’. Implicit in this description is the notion of exclusivity, that the variability of outcomes results from the different state produced by each participant having reached their desired outcome. Juul addresses this in his claim that he is consolidating other scholars’ definitional criteria of ‘goals’ and ‘conflict’. Goals as described by Suits and conflict as described by Salen and Zimmerman, as well as Crawford, are said to be “different ways of expressing the same concept” (Juul, 2005, p. 31). The concept of conflict is intimated to be apt even in ‘single-player’ contexts, where there are not multiple human competitors. In these cases the participant is understood to be in conflict with their environment. In Juul’s words, “a conflict presupposes mutually contradicting goals between two entities or, in a broader sense, between a player and the difficulty of reaching a goal” (Juul, 2005, p. 31).

The classic game model formulation of conflict can be observed in pick-up. PUAs perceive the set of possible outcomes of their activity as a ‘zero-sum’ scenario. The ability for these men to accomplish their goals is seen as mutually contradictory to the success of another party.

There are two distinct paradigms in which this can be recognised in the rhetoric of pick-up. The first is the viewing of other men as opponents, rivals for the attention of women. Much discussion concerns strategies for dealing with ‘AMOGs’, which stands for ‘Alpha Male Of Group’. This character type is defined by aggressive intimidation, with the intent of dissuading other men’s interaction with a desired woman while simultaneously capturing her attention. This is accompanied by a sense of ownership over the women, i.e. “this guy tried to AMOG me by opening my girl”. ‘AMOGing’ is also used as a tactic wherein PUAs themselves emulate aggressive behaviour towards other men. Thus masculine aggression is resented, yet also replicated. Even in the absence of AMOG status, other men are conceptualised as competitors by default. It is ordinary to see field reports that recount mundane interactions construed as threats, such as “some guy try [sic] to talk to her [. . .] I still stand my ground”.

The second case is the conceptualising of women themselves as adversaries. This portrays women as naturally averse to being courted by men. This is not the same as a total unwillingness. Instructional guides such as the *Mystery Method* claim that women possess sexual desires but unconsciously employ resistance to men's attention (Mystery, 2005, p. 12). In practice however this is often simplified to make women's interests seem at odds with men's. One thread opined that the wealth of the West had caused its societies to "give its girls everything they want", which was claimed to have created a reprehensible state. Others would describe their interactions with women they know and ask "how can I use this to my advantage".

These conflict-focused views are dependent on a limited perspective on romantic possibilities. They preclude romantic configurations that are not absolutely heterosexual, monoamorous, or even characterised by non-traditional sexual interactions. This accords with other work finding that 'hook up culture' does little in terms of constructing alternatives to heteronormative practices. Farvid and Braun (2013) explain that in its sense of what is 'natural' and its deference to figures of authority, casual sex discourse reinforces monogamistic heterosexual regimes (2013, p. 374). The authors find that while casual sex as it exists in the public arena has the potential to offer alternatives, it ultimately fails to do so (Farvid & Braun, 2013, p. 362). Competitive frames also accord with assumptions of meritocratic environments espoused by a masculine, neoliberal hegemony. This will be discussed further as it pertains to a later criterion, Player Effort.

Aside from in conflict, variability is demonstrated in pick-up's portrayal of states of success as binary. An emblematic discussion thread posited that PUAs must be careful not to kiss women in settings where sex is not practical, as it "defuses sexual tension" and "gives her too much validation". This was met in responses with exclamations of revelation at this perspective's wisdom. In commonplace attitudes such as this, it is believed that sex must be achieved or achievable, else the player has failed. Multiple or partial states of success are not encompassed by these views.

The 'quantifiable' characteristic is also observed in pick-up discussions. Men are encouraged to continually assess women on a scale of desirability, from 1 to 10. Women are then referred to by these numbers in recounts, as in "the 7 is standing right across from us". While there is acceptance of



some level of variation in individual tastes, attractiveness is judged to be an objective measure such that women of different levels are claimed to have consistent different behaviours. This perceived consensus is then used to inform the objective of pick-up. Performances are rated by the level of women successfully snared. If a man is only able to achieve his goals with women of a lower rating, he is deemed to have accomplished less, or in many cases even to have accomplished nothing. Multiple occurrences were observed for example of “a 6” being pursued only “for the reference experience” of future pursuits. There is no sense of self-awareness in terms of what is found desirable. Attractiveness is not perceived as, for example, informed by socialisation. Even where disparities are noted, such as in discussions of race by non-white PUAs, it is assumed that this is due to inherent biological racial preferences. Subsequently, default inclinations are not resisted in any way.

### 3. Valorisation of Outcome

The third criterion is intimately linked with the second; that certain outcomes are ‘valorised’. While the previous criterion demands it be clear when a desired outcome is reached, this one stipulates that a desirable outcome must exist. In short, “some of the possible outcomes of the game are better than others” (Juul, 2005, p. 40). This is the sense in which having ‘won’ a game is not only a categorical result, but also a value judgement. This value can be assigned in a number of different ways, though in all given examples Juul implies that value is imposed by the game itself. This can be done directly, e.g. “by instructions of the game” (Juul, 2005, p. 40), or indirectly, e.g. “by the fact that some actions give a higher score than others” (Juul, 2005, p. 40). In an overlap with a later criterion (Negotiable Consequences), the valorisation of an outcome occurs in a vacuum, separate from its broader context. Thus we should expect to observe an abstract valuing of the outcome itself, rather than of what that outcome is expected to be indicative of.

Regarding pick-up, we are interested both in what specific outcomes are valorised, and in what way they are valorised. The concept of outcomes is often raised as a prompt for users with questions, such as “what are you looking for?”, or “I don’t know what your goal is”. PUAs set for

themselves a variety of sub-objectives, sometimes as simple as “to approach a woman and talk to her”. These are all however promoted in the service of ultimately affirming manhood via sexuality. As seen in previous examples, while sex may be recognised as just one possible goal, it is strongly valorised. By scrutinising how PUAs understand their own sexual prowess, we can gain insight into the forces acting on men.

A valorising effect is evident in the aforementioned incessant ranking of women by PUAs. The purpose of this ranking is to create a system by which men impose critical judgement on themselves and each other. It is unsurprising then that judgements that valorise particular states of being are also correspondingly applied to men. Men are assessed to be ‘alphas’ or ‘betas’ dependent not only on their performances with women, but on their subscription to the values dominant in these spaces. These are terms taken from the study of social hierarchies amongst animals, projected onto people. The technical communal definition of beta is somewhat synonymous with the ‘Average Frustrated Chump’ designator, but is also used more broadly to indicate derision, such as in “used to be a beta liberal”. One forum even labels usernames in posts with a title, with low post-count users labelled “beta orbiters” and high labelled “alpha males”.

Valorisation is also evident in PUAs’ sense of how to appear impressive. PUAs believe that they need to create “demonstrations of value” to attract women. This stems back to a biologically reductive perspective stating that women select sexual partners that are reproductively optimal (Mystery, 2005, p. 21). Yet it is also believed that such impressions can be manipulated, and are in large part shaped by appearances. This ‘value’ interacts with men and women’s ostensible rank, such that PUAs believe as one poster states that “when approaching a girl that’s relatively high-value, it makes sense to exhibit behaviours which convey that you too, are high-value”. Such behaviours include aloofness, and employing a sense of fashion. It is also constituted by ‘peacocking’, in which men are encouraged to adorn themselves with accessories. These demonstrations valorise hierarchies of worth that relate to economic statuses. They are indicative of a perception of wealth, and of the “masculine privileges and styles of interaction” (Connell, 1995, p. 131) that are linked to its possession, as admirable. Uncritical adoption of stylings that are perceived to be demonstrative of

value contribute to those perceptions. Discussions within pick-up elide contestation of the idea that anything substantive is communicated in this way, or challenges to whether it should be, if it is.

That outcomes are valorised is not only a statement of how action is motivated, but also indicative of the limitations of that motivation. Outcomes are often conceived in isolation from their consequences, and from the potential for long-term self-development. For example, on one occasion a poster expressed bafflement that his promiscuity was not bringing him happiness, noting a perpetual dissatisfaction that he attributed to seeing flaws in every woman he slept with. In response, it was suggested that he adjust his ego, as he should be satisfied by the “dopamine style response” of “the win”. This again couches valorised expectations in biological reactions that are portrayed as immutable. The ego is stated to be at fault, to make an implicit claim regarding which factors are negotiable. This imposition is alienating in the Marxist sense, exhorting a separation from human inclinations (Fromm, 1967). The self should be adjusted to better suit what should apparently be pleasurable experiences, yet it is not generally imagined that a similar adjustment could allow the individual to find satisfaction through other means, or that the circumstances themselves produce dissatisfaction. However, some other more imaginative responses did suggest these possibilities, with the admission that they too were working through such problems. In these cases, the valorisation of outcome was rejected. Instead the realities of confronting these problems were described as “scarier”, and “less exciting”, but productive in “the long run”.

#### 4. Player Effort

‘Player Effort’ states that reaching a game’s goal presents a challenge, and that the player must exert themselves for the desired outcome to be realised (Juul, 2005, p. 40). Juul repeats the emphasis on conflict as an essential element of a game. Effort is expended in service of the player accomplishing their goal. The fact that this is necessary, that there is some obstacle to be overcome, is viewed as conflict (Juul, 2005, p. 40). The extent to which this criterion is so general as to describe any form of action is narrowly circumvented in Juul’s assertions of how effort interacts with other criteria.

Variable outcomes correspond with the effort required to produce them, such that “Positive outcomes are usually harder to reach than negative outcomes” (Juul, 2005, p. 40). The necessary expulsion of effort is then stated to evoke valorisation. Here Juul hints at how that valorisation may create a selection bias, as “A game where it is easier to reach the positive outcome than to not reach it would likely not be played much” (2005, p. 40). Thus effort is ostensibly productive by nature, and leads to results that are desirable from a game design perspective.

As seen in its neoliberal rhetoric, pick-up espouses the idea that an investment of effort is critical to success (O'Neill, 2015). In doing so, it makes assertions about how the environment in which it operates is constructed. These echo traditional perspectives employed in assessing game structures from a position of ostensible omniscience, as has been discussed by Golding (2013). Little is made of why or whether effort should be required. There is no exploration of how some might be able to achieve their desires without effort, and the inequities that could produce this. Furthermore, implicit in the notion of effort is a teleological presumption about the world. Not only is effort required, it is guaranteed to produce results. PUAs do not question why this should be the case, and as such no desires are considered too fantastical. In game settings, teleological presumptions relate to design tendencies. Formal conceptualisations of games posit inherent conflict, and thus emphasise notions of player effort as necessary to overcome obstacles. Fullerton (2008) for example in a ‘playcentric’ model of game elements states that “our need to work toward the objective is a measure of our involvement in the game” (p. 29). Pick-up projects the assumption that action will be productive onto non-designed scenarios.

The perceived necessity of effort also manifests in characterisations of the experience of implementing pick-up. Courtship was described as “war” or a “battlefield”, with one instance of a poster comparing the practice to quotes attributed to Sun Tzu; “know the enemy and know yourself, and you need not fear the result of a hundred battles”. This also highlights a belief seen in the discussion of outcomes. Competing players are not supposed to have an advantage over one another, lest one’s easiest result be to reach their positive outcome (Juul, 2005, p. 40). Therefore in terms of effort, a game should demand equal measures from each player. The belief that players must invest

effort to overcome challenges, combined with the noted adversarial status of women in this context, “the enemy”, constitutes the typical view of gender in these spaces. As far as women are seen as opponents a relationship of equal powers is purported, creating a flattening effect that resembles the errors of sex role theory as discussed by Messner (1998). Framing women as obstacles or competitors fails to acknowledge gendered power dynamics. It highlights how game structures are an appropriate framework in understanding adversarial neoliberal masculinity.

Inevitably PUAs experience disappointment with having been unable to achieve all their desires. In such instances, the shortcoming is attributed to the necessity to invest effort, rather than any failure in methods. The exhortation to “take responsibility” is prevalent, as is the assertion that failure is a part of the effort process. Users are assured by their peers of the necessity to “take your knocks”, and that they must “fail fast and fail forward” to make progress. This rhetoric of work, and of having to fail on the path to success, has the convenient side-effect of absolving promoters of any responsibility regarding the consequences of pick-up’s implementation. A lack of achieved outcomes is unfalsifiably attributed to some failings of the individual.

Prior scholarship has related such sentiments to market logics of the social systems in which pick-up operates (O’Neill, 2015, p. 10). In this context, it was interesting to note that pick-up artists in general were staunch in defences of capitalist systems, and against progressive trends. To an extent this is not unusual in online discourse, nonetheless these communities were markedly hostile to any politics that did not mandate individualistic imperatives. The stance was often related to a perceived overreach of government in gender-related issues, such as the “passing of restrictive laws” concerning “false rape allegations”. Derisive attitudes towards socialist properties were frequently observed even outside of the Roosh V forums, which has an explicit right-wing political ideology. Feminism was similarly frequently derided, and in one memorable instance the understanding of one was used to characterise the other in the statement “feminism is just socialism for women”. It is possible to speculate as to whether this hostility to socialism and other alternatives to neoliberal structures is a consequence of their being ‘ungamelike’.

## 5. Player Attached to Outcome

Next, a game is said to make its player(s) happy or unhappy as a result of winning or losing respectively. This is termed ‘Attachment’ (Juul, 2005, p. 40). Attachment differs from valorisation in that it is confined to the experience of the player, where valorisation is somehow derived from the game object. Attachment does not correspond with effort, as “a player may still feel happy when winning a game of pure chance” (Juul, 2005, p. 40). Thus where valorisation saw a disconnect between the consequences of and value assigned to an outcome, attachment apparently demonstrates a separation from the processes that preceded it. Though it is not explored explicitly, we can also intuit a judgemental dimension to Juul’s description of potential responses. The player whose responses do not reflect attachment is defined as a ‘spoilsport’; “one who refuses to seek enjoyment in winning, or refuses to become unhappy by losing” (Juul, 2005, p. 40). This is indicative of two perspectives, firstly that responses that appear like this are aberrant. Attachment not only states that a player is made unhappy by losing, but that in some sense they ought to feel this way. Secondly, the use of the word “refuse” suggests that responses, or at least such aberrant ones, are viewed as a matter of choice.

Again, this definition risks being general to the extent that its existence could be argued as demonstrated by virtue of participation in an activity. It is given the shortest description of Juul’s criteria, and is deemed a “less formal category” (Juul, 2005, p. 40). Nonetheless we can discern this formulation of attachment in pick-up’s disinterest in the relevance of courtship to PUAs’ lives. Sexual experiences and other goals are sought not for their own sake, but to ameliorate other problems, be they depressive attitudes or affirmation of manhood. One forum dedicates an entire subforum to acknowledgement and discussion of “Social Shyness and Anxiety”, and contained threads on depression, autism, and obsessive compulsive disorders. Yet pick-up contains no mechanism for assessment of whether these motivating factors have been impacted. Instead, happiness is conflated with pick-up performance. This leaves participants unable to perceive whether they are achieving self-fulfilment. Attachment to outcome is an aptly neutral descriptor, as it does not convey whether the outcome itself is valuable in a more objective sense.

Attachment is also seen in the collective insistence that other men should share the desires expressed by those in pick-up. The derisive use of 'beta' is applied not only to men within pick-up, but to those who have nothing to do with it. The label often indicates, with incredulity, that the subject does not share the motivations of PUAs, for example in "a guy who don't look like he has sexual interest for the girl [. . .] a classic white knight beta male". In these applications, the term resembles Juul's spoilsport who refuses to become unhappy by losing. The judgement placed upon others suggests that the attachment is not to self-satisfaction, but to forces of hegemony. A simple pleasure derived from reaching an outcome does not explain contempt for those who do not do the same, or refuse to participate. An abstract attachment to the gender dynamics of the outcome itself however, does.

Finally, pick-up shares with Juul's notion of attachment an attitude that responses are voluntary, and instrumental. This is seen in the concept of the 'limiting belief', demonstrative of a magical thinking and commonly deployed on pick-up artist forums. The concept states that men's capacity to seduce is causally linked to their perception that they are able to, as well as perception of factors such as attraction, and happiness. Men must believe that they are attractive, and by doing so they are made attractive. As one poster argued, "you will create your own reality for yourself". As with notions of effort, this enables a deference of responsibility onto the individual. Simultaneously, it attempts to enforce a self-effacing attachment to an outcome, as the attachment is itself said to elicit that outcome. As one member put it in a thread titled "The game summed up in one sentence"; "Your assumptions create their actions/responses", "your [sic] doing them all a favour and helping them feel happy like you already are".

## 6. Negotiable Consequences

Lastly, 'Negotiable Consequences' is a criterion that helps to explain the status of games as inherently trivial. A game, it is stated, can "optionally be assigned real-life consequences" (Juul, 2005, p. 41).

This means that games themselves are not consequential, though individual play instances may have

consequence. Central to this element is the idea that a game is something that can be extricated from the context in which it exists. This is what allows for Juul's concept of 'transmediality' (2005, p. 48), that games can be translated between materially different media. He gives the example of *Chess*, said to be a single game that can be implemented using tangible objects or alternately, using the digital instructions of a computer (Juul, 2005, p. 49). The unique qualities of each context then are secondary to the "immaterial support" (Juul, 2005, p. 48) of the game proper.

Pick-up seems to acknowledge belief in some sort of immaterial support, though its exact boundaries are contested. Discussions would often take place in which PUAs cited potential benefits of applying techniques to non-romantic arenas, in particular relating to employment. This did, however, run up against the gendered dynamics of the practice. One discussion asked "Can you 'game' guys?" with the intent of using pick-up strategies to make business deals and sales. The consensus was that the Game was translatable to other contexts, but posters were unsure whether to attribute failures to the gender of the subject. In another case, a member expressed discomfort that a "guy started gaming me" not for romantic purposes but apparently as an opener to ordinary socialisation. This caused the individual to question his own use of the practice. The response from peers was to make homophobic insinuations, shortly after which the original post was deleted.

More consensus was found when the immaterial support was posited at a higher level of abstraction. It was common to see this occur by pick-up being directly analogised to videogames. "It's like in Starcraft, a video game I play" stated one user, arguing that skilled execution of techniques did not matter if the user's attributes were not sufficiently developed. Others debated whether certain techniques are "like using cheat codes for a video game". This lucid likening of the two pursuits is an indicator of which facets of the activity are regarded as substantial.

Less clear is how consequential pick-up itself is considered to be. Games are often thought to be fundamentally disconnected from reality and thus from consequence. Juul states "that games carry a degree of separation from the rest of the world is entailed in their consequences being negotiable" (Juul, 2005, p. 36). Related is Huizinga's (2002) concept of the 'magic circle', later reformulated by Salen and Zimmerman (2004, p. 95). The concept imagines a space in which the rules of a game



apply, spatiotemporally separated from the outside world (Huizinga, 2002, p. 10). This disconnect is consequently applied to pick-up by Almog and Kaplan (2015, p. 11). The implication is that perceiving courtship scenarios as less real can explain the dehumanising attitudes expressed towards women. Yet it is also true that a great many men in pick-up hope to enact significant change on their lives. Statements that “I would really love to improve my life by learning all I can on becoming a PUA”, or that “If it wasn’t for game I’d of [sic] probably killed myself” show the stakes that men invest in pick-up. Juul reconciles the problem of “involuntary and less controllable reactions such as joy or sorrow” (2005, p. 42) by stating that though instances of these are inevitable, “*ideally* in game playing, this should not occur” (2005, p. 42). The open question then is whether men idealise the implementation of pick-up without emotional investment. Pick-up artists seem concerned with instances that possess real-life consequences, while admitting that much of their practice operates without them. As one participant posed to his fellows, “Most of us uses the game to get laid, perhaps in the future, people will use the game to get love?”.

From this analysis, I determine that the gamer mode can indeed be observed in pick-up artists. It does not comprehensively describe the beliefs and actions of these men, but it does represent a coherent disposition. The implications of this are explored in the following conclusion.

## CONCLUSION

The comparison of pick-up artists to concepts developed within game studies is one that may initially appear esoteric. It has been my intention with this thesis to guide the reader through a series of interrelated arguments, in an attempt to isolate that which is connoted by gaming. These arguments have synthesised concepts from existing literature, and demonstrated the applicability of those concepts both to and outside of the focus of game studies. By unifying this with the study of pick-up artists, a compatibility is shown between lines of thought from various disciplines. Through my own research, I have reached multiple conclusions on how and why the gamer mode operates in pick-up. These conclusions contribute to discussions regarding the trivialised status of games, the gamer identity, gender divides in gaming, the rise of reactionary men's movements, and the potential of games as an emancipatory construct.

I have started by recognising that the gamer mode can be observed distinctly as a form of engagement with games, that is not representative of the entirety of play. In this I seek to expand on the concept's formulation by Frank, who identified it in his subjects' pursuit of the formal goals of a given game. In that research, the gamer mode was detrimental as participants "gaming the game" interfered with the training objectives the game was being used for (Frank, 2012, p. 119). This establishes multiple ideas that are pertinent to our discussion: that such a tendency exists in gamers, that it is at times undesirable, and that the colloquial use of 'gaming' to imply manipulative exploitation can be related to an impulse of game players. The gamer mode is not however the only form of play possible, as players can interact with games without a respect for its formal goals. Additionally, designers may construct games in a way that defies this notion of goals, encouraging different modes of interaction. The game *Her Story* (Barlow, 2015) for instance presents players with an interface allowing for navigation of transcribed video interviews, with no certain confirmation of having reached a goal within the game. The player is instead driven only by their own curiosity at the material provided.

I expand on the gamer mode by claiming that it is articulated by the player ideal of ludological perspectives, such as in the classic game model. Where Frank's focus is only on goals, I

argue that it makes sense to characterise the gamer more fully by adherence to the player posited by these criteria. As detailed in Chapter 3, these include acting according to rules, belief in the investment of effort, etc. This can explain the defence by self-identified gamers of the importance of a game's ludic qualities, at the expense of other attributes. By giving the gamer mode other characteristics, it more closely matches a general human drive that in turn elicits that manipulative exploitation denoted by 'gaming'. A gamer, as one who exemplifies the gamer mode, acts according to some perceived game constructs, where the game is defined ludologically. This is not itself a critique of the classic game model. While the gamer mode is not necessarily how a game must be interacted with, it is certainly not uncommon for this to be the case. It may even be that the case that the gamer mode is the form of interaction that is most easily facilitated by games, thus Frank's observation of players according with it in situations where it was not desirable. It is reasonable then, to have concluded it to be an intrinsic part of the game experience.

Next, I have argued it is useful to understand the gamer mode as the antithesis to counterplay. For those familiar with counterplay, this assists in comprehension of what the gamer mode is. Apperley characterises counterplay as directly antagonistic to ludic processes and structures (Apperley, 2010, pp. 102-103). The gamer mode then is amenable, or even supportive. This dichotomy is significant given that counterplay was conceptualised with a strongly political dimension, particularly in its original formulation. This is cause to question whether the inverse of that play relationship is different in this respect. It is also the case that game studies simply has no concise term to express when a player is amenable to the forces of a game, rather than resistant. The gamer mode encapsulates this.

These points alone constitute a recommendation for scholars and designers of games. The gamer mode should be recognised as an element of videogame play. Debate over validity of formal game models is well-trodden. My approach is methodologically unorthodox in this respect, as I am not mounting an argument against the classic game model and perspectives like it, but instead using it in a different way. It is not my direct intention to challenge the validity of the classic game model, but to demonstrate that it expresses something other than what was intended. It is useful as an expression

of what games are often considered to be, whether or not that stance is consistent. This allows us to shift focus onto who enacts that consideration. The classic game model is a description of a certain player type, perhaps more so than a description of games themselves. Expounding the gamer mode also allows creators to determine how and whether they wish to encourage it. Even before the following analysis of its possible harms, there are reasons one may wish to discourage it. Hints of its disposition are shown in the way the gamer mode is masculinised, via its emphasis on instrumentality. Yet even putting this aside, the predominance of texts expectant of the gamer mode seems limiting to the literacy of the game playing public. In the case of *Her Story*, a forum discussion concerning the game was popularised from its demonstration of a player confused at the lack of a formal goal. In response to the advice that they merely needed to explore until satisfied, the player asked “how do I decide when I am satisfied?” (Valve, 2015).

With the significance for videogames noted, the next point should not be disregarded. This is my claim that the gamer mode can be observed beyond videogames. The analysis of pick-up is subsequently offered in support of this claim, as a first step in the implementation of this methodology. It must be clear though that the purpose of this thesis is not to incite a moral panic concerning the effects of videogames. Similar moral panics, such as that that have surrounded representations of violence in videogames, are based on the idea that a new media form is having a hitherto unseen effect of people (Ferguson, 2008). I do not claim that the gamer mode is isolated to videogames. Nor do I believe that videogames have instituted this attitude in people, that it did not exist before, and that it has now been transferred into non-game contexts. The individual components of the classic game model; subscription to rules, seeking of goals, valorisation of certain outcomes; all exist outside of videogames, and at times in combination. Videogames did not create the gamer mode, but they may have helped us to articulate something that already existed. Likewise, while the criteria of the classic model help us to identify the gamer mode, it is not wholly defined by them. It is a framework that identifies ways in which people may interact with something, as they often do with games. The gamer mode itself is a more general mode of engagement, that cannot be rigidly defined.

Acknowledging the gamer mode as something that can exist outside of games also betrays a potential of the game studies discipline. Game studies literature has, by necessity, incorporated other work, from sociology, psychology, gender studies, or many other fields. Less frequent is it that work from game studies is used for other purposes. It is my belief that the concepts developed within game studies can have a broader application. The study of games can yield results that are of use to research that is not concerned with games themselves. The analysis of pick-up in this thesis is an instance of this. As with the colloquial use of game metaphors to describe courtship, there is an attitude here that can be better understood through the study of games, though resting outside of its domain. By recognising the operation of the gamer mode in the pick-up practice, our understanding of this underresearched phenomenon is enriched. It makes evident some of the motivating beliefs held by pick-up artists, of relevance to any interested in these groups or their gendered configurations more generally.

This brings us to the analysis itself. First however, I make several claims that contextualise pick-up for later discussion. I argue that pick-up should not be characterised only by its most virulent actions and participants. The congregation of men in pick-up is driven by genuine problems and anxieties faced specifically by men. Men are subject to a pressure to affirm their gender, while experiencing dissatisfaction within a contemporary gender order. Additionally, pick-up is varied enough that many pick-up artists have space within the practice to distance themselves from its most misogynistic elements. This is not in any way to excuse those attitudes, and indeed the practice as a whole is dependent on an objectification of women. Yet to focus exclusively on this aspect gives an incomplete picture, without which problems cannot be remedied, or alternatives constructed. The pick-up artist movement correctly identifies ways in which social structures are sources of unhappiness for men, even if the solutions it purports to offer are counterproductive. Men are put under pressure by the expectations of a hegemonic masculinity, and pick-up provides guidance for navigating these pressures. It is also true that there is little in the way of coherent alternatives offered to men experiencing these anxieties. The men's liberation movement was attractive due to its recognition of difficulties faced by men, but ultimately devolved into gender equivocation and attacks

on feminist gains (Messner, 1998, p. 266). A movement without these adversarial leanings would be desirable, and in the absence of such a movement men are subsumed by the men's rights groups of today.

Following from this, we can recognise more broadly that reactionary men's movements, to which pick-up is closely aligned, skirt closely to a more radical potential. Here Connell's discussion of complicit vs protest masculinities is of relevance. Protest masculinities that virulently enact elements of hegemonic masculinity may still undermine it, by fighting to establish a claim to the potency of masculinity while containing attributes contradictory to hegemonic ideals (Connell, 1995, pp. 111-112). While not ideal, this can ultimately have emancipatory consequences for both men and women. Complicit masculinities meanwhile may harbour dissatisfactions but only seek to navigate hegemonic systems, rather than challenge them (Connell, 1995, pp. 115-116). Assessing pick-up, I conclude that it cannot be said to demonstrate a protest masculinity. Pick-up has a potential to admit valuable attributes to conceptualisations of masculinity, such as a sensitivity to men's emotional needs. However, it ultimately encourages a complicit resentment of women and other men, attempting to offer guidance within current contexts without undermining them. It is true generally of these contemporary men's movements that they have a potential that has not manifested. A striking example is contained in the name RedPill, an ideology that claims to offer the revelatory insight that men are in fact the greatest victims of the gender order, and must be prepared to fight for various entitlements. The name is a reference to the film *The Matrix*, in which the protagonist is offered a red or blue pill to become either conscious or ignorant respectively of an oppression they invisibly suffer. That this has been adopted as the dominant metaphor of the gender-focused men's rights movement is interesting, given the coming out of both the film's writers and directors as transgender women. One of these two, Lilly Wachowski, has directly spoken to the validity of a transgender reading (Manning, 2016). Yet the RedPill movement is explicitly hostile to women, and finds the existence of transgender people reprehensible. It is hard not to speculate how men's rights advocates may in some way be in want of an alternative gender politics. It is also notable for this thesis that these men couch their activity in a metaphor of virtual worlds, of fictive digital spaces.

Through these lenses, and the analysis that constituted this research, I conclude that the gamer mode is indeed observable in pick-up. It is not a totalising effect, and certainly cannot account for the entirety of the varied rhetoric that exists within pick-up artist communities. It does however give an accurate sense of an attitudinal tendency that is central to the common positions of the movement. Through application of the classic game model, I find that each of the criteria assists in expressing the beliefs and behaviours of pick-up artists. Pick-up artists perceive the existence of rules guiding their practice, that are immutable realities related to their reliance on biologically essentialist perspectives. The fixed nature of these rules accounts for the belief that women's behaviour is reducible to a limited set of reactions. Pick-up entails the perception of a competitive environment, and an engagement based on this perception. A gamelike notion of conflict is viewed as inescapable, both amongst men and between men and women. This follows from a binary understanding of states of success, and the valorisation of those deemed winners in the game of pick-up. These factors are also evident by the numeric ranking and rating that takes place throughout pick-up. The practice is underpinned by a belief in the necessity of investing effort to succeed, espoused both communally and in the interests of surrounding business ventures. Not only does this belief exist, but the necessity of effort is itself framed as justified, in the same way formal game models prescribe effort as determinant of an outcome's value. A player attachment to the outcomes of pick-up is promoted by dominant value sets, as seen in the attitude that men who do not participate in pick-up should nonetheless have similar desires. Finally, the idea of negotiable consequences is apparent in attempts by PUAs to translate their engagement between contexts; making women interchangeable, and imbuing the practice with a sense of the virtual.

What makes these findings more than incidental is that they together represent a cohesive disposition, a way of engaging with the world, prescribed by pick-up. This is what is expressed by the gamer mode. Furthermore, the mode is a specifically masculinised one, characterised by interactions most readily afforded to men as a result of their position in a gender order. This explains the presence of the gamer mode in pick-up, and the greater unwillingness of women to identify as a gamer. When I began this research I expected to find something similar to Almog & Kaplan (2015), that pick-up

artists' view of their practice as a game was relevant to their dehumanisation of others. While there may be some merit to this argument, I ended up forming a different conclusion; that pick-up is least ambitious as a practice where it accords with the gamer mode. Despite its potential, pick-up fails to imagine alternatives to the structures that elicit its central anxieties. Possibilities were limited by a deference to the authority of various dominant social structures, and these shortcomings coincided with the ways in which pick-up reflected formal game elements. Conversely, pick-up artists pushed the boundaries of the practice when rejecting the gamer mode. For example, contestation of rules (which are supposed to be beyond debate) enabled PUAs to challenge each other on morally questionable acts, where moral appeals made for their own sake would not be effective. Pick-up was recognised as a crutch by some participants, who noted that it was "scarier" but ultimately worthwhile to confront the notion of self-fulfilment through means other than what is instilled by the practice's proponents.

Examination initially occurred through the lens of gender, with Connell's complicit and protest masculinities used as a framework. However, this correlation was also observed in relation to other social constructs. Biological essentialism was repeatedly deferred to as justification for rules of the game, for the fixed roles men and women are deemed to play, and for the competitive environment that is portrayed as inescapable. A neoliberal ethic was demonstrated in attitudes concerning effort, competition, and the assignment of value to certain outcomes. Other research into pick-up artists has noted these alignments (Denes, 2011; O'Neill, 2015). Finally, gender hierarchies were reinforced via the flattening effect of positing equal competitors, similar to the way sex role theory was exploited to argue that the gender order causes men and women equivalent harms (Messner, 1998).

Such parallels assist study of the groups in question. For those concerned with pick-up artists in terms of gender relations and their position amongst a rising reactionary cultural contingent, this thesis offers a framework towards their comprehension. Understanding the ludic element of these groups' behaviours is crucial to articulating what attracts participants to it, and thus to construct alternatives that might ameliorate the genuine anxieties of men while eschewing the harms that pick-



up inflicts on women. Yet there are also more significant connections observable here. These dispositional tendencies exist in the wider sociocultural forces that inform pick-up. Articulating these connections demonstrates how game and gender discourses can be synthesised to gain insight into those forces. Golding's (2013) work on configurative vs navigatory frameworks for game engagements alludes to a conceit shared by traditional game discourses and neoliberal ideology. He argues that games are dominantly seen as something the user is external to and omniscient of, rather than the more apt view of them as something that must be navigated from within. This echoes feminist critiques of positivist attitudes in academia particularly, but also in conventional cultural assumptions. These assumptions are what enables the existence of meritocratic and individualistic ideologies under neoliberal capitalism. Pick-up artists, in fitting with this, consider themselves to be able to comprehensively understand a system that they are outside of, rather than part of. The configurative assumption is made in error, and the structures it perceives are artificial. Showing the gamer mode to be evident in these groups paves the way for applying it to other, broader elements of culture. Thus, this thesis gestures towards a wider manifestation of ludic masculinity as an element of contemporary neoliberal hegemony.

The suggestion that follows from this is that the gamer mode encourages a compliance with hegemony. However, it is not clear that we can generalise this from the evidence. This is instead proposed as a theory that merits future investigation. If such an effect exists, its boundaries and exact mechanisms must be identified. It might produce apolitical stances, or more distinct leanings. Comprehension of the gamer mode via the classic game model also makes uncertain which criteria might be more relevant than others. For instance, it is easy to imagine that the imposition of rule structures could be inherently limiting to men's human potential. On the other hand, Vandello et al. (2008) propose that harms are caused in men by a lack of formal manhood rituals, which might be compared to rules. Others see a potential for games to be a valuable site of resistance, for young boys in particular (Sanford & Madill, 2006). If the gamer mode has a fundamentally non-radical effect, an explanation must be given of why this should be the case. Relating the gamer mode to ludological formulations of games does nonetheless provide a starting point for such investigation. Concepts such

as transmediality and the magic circle, evident in the notion of negotiable consequences, may project a triviality onto game structures. There are also questions around the coercive potential of games, and the dependence of this on games' portable immaterial support. Bogost for instance has written on how the systemic procedures of videogames may elicit a persuasive rhetoric (Bogost, 2007), and how trends such as 'gamification' have seen game elements "harnessed for corporate benefit" (Bogost, 2015, p. 65). Similarly of note are applications of game theory, particularly in the context of economic rationalism (Brubaker, 1984). It may be useful to identify the gamer mode as deployed at a societal level. Ecofeminism for example links exploitative ideology on an environmental level with that inflicted on women (Mies & Shiva, 1993). Similar comparisons could be formed using the gamer mode. One could even speculate at the significance of the term game's use to indicate the subject of predatory behaviour. Individualistic conceptualisations of game players could also be relevant, as collectivist structures are arguably ungamelike. These suggestions cannot be adequately explored here, but the gamer mode provides a basis for such investigation. Future research then should consider whether it is possible for classically-defined games to be participated in as a means of resistance to hegemonic structures. If it is not, then we will have to carefully consider when people are encouraged to be gamers.

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