

Play Beyond the Margins: Identity, Marginalisation, and Video Games

Gemma Roberts BSc/BA (Hons), MRes

Department of Music, Media, Communication, and Cultural Studies

Macquarie University, Sydney

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Abstract

The concept of the ‘gamer’ has undergone much scrutiny within media and academic discourses, particularly during and after the events of GamerGate in 2014. As an identity whose heritage stems from geek masculinity, and is frequently seen as exclusionary and ideologically homogenous, it frequently sees itself as occupying a ‘charmed’ position within game spaces through the mythologisation of the archetypal gamer. In order to maintain positions of hegemonic power within game spaces, this identity uses strategies of delegitimisation to exclude and disempower those who reject the values and power structures of geek masculinity, and control the perception of gaming as an inherently masculine space. Despite this, video game spaces have long been populated by groups that are excluded from full participation from the ‘gamer’ identity, but nonetheless persist in these spaces, even as their accounts are ignored and hidden from view. This thesis aims to analyse three particular communities: queer gaming communities, the ‘casual’ gamer-as-modder, and the indie game developer. These three examples actively challenge the strategies used to delegitimise them, and in so doing, these communities function as sites for progressive politics to emerge, and as spaces of resistance to processes of marginalisation. In examining how these communities challenge the strategies of delegitimisation, it also offers possible pathways through which these strategies can be contested and negated.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Signature: _____ Date: 25/07/2019

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Introduction

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Introduction

The medium of the video game is an enormously rich space capable of offering innumerable and diverse experiences. From play as relaxation, to play as competition, to play as a form of socialising with others, video games are capable of offering such a range of play practices that can meet the needs of almost anyone. As a medium that has also seen significant integration into daily life across a variety of platforms and devices, gaming has become such a commonplace part of the contemporary human experience that, it seems, almost everyone is a gamer now. Despite the integration of gaming into mainstream contemporary culture, the terrain that surrounds video games is far from the utopian and egalitarian environment that it *could* be, of a domain that embraces a diversity of play practices and players that the medium *should* be capable of offering. Instead, gaming is so frequently perceived as a practice that is inhabited by a singular mythologised gamer culture, particularly within media discourses of gaming, but also through the reinforcement of this notion within gaming environments themselves.

2014 proved to be a pivotal year in the history of video games and video game culture, with the once-simple label of ‘gamer’ now laden with cultural baggage becoming an increasingly contested term. During the events of GamerGate, self-identified gamers became factionalised over issues such as the contributions of women to cultural critiques of games, the necessity of representation of people of colour with games, and the tendency for games to be considered masculine spaces. Headlines across news articles and from academic writers alike highlighted the need to discard this label (‘Opinion: Let’s retire the word ‘gamer’’, Sheffield, 2013) , while Dan Golding’s ‘The End of Gamers’ (2014) seemed to argue that the label and identity of the ‘gamer’ was already experiencing its death throes. Kotaku writer Luke Plunkett wrote a piece musing that ‘We Might Be Witnessing The ‘Death Of An Identity’’ (2014), a thought that echoed Leigh Alexander’s plea to game developers that ‘Gamers' don't have to be your audience. 'Gamers' are over.’ (2014). Such an assault on the term might seem conjured out of thin air, had it not been percolating for some years prior. These same thoughts were addressed by video game theorist Adrienne Shaw, who scrutinised the label of gamer through her ethnographic work in ‘Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity’. Shaw (2011) saw a gradual disillusionment of certain types of people - such as women and minorities - with the label of ‘gamer’, arguing that the term failed to properly encompass them. Yet, 2014 seemed to be the time where, for many working in and around the industry, a desire to distance themselves from the label of the ‘gamer’ had reached a critical point, and individuals found themselves either discarding the label, or holding onto it even more tightly.

This shift in identification as a gamer, or for some, as *not* a gamer, has become a point of contention within video game cultures. While the term need *only* be a descriptor, that is, a gamer as ‘one who plays games’, it became an identifier, a way of differentiating friend from foe, in-

group from out-group. This supposed formation of a singular gamer identity around an entire medium, one that is no less diverse in scope and theme than cinema or music, and with its own genres, subcultures, and fans, does not do the medium, or its diverse communities and extensive range of play practices, justice. It is in this complicated history and this conflict of identities that this project wishes to examine video game culture as more than simply the culture of the codified, mythologised gamer. In spite of a desire to control narratives about who plays games and who qualifies as a gamer, gaming remains a medium and a leisure activity that is embraced by a diverse audience to fulfill a variety of needs.

This project therefore aims to understand the nature of this crisis over the term ‘gamer’, recognising that while there are dominant narratives about who and what a gamer is, there are, and have always been, constant challenges to the performance of this narrative. In understanding the tensions inherent within this identity, and how it has responded to challenges to its mythologisation, the desire to maintain gaming spaces as the domain of the gamer serves a very deliberate purpose, ensuring that it remains as much a monoculture as possible through strategies of delegitimisation. The attempts to exclude or obfuscate alternative heritages from gaming’s history are certainly not done by accident or mere omission. In resisting this dominant gamer identity and its attempts of erasure, many of these forms of participation within gaming have flown under the radar, through the formation of groups that escape easy identification and challenge conventional narratives. As this project will show, a rich culture underlies these hidden communities, exerting great creative potential within the communities that have made this medium their home. The privileging and legitimising of certain play practices over others often comes at the cost of ignoring, negating, and omitting other practices (or indeed, other individuals). However, these ignored practices are often capable of breaking taboos around

sexuality and gender, of resisting prescriptive forms of play, and of challenging audience expectations that are entrenched within video games. These practices, then, are the focus of this thesis: the play that occurs so frequently outside the margins of acceptability, or outside the framing of media discourses of video games, that have the potential to radically reshape the trajectory of the video game industry as a whole.

Goals of the Project

The purpose of this thesis is to re-examine the contributions of hidden and under-represented communities, many of whom have been existing within game spaces despite the hostile and exclusionary culture that surrounds them. The inspiration for this as a primary focus of the project comes in part due to the culture that has so violently resisted embracing its already diverse playerbase and communities, but it is also in part due to the persistent media (and to some extent, academic) discourse that so frequently totalises and universalises game cultures as the aggressive, straight white male identity. As a consequence, these two narratives - from both within the gamer subculture and from the discourses that critique them - frequently ignore these more positive depictions of gaming as spaces for creative potential (through modding and game development), as places of social integration (through the formation of social groups comprised of marginalised groups), and thus as sites of resistance to mainstream ideas of what constitutes a gamer. In omitting these depictions, however, the mythologised ideal of the gamer identity maintains a dominant presence in media depictions of gaming, and further plays into the perception of gaming as an exclusionary monoculture.

This project also hopes to offer contributions to video game studies, in order to further expand the scope of this interdisciplinary field. While video game studies has expanded its scope

and the terrain of its debates considerably since the early ludology/narratology debates of the 2000s (Frasca, 1999, Frasca, 2003, Murray, 2005), the junctions between it and other disciplines, such as queer theory and leisure studies, often leave much to be desired. In this respect, this project hopes to offer frameworks that help to expand our understanding of play practices, social formations, and the labour practices that surround gaming. These same desires are reflected in journals such as the recent special issue of *Game Studies* 'Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games (Introduction)' (Ruberg & Phillips, 2018), an issue that emerged in response to the fact that while the textual and narrative elements of video games have become increasingly inclusive, and the contributions of academics within the field have reflected upon this at length, it is the politics of in-game representation that tends to dominate academic discourses around marginalised groups. While the issue of representation is undoubtedly important to study, Ruberg & Phillips argue that we still need to 'unearth the contributions of queer and transgender folks, alongside women and people of color, who have been appearing in and helping create games for decades, often with little recognition' (2018, para. 2). This project, then, attempts to do precisely this: to unearth the contributions of those who are often ignored or left unseen; to reconsider practices often disregarded as exploitative, as instead sites for generative and political change; and ultimately, to unseat the hegemonic vision of the gamer as the sole contributor to, and beneficiary of, gaming's tempestuous history. In so doing, this project hopes to play some role in reconfiguring play practices that occur at the margins of intelligibility as sites for further exploration and discovery.

In order to survey the landscape that surrounds the gaming practices that this thesis will examine, this project will be broken up into four parts. The first chapter will examine the concept of the gamer and gaming cultures broadly, identifying the interplay between the concepts of

identity that vie for ownership of the medium, as well as the contemporary media discourse that surrounds these constructs. As a consequence of this, the GamerGate controversy will be utilised to examine the tensions present within gamer cultures, and to understand the patterns of behaviour involved in this conflict as indicative of underlying structural and systemic processes. Through this, it will also shine light on how marginalised play practices and communities so frequently remain unaccounted for, and rendered invisible (if not outright unintelligible), by strategies both intentional and incidental that disqualify and disempower some from full access to gaming, while others still are deterred from participation by the perception of gaming as an unwelcoming, exclusive domain. These three strategies function to disqualify and disempower individuals within gaming culture, but also to control the perception of gaming externally as an inherently masculine space.

As such, this first chapter will look at how cultural theories of identity formation cohere and conflict with this label, as well as understanding it as a subculture that positions it as existing in a point of tension that naturally leads towards such a crisis point. In understanding the ‘gamer’ as a subculture, we can also see it as inheriting traits from its parent subcultural identity, that of the ‘geek masculinity’, a derivative/subversion of hegemonic masculinity that maintains a patriarchal structure while also privileging traits like esoteric knowledge of geek culture and mastery of game systems. Alternative play practices that ignore or reject this hierarchical structure and values system are thus often excised from full participation within gamer culture and disqualified from being seen as legitimised play practices, so as to minimise the potential for these play practices to destabilise the gamer identity. In response, however, the rise of subaltern counterpublics, of groups that experience an awareness of their subordinate status, emerge and form new configurations that oppose the dominant cultural groups.

Despite the contentious and volatile status of the gamer identity, as well as the exclusionary ideologies it replicates and propagates, it might seem that it would be advantageous to dismantle and do away with the concept of the gamer identity in its entirety. Indeed, the works of Keogh (2016), Cote (2015) and Kirkpatrick (2016), among others, argue that the identity of the gamer has been constructed, treated, and marketed, as a masculine domain that seems unflinching in its desire to maintain this image in the face of gradually shifting demographics. However, is not the intention of this project to suggest that we could, or should, dismantle and discard this identity, even if it were possible to do so. While the identity itself may seem rooted in its views that are incompatible with progressive politics, with a long gendered construction of this industry and play practice, this project intends to show how marginalised groups nonetheless persist and thrive in the face of hostility and exclusion – and perhaps more importantly, have *always* persisted and thrived, even if unseen and unaccounted for – utilising their status as subaltern counterpublics to generate change from within.

The subsequent three chapters will shift the focus towards these subaltern counterpublics, as communities that challenge these constructs to show the various and numerous ways in which gaming can host environments that exist in parallel to the gamer identity and subculture of the first chapter. Where Chapter 1 seeks to analyse the gamer as an identity that attempts to regulate its internal culture while maintaining an exclusionary boundary around the medium, Chapter 2 turns to a combined leisure studies and queer theory approach to demonstrate that participation within leisure spaces (including video gaming) is not a trivial matter, but an important part of social participation. As a demographic that has seen much exclusion from leisure spaces (including game spaces), both in terms of representation *and* cultural inclusion, queer identities actively resist attempts of marginalisation and disempowerment through the formation of

‘queerscapes’: formations that are conducive to queer survival, and enable the generation of social capital and processes such as self-actualisation, even when surrounded by a dominant culture that views non-heteronormative identities as subordinate. Despite changing social perspectives on queer identities, methods used to facilitate survival and safety of queer identified individuals in the physical world also prove useful when mapped onto digital spaces, and it is through these methods that new networks can be established that serve the needs of these communities. These alternative pathways towards social participation - often invisible to those outside of them - allow for disempowered minorities within gaming spaces to form social bonds and find fulfillment within these insular communities without necessarily needing to directly engage with the broader gamer culture.

This is not the only way this thesis seeks to challenge the politics of this dominant gamer identity. In Chapter 3, we will see how the ‘casual’ gamer - a label that frequently discredits and disqualifies individuals from being seen as ‘real gamers’ - is largely irrelevant to the communities that form around particular games, who instead channel the creative potential of its users to reshape the politics of the game space itself through the practice of user generated content and modding, such as through mods that enhance the range of skin tones available for character creation. While modding need not *always* be a tool for political intervention, this chapter will examine one particular community that not only challenges the status quo of the game space itself, but also those of the gaming industry (and society more generally) itself. *The Sims (2000-2014)*, while a respected and well established game series in its own right, is heavily interwoven with its modding community, and has been influential in ensuring the politics embedded within the game series matches the politics of the community itself. In examining these processes, this chapter will demonstrate the potential of modders as part of fan

communities to pre-emptively make enhancements and additions to the game space to encourage the developers to follow their lead, such that the developer is responsive to the desires and needs of its fanbase. While positioning modders as active participants within game play and game development raises a set of ethical questions around the nature of the unpaid labour they undertake, it also reveals the impact that even a relatively small subset of users can have on shaping the trajectory of a game series, and in turn, reshape expectations of how inclusive and responsive a game should be.

Finally, in Chapter 4, we will see how the rise of indie gaming, and the shifts in economic and technological barriers and practices that have allowed for it, present opportunities for individuals to move beyond mere modders into game developers, and are capable of repurposing genres, aesthetics, and the other signifiers of gaming culture into a way that can meet the needs and desires of the communities themselves, if not stretch the boundaries of what gaming itself can be. Indie game development, then, plays a crucial role in challenging the perception of gaming as an exclusive space for geek masculinity and the gamer identity, offering a potential to resignify the core traits of gaming in a way that better fits the needs of the users. As beneficiaries of the rise of digital platforms such as Steam, console e-shops, smartphone marketplaces, and so forth, small scale development can bring an experimental or anti-authoritarian element to gaming that is less commonly found in traditional large studio development, particularly when a single (and often amateur) individual can bring their creative vision to a finished product. This chapter will examine indie game production as incorporating practices of produsage, a set of practices that draw from heritages of DIY culture, where the user(s) of a product or service becomes a participant in its creation or continual development. Meanwhile, the paradigm shift towards platform capitalism, a trend towards digitisation and data accumulation in order to offer a

superior (often monopolistic) service that directly benefits from both the passive consumption *and* active development of the platform by its userbase, has a vested interest in ensuring the practices of produsage are available. In this way, this chapter will show how the indie gaming industry can still offer fundamentally new and experimental experiences through produsage-based practices that challenge existing perceptions of gaming as a masculine domain.

This project therefore seeks to find a pathway through which the strategies used to maintain the dominance of the gamer identity can be challenged, and will examine three separate instances of social formations centring around different play practices that are frequently unaccounted for in media and academic discussions of gamer cultures. Through this, it is hoped that the frameworks utilised throughout can be put to use to reposition marginalised gamers - the hidden gamer, the 'casual' gamer, and the experimental developer - as legitimate, valid, and valuable contributors to video game culture.

Definition of Key Terms

In order to better understand these diverse subsets of the gaming community, this project will be looking at the cultures surrounding video game cultures, in order to find ways to challenge, subvert, and contest any monopolisation that any one cultural group may claim to the medium, and in order to locate strategies to vie for the future of the medium as a space for not just creative potential, but as a place where one can find self-fulfillment and self-actualisation. However, the study of video game cultures is not one that can be undertaken without significant complications of what this entails. Certainly, to consider the concept of the gamer as a monolithic entity is a simplistic notion, and one that does not sufficiently differentiate between the gamer communities, gamer identities, and gamer subcultures. Instead, this thesis

acknowledges that these three terms should be considered distinct, and the terminology used to describe each is chosen carefully. Thus, we will recognise video game *communities* as the small-scale groups that form around a shared goal or ideal and feature interaction between its members: these are the guilds and clans within game spaces, the fan communities that share information on how to improve gameplay with a particular style of play, the modders that collaborate to ensure a game is kept up to date long beyond the developers cease its updates, the discussion boards and subreddits that form around the shared passion for a game, and participate in dialogue with developers. Video game communities are thus pluralistic, and have their own distinct values, rules that are usually enforced, and culture that may vary wildly from the media depictions of gamers - or may fit the mould perfectly.

The concept of a community in this context also bears a closer resemblance to a nodal structure than a porous amorphous group of people, largely due to properties of the technologies that host such communities. This conceptualisation allows us to see the infrastructure that supports communities - whether they be message boards, discord channels, subreddits, or the official forums of a game - as comparatively insular from other video game communities, but also as autonomous self-governing and self-policing entities. There are connections between these nodes, but they function relatively independently from their relatives, and in so doing, have a comparatively static and parochial scope. While various communities may draw from similar overarching themes common to the gamer identity and subculture, the in-jokes, memes, and cultural assumptions that a *Super Mario* based subreddit make will be distinctly different from those of a *Final Fantasy* message board or a *World of Warcraft* discord server, as there tends to be little interaction between these individual communities. As such, each individual community will have their own brand of humour and jargon specific to that community, and will rarely spill

over and begin affecting the ‘common’ gamer culture unless the titles or communities are of a particular cultural significance.

In contrast, video game *culture* describes a vastly different entity. It is often seen and treated as singular, with the dominant form of this culture depicted in media and culture as the ‘authentic’ version of the culture. Here, the disambiguations of Adrienne Shaw (2010) are useful; despite often being treated as something obvious and commonsense (p404), she understands ‘video game culture’ as being ‘something very distinct and very different from mainstream U.S. culture’ (p404). While Shaw’s work demonstrates that is not easy to locate a singular, all-purpose definition with well-defined boundaries, she notes that this amorphous term is broadly used to describe who plays games, what they play, and how they play, but that journalistic and academic deployment of this term often results in a much more diverse understanding of who would fit into these categories than a conventional commonsense view of video game culture would otherwise permit (p414). Even so, this commonsense view is one that holds much currency, particularly since the ‘defense’ of this culture is something so strongly espoused in conflicts such as GamerGate. In this regard, it is worth considering, at least for the purposes of discussion, the view that ‘video game culture’ is inhabited by gamers that share a group identity, as well as shared values, ideologies, and linguistic quirks across a broad spectrum of backgrounds and preferred genres. These are the gamers that act as representatives of the ‘gamer identity’. In understanding this as an identity, we can examine the rituals that are performed in the service of reaffirming this identity. For individuals for whom this identity is integrated into their own sense of self, it requires repetition over time to maintain its form.

Meanwhile, Shaw also acknowledges that we can also understand video game culture as existing as a form of *subculture*, a term examined in great detail by Dick Hebdige (1979). While

an analysis of the gamer as an identity opens up avenues of studying it as a repeated performance, as a subculture, we can understand its emergence as occurring through resistance to the dominant culture. It does so through the adoption of a series of styles and signifiers that embody this subculture. As a subculture, we should therefore expect it to fit into a cyclical pattern of rebellion and incorporation, the first phase where it presents itself as threatening to the social order, and the second where it is pacified and sedated as it becomes normalised within everyday life. While there may be many subcultures within game spaces – the subcultures that cosplay at gaming conventions are certainly distinct from the ‘generic’ gamer subculture that inhabits game worlds – this thesis will be examining the gamer subculture as an extension of its historical antecedent of geek masculinity.

Recognising that video game communities, cultures, and identities are distinct helps to examine each in relation to each other, and begins to unearth the tensions that exist between them. As this project will explore multiple play practices that are so frequently omitted from gaming cultures and discourses, it is crucial to acknowledge the various identities and modes of play that exist within the medium. In so doing, we will demonstrate the potential for games to offer play experiences that encompass a set of politics that stand in contrast to the politics of the dominant gamer identity and culture. Some of these play practices will show how the mere act of participation within game spaces can introduce a progressive set of politics that would otherwise be absent, particularly by those who are queer-identified or allied, or use these spaces for purposes pertaining to their sexual or gender identity. While concepts such as queer identity and progressive politics are often assumed to be self-explanatory and self-evident, the nuances inherent in such loaded terms need to be teased out before they can be used within this project.

As such, this project will use the term ‘queer’ as an umbrella term for sexual and gender diverse individuals and groups, with an understanding of its history as a slur, as a reclaimed term, and of its usage within academic (queer) theory. When discussing concepts such as the ‘queerscapes’ (Ingram, 1998) in Chapter 2, it will be apparent that much of the academic history of the term is used to examine gay culture in particular, largely as a product of its time. However, the usage of this term within this project is intended to explicitly *not* be exclusive to any particular sexuality or gender identity. Thus, its usage should be seen in this umbrella form, as shorthand for the numerous LGBTIQ+ identities, past, present, and future.

Where reference is made to a ‘progressive’ politics, it is to be understood as an ideology or set of practices that are, on some level, a challenge to the status quo of the practices, game, industry, or culture within which these practices occur. This usually is in favour of redistributing agency and autonomy to the participants of a technology or culture in such a way that it allows for a more ‘fair’ usage of the technology, game spaces, and so forth. Generally, this project will discuss the incorporation of progressive politics as an action that players can make, but as we will see, they can also be embedded within game spaces in such a way that the game worlds themselves embrace this play experience. This is not to insinuate that progressive politics are *inherently* better, or always worth striving towards at any cost, but will be used to encompass play practices and ideologies that seek to destigmatise identities and movements that fit outside prescribed and normalised cultural narratives (such as heteronormativity). In this sense, game spaces and play practices that incorporate a ‘progressive set of politics’ within this thesis will often be seen as being in opposition to exclusionary sets of politics that seek to remove and marginalise individuals and groups from gamer culture.

This project will also frame much of its discussion around what will be termed ‘strategies of delegitimisation’. While ethnographers such as T.L. Taylor (2006) have shown the ways in which marginalised groups (particularly women) have co-existed in gaming spaces despite their precarious status in male-dominated environments, this project will clarify what these techniques are, how they are used, and subsequently, how they can be resisted. In so doing, these strategies will be used to show how practices of marginalisation are not always equal in their intention or impact. In breaking these practices down into three distinct strategies (disqualification, disempowerment, and controlling perception), it will serve to disambiguate the nebulous concept of marginalisation into the more concrete consequences of vitriolic rhetoric, harassment, the gendering of game spaces, and so forth. These strategies will illustrate how the social and political structure of the gamer identity is maintained, but also allows for this project to directly respond to each of these strategies as methods through which the hegemonic position of the gamer identity can be challenged.

Finally, the concept of the ‘subaltern counterpublic’ will be used throughout this project. This concept, primarily as used by Nancy Fraser (1990), is used to identify the various configurations that emerge in response to a position of subordination and marginalisation. These configurations are therefore crucial to much of this project, as they reflect the hidden communities that exist at the margins of play. While these will be referred to with more specificity throughout (for example, the queerscape functions as a counterpublic, but a very specific *kind* of counterpublic) this concept of the marginalised social group that creates alternate modes of existing, of sharing information, of protesting, and ultimately of creating ‘counterdiscourses’ (p67) will be key to this entire project.

Methodology

This project at its foundation lies within the discipline of video game studies, and as it has set out to understand gamer cultures, communities, and identities in their heterogeneous forms, it requires an understanding of these concepts on a theoretical level. The work of ethnographers and of quantitative data analysis are important in helping inform this project in attempting to address the issues that surround not just the nature of the dominant gamer identity, but also the communities and cultures that exist within gaming outside of this identity. As such, this project is well suited to use an approach that draws from a cultural studies background, and thus primarily uses critical theory approaches to examine systemic concepts and examine the interplay between them. More importantly, this thesis attempts to embody a methodological approach that ‘is an essential element in the historical effort to create a world which satisfies the needs and powers of men [sic]’ (Horkheimer, 1972, p246), and thus engages in these efforts through feminist theory, queer theory, and other approaches that seek to challenge the power structures that obstruct social movement, participation, and emancipation of their citizens. Performing a critical theory approach to these questions thus helps to illuminate the research focus area. It allows for this project to articulate why the gamer identity finds itself with the set of values it has, and why it resists change, in a way that considers the underlying systemic effects as key to understanding the culture itself. It also helps to understand the critiques that media discourse surrounding the gamer identity so frequently make, and it positions the communities and cultures that are marginalised by the dominant gamer culture as subjects of significance.

This project is one that is at its core interdisciplinary in nature, drawing from various other fields that do not frequently intersect. While it is clearly rooted in video game studies, it will also incorporate aspects of queer theory to discuss concepts such as social formations of

marginalised groups, as well as elements of leisure studies that articulate the importance of participation in leisure for marginalised groups. Additionally, theory with a focus on the political and economic impacts of play practices (such as modding and produsage) will be utilised to view even relatively simple mods, such as those designed to enhance the range of available skin tones, into broader commentaries on outsourcing labour to fans. In this regard, adopting critical theory approaches allows for these disparate ideas to be connected through these larger frameworks that describe power structures, and the way that individuals navigate through broader, potentially society-wide configurations and institutions. In this regard, this project should not be seen as one that exists within feminist/queer theory alone, but one that utilises an interdisciplinary approach to fully explore the expansive range of mechanisms to challenge the dominant gamer culture, including through examinations of both leisure and of labour, neither of which could be satisfactorily done solely through these aforementioned disciplines.

As this project examines not just the cultures surrounding gaming, but the artifacts they produce also, there are sections of this project that require some degree of textual analysis as an adjunct to the understanding of the culture that produces them. Aeron Davis' work on research methods warns that 'textual analysis often assumes rather more than it should about the conditions of cultural production and consumption' (2008, p58). To this end, the third chapter will engage in an examination of user-generated content and modding as a practice, and in so doing, will look closely at the cultural artifacts that are produced through this practice within a specific modding community through a textual analysis of these artifacts. In his reflections upon research methods, Davis (2008) finds that an analysis of textual elements is a way for 'cultural production [to be] investigated indirectly. Wider deductions about the production (and also consumption) process are inferred from assessments from what is produced' (p56). In so doing,

however, it is important that any texts that are selected be representative samples of the range of texts (Davis, p57). The fact that modders are usually not only cultural producers, but also consumers of these very same products (whether that be the base games, or the mods of their own creation, *or* mods from others), means that the textual analysis of these products needs an awareness that this line between producer and consumer is not always clear. Further, we must understand that the significance of any mod created is limited by how - and sometimes *if* - it is consumed. Thus, we will also look at mod consumption habits through quantitative features such as download rates and revenue where relevant to better understand this link between producer and consumer.

The inclusion of texts as objects of examination raises important methodological questions about what *sort* of games are suitable for this project. While there are uncountable games that operate outside of the conventional boundaries of gaming that could function as suitable texts that challenge the assumptions made by gamer cultures, given the focus of this project on attempting to locate paths of resistance against the dominant gamer culture, the texts that have been chosen must speak to the tensions inherent between their status as bona fide 'legitimate' games, and the ways in which certain group identities can occupy these spaces despite their marginalisation by the dominant gamer culture. Thus, while there are countless microgames, art games, and other varieties of games that engage in radical reconfigurations of what a game can be, these nonetheless exist on the periphery of what can be defined as a 'game'. Zoe Quinn's *Depression Quest*, or Anna Anthropy's *dys4ia* and *Queers In Love At The End Of The World* may offer critiques of what a game is, or what its content should be about, but ultimately these games are limited in their ability to engage in a dialogue with the dominant gamer culture (and the structures that maintain its hegemonic position) by way of their omission

from this culture. More than simply a rejection by gamer cultures, however, these sentiments are echoed in academic video game studies ideals too; Jesper Juul's *Half Real* (2005) demonstrates how easily a prescriptive lens on what a game 'is' can delegitimise those that do not fit these narrow models, pushing objective-less games or those without strict win/lose conditions into the realm of 'borderline cases' or even 'non-games' entirely.

It is for this reason that the games that have been selected as suitable texts within this project are ones that have been accepted by gaming cultures to some degree, and that are regarded as 'legitimate' games, if not at least 'borderline' cases. In so doing, these games offer insight into how marginalised populations can occupy and cohabit these spaces in such a way that they can affect change within the culture from the inside, rather than denouncing and critiquing it from a position of exile. In this way, games such as *World of Warcraft*, one of the most successful games to date in terms of its subscriber models, revenue, and cultural impact, can demonstrate the potential for marginalised groups to occupy game spaces to enact some degree of meaningful change. Similarly, enormously popular games such as *The Sims* – while it occupies an interesting position as a 'borderline' and 'feminised' play experience – is rarely challenged in its status as a popular and successful game. The texts that function as the focus in Chapter 4, *Stardew Valley* and *Doki Doki Literature Club*, are representative of the kind of position that indie games can hold, straddling the line between 'borderline' games – the former an uncompetitive game with open ended goals and a focus on resource/time maintenance and relationship management, the latter a linear narrative experience more akin to a book than a game – yet both have managed to establish cult status as tremendously popular and influential games. In this regard, the games selected as texts within this project manage to be both within the accepted conventional ideas of what constitutes a game, while still offering the potential for

the players to use them as tools for subversion of the cultural norms and expectations of the dominant gamer culture. These games have been embraced by the gamer identity while still challenging conservative ideals, whether explicitly (through the developer's intentions) or through the emergent properties afforded to the players through the game spaces. In much the same way, the focus in Chapter 3 on modding aims to examine the ways in which mods allow for users to occupy game spaces and shift its cultural production in ways that challenge the dominant gamer identity. This allows for the selection of mods that highlight this avenue for political change. While there are certainly mods that reinforce misogynistic and racist ideals – as will be discussed to a limited extent in chapter 4 – these are not the focus of chapter 3.

This project also views the relationship between 'play culture' and 'maker culture' as perhaps more porous than it may seem on the surface. While this is most explicit in the shift from chapters 1 and 2 – which largely focus on play practices – and chapters 3 and 4 - where modding and indie gaming are examples of players moving into active development roles – it is crucial to understand these as not mutually exclusive or incompatible concepts, but rather as a continuous spectrum of play-as-productive. For example, where Chapter 2 uses modes of play (such as sexual experiences in game spaces) as the subject of examination, these can also be understood as a reconfiguration or a modification of the play space in order to suit the needs of the users. Further, to consider players and play-culture as separate and distinct from maker-culture seems to be an arbitrary distinction that needs not be made; T.L. Taylor's ethnographic work in *Play Between Worlds* (2006) criticises the idea that players are passive, and instead argues that players are producers, especially when considering the diverse range of practices that are considered normative aspects of play now, from the creation of walkthroughs and FAQs, to message board Q&As, to the ways in which each server within a game generates its own

microcosm of the game culture (including the formation of guilds) (p155). In this sense, much of the practices of play *also* fit into modes of constructing and modifying play spaces; the major difference is therefore one of scale, and while the distinction between the two is important to be aware of, this thesis understands the two to be symbiotic, complimentary, and to some extent, inseparable from each other.

Scope and Limits

In attempting to provide a useful set of analyses across a broad range of play practices, one of which includes the ways in which queer individuals can repurpose existing spaces for their own needs, it is important to note that this project does *not* seek to analyse textual analyses of representation directly. While these are also worthy of critique, and the importance of positive representation cannot be understated, this project has chosen to focus *not* on the representation of fictionalised queer identities within game spaces, but the configurations that queer people make use of while playing games, as well as the safety and survival strategies they employ in a domain that often treats them as marginalised minorities. As already addressed, this is an area that is significantly under-developed within video game studies in favour of focuses on representation.

It is also important to note that this project, when dealing with notions of ‘otherness’ that surround video game cultures, primarily focuses on processes of othering based on gender and sexuality, as well as subversive play practices that do not meet normative ideas of what play ‘should’ be. While a focus on race is also important in these notions of ‘otherness’, this is outside the scope of this thesis beyond the recognition that geek, nerd, and gamer identities are almost exclusively the domain of the straight white male, and that those outside of this narrow band of subjective experience are frequently omitted from hallowed positions within gaming hierarchies.

Additionally, there are certainly limits to this methodology in the context of the research scope. Instead, it is hoped that this project will in turn help ethnographically inclined researchers to further explore the theory addressed within as a basis for their own research, and help them to locate unexplored avenues of research for these systemic and oftentimes abstracted concepts.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this project should be seen as a process. It started with a core question: who, or what, is a gamer, and how could such a simple term embody such negative cultural baggage and become such a contentious label? In following this thread, many of the issues that were pertinent to this question came to boiling point around the time that the GamerGate controversy was at its peak, and while an examination of the culture that found its home in this movement is certainly necessary, it was never intended to be a focal point of this research. Instead, this project should not be seen as aiming to act as a condemnation of gamer culture - although there is still ample critique of it within - but as a celebration of the multitudinous and untold forms of play that, if they were more fully incorporated into contemporary discourses gaming, would present the medium and its respective culture in a much more positive light. While the dominant gamer identity is not without its faults, the societal fixation on it has reinforced the exclusion, erasure, and lack of awareness of these myriad play practices that complicate the simplistic notion of the gamer considerably.

It is with this in mind that this project's primary goal is to uncover these play practices, despite the processes of marginalisation that are used to obfuscate them, and examine how they are utilised in various ways: from the formation of social groups, to the usage of game-specific tools, to the creation of new forms of games entirely, that befit the needs of the individuals. In so

doing, it reframes play as far from passive consumption, into an active set of practices that become enriched through the participation of the inhabitants of the game spaces. In order to uncover these hidden heritages and play practices, we will first turn our attention to the dominant gamer identity. In revealing the mechanisms that enable this culture to exist as it does, it will also lead us to uncover the minority cultures that orbit the game spaces, and help us to understand how and why they exist as they do.

Chapter 1: The Gamer Identity

1.1 Introduction

1.2: The Gamer Identity in Crisis

1.3: Strategies of Marginalisation: A Taxonomy of Delegitimisation

1.4: Identity Formation: A Butlerian Approach

1.5: The Gamer as a Subculture

1.6: Conclusion

1.1 Introduction

The primary purpose of this chapter is to examine the concept of the gamer as an identity, and subsequently to understand the climate in which the identity came to a point of crisis. In so doing, it will be shown that the crisis over the term is demonstrative of complex underlying tensions within this identity. As a case study, the GamerGate controversy will be used to show this identity in crisis at the peak of its tensions. The second function of this chapter is to examine these tensions over the gamer identity as part of a strategy of exclusion, in an attempt to maintain a hegemonic position within ‘geek culture’, by seeking to prevent others from participation within the game space. By effectively erasing and ignoring the histories and contributions of those outside of this hegemonic position, the dominant gamer identity can construct its own narratives about who and what a gamer is. Through examining how these processes function within the culture surrounding this identity, it will provide a pathway through which the rest of this project can examine how these alternative heritages and play practices have existed, and will

continue to exist, despite an actively hostile culture to those who do not neatly fit into the conventional understanding of the dominant gamer identity.

Finding a common understanding of the term ‘gamer’ is therefore the first objective. As a term, its usage varies based on context; within market and demographic data, it is often used in its simplest form, as an identifier of those who play video games, as with organisations such as the Entertainment Software Association (The ESA, 2019). However, when it is used as a term of self-identification, it refers to a very different conceptualisation of the gamer: of one who feels an affiliation towards gaming as a primary hobby. This type of gamer as a social identity represents a marked shift from other media forms, for which there are rarely descriptors for those who participate in their consumption. As game developer Brandon Sheffield (2013) notes, there are certainly cinephiles and audiophiles, but these terms describe a subset of viewers/listeners who are part of a subculture that relishes in scrutinising these mediums to extreme lengths. The average movie-goer is just that; not a ‘movier’ or a ‘reader’, they are simply someone who watches movies, listens to music, or reads books.

The usage of the term gamer, then, is much more convoluted than that of the movie-goer or book-reader. It is used in a variety of ways to refer to many different concepts, often with little indication of which is intended. In their attempt to disambiguate the various notions of what it means to be a gamer, Grooten & Kowert (2015) find the term refers to a ‘multi-faceted social identity that spans personal, social, and virtual contexts’ (p83). Complicating the term allows us to divide it into three key constructs: the gamer as a social identity (the self-identifying gamer), as a social group (or as stereotypes of a young, male-dominated, “social outcasts that are unable or unwilling to integrate into mainstream society” (p75)), and as a virtual community (whereby the formation of social bonds creates a sense of belonging within its members). These three

usages are often conflated and used interchangeably, and while attempting to untangle these usages will provide a challenge, it is the contention of this chapter that the crisis over the gamer identity occurred in large part due to the complicated legacy between these first two usages; the formation of virtual communities as a mechanism for bonding will be examined in much greater detail in the next chapter. As such, to tease apart these distinctions and reach the crux of the crisis over the gamer identity, this chapter will offer two different approaches for analysis: the first will understand the gamer identity as a social identity through a Butlerian framework, as a process of self-identification that found itself congealed and resistant to processes of resignification that would allow it to adapt to changing demographics. The second analysis will view the gamer identity as part of a subculture, an initially rebellious social group that has its own distinct styles and signifiers that require homogenisation to be effective; in so doing, it acts as a way of standardising methods of identifying gamers from non-gamers, and thus ways of policing the boundaries of the in-group and out-group.

This project, then, should start by attempting to understand the lineage through which the gamer identity as a social construct came to exist as it currently does, in order to understand what it means for one to self-identify as a gamer. As Grooten & Kowert (2015) argue:

[S]elf-identifying as a gamer also signifies a shared identity with other members of the broader gaming community and culture and denotes an alignment with the group's idiosyncrasies, traditions, and social practices. [...]

Being a 'gamer' is more than just a label given from the outside; it is a part of one's self-conception and an expression of one's affiliation with a group of society. (pp73-74).

If being a gamer is part of one's expression of affiliation with a group, then it is impossible to understand why one would self-identify as a gamer without also understanding what this shared identity is, complete with its idiosyncrasies, traditions, and social practices. Indeed, as Grooten & Kowert note, this gamer identity has long been culturally and politically regarded as congruent with a certain *type* of gamer: a homogenous archetype, representative of a competitive, boisterous, recalcitrant, and almost undoubtedly white, male identity. For all the changes we may see in market data, demographics, academic studies, and media depictions of gamers, culturally it has been difficult, if not impossible, to shake the image of the quintessential gamer as it has always been. Thus, the enduring myth of this identity needs to be understood as not just a prescriptive list of some core set of traits that all gamers share. After all, girls can certainly be gamers, even if conventional understandings of gamers do not necessarily assume this to be so; similarly, one need not be white to be a gamer, nor play certain types of games, or play for a specific number of hours per day or week. These attributes form an amorphous and nebulous set of ideas that are used to construct canonical interpretation of who and what a gamer is. Instead, we should view the social construct of the gamer as a mythologisation of an essentialised gamer identity; an idealised form of 'gamerness' that embodies the core attributes of what it means to be a gamer, or how best to perform the identity of 'being' a gamer.

This mythologisation, particularly of the gamer-as-male, is one that has a long legacy that seems inherently resistant to change, no matter how radically the demographics of gaming may shift. Even in the academic literature that seeks to question and challenge the gendered nature of gaming, there seems to be a certain level of acceptance that gaming, as a hobby, is already sufficiently gendered to a point where it would be difficult - if not impossible - to decouple masculinity from gaming. In her ethnographic research, Sue Thornham goes so far as to declare

‘Videogames are gendered...the way videogames are both thought of and used, critically and popularly, physically and rhetorically, is gendered’ (2008, p127). The gendering of video games, in media and culture, has consequences too, as seen in Adrienne Shaw’s ‘Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity’ (2011), where she draws a similar conclusion, arguing that for many who do not fit within culturally sanctioned ideas of who is ‘permitted’ to be a gamer - and particularly for those for whom there is little representation within video games, including women and other marginalised groups - it is possible, even if perhaps likely, for people to consciously choose *not* to identify as a gamer, and refuse to integrate themselves into the culture entirely.

There have been numerous attempts to account for this gendering of gaming. Bryce & Rutter (2005) argue that the practice of identification (or indeed non-identification) as a gamer is a self-perpetuating cycle, where the exclusion that girls and women experience when attempting to enter male gaming spaces ‘creates expectations of rejection which, together with the identification of gaming as a male activity, discourages women from attempting to enter into gaming practices or associating themselves with being “a gamer”.’ (p251). Much like Shaw, Bryce & Rutter argue that for many women, a lack of affiliation to this identity may originate from feeling that their dedication to gaming is less serious, which may ‘reflect a lack of self-identification as a gamer by females who may perceive themselves as casual or infrequent gamers who have a more casual commitment to the activity’. Dovey & Kennedy (2006) acknowledge the ‘powerful structuring force’ that gender has on play spaces in general, including physical spaces, where ‘boy’ styles of play tend to ‘“take over” a disproportionate amount of space’ (p36). In a similar way, as an historical and textual explanation, Jenkins (1998) argues that ‘boy’ styles of play - exploration, colonisation, exploitation, and domination - are

much easier to incorporate into digital/visual forms of play than ‘girl’ play, which has historically been constructed as an inner journey, of managing social relationships, and of navigating domestic space. While there are ways for both ‘girl’ spaces and gender neutral spaces to exist within game spaces, to do so often breaks with tradition within the industry. Jenkins, then, offers a plausible explanation for the historical conflation of gaming and masculinity, and why these forms of play were initially more enticing to boys than to girls, even if it raises more questions as to why these forms of play are to be considered intrinsically masculine. Other more pragmatic accounts, such as the question of where to place video games within toy stores (Lien, 2013), offer unsatisfying, unacademic, and apocryphal explanations that are difficult to verify, let alone prove. Whatever the initial reason(s) for gaming to be initially perceived as a masculine hobby, it is clear that this is the terrain in which we must now work.

Instead of dissecting the origins of how gaming and masculinity became tied together, it may prove more useful to examine how the concept of the gamer, as a mythologised entity, came to be. Considering the strong overlap the gamer has with its forebears, the geek and nerd, Michael Salter (2017) suggests that the gamer identity exists through the performance of ‘geek masculinities’, a term that is used to describe the type of culture that forms around technology, and the way in which these technological-based cultures integrate, exclude, and order its participants. While geek masculinities are specific to geek/nerd/gaming cultures, they are not unique; instead, they are a subset of broader ‘hegemonic masculinities’ within society. Hegemonic masculinity reflects the broader, non-subcultural specific understandings of the ‘most honored way of being a man’ (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p832) within a given society. In western culture, this form of masculinity is exemplified by physical prowess, athleticism, (heterosexual) virility, dominance over others, and so forth; that is, the traits that are

viewed through societal discourse to ‘make a man’, or what one would typify as ‘masculine’. It is important to note that even if this way of expressing masculinity is rarely seen (in the physical world *or* in media), it is nonetheless considered to be normative, a state whereupon it ‘requir[es] all other men to position themselves in relation to it’ (p832). Thus, it sets the standard for what ‘makes a man’; subsequently, there will be other ways of performing masculinity that do not necessarily meet these standards, and performing masculinity in these subversive ways may come at a price. Geek masculinities, therefore, understand there to be a default, idealised way of performing masculinity within a given culture, and in this case, within and around video game spaces.

It is important to note that one does not necessarily participate in the reproduction of these hegemonic masculinities, including geek masculinities, to reap the benefits such a system offers. Connell & Messerschmidt regard men who receive the benefits of a patriarchal system without needing to enact a form of hegemonic masculinity as displaying a ‘complicit masculinity’ (p832), a situation where the positive benefits of hegemonic masculinity nonetheless flow on to these men. Similarly, there can be people who fail to live up to the standards of hegemonic masculinity; for those, they are positioned in relationship to hegemonic masculinity as marginalised or subordinate masculinities. Such a hierarchical system often finds its ‘ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion’, rather than explicit force (p832). Thus, these subordinate or marginalised masculinities are rendered comparatively - but not completely - powerless through the inability to adequately perform hegemonic masculinities. It is in this space between hegemonic and subordinate masculinities that room for geek masculinity emerges.

Rather than drawing from heterosexual or athletic prowess, geek masculinity re-codifies what it means to be a man within certain technological domains. Salter (2017) identifies traits that are intrinsic or valued to this geek masculinity as including technological knowledge and aptitude, ideals of individualism, competitiveness, aggression; of viewing technologies such as the internet 'as a 'new frontier' to be invaded and colonized through force and bravado' (2017, p251). Therefore mastery is still an important trait, although it is mastery of technological systems, instead of the physical world, that is rewarded. Additionally, these systems feature similar benefits to hegemonic masculinities if they are performed correctly: Salter argues that '[i]n geek masculinity, masculine self-esteem and social capital are built through specialized technical knowledge and skills, rather than through mainstream indices of masculinity' (Salter, M, 2017, p250). Therefore, geek masculinity is, at its core, a subversive form of masculinity in relation to the broader cultural hegemonic form of masculinity; however, rather than supplanting hegemonic masculinity and its hierarchical power structures, they remain almost identical structurally; the blueprint that geek masculinities are founded on is the same as that of other hegemonic masculinities, merely replacing one set of signifiers with another. As a consequence, within the domain of geek culture all other forms of gender(ed) expression are positioned in relation to the dominant geek masculinity. Men act as agents within the system, while the value of women is relational to how readily they reinforce the heteronormative notions that underpin geek masculinity. In such a system, female gamers are usually perceived as either acting as support to their male counterparts, or are understood as being 'one of the boys'. Failure to be recognised within these two categories renders the woman within a system of geek masculinity as unintelligible, as 'not a real gamer'. Kuittinen et al. note that this is often done by relegating female gamers to the position of 'casual' gamer, a term that 'Hardcore or core gamers sometimes

use...to distinguish between the “true” gamers and the mass so that the casual gamer is not really a gamer at all.’ (2007, p106). Similarly, the value of gender nonconforming individuals - for whom there is rarely a role within a system where heterosexuality and heteronormativity are unquestioned defaults – is often negligible.

Much like the hegemonic masculinity from which it is derived, geek masculinities project a hierarchical model of value of individuals; those who subscribe to geek masculinity best within geek culture are considered more valuable, more important, and more trustworthy than those who fall short of these standards. Within geek masculinities, one may be successful by excelling at the virtues of *that* type of masculinity, even if marginalised by broader cultural masculinities. Thus, geek masculinity offers an alternate pathway through which men who do not fit into positions of dominance within one set of power structures may enter another system where they excel through the reproduction of a different set of signifiers. Michael Salter (2017) remarks upon the tension within this system, of an identity formed around both its position as ostracised outsider *and* powerful insider:

Geek masculinity thus contains a contradictory construction, in which a victimized “outsider” posture can obscure relations of dominance which are maintained through the control and assertion of technological power. This power is exercised between and over other men and boys in competitions for status and respect from which girls and women are often excluded, or may only participate by acting like “one of the boys”. (Salter, M, 2017, p250)

As a culture embroiled in a set of power relations, then, this notion of being a victimised ‘outsider’ is essential to the mythologisation of the gamer. Meanwhile, in being able to leverage

technological power to its advantage, the geek can orient themselves into positions of dominance within a culture where these markers are of significance. Thus, the gamer identity, inheriting a template of geek masculinity, creates and polices its own domains through the reinforcement of signifiers that uphold this form of masculinity, and marginalising those that serve to undermine it.

Understanding the gamer identity as a complex interplay of tensions - as both self-identification and as social stereotypes, as both insider and outsider, as both powerful yet victimised, and as a mythologisation of an idealised archetype in conflict with changing demographics - helps to begin to see how the gamer identity, with its numerous contradictions, can reach a crisis point. If a hierarchical power structure, where existing participants had already found comfort in their position within the culture, could be subject to a challenge - if, say, the previous markers of value within this mythologisation were somehow supplanted and replaced with different markers - then this challenge could potentially threaten to uproot the entire system. In the next section, we will see how this identity reached a point of crisis through challenges to this power structure that highlighted these internal tensions from within the culture.

1.2 The Gamer Identity in Crisis

This section will focus on the GamerGate controversy in 2014 in order to use it as a case study through which we can understand the gamer identity as an identity in crisis. It is difficult to understate the impact that this conflict had within video game culture and video game studies alike, as well as its role in the polarisation of the opposing sides of the movement. Most accounts of how this movement began point to the blog post by Eron Gjoni, ex-boyfriend of Zoe Quinn. In it, he ‘details the messy and convoluted end of his romantic relationship’ (Braithwaite, 2016, p4),

where Gjoni accuses Quinn of cheating on him, and implied she traded sex for favourable reviews for her game (p4). Despite no evidence that the events between Quinn and the reviewer had occurred (Totilo, 2014), calls for ‘more transparent and ethical games journalism’ (Braithwaite, 2016, p4) gained momentum, particularly after actor Adam Baldwin popularised the hashtag #Gamergate. Rather than focusing on this one particular instance of perceived injustice, GamerGate rapidly expanded its scope to include dissatisfaction with the presence of Anita Sarkeesian as a feminist critic of video games, who had released a YouTube video at the same time (Mortensen, 2016, p790). The slew of articles around the ‘death of the gamer’ (Alexander, 2014, Plunkett, 2014, Golding, 2014) were seen to add fuel to the fire, and what had ostensibly began as a campaign that sought to ensure ethics standards were upheld within video games journalism had spiraled out of control into what Mortensen describes as ‘swarm-like’ behaviour (2016, p789) that could pick new targets for harassment, whether that was the doxxing¹ of female game developers like Brianna Wu or gaming celebrities like Felicia Day (p793), or academics like Mia Consalvo and Adrienne Shaw (p789).

As a conflict, GamerGate generally split the belligerents into two camps, each with their own competing narratives: on one side, within the pro-GamerGate movement, it saw itself as a movement by self-identified gamers to uphold standards of journalistic integrity surrounding video games journalism (Braithwaite, 2016). For those outside of this movement, including within academic and mainstream media coverage of it, it was seen largely as a movement that was centred around the systematic harassment (including death threats) of several key women who work in the gaming industry, or otherwise participate in the culture surrounding it. While much has been written about GamerGate, it is difficult to find sources that are not polarised by

¹ Doxxing refers to the practice of discovering and publishing personal details, such as the home address, of individuals in an attempt to intimidate or expose them to personal harm.

the movement entirely. In her writing about GamerGate, Mortensen (2016) writes ‘In this article, I attempt to describe GG, but a description cannot, due to the raw emotional rhetoric of the campaign, ignore the subjective impression the event made’ (p3). Certainly, this appears to be a commonality between much of the academic writing² and journalistic articles about this event, the latter of which tended to dismiss it as a ‘tone-deaf rabble of angry obsessives with a misguided understanding of journalistic ethics’ (Hathaway, 2014), often viewing the concerns of the GamerGate movement as false pretenses through which this process of harassment was legitimised.

While the controversy and conflict was in full swing, those that identified as being anti-GamerGate often took aim at not just the pro-GamerGate movement’s motivations and tactics, but at the identity of the gamer, claiming that the identity itself was dying, if not already dead. Leigh Alexander’s article from August 2014 argued that the ‘Gamer isn’t just a dated demographic label that most people increasingly prefer not to use. Gamers are over.’, dismissing ‘game culture’ as no more than the act of ‘spackling over memes and in-jokes repeatedly, and it’s getting mad on the internet’ (Alexander, 2014, para. 1). That same month, Dan Golding wrote that ‘The gamer as an identity feels like it is under assault, and so it should...the traditional gamer identity is now culturally irrelevant’ (2014, para. 9)³. To Golding, 2014 marked a change where, ‘From now on, there are no more gamers - only players’, citing that the circumstances that led to the formation of the gamer identity are no longer present in the world: the gamer is ‘an

² Mortensen (2016) does note that there are some from an academic background that find validity in the GamerGate movement (p6), but these views are few and far between.

³ It is worth noting that while this piece was posted as a Tumblr response, it was done so by Golding as an academic, to act as an intervention to the crisis over the term ‘gamer’ during the peak of the GamerGate tensions. Given the speed at which these events reached crisis point, it’s unlikely that waiting to publish this piece (as he did with his later book, *Game Changers: From Minecraft to Misogyny* (Golding & Deventer, 2016)) would have been sufficient.

identity based on difference and separateness. When playing games was an unusual activity, this identity was constructed in order to define and unite the group...To be a gamer was to signal a great many things, not all of which are about the actual playing of videogames' (para. 5). It seemed, to video game journalists and academics alike, that the term had outlived its usefulness as a descriptor in an era where gaming was no longer a hobby for outcasts, where the position of victimised outsider had no more relevance in a culture of geek masculinity, as the demographics of the standard video game had left its masculine and mythologised origins well behind.

These fundamental challenges to the necessity and appropriateness of the gamer identity incited much of the blowback of the movement. Alongside the slew of articles in 2014 that served to critique the label of the gamer, as well as GamerGate itself, there has been much academic writing on the subject of GamerGate *since* then (Golding & Van Deventer, 2016, Todd, 2015, Mortensen, 2016, Braithwaite, 2016, Salter, 2017, Salter & Blodgett, 2017) that has served as a post-mortem of this event. Perhaps this is in part due to researchers themselves - including video game theorists Adrienne Shaw and Mia Consalvo - becoming targets through this movement (Mortensen, 2016, p2) alongside other female and feminist critics of the video game industry, as well as the female, people of colour, and queer identified individuals working within the video games industry. The concern in this chapter is not to debate the validity of the claims that the movement was ostensibly about ethics in video games journalism, nor any of the underlying arguments for or against this movement. Indeed, the movement itself appeared to take many forms even amongst those who participated in it. Mortensen notes that 'GG was not a unified group - the individuals of the swarm were not the whole' (p6). Rather, the individuals within the movement sought a range of outcomes: for some, the most important outcome was to hold journalists accountable for false information or biased reporting; for others, the most

important outcome was to vilify game developers or journalists who were seen as engaging in, or condoning, the aforementioned behaviour. For others still, this provided a smokescreen through which a righteous anger could be channeled against outspoken women within the industry who were seen as threats to the gamer identity. Yet despite this range of desired outcomes, the tensions created within GamerGate served to reinforce lines based on existing in-group affiliations or political ideologies. This makes it all the more important to understand that any analysis of GamerGate requires an understanding of the gamer identity as not a monolithic entity rooted in this mythologisation of the gamer, but as one that *wishes* that it were.

GamerGate, then, acted as a movement that forced its participants to choose a side, and to commit to it. In so doing, it also forced a rapid homogenisation of ideologies amongst its participants. As Grooten & Kowert (2015) noted, the process through which one self-identifies as a gamer is one that also ‘signifies a shared identity with other members of the broader gaming community and culture and denotes an alignment with the group’s idiosyncrasies, traditions, and social practices’ (pp73-74). Thus, where the pro-GamerGate movement consisted of proud self-identifying gamers, the anti-GamerGate side comprised of people who saw the label and identity as unnecessary, or even harmful, or who were intrinsically challenging the hierarchical values of geek masculinity which had offered comfort to them, then deciding which side to join was an obvious choice for many. This rapid homogenisation of the gamer identity thus added a new element to the mythologisation of the gamer: as an identity that would resist critique from those it perceived as being ‘external’ to video game culture: critique from feminists, from academics, and even from scrutiny within its own movement. Through this rejection of critique, O’Rourke (2014) notes that gamers became evangelised ‘gatekeepers of the gaming community’, making determinations on who was eligible to act as a critic of the medium. In this way, the GamerGate

movement sought to suppress those that did not fit the narrow model of who performed the identity of the gamer, as well as those who challenged the underlying structure upon which this identity had been constructed.

This hostile culture of gamers - not just in terms of its harassment, but in its reluctance to be critiqued - is not to be understood as an isolated event, but as a particularly egregious symptom of an identity that had been under threat for a prolonged period of time. The tensions in GamerGate were not unique to this event; Salter & Blodgett (2012) demonstrate the way in which gaming spaces became a flashpoint for division after the webcomic Penny Arcade used rape (by 'dickwolves') as a punchline in a comic strip, and subsequently were treated as exclusionary to women and as a 'good ol' boys club' in 2012. Mia Consalvo's 'Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture' (2012) expressed similar concerns about the 'dickwolves' controversy, and catalogued multiple instances of personal and professional harassment towards Anita Sarkeesian and other prominent women within the gaming industry who were perceived as threats to gaming culture, noting that '[s]lowly but surely and building upon one another in frequency and intensity, all of these events have been responding to the growing presence of women and girls in gaming not as a novelty but as a regular and increasingly important demographic.' (para. 4).

This perceived threat to the gamer identity was not in the form of physical or tangible threats from these women, but an existential one. As an identity that was born in the image of geek masculinity, the mid 2010s was a time where this identity had begun to fall to the wayside. As women increasingly picked up controllers, built their own PCs, and created their own YouTube channels, it served to challenge ideas of gamer (and geek) culture as being the exclusive domain of men, or of people willing to subscribe to notions of geek masculinity. Thus,

while the crisis had been precipitating since well before 2014, the hostilities over GamerGate were fueled by critiques offered not just by gaming journalists (such as Leigh Alexander), but by academics (particularly Adrienne Shaw and Mia Consalvo), YouTube personalities (most notably Anita Sarkeesian), game developers (Brianna Wu, Zoë Quinn), and mainstream media outlets about the changing nature of the gamer demographic (and hence its identity), and what the gaming medium could be. Who a gamer was had begun to fundamentally shift, and so the identity, the values systems it inherited, what it meant to ‘perform’ the gamer identity, was subject to change.

This movement acted as a watershed moment in gaming history, factionalising those who may have otherwise been neutral on a number of issues pertaining to the politics surrounding video games. Mortensen (2016) notes that this mo(ve)ment ‘emphasized the need to take the study of game culture seriously’ (p1), although somewhat ironically, for those outside the movement, this ended up being true not for the reasons intended, but due to the criticism, harassment, and stalking that women in video game related fields, particularly those who identified as feminists, (including researchers and scholars (pp2-3)) received while the movement was at its apogee. GamerGate thus became a moment in gaming history that irrevocably ensured that gaming *was* a political medium, one marked in particular by its radical understanding of gender as a barrier to entry to the medium. There is further irony in the fact that this behaviour mirrored the ‘popular gamer stereotypes [that] research has resisted’ (p3); while video game studies was actively trying to demonstrate the diversity of gamer audiences and the shifting demographics that reflect a greater societal embracing of gaming, the GamerGate movement actively sought to reject those they perceived as newcomers that could destabilise the gamer identity.

In her research on GamerGate, Braithwaite (2016) reaffirms what we have already seen: this movement both embodies and espouses a geek masculinity (as a subset of hegemonic masculinity), which she argues ‘expresses a different configuration of masculinity, incorporating some elements of hegemonic masculinity (such as judgment and mastery) while often renouncing others (such as sporting or athletic cultures)’ (p2). It is in this regard that we see GamerGate as a movement that, at its core, can be seen as gamers attempting to assert their geek(-as-hegemonic) masculinity as something to be valued. This includes not only their mastery of the games of which they play, but also their role in the supposed hierarchy that allows for them to categorise women as valued or not, whether they could be dismissed and discredited; for example, Braithwaite notes that ‘By not meeting their ideals of sexual attractiveness and availability, [Brianna] Wu must be lying about her gender; if Wu is lying about her gender, then anything else she says cannot be taken seriously’ (p5). This should be understood as not just a gender divide of men vs women, but a cultural one that ensured a strict adherence to gender roles; women too had a role in GamerGate, and this ‘primary value lies in service of a domineering aggressive masculinity’ (p5).

These issues are at the heart of the crisis over the label of gamer. Here, we see the GamerGate movement as the culmination of geek masculinity left largely unchallenged until it reached a crisis point. The radical and aggressive nature of the campaign ensured that people were unable to remain on the sidelines, and were encouraged to choose a side. This further reinforced the homogenisation of the gamer identity, such that the self-identifying gamer identity was further merged with its cultural stereotype and mythologised ideal; meanwhile, those who saw themselves as falling outside of these normative bounds of what constituted a gamer began to actively *de-identify* as a gamer. In refusing to address critiques about video game culture, the

identity refused to adapt or evolve, instead reaffirming itself as it had always been: an exclusive club for those who fit conventional understandings of who was a gamer. On top of this, in rejecting critique, the GamerGate movement had framed itself as a crusade, as a battle for right vs wrong: Braithwaite (2016) comments that their ‘references to war create a “narrative framing to set themselves as ‘the good guys’” on a quest for truth’ (Salter, A, & Blodgett, 2012, in Braithwaite, p4). This rhetoric is key to the framing of participants as either being within the in-group, and by exclusion, with others as part of an out-group who don’t belong.

This chapter thus far has attempted to identify the heritage from which the gamer stems - that of geek masculinity - and that the identity has found itself at a point of crisis, as a shift in demographics and access to the medium has become easier. However, while this chapter is examining the gamer identity in particular, Adrienne Shaw (2015) emphasises the importance of understanding this crisis not in isolation, but as part of a larger cultural phenomenon, of which the gamer-in-crisis plays only one part. She writes:

Treating gaming as an isolated realm makes this misogyny a spectacle at the same time it normalizes the oppressive behavior within mainstream gamer cultures. Similarly, to treat representation in games as being just about games, to do the same for any medium for that matter, fails to account for the ways in which violence against queers (homo- or bisexual or not), women (cisgendered or queer or not), and people of color (queer or not, cisgendered women or not) exists everywhere, in all media, and in all institutions of power. (p2)

It is for this reason that this chapter has so crucially attempted to tie the gamer identity as an offshoot of, and intimately connected to, this geek masculinity, rather than understanding it as some isolated occurrence. As a point of crisis for this identity, it bubbled over into not just gaming circles, but broader cultural conflicts as well, demonstrating that it was not merely an esoteric issue, but one that reflected larger cultural divisions that continue to play out to this day. Shaw notes the similarities shared between the way social media served as a vehicle for GamerGate and also as a vehicle for dissatisfaction over the transition of *The Hunger Games* series from book form to movie form, particularly with regards to its casting of certain characters as visibly black. While the crisis over the identity of the gamer may seem esoteric, *it is not*. This crisis serves as one skirmish in a broader cultural dissatisfaction, manifesting through disputes over the gradual integration of women and minorities into positions of technology, into positions of power within hierarchies, and into positions capable of enacting cultural change. While *our* focus is on the way in which the gamer identity has served as a tool in pushing back against these shifts, ignoring its role in wider political discourse would be shortsighted indeed.

1.3: Strategies of Delegitimisation: A Taxonomy of Marginalisation

The events that took place within GamerGate are able to be understood within frameworks of geek masculinity. Through this lens, the gamer identity relies upon a mythologised archetype, and as it entered a state of crisis, it resisted processes that it perceived as threats. While many of the academic accounts of GamerGate focus on how and why this culture of masculinity surrounding games precipitated into a campaign of harassment, there is frequently a simplification of the mechanisms of exclusion utilised by this movement, viewing harassment as a catch-all for the strategies used to exclude a diversity of voices from

participating in gaming culture. Many of the events with GamerGate may have been conducted aggressively and heavy-handedly, but it is important to note that the impact of this campaign was not singular in its purpose. Regardless of the intention of each participant, from more innocuous demands for ethics standards to be upheld, to the laser-guided stalking and harassment of individuals, these attempts to delegitimise the arguments and perspectives of those perceived as ‘non-gamers’ were thus an organic response that served to reinforce the hierarchical structure of the gamer identity, largely by excluding others from participation.

This organic response to reinforce the hierarchical structure of the gamer identity can be understood as serving to maintain what Fron, Fullerton, Morie & Pearce (2007) refer to as the ‘hegemony of play’. This concept is used to describe ‘the way in which the digital game industry has influenced the global culture of play in much the same way that hegemonic nations, such as the British Empire or post-WWII America, have, in their times of influence, dominated global culture.’ (p309). Fron et al. argue that the mutual interests of game developers and ‘self-selected hardcore “gamers”’

have systematically developed a rhetoric of play that is exclusionary, if not entirely alienating to “minority” players (who, in numerical terms, actually constitute a majority) such as most women and girls, males of many ages, and people of different racial and cultural backgrounds. It is aided and abetted by a publication and advertising infrastructure, characterized by game review magazines, television programming and advertising that valorizes certain types of games, while it marginalizes those that do not fit the “hardcore gamer” demographic. (p309).

The hegemony of play therefore normalises and standardises certain expectations of play practices, as well as players, and serves to further provide legitimacy to these already established ‘norms’, even if they are not statistically the most numerous or popular ones. This form of legitimacy, amplified not just within the insular gamer identity but *also* by the marketing and journalism around games, gives a sense of justification that the domain of the video game does indeed ‘belong’ to the benefactors of the hegemony of play.

Understanding the culture as upholding an ideal that is reinforced by the media that surrounds it provides a rationalisation – if an unsatisfactory one – for why the GamerGate movement became so exclusionary. Exclusion of certain targeted individuals who existed outside of the hegemony of play was certainly a goal - Kishonna Gray (2014) notes the ways in which both ‘girl gamers’ and ‘gamers of color’ are marginalised by hegemony of play (pp xxi-xxiv) - but the rapid expulsion and marginalisation of these categories of gamer was not the only effect felt by the gaming community and society more broadly. The nature of these aggressive responses gives insight into their purpose beyond mere knee-jerk reactions, and instead exposes them as complex - if subconscious - multi-layered strategies intended to isolate and insulate the gamer identity from perceived outsiders through processes that delegitimise the ‘other’. In identifying these strategies as intending to fulfill specific functions, it also opens up a potential pathway through which these strategies can be challenged. This section, then, will establish a taxonomy of these strategies of delegitimation. It is hoped that by identifying how these strategies function and what their intent is, that counter-strategies can be formulated that resist and allow for the reclamation of these spaces. Therefore, it is proposed that within and surrounding gaming spaces, there exist three primary mechanisms of delegitimation: disqualification, disempowerment, and controlling perception. These three methods of

delegitimisation are acknowledged in T.L. Taylor's ethnographic work within *Play Between Worlds* (2006), where she examines how women have often been marginalised and excluded from being visibly seen as gamers. In the absence of any clear taxonomy, however, it is the objective of this section to clearly demarcate and identify how these processes and practices function. The first, disqualification, is used to remove an individual or group from holding a legitimate claim to the gamer identity and gamer culture. The second, disempowerment, allows for individuals or groups to participate in gamer culture, but minimises their agency in such a way that they are forced to exist within the structures of geek masculinity. The third way, controlling perception, harnesses the way that games are *perceived* in order to give gamer culture a perception of being closed off or hostile to those outside the subculture, ensuring homogeneity within. While they serve three distinct functions, an individual event, such as the harassment of a given YouTube personality, or the profiling of users over voice chat (Gray, 2014), may engage all three of these processes. Used in combination with each other, these strategies serve to ensure homogenisation within the culture both immediately (by ejecting unwanted individuals), in the short term (by regulating the behaviour of those who remain within gamer culture and limiting their access to positions of power), and in the longer term (by deterring others from wanting to join, or feeling as though it is a space that would welcome them). These strategies will be explored in more detail below.

Disqualification

The process of disqualification is one in which the boundaries into the subculture are impermeable to those who do not meet certain criteria. In disqualifying certain individuals from entering this subculture, it ensures ideological purity within the subculture by privileging certain

play practices as an idealised form of what a game ‘should’ be, as well as certain players, who represent an idealised form of who a gamer ‘should’ be. In this regard, disqualification delegitimises certain players, and certain play practices, by not meeting some base requirement that would authenticate one’s entry to the subculture. Disqualification, then, relies upon binarised logics: that one either ‘is’ or ‘is not’ a gamer, that an artifact ‘is’ or ‘is not’ a game, and that the gamer remains the arbiter of these philosophical quests. It also conjures ideas of essentialism, on assumptions that there is some ‘true’ essence of what constitutes a gamer, and that failure to meet these (often arbitrary) requirements also disqualifies one from having legitimate input into how a game should be.

How disqualification functions differs based on the context and the subject. T.L. Taylor’s examination of women’s participation in gaming spaces showed how ‘women are seen as “intruders” rather than inhabitants of gamer culture, [and is] linked to a much older rhetoric touching on not only issues of women and technology, but their engagement with sports’ (2006, p100). This status as ‘intruder’ is therefore also used to position women as ‘outsiders’, as unwelcome and illegitimate participants within these game spaces. This chapter has shown that the pro-GamerGate movement ensured that certain individuals were disqualified from giving input into the industry. In failing to meet certain arbitrary standards of attractiveness and submission - or rather, of expected performances of femininity - Wu’s contributions to gaming were seen as invalidated (Braithwaite, 2015, p5). Anita Sarkeesian was frequently dismissed as ‘not being a real gamer’ by her detractors, and as such, her critiques of video game culture were dismissed as unqualified. Lisa Nakamura (2012) notes the way that women of colour such as Aisha Tyler are often required to defend their credibility as a gamer. Meanwhile, forms of ‘feminised’ play practices, including playing for social reasons, playing infrequently, or playing

on devices that are not dedicated to gaming frequently relegates female gamers to the role of ‘casual’ gamer. The gendering of casual games as feminised has also contributed to this, whereby ‘hardcore’ or ‘serious’ games are considered privileged and idealised, while casual games are considered inferior and trivial; ‘Hardcore games become the dominant masculine while casual games become the subordinate feminine.’ (Vanderhoef, 2013). Despite the contentious definition of this term, Easpaig (2018) notes that how ‘casual’ a game is ‘is less important than the strategic rhetorical function it serves. Recent critique posits that conflating women’s gameplay with the lesser regarded category of “casual gaming” functions to delegitimise women as “real gamers” and to dismiss their contribution to gaming communities.’ (p121).

This rhetorical function can be seen in a string of controversial video game releases since 2014. Zoe Quinn’s *Depression Quest* (2014) was seen as failing the basic requirements of a game; a *New Yorker* article claims that it ‘eschews the usual characteristics of most video games: there is no victorious ending and, as the developers warn in the preamble text, the game “is not meant to be a fun or light-hearted experience.”’ (Parker, 2014, para. 9), citing Steam reviews that claim that “I can’t really call it a game since I don’t think the point is to entertain you” (Parker, 2014, para. 3). Meanwhile, some of the hatred towards Quinn ‘has come from video-game enthusiasts who think that the darker themes are not suitable for video games, which they believe should be playful and primarily focused on entertaining’. Around the same time, *Gone Home* (2013) received criticism for ‘failing’ to be a game, and was instead given the pejorative ‘walking simulator’ (Campbell, 2016). Other games that provide more open-ended and freeform goals, like *The Sims* are still regarded as games, but are relegated to the diminutive ‘casual’ label, a term that ‘immediately connotes ideas of a less committed or less serious player’ (Keogh,

2015, p157). In this way, the goals of disqualification are simple - to eject the target out of gamer culture by failing to uphold a mythologised essentialised set of characteristics that 'real' games supposedly uphold. Disqualification seeks to delegitimise games and gamers alike through a variety of mechanisms in order to act as a form of gatekeeping into gamer culture, and in so doing, it ensures that challenges to the perceived integrity of gaming are minimised, dismissed and hidden from view.

Disempowerment

The second strategy, disempowerment, does not prevent individuals from existing within game spaces, but ensures that its marginalised participants subscribe to the power structures of geek masculinity. Those outside of the privileged positions within geek masculinity, such as women, people of colour, queer identified individuals, and so forth, are therefore ensured a continued existence within gamer culture that is conditional upon the status quo being maintained. In this regard, disempowerment does not prevent participation within these spaces, but ensures that any participation is subject to the terms and conditions of geek masculinity. Disempowerment, then, is a mechanism of internal regulation of its members that minimises the potential to disrupt or upset geek masculinity by ensuring that minority populations hold little power, or are unable to congregate and form powerful sub-groups, or are discouraged from being visible for fear of running the risk of disqualification and ejection from the subculture.

Accounts of GamerGate that focus on it as a campaign designed to exclude women from gaming spaces often fail to distinguish between the subtle but important distinction between disqualification and disempowerment. Disempowerment does not deny its marginalised participants a role of power within this culture specifically; instead, it allows for these

individuals to take positions of power insomuch as they perpetuate the values and the rhetoric of the gamer subculture. Taylor (2006) argued that this manifests as a rendering invisible of the minority group, 'one in which game designers, companies, and sometimes even players render an entire demographic as tangential. This move, to marginalize women and to not imagine them as a core demographic, in turn helps enact design decisions and structural barriers that create the conditions for disenfranchisement.' (p113). As Salter (2017) argues, this structure incorporates women as part of a system of where they are able to exist, but be unable to compete for status or respect, or may participate by fulfilling the role of being 'one of the boys' (p250). The effectiveness of disempowerment, through which marginalised groups have remained almost silent within gaming, also reflects a desire to mediate between forces that seek a positive public perception, and those that happily subjugate their minority populations. By not ejecting *all* women from gaming spaces, it is possible to maintain the appearance that women are welcome within them, even if the regulation and policing of these women undermines this narrative.

The creation of the cartoon character Vivian James by 4chan's /v/ board in the midst of the GamerGate controversy serves as a concise example of how disempowerment of women is conducted with finer brush strokes than disqualification. Vivian James' creation is argued to give a face to the 'everywoman of gaming' (Butt & Apperley, 2016, p5): a female character with red hair, a cynical demeanour, and conspicuously white skin. In her average-ness, Vivian James was designed to represent the type of 'acceptable' female gamer within the pro-GamerGate communities, and thus was a reflection of desires for women in gaming to inhabit this submissive role. This avatar of an idealised female gamer - perhaps ironically, one in which Butt & Apperley argue is 'no different than the stereotypical "gamer boy", with the addition of eyelashes, long hair and breasts' (p6) - was constructed to 'troll "Social Justice Warriors" (a

derogatory term used for feminists and people who promote progressive politics) and reform an anti-feminist image [of video games] with a “not-sexist” one’ (Butt & Apperley, 2016, p5).

Vivian James, then, represents the complicit woman within geek masculinities.

This particular example of a constructed female ideal therefore represents the type of acceptable performance of women who seek to have any degree of agency within gaming spaces. However, Butt & Apperley argue that Vivian James’ de-feminised appearance reflects a belief that ‘only attractive, obedient women, who “shut up and just play games” are welcome in gaming. Claiming that Vivian James is the “everywoman” or “just an average female gamer” in fact polices women, feminine, and non-binary gamer identities to act in a very specific and silenced manner’ (p9). In this way, the construction of Vivian James is argued by Butt & Apperley to reflect a ‘mythical constructed identity of an “average female gamer”’ (p10) - a gender-flipped counterpart to the mythologised male gamer - that embodies these idealised forms of gender.

Compared to disqualification, disempowerment serves a much less overtly violent but still powerful effect in silencing, regulating, and policing behaviour so that it fits within narrow bands of acceptability prescribed by geek masculinity. Women in particular exist not as autonomous individuals, but as accessories to male play practices and social structures. Meanwhile, other minorities such as queer identified individuals often are left without any specific role to play within a heteronormative culture, and are left on the periphery of gaming. The inclusion of gay or transgender characters within video games are often met with disproportionately aggressive responses (Feldman, 2016, Owen, 2016, Hill, 2016), implying that queerness is accepted, so long as it is invisible. In this way, disempowerment’s primary goal is to ensure that the status quo is maintained by regulating the constituents of gaming culture, and

leaves the threat of disqualification for those who fail to uphold these idealised modes of existence.

Controlling Perception

Where disqualification and disempowerment seek to police the boundaries of the subculture by watching its borders closely, ejecting or rendering invisible those who fail to meet a certain set of standards, the third strategy of exclusion takes place in the public sphere. This strategy seeks to reinforce existing perceptions of gaming as an intrinsically male space, as an allegedly 'apolitical' space (that is, a space that need not confront its treatment of women or minorities within game spaces), and as a space that does not take kindly to perceived interlopers. In this way, while GamerGate simultaneously disqualified certain games and gamers as illegitimate, *and* disempowered women and minorities into positions of silence through threats of force, it did so in order to make visible the consequences of making claims on game spaces. By reinforcing these ideas to the public about what gaming 'should' be, it deters those who are otherwise curious from becoming more actively involved in gaming spaces. In this sense, by publicly manipulating the appearance of gaming, it projects an inaccurate picture of gaming as one that is largely monolithic that is then internalised and reproduced by those who see it as such.

While the practices of disqualification and disempowerment serve to regulate the behaviour of the existing subculture and reinforce the hegemony of play, manipulating the perception of gaming serves as a longer term strategy to discourage participation. Not only is this reinforced by events such as GamerGate, but it serves the economic interests of video game companies to sell to their known demographics, and thus to also market to them, as Fron et al.

(2007) argue is key to maintaining the hegemony of play. T.L. Taylor (2006) agrees, arguing that ‘marketing campaigns can both be off-putting to potential players, disenfranchising them from the product, and simultaneously put women gamers into the awkward position of reevaluating their own previous use and pleasures in gaming.’ (p120) These visible depictions of gaming as male-oriented are also argued by Bryce & Rutter (2005) to occur in three ways: the gendering of game content (themes of war, violence, sports, and so forth), the gendering of spaces surrounding games (the social environments in which games take place), and gaming as a gendered activity (whereby gaming is perceived as an inherently masculine activity). While Bryce & Rutter acknowledge the essentialist logics that underlie these perceptions of gaming as an activity for boys/men, they nonetheless act as reinforcement that gaming *is* a gendered activity in every way - the content, the spaces, and the kinds of activities required are intrinsically tailored towards male preferences.

This tripartite examination of games as being perceived as intrinsically masculine has only been increasingly emphasised since Bryce & Rutter’s article was written in 2005; since then, conventions such as e3, PAX, and other gaming related conventions, as well as eSports events, are overwhelming marketed to and attended by men (Jenson & de Castell, 2018, Paaßen, Morgenroth & Stratemeyer, 2016, p427), with women only inhabiting two visible roles: as “booth babes” and as cosplay enthusiasts (p428). Meanwhile, games that replicate gendered stereotypes and expectations, as well as queer representation, have been the focus of much critique in both public and academic discourse (Sarkeesian, 2013, Kennedy, 2002, Shaw, 2015a, Shaw, 2016), but the need for these sustained critiques are indicative of a resistance to change this trend within the industry.

Bryce & Rutter's (2005) observations about the gendering of gaming in these three ways also provides room for understanding how these tropes and conventions, as well as the spaces around gaming, can be challenged. While this thesis does not specifically focus on issues of representation within game worlds, it is still apparent that the focus within academia on representation (of women, of queer identities, of people of colour, etc.) are crucial to re-codifying the game content as not solely reflective of desires and expectations of geek masculinity. As such, the surest way to reinforce the perception of gaming as a masculine hobby is to limit the development or reach of games that promote a diversity of representation, of themes, and of a culture that remains visibly masculine in the public sphere.

Resisting Strategies of Delegitimisation

No single strategy is, on its own, capable of reinforcing these structures alone. Indeed, many of the incidents of harassment during GamerGate served to simultaneously invoke all three of these strategies: in disqualifying certain women as being 'not real gamers', it also discourages other women within gaming from challenging these arguments (lest they become the next target), and it further perpetuated ideas of gaming as a 'boys club' to observers outside gaming culture. Paaßen et al. (2016) note that these factors are interlinked; 'If gaming is associated with the male gender, women who display their gamer identity face a social cost; for example, women who reveal their gender in multiplayer games are likely to be challenged over their legitimacy and competence...In turn, fewer women visibly perform their role as a gamer.' (p428). To challenge the potency of any one of these strategies, then, requires an awareness of their entwined complexity.

It is through the combined effects of these forces that geek masculinity maintains its hegemonic position despite changing demographics of gaming, and despite the increasing economic power of game developers that publish to diverse audiences and on diverse devices (such as smartphones). While these strategies of exclusion and marginalisation run an effective campaign to minimise the impact of those unwilling to subscribe to the structures of geek masculinities, their presence and reinforcement does not mean that these subjugated groups are completely powerless and forced into submission. Nancy Fraser (1990) argues that ‘members of subordinated social groups - women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians - have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics’ (p67). These formations that Fraser terms ‘subaltern counterpublics’ are ‘parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.’ (p67). These spaces, which function as ‘spaces of withdrawal and regroupment’ as well as ‘training groups for agitational activities directed towards wider publics’, (p68) demonstrates the potential for a marginalised group to use this position of disempowerment

This project, then, offers a pathway through which these strategies of exclusion, of delegitimisation, and of de-empowerment in video game spaces, can be challenged and made visible by the formation of subaltern counterpublics. Where the gamer identity attempts to stand in to represent the enormous breadth of gaming potential and deny agency to those who fit outside these boxes, it instead reflects an incredibly narrow set of identities and practices that reinforce and perpetuate these ideas that are not at all representative of what the medium has to offer its diverse playerbase. While the gamer identity may seek to exclude those who do not fit within these confines and render them invisible, this does not make them vanish. Instead, this

project will show the ways in which these communities explicitly reject and thrive in game spaces in spite of these prescriptive expectations of play.

1.4: Identity Formation: A Butlerian Approach

Understanding the conflict in which the gamer identity found itself allows us to home in on these underlying tensions in greater detail. Certainly, the gamer identity served as a battleground, where self-identification became a key determinant in what side of the conflict one fell on, but this does not explain why the gamer identity found itself clinging to mythologised ideals of what it meant to be a gamer. Why was the identity a cause of such conflict, and why could it not be resolved through a process of adaptation to change, a new and revitalised understanding of what it meant to be a gamer?

In identifying the potential for subaltern counterpublics to form in resistance to strategies of exclusion, the rest of this chapter will return to the question of the crisis over the gamer identity, particularly as an identity that solidified around the values intrinsic to the geek masculinity: masculine forms of play, the formation of bonds between male players, the devaluation of women within this domain, and so forth. What about this identity, the mythologisation of the gamer, rendered it so paralysed and inflexible; why could it not adapt to, for example, women inhabiting game spaces as equal competitors and compatriots? In order to understand this resistance to change, we need to understand identity, and in particular, self-identification, not as a singular act, but as a process of solidification over time. As such, Judith Butler's approach to identity formation will be used to show how the gamer identity became fixed and resistant to change.

Integrating a Butlerian framework forces us to ask some fundamental questions about the nature of identity and identification itself, not just about gamers, but about *all* identities. Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) regarded all identities as constructs that are reaffirmed through the process of performance, rather than being innate or biological. This does not just apply to identities that we accrue, such as those we adopt through our professions or hobbies, but extends to identities even so ingrained as gender itself. Thus, while Shaw's observation that the process through which one is interpellated as a gamer is important, this is not a process whereby one can simply be hailed once as a gamer and be done. Butler articulates that one's identity is acknowledged in not just the *achievement* of identity but in the continual re-performance of the dominant discourses about the identity. Therefore, 'performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration' (1990, p xv). The concept of identity, and the process of identification, is not only in Butler's view a performative act, but such a definition implies that there *is* no such thing as a 'true' identity; the 'truest' identities are those that one can convincingly sustain over an extended period of time. Butler writes:

If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the "congealing" is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means. (1990, p33)

This approach to identity fundamentally undermines any notion of *any* identity - no less, the gamer - as innate. Identities not only need to be continually performed within a culture that recognises and acknowledges them, but in being 'open to intervention and resignification', they are also capable of being destabilised through challenges to these identities. New ways of signifying identity can supplant and supercede the old, and if our identities - even our gender - are socially constructed, then *any* identifier we claim for ourselves is therefore mediated through social interactions, recognition, and interpellation. Even something as innate as gender becomes tenuous: '[i]f the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity' (p136). Therefore, even an identity like the gamer is open to intervention and resignification; it is only through the process whereby an identity 'congeals' that it can resist these mechanisms that redefine identity itself.

None of this is to suggest that identity is not 'real'; however, it does mean that the concept of identity itself only exists *through* these mechanisms. While the concept of identity may exist through processes of fabrication, this also does not imply they are 'fake': instead, they only exist to the extent that they are able to be convincingly performed, signaling to observers that this particular individual is capable of being recognised as part of a collective (and in turn interpellated as genuine), whether that collective be something broad like being perceived as 'man' or 'woman', or something more esoteric, like being perceived as a 'gamer'. Thus, Butler's theory destabilises the concept of the gamer as essentialised, but something that is recognised, acknowledged, and must be sustained. As a corollary, if one *cannot* sustain this identity, it may

evaporate, no longer forming a part of the individual's identity, and no longer allowing others to recognise them as gamers.

This work therefore presents three main vectors through which the gamer identity can find itself undermined and in a position of precariousness. Firstly, it argues that the concept of a 'true' identity itself is illusory, and only exists through the repeated performance of cultural signifiers that convey the identity; the concept of the gamer is thus an artificial construction bound to the signifiers that produce this identity in a social context. Secondly, it allows for individuals to 'fail' to convincingly perform an identity if it is not successfully signified to other members of this identity. As such, identity is subject to policing in order to validate or authenticate these identities. Thirdly, it allows for a pathway through which individuals can de-identify over time. If an identity requires sustaining the rituals over some duration of time, then failure to upkeep these rituals - whether due to them no longer being possible or no longer desirable to perform - can lead to the de-identification of the individual. If one identified as a gamer in their youth, dedicating countless hours to gaming, but through the constraints of full time work and child rearing find themselves no longer able to dedicate the same amount of time, they may no longer regard themselves as a gamer; meanwhile, video game cultures may demote these individuals to the position of 'casual gamer' (and thus less 'authentic') as they are unable to maintain this identity over a sustained temporal duration. Indeed, Butler's work posits that if one's identity 'congeals' through the act of ritual, then it follows that it can also be taken away through denying one access to these identity reinforcers and to situations where the rituals *can* be performed. If one is denied a space to practice a hobby, their capacity to allow this to be one of their identifiers is limited. Shaw (2013) agrees, noting that 'identity as a construction and performance is closed off for some players and in some particular contexts' (para. 9),

acknowledging that Butler's concept of identity formation also requires that 'one must perform identities in an intelligible way, in a way that can be read by others, in order to be recognized' (para. 9).

This helps us to situate the crisis over the gamer identity within a theoretical framework. If the concept of identity only exists inasmuch as it can be transmuted into rituals and performances, then the act of being a gamer, or identifying as a gamer, only exists in the sense that these gamers are capable of performing the rituals that are 'naturalised' within this identity. In this case, it is possible to see that the conflict within GamerGate as not simply re-performing the behaviours encoded within geek masculinity, but were a response to an existential threat within this identity. The underlying conditions that were considered intrinsic to gamers - the culture of geek masculinity - were under threat: journalists had claimed the identity was irrelevant, redundant, and dead; feminist critiques of sexist tropes were receiving mainstream (and often positive) coverage (Kane, 2013); women were occupying an increasing number of roles within the video game industry. This existential threat to the gamer identity is thus at the core of the GamerGate controversy, fueled by a resistance to an inevitable process of resignification occurring; it is at the breakdown of the myth of the gamer as intrinsically male, and as a culture entrenched in geek masculinity, that we see this rejection occur. The campaigns of harassment that surrounded this conflict provided a visible demonstration of who and what a gamer was, to those both within and outside gaming culture.

Here we see the importance of Butler's theory directly: as a consequence of changing cultural values and demographics, the identity of those who play video games was ready to reach a point of intervention, as there had become multiple, mutually exclusive ways to 'perform' a gamer identity. It could continue to perform an identity that reflected a framework of geek

masculinity, or it could renew itself, discarding this power structure and establish a new one; one that allowed for women to exist in game spaces as more than just as support, or as ‘one of the boys’, and one that viewed people of colour and of diverse ethnic backgrounds as equally welcome within these spaces. It instead rejected this intervention, as well as any new forms of signification, reaffirming the importance of geek masculinity to the core of its identity. How could it not? As a form of self-identification, the investment many individuals had made into the gamer identity was significant on a personal and social, not to mention financial, level. For many, this identity had provided comfort against a perceived victimised status; it had given value to those for whom mastery and competitiveness were desirable traits; and it had a clear and visible set of signifiers that unambiguously represented this gamer identity. In so doing, it demonstrated the position women should have within the gamer identity: not as activists, but as either complicit in a culture of systemic harassment towards women who sought to critique the limitations and expand the boundaries of gaming itself, or as otherwise absent or outcast from this system.

In examining this movement and the critiques offered since 2014, we can see how the theory on the gamer as a ‘congealed’ and inflexible identity leads it to a point of friction that cannot be resolved without either a massive intervention and a process of resignification, or a reaffirmation of the previous identity, sustained and regulated through the rejection of any intervention. The events of GamerGate were therefore critical in reaffirming *who* a gamer was to this group of people, and in projecting this image out to the world. Rather than attempting to present a sanitised image to the public of a reformed gamer identity, the crisis over the gamer identity was fought to ensure that the underlying value system that had permeated throughout gamer culture - that of geek masculinity - was reinstated as the dominant and hegemonic way to

interact with games and games cultures, and alternative play practices, and indeed, players, were to be rejected and expelled from these spaces. It solidified certain values that were endemic to one group identity, while rejecting others. However, this should not be surprising if we are to consider the GamerGate movement as not something that sought to redeem itself in the eyes of the public, but as a visible signifier to other self-identifying gamers to intensify and reinforce the ritualised behaviours of the gamer identity, particularly those for use in retaliation to challenges to its identity. Therefore, we can see this event as an opportunistic set of signals to those on the sidelines - perhaps those seen to occupy a state of 'complicit geek masculinity' - to demarcate where the boundary for acceptance into the gamer identity lies. For those who were receiving the benefits of a culture of geek masculinity it reinforced the set of values that they too should incorporate, mainstreaming ideas within video game culture about the role that its participants should play. It also served as a warning to those not willing to accept these values that these same punishments - campaigns of harassment, doxxing, and the like - could await them.

1.5: The Gamer as a Subculture

This section will shift towards examining this Butlerian process of 'congealment' of the gamer identity, a process through which the signifiers of what it means to be a gamer can be made visible and readily interpreted by its own members. Even if the gamer identity congeals in the image of geek masculinities, then as the demographics of the industry and the playerbase change, so too should the underlying culture, or so it would seem. In looking at how video game cultures have historically been studied, Shaw's piece, 'What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies' (2010) attempts to unpack much of the academic theory surrounding video game cultures, noting that while there have been varied approaches to this topic, from

looking at video games in relation to learning, gender, war, etc, the culture itself had escaped a proper cultural analysis: a prophetic warning given the events that would transpire a few years later. In avoiding simplistic analyses of video game culture, Shaw observes that video game culture can be also be seen as a subculture; as such, Dick Hebdige's work on subcultures provides a framework for analysis of these phenomena, 'tracing these expressions of culture to class identities and tensions' (Shaw, 2010, p410). This insight on class identities and tensions is precisely what is needed in order to conduct a meaningful analysis on the gamer not just as a form of self-identification, but as part of a larger culture with its own distinct modes of existence.

Thus far, the gamer identity has been analysed as precisely that: as an identity, only 'true' in the sense that it is able to convincingly be performed by those for whom the identity is relevant. Through this lens, the crisis of the gamer identity was inevitable. So long as it congealed and was resistant to change, and so long as at the core of its value system, a hierarchy existed that relied upon in-groups and out-groups, it would inevitably be challenged by those on the periphery on the system. In this section, the gamer is to be understood not just as an identity, but as part of a subculture, and through this perspective, the gamer identity did not simply congeal through a set of values, but also through the 'styles' of this subculture. However, this chapter set out to not only understand the gamer identity as an identity in crisis, but also to see how this crisis is reflective of hidden heritages within gaming that have been historically unaccounted for. Through a subcultural analysis, we will also see that understanding video game culture as a subculture also opens up the possibility for us to locate alternate subcultures within gaming's history that have been remained obscured by the dominance of the gamer identity.

The work of Hebdige (1979) offered an analysis of the many subcultures⁴ that had emerged by the late 1970's in post-war Britain, and while many of these have all but vanished from modern life, it is through Hebdige's work that we can see many parallels between the ongoing tensions within gaming communities and the subcultures of Hebdige's time. Focusing on the specific subcultures of this period - the punks, teddy boys, reggae enthusiasts and other musically-borne subcultures - Hebdige found that these subcultures all shared similar origins, emerging as a consequence of dissatisfaction and dissent to socio-cultural factors that were pervasive during that particular time period. Hebdige notes that other authors in this time period 'interpreted the succession of youth cultural styles as symbolic forms of resistance; as spectacular symptoms of a wider and more generally submerged dissent which characterized the whole post-war period.' (1979, p80). This understanding of subcultures emerging through friction and resistance is certainly apt for our understanding of video game subcultures; we have seen that the gamer identity inherited characteristics and traits from geek masculinity, which was itself a resistance against hegemonic masculinity of which it saw itself a 'victimised outsider', adopting some of its core values and power structures, but finding difference with others. Hebdige acknowledges that this plays a crucial formational role in a subculture, whereupon it must find a 'compromise solution between two contradictory needs: the need to create and express autonomy and difference from parents...and the need to maintain the parental identifications' (Cohen, 1972a in Hebdige, 1979, p77).

Where Butler's framework argued that identity is to be understood as performative, congealing through the repetition of behaviours and rituals, Hebdige offers a complimentary

⁴ 'Subcultures' were also described by Hebdige as 'youth cultural styles'. While this is an interesting term, we do not want to limit our scope to understanding the gamer identity as intrinsically a 'youth' culture, even if it may be perpetuated, redefined, or reified by youth gamers.

idea: that the identity of a subculture is forged through the *act* of rebellion, of splintering from its parent culture. Thus, to reconcile the two, we should understand the identity of the subculture as initially forming around the process through which it splinters from its parent culture, but must be maintained and re-performed over time for the identity of the subculture to persist. The geek masculinity that formed in the 1990s around the medium of the video game is thus a splintering off from hegemonic masculinity, a rebellion against impossible ideals that could never be attained by its members; a rebellion against the fundamental experience of being bullied, marginalised, or excluded from the social mainstream, but an insistence nonetheless on the superiority of the geek, and the values of geek culture. Rather than being competing ideas, these two work in tandem. The performance of an identity cannot originate from nowhere; instead, the act of rebellion provides a blueprint for the new subculture to work around, incorporating aspects of this formative period within the visible identifiers of the subculture.

It is around this blueprint, this act through which the subculture splits from its parent culture, that its 'style' congeals. Through the adoption of objects and iconography surrounding the subculture, a process known as 'bricolage', the subculture utilises signifiers that subvert their intended meaning. It is through the cohesion of these signifiers that the 'style' becomes apparent, and portrays one's affiliation to the subculture. For the punk movement, the incorporation of the safety pin into the aesthetic of punk was representative of the DIY-ethic of the movement; what was once a makeshift solution to torn clothing became a desirable signifier. In isolation, it represented little, but alongside its other signifiers - the spiked coloured hair, studded leather clothing, badges, and so forth - these elements in cohesion became the unified 'style' of the punk movement. In making visible these signifiers as a part of a singular style, members of the subculture could display their affiliation to the subculture.

What, then, are the signifiers that the gamer can incorporate into their aesthetic that groups them within the gamer subculture? As a digital medium, and as we enter an increasingly online era, any signifiers that are used as physical adornments become increasingly invisible to other gamers. Certainly, gaming merchandise is a common way to display such an affiliation, with companies like *ThinkGeek* selling gaming-themed trinkets and household items, and *J!NX* clothing selling gaming themed T-shirts. These signifiers certainly display the investment, both economic and social, of a gamer identity. While these signifiers can be useful in the physical world, these are hardly visible in an online context. As such, it is worth considering that Hebdige's analysis of subcultures in 1979 was limited in its ability to foresee how subcultures would adapt to an online era. This does not mean that such signifiers do not exist. Instead, this subculture made a transition from the incorporation of visible signifiers on the body towards the adornment of visible signifiers through digital profiles. Gaming-themed profile pictures on Facebook and usernames that reference gaming humour help provide these signifiers on the digital 'body' of the gamer. Equally important, perhaps, is the vernacular used by gamers. While now outdated, the adoption of 'l33t speak' was used within gamer subcultures in the mid-1990s into the mid-2000s (Marvin, 1995, Blashki & Nichol, 2005), to identify gamers from non-gamers. The incorporation of linguistic quirks such as this into the style of the gamer subculture is just as important as the visual elements that Hebdige saw as the unification of a singular style.

On the surface, the style and signifiers of gamers reflect a subculture that *appears* subversive. Rejecting expectations of hegemonic masculinity and replacing it with its own set of values, and harassing certain types of gamers (particularly women) and those within the gaming industry that do not fit their beliefs certainly lends itself to a recalcitrant, anti-authoritarian attitude not dissimilar to the punk of Hebdige's era. However, a subculture does not remain

subversive forever. Whatever its starting conditions, Hebdige notes that *all* subcultures follow one of two paths through which they are 'incorporated' into the greater culture. The first method is where, as the style and signifiers of the subculture become known for their 'eminently marketable pose', it becomes inevitable that even 'the mods, the punks, the glitter rockers can be incorporated, brought back into line' (1997, p122) This process, known as 'recuperation', sees the social order reaffirmed, with the deviancy and subversiveness of these subcultures brought back as intelligible, recognisable, and sanitised.

What could have such power to see a subculture as full of anger and youthful resistance as punk, or as competitive and technologically experimental as the gamer, brought back into line and regarded as 'safe' to those outside the subculture? Hebdige argues that since subcultures are concerned 'first and foremost with consumption' as they operate 'exclusively in the leisure sphere' (p123), a fundamental change occurs at the point at which the subculture becomes commodifiable by the marketing powers outside the subculture. Hebdige (1997) writes:

As soon as the original innovations which signify 'subculture' are translated into commodities and made generally available, they become 'frozen'. Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise. In this way, the two forms of incorporation (the semantic/ideological and the 'real'/commercial) can be said to converge on the commodity form. (p123)

This process of recuperation sees the subcultural signifiers being converted into a sanitised and commodifiable form by corporations who see marketable potential in the subculture's signifiers. With regards to punk, torn jeans - a signifier of an ethic of re-use until expiry - become commodified, with fashion outlets selling jeans pre-torn; 'punk clothing and insignia could be bought mail-order by the summer of 1977, and in the September of that year *Cosmopolitan* ran a review of Zandra Rhodes' latest collection of couture follies which consisted entirely of variations on the punk theme' (Hebdige, 1997, p123). This systematic disempowerment of the punk subculture, or of *any* subculture, whereupon commercial forces become key drivers in the trajectory of the subculture, demonstrates the way in which the subculture is only in control of its own style and signifiers - the linguistic quirks, the fashion statements, and indeed, its own ideologies - so long as it is not harnessed into a commodifiable form to the general public.

The second method through which the subversive potential of the subculture can become minimised is through an 'ideological' form of incorporation. Here, the subculture is presented as 'exotic' in the media, and are 'seen to contain both dangerous aliens and boisterous kids, wild animals and wayward pets' (p123), converting the subculture into the threatening figure of the 'Other'. From here, it can either become trivialised, naturalised, and domesticated, denying these subcultures the agency to affect change in any real way. However, if it cannot be harnessed in this way, it is instead converted into a 'spectacle' to be observed or mocked, but not interacted with.

These processes are not mutually exclusive; the punk subculture had its signifiers harnessed into a commodifiable form while *also* being presented as 'pure objects, as villainous clowns' (p124). In much the same way, we can see how the gamer subculture can become

recuperated and incorporated back into society such that it no longer threatens the social order. While gaming had originally existed as a hobby on the periphery of society, the signifiers of this subculture were easily commodified. Endless ephemera, from Pokemon trading cards to McDonalds collectible toy series, from quippy t-shirts of the J!NX store to the Funko Pop bobble-heads sold on the same shelves as game consoles and titles, took on a life of its own by marketers and content producers who saw gaming as a practice that was so readily engaged in a practice of consumption that its eventual commodification was inevitable. Similarly, it also involved a process of ideological incorporation, with media depictions of the gamer as a spectacle to be laughed at.

On a group level, this parallels Butler's description of an individual's identity as something that 'congeals'; once such an identity forms initially, it only has a limited time to find its shape before it is forever incorporated into culture as commodity, treated as spectacle, or mitigated as domesticated. The truly subversive political power that was once potentially wielded by this subculture had been defanged, and the subculture itself - signifiers and ideologies alike - are no longer in the hands of those within the subculture. Both Butler and Hebdige, then, would agree that subcultures are thus unlikely to evolve significantly once their defining characteristics have taken shape and become commodified, or if this commodification potential is limited, then relegated to 'Other'.

We thus return to the heart of the crisis over the gamer identity. As voracious consumers of culture, positioned in a role of spectacle in media as exhibits of geek masculinity, with the signifiers of this once-rebellious subculture now harnessed by consumer culture, the gamer identity and subculture wielded very little political power of its own. Largely unable to challenge the trajectory of the gaming industry, the subculture was pacified and placated by market and

media forces. If a game was released that challenged a particular component of the gamer ideology - say, the normalisation of queer identities - or a video was released that critiqued gender roles within games - such as Anita Sarkeesian's critique of the 'Damsel in Distress' (2013) trope that had been 'otherwise unproblematic' until now - what *real* resistance could the gamer offer? To those for whom the subculture was an intrinsic part of their identity, the style and signifiers that gaming had to offer were being used to present a subversion of what this subculture envisioned was the purpose of the medium.

The crisis over the gamer identity, then, is not just one over a rejection of a culturally sanctioned process of resignification - although this most certainly plays a significant part - but also reflective of a loss of control over this subculture that its members once had. Where the gamer identity initially had control over what styles would best cohere with geek masculinity, the commodification of the gaming industry saw control over these signifiers of gaming identity gradually relinquished. The gatekeepers of the medium had therefore lost control not just to the women, or journalists, or academics, who sought a more inclusive culture for their own purposes, but of an industry that saw great economic potential in the medium, and moved to capitalise on this.

In order to challenge these processes, the gamer subculture utilised the GamerGate movement to reassert an updated set of signifiers of this subculture. In finding a shared heritage and set of political ideologies with the alt-right, the continued meshing of gamer culture with a reactionary anti-progressive movement became further encoded through these shared signifiers. The adoption of Pepe as a mascot for the alt-right movement⁵ became shorthand in profile

⁵ Pepe the Frog, much to the protestations of its creator, became an important part of alt-right meme humour, with various mutations of his likeness used as image responses within social media. While any analysis of the alt-right movement far exceeds the scope of this thesis, it is important to understand the gamer identity's relationship to this set of politics.

pictures and social media interactions for visibly signifying one's affiliation to these movements, and the adoption of certain linguistic signifiers - such as the integration and proliferation of words such as 'redpill', 'SJW', and 'cuck' into gamer cultures (Kelly, 2017, Salazar, 2018) - became ways to express this shared set of ideologies and identities. Indeed, the overlap between these gaming subcultures and the alt-right demonstrates that the realm of gaming is *not* isolated, but is part of a broader set of class and gender tensions, 'inspired and defined by a discourse of anxiety about traditional white masculinity, which is seen as being artificially but powerfully 'degenerated'' (Kelly, 2017, p69). In reacting to these tensions, we see the gamer identity attempting to perform its own process of resignification - in this case, an update of the signifiers of gamer culture to better match the regressive far-right political environment in which it finds its affiliation - but no significant attempt to stage an intervention. In this sense, these new signifiers are used as ways to rejuvenate the subculture, without accepting any attempts to challenge it.

This certainly helps us to understand how shared assumptions and values within the subculture bubbled into tensions, that in turn erupted into actions that were symbolic of this crisis over the gamer identity in 2014. However, the focus of the rest of this thesis is not on the gamer identity as such, but rather to locate the heritages of gamers who have not been accounted for *within* this identity, and for whom these processes of marginalisation and delegitimisation have rendered invisible. Hebdige helps us to understand the subculture as something that can be incorporated into consumer culture, but what of those for whom consumer culture conspicuously avoids? How are newcomers to this digital medium able to interact with an identity that has already laid its roots deep into the styles and signifiers of the medium itself, or for whom the process of commodification never applied? If a subcultural identity such as the gamer identity is

frozen as spectacle - with all its stereotypes, good and bad - where do those who do not fit within the narrow mould offered by this label go? Have women historically been excluded from the gamer identity and subculture through a lack of substantial commodification of this demographic (even though 'girl games' do exist, and women have long occupied significant roles in gaming history), or through a lack of inclusion of the woman gamer in the media spectacle alongside their male counterparts? Or is it just that women have no desire to be a part of this subculture at all, rejecting the group affiliation, as Shaw suggested?

Focusing on the gamer subculture as historically male may seem like a safe assumption due to decades of cultural encoding and congealing of gaming-as-masculine. However, we must ask whether this is truly how this subculture has existed, or whether this encoding-as-masculine is an artifact of subcultures themselves. While Hebdige exists in the literature as a key name in subcultural studies, critiques of his work have populated the literature since soon after it was first published (Clarke, 1981, in Gelder, 2005, Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003). However, feminist and queer studies critiques argue that Hebdige's work does little to illuminate the role of women and queer-identified individuals within these subcultures. In particular, Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber (2000) question the relative invisibility of women, noting that:

Very little seems to have been written about the role of girls in youth cultural groupings. They are absent from the classic subcultural ethnographic studies, the pop histories, the personal accounts and the journalistic surveys of the field. When girls do appear, it is either in ways which uncritically reinforce the stereotypical image of women with which we are now so familiar ... or else they are fleetingly and marginally presented (p1).

The conspicuous absence of girls and women in the gamer subculture, then, may well not be simply due to the actual absence of women from gaming, but due to the very way in which subcultures are dissected and analysed. McRobbie and Garber challenge the relatively slight academic literature on the place of women within subcultures - and more specifically, girl subcultures themselves - and in particular, McRobbie critiques Hebdige's almost complete disregard for girls within his writing. In attempting to determine where women exist within subcultures, they run through a list of potential possibilities. It could simply be that girls are completely absent from subcultures, as implausible as such a scenario might seem. Or, it could be that girls are present, but invisible; after all, McRobbie argues that 'subculture's best-kept secret, [is] its claiming of a style as a male but never unambiguously masculine prerogative. This is not to say that women are denied style, rather that the style of a subculture is primarily that of its men'. (McRobbie, 2000, p24). However, McRobbie & Garber note that the commodification of subculture - the pin-up pictures, records, and magazines, were as focused on female consumption as male, so to some degree, women were expected to be included in this process of commodification and recuperation.

A far more plausible explanation is offered by McRobbie & Garber through the suggestion that, rather than girls rejecting subcultures, that girls instead find alternate ways of organising cultural life that can run in parallel to the visible subculture. Instead of adhering to masculine subcultural structures - the hierarchies, values, the importance of style, and so forth - McRobbie & Garber propose that 'The important question may not be the absence or presence of girls in male subcultures, but the complementary ways in which young girls interact among themselves and with each other to form a distinctive culture of their own, one which is recognised by and catered to in the girls' weekly comics and magazines' (2000, p11). In this

sense, we may be able to consider ‘girl subcultures’ as qualitatively different from the ‘boy subcultures’ that have been universalised as the ‘true’ (or at the very least, progenitor) form of the subculture. Noting that the ‘classic’ subcultural terrain of sociologists such as Hebdige is marked as oppositional and defiant, McRobbie & Garber suggest that the subcultures that girls negotiate are a ‘different leisure space’ and occupy ‘different personal spaces from those inhabited by boys’ (p14).

Such a reading of obscured girl subcultures does not necessarily omit them from many of the same processes that Hebdige’s model of subcultures suggests are inevitable, but it does suggest that they exist as subaltern counterpublics. These leisure spaces of girls, the ‘weekly comics and magazines’, are subject to the same process of commodification and recuperation that Hebdige’s oppositional subcultures eventually are. Similarly, when not easily commodifiable, girl subcultures are often reduced to spectacle to be dismissed as unintelligible ‘screaming brats’, as the punk offshoot Riot Grrrl was described years later (Goad, 1994, in Leonard, 2007, p125). This reading also does not suggest that these configurations are unproblematic in their own right; after all, McRobbie & Garber understand well the economic impacts, let alone the concern of safety, that women’s participation in non-domestic spheres must confront. However, this particular reading does offer an account for why girls within gaming subcultures were relatively unaffected by the issues that incensed the male gaming subculture: while some were active participants in reinforcing the geek masculinity hierarchies that were seemingly at stake, and others were the explicit targets of this gamer identity, it is entirely possible that the formations of girl subcultures within and around gaming had structured themselves differently, forgoing these hierarchies in favour of alternative configurations. While male gamers congregated on certain message boards, subreddits, Twitter accounts, news sites

and the like, it is possible that female gamers may well have been congregating in entirely different spheres, such as tumblr, or private Facebook groups, if they were congregating at all. Recognising the inherent gender biases in subcultural formation and analysis therefore also helps us to understand that such subcultural crises are *also* gender specific.

Shifting the focus onto women's participation within subcultures also reframes the concept of subculture entirely, and highlights numerous blind spots. As for queer participants in these subcultures, where do they fit? Halberstam suggests that the spaces of McRobbie & Garber's 'girl subcultures' may not appeal to queer identified girls at all, noting that 'there tends to be little recognition that some girls, usually queer girls, may in fact involve themselves in subcultures precisely because of the 'strong masculine overtones' associated with these activities. Thus, a young queer girl interested in punk will not be put off by the masculinity of the subculture; she may as easily be seduced by it (Halberstam, 2003, in Leonard, 2007, p116). Yet, our ability to identify the place of queer individuals within subcultures is lacking, with women who do not fit into a heteronormative structure often regarded as unintelligible, or 'kind of weird'.

Understanding the gamer identity as part of a subculture further demonstrates the crisis over the gamer identity as an inevitable consequence of an outdated identity forced to adapt to a changing landscape. However, it is also a pathway through which we can start to see that the gamer identity is hardly appropriate for all participants within the culture, and that there doubtless exist many within video game culture that are marginalised and unaccounted for because they do not perform the set of signifiers we expect of a gamer. In this regard, the gamer identity is often portrayed as this singular identity, where the mythologisation of the gamer remains the definitive version, and in so doing it places those who fail to embody the style of the

gamer into the periphery of play. This will become increasingly important in the next chapter, where the focus will shift to these cultures that the gamer identity often fails to acknowledge.

1.6: Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to offer a detailed set of explanations for how the crisis over the gamer identity took hold, radicalising a subculture that sought to exclude those who did not meet the criteria of what a gamer should be. It is crucial to understand the important role that this subculture has played in continuing to marginalise players and play practices that do not fit within this narrow conception of what a gamer is. Both McRobbie & Garber (2000) and Halberstam (in Leonard, 2007) show how girl subcultures and queer existence within subcultures are frequently omitted from broader accounts of subcultures, and this represents a failure of the reliance upon a singular theoretical account of subcultures, no matter how seminal that particular work is. Meanwhile, the failure to recognise and acknowledge that girl subcultures exist in and around their male-dominated counterparts perpetuates the idea that male subcultures are the default, visible, and most analysis-worthy subcultures that exist. While they certainly deserve analysis, as this chapter demonstrates, in focusing solely on male subcultures, it is also easy to perpetuate the practices of marginalisation that these alternative players occupy.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is not to claim that there are no girl gamers, or queer identified gamers - as there most certainly are many who consider themselves gamers within these groups – nor is it to suggest that there is only one kind of gamer subculture – as we will see that others, including the indie game subculture, co-exists alongside the traditional concept of the gamer - but that the dominant gamer identity has occupied a position within gaming culture whereby the straight, white, cismale gamer stands as the ‘default’ mode of existence, and is

normalised so much so that these factors of identity are considered ‘unmarked’. In contrast, identities that are ‘marked’ by processes of othering are systematically excluded from full participation in game spaces. Whether that results in rendering these groups invisible despite their presence within game spaces, ensuring that they cannot maintain positions of power within these systems, or functions to prevent them from entering the game spaces in the first place, depends on the strategies used to limit participation. Regardless of the mechanisms, however, these strategies function in unison to delegitimise certain players and certain play practices, with those that remain within these spaces existing as subaltern counterpublics, sometimes existing in spite of their marginalisation. Even so, while some of these strategies are actively and intentionally conducted, there are also processes that function to passively discriminate and exclude from participation.

The conditions that led to the crisis over the gamer identity were, for better or worse, inevitable. This is due in part to the fact that as the gaming industry and demographics changed, the narrow mythologisation of the gamer had remained static. Dan Golding saw this as a long process, where ‘over the last decade...the gamer identity remained fairly uniformly stagnant and immobile. Gamer identity was simply not fluid enough to apply to a broad spectrum of people’ (2014). In this stagnant state, Golding comments that the gamer identity ‘could not meaningfully contain, for example, *Candy Crush* players, *Proteus* players, and *Call of Duty* players simultaneously’ (para. 6); play practices that vary from the competitive, the achievement-oriented, the exploratory, and the mindless and robotic. This stagnancy of identity also reveals the gamer identity - as it wished to be seen - as something of an anachronism, displaying the values, as well as the style, of an era that has since passed.

As an increasingly ubiquitous form of media consumption, the archetypal gamer identity and its heritage has been the de facto face of gaming, and has occupied an important role in gaming's history. However, this role has not been uncomplicated or unproblematic, with its share of controversies and crises. This chapter has shown that video games have had a past that has been explicitly gendered, and this gender-coding has been, whether intentionally or not, reinforced by the medium and the forms of play they prioritise; by the industry and its use of marketing and genre conventions; by the media, for whom the gamer identity presents an easily conceivable social outcast to vilify; and perhaps most importantly, by the gamer identity itself, and the subculture that surrounds video games. In rapidly adopting the medium, the terrain of the video game was claimed for geek masculinity as an extension of other mediums that already privileged mastery, technological proficiency, and specialised knowledge, over forms of masculinity that were seen outside geek culture. The signifiers of this subculture have been unambiguously coded as masculine, so it should not come as a surprise that the dominant subculture that forms around it is inherently masculine in its values as well as its participation.

We must thus understand this dominant gamer identity and subculture as both a culture enmeshed within geek masculinity, but also as a part of a broader patriarchal system; gamer subcultures inherit values from its parent culture, but it also generates and disseminates its own particular brand, and membership from this group also bleeds into more radical related groups with political goals, such as the alt-right. The relationship between the gamer subculture and the broader system of hegemonic masculinity is not a one-way street, however: in a system of values that relies on power relationships and dynamics to be maintained to remain stable, hegemonic masculinity's values flow on down through to the gamer cultures, and - if it were so desired - gamer culture in turn has the potential to destabilise and supplant hegemonic masculinities. Thus,

the conflict over the gamer identity in 2014 should not be dismissed as petty squabbles over a label, but recognised as the cultural point of friction that it is: an anxiety over the loss of the monopolisation of an identity, and the violent repercussions that follow such a threat. These anxieties could be alleviated through a willingness to assert a new set of signifiers of what it means to belong to the gamer identity, and a new process of bricolage that signifies a new style of video game subculture, but the resistance to such interventions leaves this identity at a point of tension that is no more resolved now than it was in 2014.

The gamer identity that dominates video game culture has largely avoided attempts to revitalise itself, or to challenge the values it considers canon; instead, case studies such as GamerGate provide insight into the mechanisms utilised in order to avoid further destabilisation of this identity. A strong preference to adhere to the values that were present at their origin remains: their rugged individualism, their competitiveness, their desire to institute hierarchies of power relationships and value, and a valourisation of mastery and expertise. Yet, for all the potential for this identity to be reshaped or for it to meet a point of intervention and be re-performed and re-ritualised in a new, inclusive, and gender-neutral way, the gamer identity and subculture has instead found itself recuperated into broader society as no longer deviant, defiant, or politically subversive, and this impotence is undoubtedly a key contributing factor to the explosive polarisation of the gaming community since 2014 and the divisive split over who and what a gamer now 'should' be.

However, while there has been much focus on the gamer identity in crisis, analyses of this identity often fail to acknowledge that this narrative is, and always has been, mythical in nature. The theory utilised in this chapter has already begun to show the cracks in such a mythologisation. We have seen that some individuals who do game actively avoid positively

identifying with the gamer identity, complicating any simplistic notion of congruence between the gamer identity and those who play video games. Further, Fraser's understanding of the subaltern counterpublic, as well as McRobbie & Garber's understanding of the unseen, unaccounted for girl subcultures, demonstrate the importance of understanding that subcultural analyses often either ignore the roles of women within these groups, or outright ignore the girl subcultures that form parallel to them, to say nothing of the other identities (such as queer identities) that far too frequently are ignored in these analyses outright.

These minority gamers, and the alternative play practices of those outside the gamer subculture, are the basis for the rest of this thesis. This chapter has shown how the dominant gamer subculture has participated in espousing regressive and exclusionary politics. However, there are many domains in which video games - and the cultures that surround particular games, genres, or playstyles - challenge this identity (as well as the styles and signifiers of the subculture that surrounds it) through the formation of subaltern counterpublics, and offer a distinctly progressive approach to the medium. Rather than forgoing participation in this medium, those who have often been relegated to the periphery of the medium have formed their own social networks and configurations that redefine what it means to participate in gaming. It is in uncovering these heritages that this project hopes to show that the medium itself can offer radical potential, even while being overshadowed by the dominant gamer identity.

Chapter 2: Leisure, Gaming and Queerscapes

2.1 Introduction

2.2 The Leisure Studies Approach to Gaming

2.3 Queerscapes

2.4 Variations of Queerscapes

2.5 Digital Queerscapes in a Gaming Context

2.5.1 Sexual Spaces: Goldshire Inn

2.5.2: Sexual/Political Spaces: Networks, Guilds, and Social Media Technologies

2.5.3 Political Spaces: The Queer Gamer as Game Developer

2.6 Conclusion

2.1 Introduction

We have seen that the gamer identity and its subculture has resisted attempts to initiate a process of resignification, although not without tensions within it. While the crisis over the term gamer in many ways helped to reinforce the idea of the gamer as a homogenous collective of unified ideals and shared behaviours (both internally within the subculture, and within media discourse of it), it also functioned as a mechanism to galvanise resistance against this singular monoculture. Women, ethnic and racial minorities, and queer-identified individuals are often excluded and disqualified from these spaces by virtue of these attributes, but those that are accepted and integrated into this subculture often do so on a one-by-one basis, on the assurance that they will not disrupt the established hierarchy that allows for gaming spaces to be perceived as apolitical, and ‘about fun’. In this regard, the strategy of disempowerment serves to ensure

that minorities and marginalised groups can participate within gaming in certain contexts, where their potential to hold positions of influence and visibility are limited.

Despite the potency of these strategies of delegitimisation, it did not stop academics from critiquing this culture (Braithwaite, 2016, Mortensen, 2016, Golding & Van Deventer, 2016). Nor did the strategies of disqualification lead to the end of the queer gamer, or the female gamer, or other marginalised and disempowered groups within gaming cultures. Zoe Quinn, one of the primary targets of this movement, has since published a book on her experiences (Quinn, 2017), and Anita Sarkeesian has continued as a public figure to advocate for shifts in video game representation, as well as to combat misogyny within gaming spaces (Collins, 2014), as well as a consultant to video game developers ('Consulting', n.d.). Academic work on this subculture continues to proliferate despite the threat of harassment, shining new light on a perennial problem. In this way, it might seem as though no matter how hostile or exclusionary a space may be, there will always be some who persist in these spaces, resisting attempts to marginalise or assimilate them, forming subaltern counterpublics that can congregate and actively resist the strategies that seek to silence them. These processes of marginalisation can often render these groups invisible, as McRobbie & Garber (2000) demonstrated through the absence of literature on the presence of women within subcultures, but this does not mean that they do not exist. Such acts of resistance can take place in numerous ways, from the mere occupation of spaces, to more active resistance through undermining the values systems that are considered so intrinsic to these systems. Where Chapter 1 worked to establish an historical understanding of the gamer identity and subculture, such techniques of resistance, of occupation, and of existence, are the true focus of this thesis. In understanding the dominant gamer identity as a subculture, we can now position

it in opposition to other subcultures, identities, and communities that emerge and form in the gaps within it.

Queer individuals within game worlds nonetheless persist, and often do so despite the harassment and exclusionary behaviour that so often permeates these game spaces. In order to visualise how this occurs, this chapter will attempt to view the overlap between queer spaces and gaming spaces. This will be performed through two primary tasks. Firstly, this chapter will further expand upon the role that hobbies and leisure activities play in the process of identity formation and social cohesion, approaching this primarily from the discipline of leisure studies. This corpora of theory allows for us to analyse leisure activities (such as gaming) as far more than trivial toys or hobbies, recognising the role that leisure plays in the formation of in-groups and out-groups, as well as the policing of boundaries that happens around the leisure activity. Additionally, it reframes leisure as key to many social interactions, offering areas where mutual cooperation and competition can help build relationships across geographic, cultural and gender divides.

Secondly, this chapter will attempt to present a counterculture to the gamer identity by looking at a subgroup that is frequently marginalised within these spaces, whether voluntarily or not, and whether intentionally or not. In her work 'Talking to Gaymers: Questioning, Identity, Community and Media Representation' (2012) Adrienne Shaw highlights the need for queer gamers (sometimes referred to as 'gaymers') to find places that could offer 'a queer sensibility and a safe space from the gay-bashing of other gamer communities' (p81). However, it is not just due to the hostile nature of these gaming spaces that gaymers may seek alternative game spaces; the gamer identity - firmly entrenched within a culture of geek masculinity - features a power structure where queer individuals are typically unable to hold positions of power or have 'value'.

In this regard, queer identified gamers are often not only harassed within these spaces, but also disempowered and unable to occupy positions of influence. Therefore, the need for the gaymer identity to find these spaces that are free from ‘gay-bashing’ and other forms of harassment exist not just as a safety mechanism, but also as an alternative configuration of an identity that allows for a reshaping of these power structures that offer more favourable value systems to this subaltern counterpublic. There has been no shortage of indications throughout this project so far that there are many who wish to inhabit gaming spaces, but need to do so with caution, reservation, and trepidation. Thus, we turn our focus in this chapter onto those for whom the identity of the gamer is not necessarily an easy fit due to their gender or sexual identity, and seek to find how these individuals and groups shift their play practices in order to find their place in these digital worlds.

These mechanisms for survival and resistance for queer identified individuals are termed by Ingram, Bouthillette & Retter (1997) as ‘queerscapes’: spaces that are utilised to facilitate queer movement, safety, survival, organisation, or sexual expression. These spaces often incorporate a protective element into their design, policing the boundaries through which members that belong can enter, such as student queer spaces with an autonomous usage policy. These spaces are also frequently used in such a way that their users - and sometimes the spaces themselves - can be nomadic, shifting from one place to the next to avoid persecution and discrimination. However, not all queer spaces operate in the same ways, or for the same purposes, particularly with the adoption of digital technologies, architectures and landscapes. As such, in section 2.4, a taxonomy will be presented to help articulate the differences and the nuances that queerscapes help to flourish.

While these queerscapes may be set up as spaces that allow for the survival of individuals, it also allows for social structures to be formed that enable new forms of values systems to emerge; ones where hegemonic understandings of value are inverted or replaced with values that align more closely with this demographic. Particularly for gaming demographics, this can mean an inversion of geek masculinity in place of other ideologies. In this sense, the formation of queerscapes can serve not just as a safety mechanism for queer identified individuals, but can be a refuge for others for whom the values inherent in geek masculinity serve to ostracise and exclude them. For the purposes of this chapter, the focus will be specifically on queer experiences within game spaces (both in-game and in the real-world spaces that surround them), and as such, the theory utilised will pertain to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and other non-heteronormative identities. However, the frameworks that this chapter establishes to understand mechanisms of resistance also have potential to be applied to heterosexual women, for whom the values of geek masculinity can limit their participation, as well as other minority demographics for whom disempowerment within game spaces is a reality. By demonstrating the impact that sexuality and gender identity may have in obstructing individuals from full participation in game spaces, even in spite of game spaces frequently being almost completely non-sexual domains, it further reinforces the fact that identity - even when it may seem only tangentially relevant to the leisure activity - nonetheless acts as feature to reinforce social hierarchies. In this way, it demonstrates how the Butlerian notion of performativity serves to reject challenges to this hegemony through the marginalisation and rendering unintelligible of those seen to be ‘othered’ from this subculture.

This chapter then will commence by offering a leisure studies approach to articulate the importance of queer individuals existing in these spaces. In so doing, it will reinforce the

importance of queer resistance as not just a political statement, but as a key component of social life. As a now normalised part of social life, video game play and participation should be considered part of this examination of leisure, and one that is worthy of study in order to locate these sites of resistance within video game spaces and cultures.

2.2 The Leisure Studies Approach to Gaming

While gaming has been increasingly legitimised as a hobby over time, the act of relegating gaming to the realm of the ‘hobby’ may minimise the importance of these experiences and environments, risking the possibility that they are reduced to quaint, esoteric, or culturally insignificant pastimes. However, there is much work within the literature of leisure studies that instead aims to identify the cultural and political importance of leisure activities and their relationship to the rest of the world. Alongside gaming’s integration with online and social media technologies, gaming as a leisure pursuit has advanced to the point where considering it a simple tool to pass the time also undersells the massively immersive worlds developers create, the fine-tune balancing they apply, and their need to meet both shareholder and player expectations. Further, the community-based experiences that players generate, often organically, create dynamic experiences and enhance the longevity of games well past the point that developers intend. While video games may, in some sense, take part in a digital space where a barrier exists between the player and the screen, these experiences are no less real in their impact on the individual. For this reason, repositioning gaming - whether the act of participating in video game play, of identifying as a gamer, or as participating in gaming communities - from a ‘hobby’, to occurring within the realm of ‘leisure’ instead helps reframe it as more than just a toy one uses to

pass the time, and opens this topic up to the broader field of leisure studies to understand these cultural and political factors.

As a thesis that focuses on alternative play practices and heritages, it should not need to be said that this perspective considers engagement in leisure as an important part of human life. While this is not in complete consensus within leisure studies, Chris Rojek's work on has presented challenges to traditional notions of leisure, reframing it as an activity capable of significant social impact. Much of Rojek's work can be described as 'iconoclastic interventions into leisure studies' (Peter Bramham, 2002, p222), but however divisive these ideas may be, they offer a useful set of tools for studying leisure with regards to play within a Foucauldian framework. Rejecting the ideas of social formalism, which 'offers us theories of 'leisure without society'' (p223), Rojek refutes the idea that it is possible to study hobbies, leisure, or games, without also studying their social contexts. These ideas are used within video studies as a response to debates surrounding the 'magic circle', whereupon one would attempt to study games without incorporating the elements of culture that factor into how the play occurs, and how the game play and experience affects culture in turn (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003); Crawford (2015) in particular uses this idea to analyse sports-themed videogames in relation to their wider social settings, as well as the sports they refer to from the physical world (p576).

However, it is not just that leisure should be analysed within the social contexts that participate and give rise to it: Rojek (2005) notes that play, as a component of leisure, functions as 'a mechanism for discharging cognitive and motor energies. It also possesses the strong capacity to generate and enhance reciprocity, because playing together involves mutual recognition and support.' (p16). To ignore the importance of these aspects of leisure in the creation and maintenance of social interaction is to treat leisure as an apolitical, asocial, and

ultimately insular experience. The benefits of participating in play/leisure activities may be as varied as the activities themselves, but at the very least, such experiences can lay the foundation for social engagement. In addition, Rojek also notes that leisure ‘is one of the principal institutions through which social capital is accumulated’ (p16), where social capital ‘refers to the mutual, reciprocal sphere of relations that render meaningful popular perceptions of neighbourliness and community well-being. Social capital is fundamental in enhancing care for the self and care for the other.’ (p16).

Rojek’s arguments paint a picture of leisure as being far from a frivolous component of life. Instead, leisure and play constitutes an *integral* part of social life. These ideas should not be unexpected, however, as we have already seen the connections between gaming, the formation of the gamer identity, and the usage of signifiers within subculture, itself acting as an important nexus of social interaction. Where we saw these as being used for negative purposes - the vilification and exclusion of individuals based on attributes such as gender, race, or sexual identity - it still functioned to facilitate social cohesion within these subcultures, with members able to accrue social capital through these interactions, through the willingness to adopt the ‘style’ of the subculture, and so forth. These factors led to a sense of community of those within it through their participation in these spaces that congregate around the leisure activity of gaming.

The exclusion and marginalisation of one from leisure activities - whether intentional or not - can be far more damaging than a simple experience of ‘missing out’: it is also a way of stunting one’s potential to generate social capital, and prevent or sever their social connections. Therefore, it is not that the formation of gaming cultures and communities should be seen as negative. Quite the opposite, in fact: gaming communities are capable of enabling these sorts of

social economies of care that are important to the wellbeing of those who exist within them. Instead, it is the exclusion from these spaces that should be seen as harmful, as it limits the ability for one to participate in the generation of social capital. Exclusion, exile or omission from leisure can deliberately throttles one's potential to 'discharge energies', or to make meaningful friendships in what Rojek describes as non-pecuniary situations: those without a financial or material basis for the interaction. Policing the boundaries of leisure by omitting people from accessing leisure spaces, whether they be the pub, the guild, or the local sports team, can be effective at ensuring that some individuals are isolated from many of the spaces that are key to social development.

Unfortunately, the policing of these boundaries around leisure spaces has historically been quite common. In her examination of the usages of leisure spaces, Sharpe (2013) notes that 'community leisure spaces such as the street, the park, the mall, or the café have long been important sites for groups to engage in the politics of representation and participation' (p521), and publicly accessible spaces such as these have functioned as the cornerstone for such interactions. This also means that those that find themselves prohibited from accessing these spaces find themselves omitted from the politics of representation and participation. Not surprisingly, if one is excluded from a leisure pursuit (and subsequently, from the bonds that form through shared leisure), they rarely can access a social network of individuals to support their rally for change from within the system, instead resorting to public protests that, somewhat ironically, invoke their own form of leisure. Sharpe (2013) writes:

[M]arginalized groups that have been denied participation in the public have used leisure-based events such as festivals or carnivals as a vehicle to voice concerns and be seen and heard (Jackson, 1992). What such observations tell us

is that power is regularly exerted on leisure practices in the community, as authorities attempt to regulate and enforce what leisure can be practised where and by whom. At other times the politics are embedded in the dominant values, power structures, ideologies, and histories of the community, and it is through interrogations into leisure that takes place in the community sphere that the processes underlying collective identity, belonging, exclusion, or marginality become more apparent. (pp521-522)

This presents a fascinating picture. While leisure activities can be policed to great effect, how effective these are often depends upon whether the regulation is extrinsic (by authorities and governing bodies of the leisure), or intrinsic (the internal politics, power structures, and so on). However, Sharpe also highlights that leisure spaces can be repurposed to enact forms of resistance to these forces. Thus, leisure spaces are not ‘owned’ or ‘controlled’ in a complete sense. Instead, we must view them as sites of tension, where those excluded from the space can repurpose it to begin the process of enacting change within these spaces. We saw this in regards to the dominant gamer subculture: while it maintained an effort to police the boundaries of the gamer identity, it nonetheless remained a site of tension, and many individuals worked within these spaces (including through YouTube videos and social media) to repurpose these spaces. Thus, leisure spaces act as environments that *can* be policed, but can also be repurposed by those on the periphery for whom participation is desirable, but not necessarily feasible.

It should be clarified that while Sharpe uses the term ‘authorities’, and this may indeed be police, courts, politicians, or even the body that oversees and authorises the activities (as is the case with sporting leagues), authorities can also be those *within* the leisure groups who have

accumulated enough social capital to enforce these boundaries. This allows for in-group members to ensure that the ‘purity’ of a leisure activity remains. However, Sharpe’s observation that it is not *just* the individuals themselves that police these leisure activities - although these are definitely a good place to start examining this issue - but also the embedded dominant values, power structures, ideologies and histories of the community. These exist beyond any one individual, but function as a congealing force that keeps the community as homogenous as possible. What is also important about Sharpe’s observation is that this can apply to *any* leisure pursuit: whether for scout groups, motor enthusiast clubs, or guilds within video games. Those who exercise authority (and are thus in a position to permit entry) enforce the boundaries of leisure spaces by maintaining these dominant values and power structures.

It seems then that Sharpe (2013) and Rojek (2005) are in agreement in observing that leisure is never *just* about the act of play, removed from all politics. Rather, it is *not possible* for play to exist in a state where it is divorced from the political. In fact, Rojek notes that such a belief is mere fantasy; instead, ‘The common-sense notion that leisure is primarily about play and relaxation, or that it can be compartmentalized or segregated from the rest of life, is therefore replaced with the more radical proposition that leisure is always and already, political.’ (Rojek, 2005, p. 24). If indeed this leisure studies approach to engagement posits that there is no discrete distinction between ‘game’ and ‘political’, nor between ‘game’ and ‘society’, then we can see that the politics of leisure spaces dictate that certain types of leisure can and should only be enjoyed by certain types of people, and we can see the value - quite literally - of policing who does and does not have access to these spaces. If access to leisure activities generates social capital within an in-group, then we may infer that this social capital is devalued by mainstream access (or the loss of exclusivity and subsequent market saturation) of the game space. If so, then

regulating access to these spaces through mechanisms such as making the space unpalatable to outsiders may be a very real strategy in ensuring the relative value of these non-pecuniary interactions and exchanges is upheld. This was shown to be happening within game spaces through the controlling of perception in Chapter 1, where the dominant gamer identity saw itself as the gatekeeper to game play.

In applying a Foucauldian reading of leisure spaces, Sharpe (2013) suggests that the political processes in and around leisure activities function as the very mechanisms for policing these activities. She writes,

One way that politics interpellates community leisure space is through the processes of control and exclusion that unfold in the community sphere. One way that power exerts itself in community leisure space is through disciplinary practices that control the movement of bodies in specific ways. As Foucault (1977) describes in his work on discipline, control can be exerted through a variety of disciplinary techniques, including temporalization (controlling when spaces can be used), containment (establishing boundaries), or regulation (establishing rules for how movement should unfold), and further enforced through surveillance and policing. Although certainly all community spaces would have some form of discipline, these forms of discipline need to be scrutinized in terms of whom they are being applied to and on what basis. For example, Andrew, Harvey and Dawson (1994) conducted a review of the regulations of public parks in Toronto and found that the regulations were more oriented toward ease of maintenance than they were around social engagement or freedom of movement. However, more significant concerns arise when disciplinary practices are found to be excluding certain groups of users. (p523)

Thus, individuals can be excluded from utilising spaces for leisure for a variety of reasons. Some of these reasons we may consider justifiable, such as ‘ease of maintenance’, but these may have follow-on effects that can (deliberately or otherwise) exclude certain types of users from utilising the spaces entirely. An automated sprinkler system in a park that turns on after dark may seem like an innocuous enough idea, but may have the unintentional temporalisation side effect of discouraging teenagers from using these spaces, for whom these public areas are an important part in generating social capital. Or, perhaps this could be considered a very intentional decision for the authoritative bodies, to whom keeping the park grounds well maintained is more important than the social capital of the teenagers, who, after all, can simply move to the paved areas nearby (thus functioning as an act of containment). In game spaces, however, this may extend to the usage of social spaces, whereby the dominant gamer identity can police message boards, subreddits, and the like, harassing those with dissonant values or who have visible profile information that is recognisably out of sync with this identity. Regardless of intent, these processes - temporalisation, containment, regulation, surveillance, and policing - function as barriers to usage of leisure spaces.

These processes of exclusion surrounding leisure spaces would seem to indicate that access to leisure spaces is indeed privileged, and with regards to gaming spaces, this privileging tends to occur along standard axes of oppression: gender, sexuality, class, race, and so forth. However, even despite these restrictions, Sharpe showed that leisure spaces can be subverted in order to facilitate leisure practices for the very same people that are typically excluded from these spaces. In this way, while this section has focused on the consequences and politics behind the policing of boundaries, there will nonetheless be some who manage to exist in these spaces

under the radar. How this happens will serve as the basis for the rest of the chapter; in so doing, we will examine how the LGBT community, as one subset of a marginalised group, have historically utilised practices and tactics in order to carve out their *own* in-group communities, and have done so through these very leisure spaces that have often sought to exclude and disempower them. Identifying what these spaces are, why they exist, and how they have adapted to the increasing digitisation of social practices, can be utilised to better understand how the queer gaming community can act in defiance to the dominant gamer identity and the subculture that surrounds it.

2.3 Queerscapes

When looking through the lens of leisure studies, it becomes apparent that the ‘authorities’ of leisure spaces have historically worked to police the boundaries of leisure, sometimes maliciously, sometimes unintentionally. However, the focus of this chapter is on how these politics and methods of policing can be subverted and repurposed. Our intention in this section is to examine how queer spaces, as historically unsanctioned spaces that have existed on the periphery of social life, have adapted to this marginalised position through the formation of ‘queerscapes’, and used these structures to participate in social and political life.

In some ways, the terrain around queer politics has changed drastically in the last few decades, with acceptance of these identities radically growing in popularity since the 1970s. While western society has turned away from the overt criminalisation of homosexuality and transgender identities (and subsequently towards social forms of ostracisation and isolation rather than legal forms), the 1970s marks an era of United States history that Gayle Rubin identifies as punctuated with heightened FBI surveillance and police raids on gay venues (2012,

p141). Known gay cruising areas, libraries, beaches, bath houses, bars, street sweeps; any and all locations that offered refuge to queer activities, if not sexual activities altogether, were subject to an 'erotic hysteria' that served to stifle this form of social life. This antagonistic relationship between the law and queer society was not isolated to the US, of course, as this time period saw many western nations (including Australia) continuing to prosecute homosexual activity under sodomy laws; even once these were repealed, loopholes such as the 'loosely worded "soliciting for immoral purposes" clause, inserted by dissident Liberals, saw police harassment of gays continue well into the 1980s.' ('Timeline: Australian states decriminalise male homosexuality', 2015). To exist as queer in such a time often required discretion, and to avoid persecution as queer in such a time often required isolation.

In this way, the necessity of queer spaces may be immediately apparent. Through both the overt criminalisation and the social ostracisation of homosexuality and other non-heteronormative identities, queer individuals were denied access to many of the basics of social life, including freedom of expression. As such, it is not hard to see how many felt the need for queer-oriented venues that could act as a shield from society, obfuscating queer relationships and sexual activity from the law and public scrutiny alike. Ingram, Bouthillette & Retter (1997) describes how the emergence of 'queerscapes', a term used to describe the geographic locations that could be used as a focal point for queer identified individuals to meet and mingle, were crucial for many people with non-heteronormative identities. For marginalised groups that had little, if any, acceptance in society, such spaces were important in enabling 'people with marginalized (homo) sexualities and identities to survive and to gradually expand their influence and opportunities to live fully' (Ingram et al., 1997, p.3). Thus, for individuals who find themselves unable to 'fully' engage in social life due to their identities, Ingram et al. argue that

such spaces allow a degree of freedom to be oneself. In the absence of such spaces, one's potential to enjoy the benefits of social life were limited. While this explicitly is referring to queerscapes, it also resonates with Rojek's (2005) concept of the leisure space as a vehicle for discharging energies and a way to generate and enhance reciprocity; by being excluded from social existence, LGBT individuals historically were prohibited from these fundamental components of human existence. Thus, we can view the establishment of queer spaces, or queerscapes, as serving as a work-around to this broader exclusion from social life.

Queerscapes are not merely the formation of spaces that where queer identified individuals can exist in safety, however. Ingram (1998) codifies the concept as those spaces that: embody processes that counter those that directly harm, discount, isolate, ghettoize, and assimilate. A queerscape is, therefore, a cumulative kind of spatial unit, a set of places, a plane of subjectivities constituting a collectivity, involving multiple alliances of lesbian, gay men, bisexuals, and transsexuals and supporting a variety of activities, transactions, and functions. At least for some time to come, a queerscape nearly always overlaps with and is surrounded by social groups where heterosexuality is supposedly the norm. (pp6-7)

This definition of 'queerscape' would seem to render it interchangeable with 'queer space', but no matter how similar they seem, they are but nonetheless distinct. Where queer spaces are reified as a queerspace through its usage, recognition, and a certain degree of autonomy, Ingram makes it clear that the primary purpose of a queerscape is in being situated as being in *opposition* to the harming or isolation that queer identified individuals experience from other non-marginalised spaces in society. In this way, queerscapes are also specific kinds of subaltern counterpublics, not only resisting the processes that marginalise its members, but also

constructing new alliances that serve to mutually benefit its members. Further, Ingram notes that these queerscapes overlap and are surrounded by heterosexual spaces for the foreseeable future. This has a certain straightforward logic to it: if a queerscape by its definition exists to resist processes to marginalise, isolate, or assimilate, then it should must also exist within these spaces as an act of defiance. This puts queerscapes in a precarious position; they exist not just as a response to their marginalisation, but *in spite* of it. Rather than relocating to a place of comparative safety, where social and legal structures exist for their protection, queerscapes exist in a space of marginalisation in order to facilitate social life for those that are a part of the ‘plane of subjectivities constituting a collectivity’ (p6).

Queerscapes are thus by their very nature defiant in their resistance to be outcast from society, and survive through the repurposing of spaces that originally were intended to function within a hegemonic order of society into the bars and social groups within which queer identified individuals can form a collective. As such, Sherlock identifies these ‘queer affinity groups’ as a counterpublic. Where Fraser (1990) recognises subaltern counterpublics as subordinated social groups formulating counter discourses around their own needs, Sherlock (citing Michael Warner (2002)) argues that ‘a counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one’. (Warner, 2002, p119, in Sherlock, 2013 p170). This awareness of their subordinate position may have varying impacts on their ability to live fulfilling lives, but it also incorporates an acceptance of experiences and activities that are otherwise prohibited in the aforementioned heteronormative spaces, thus opening the possibility for queerscapes to invite and encourage other ‘deviant’ behaviours or preferences that are off limits within the rest of the heteronormative society. It is important to note that Ingram addresses

that these spaces support a ‘variety of activities, transactions, and functions’: these spaces are not solely intended as spaces where sexual interactions occur (although they may well be used for this), but as anything that may constitute a political resistance to the harm, assimilation or isolation of queer individuals.

This observation that queerscapes serve not only their homosexual inhabitants, but a ‘variety of activities, transactions, and functions’, becomes important in realising that the struggles that lead to the formation of queerscapes are *not* unique to this group; they are simply one of the more visible and politically active groups in recent decades as identities that demonstrate how sexual or gender identity can function as a barrier to participation in social and leisure life. Rubin’s concept of the ‘charmed circle’ offers a visualisation of the privileging of some forms of sexual existence over others in the ‘sexual hierarchy’ (2012, pp151-152), illustrating how there are many ways in which one can fall from a hallowed position into ‘deviant’ behaviour. The charmed circle places these privileged forms of sexual activity - those that society deems ‘appropriate’ and permissible, such as monogamous sex between heterosexual partners that are married - in the inner circle. ‘The Outer Limits’ of the circle act as oppositional to the inner equivalents: homosexual sex with unmarried groups of partners transgresses many of these ‘axes’ of the charmed circle, and in an era where homosexual marriage was not an option, it’s also apparent that these can cascade into each other. The overlap between queer environments, queer activities, and other ‘deviant’ forms of sexual life is not insignificant. Therefore, while the focus of this chapter is on queer subjectivities and experiences, other forms of ‘outer limit’ experiences also exist outside of the hallowed ground of the charmed circle, and have historically required unconventional avenues to be practiced.

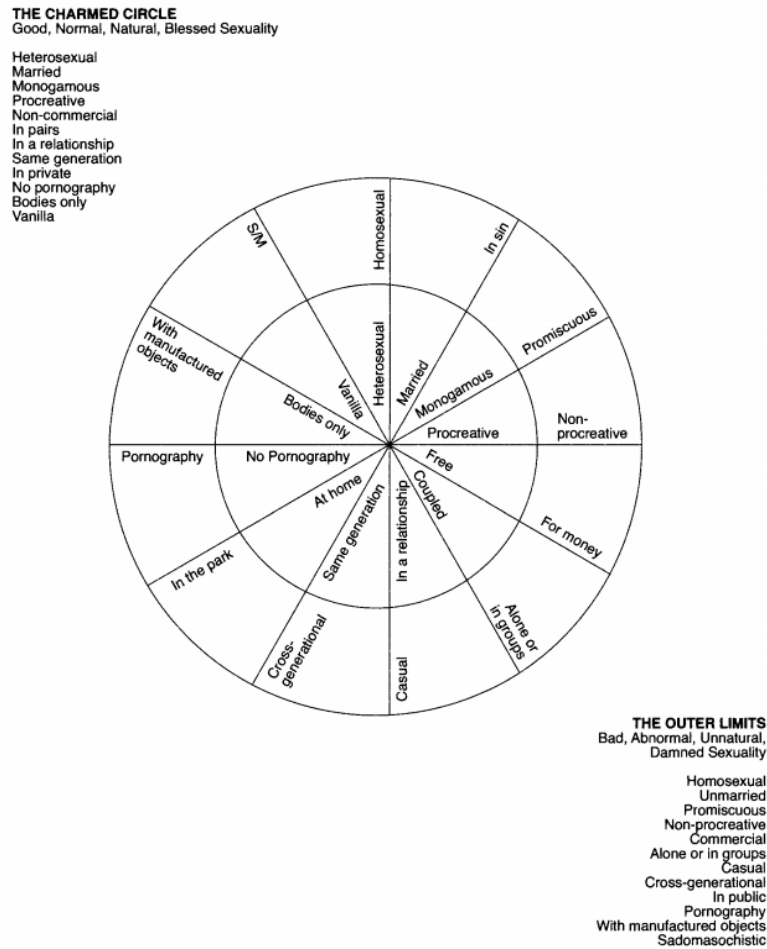


Image 1: The ‘charmed circle’ shows that within the centre exist privileged forms of sexual experience, while ‘undesired’ and ‘deviant’ sexual behaviour exists on the periphery of this circle in its ‘outer limits’ (Rubin, 2012, p152)

The charmed circle, as reflective of broader cultural trends and beliefs about permissible behaviour, often acts as a policing mechanism through which many find themselves unable to participate in these forms of sexual life, or must keep such participation concealed. However, as pervasive as they are, these mechanisms exist in a state of tension with their counterpart: spaces that resist, overturn, and subvert these expectations. These spaces, the queerscapes within society, fundamentally shift this dynamic, if only within these spaces, and within them, the

charmed circle model is temporarily suspended. The ‘undesired’ can be ‘desired’, and the ‘outer limits’ can become normalised. For those living under a position of constant marginalisation, these very spaces may well mean the difference between survival and incarceration. In subverting this charmed circle hierarchy through the normalisation of queer identities, queerscapes can also be a way for individuals to become groups, and for groups to become collectives; for counterpublics to become a temporary norm. As a consequence, queer-identified people may not only find queerscapes necessary in this sense, but for some, they may only be a starting point from which their safety or self-actualisation may begin.

Queerscapes are not a one-size-fits-all in their resistance to oppressive forces, though: for those who may perceive themselves as marginalised *within* their own subculture, further recursive steps to carve out niche spaces might also be necessary for the same sort of self-actualisation and survival; a venue could cater primarily to gay male patrons, even though it will not refuse gay women, but it would seem hardly sufficient a venue in catering to the needs of a lesbian community, with its own microcosm of subculture, humour, internal regulation and policing, and so forth. Similarly, a space that features drag queens as performers and entertainers might be seen as unintentionally exclusionary for transgender individuals, who may feel their experience of transgressing gender boundaries is openly mocked and played for laughs - even if other transgender individuals may feel the very opposite, if their understanding of gender aligns with a more Bulterian philosophy.

As visibility of queer minorities has improved, so too has the potential for those who might find themselves outside the dominant L or G (of the LGBTIQ+) to create such spaces through new technologies and platforms of connectivity. As such, non-binary, femme-loving-femme lesbians, non-op trans individuals, and so on, have found solace in digital platforms in

order to find similar minded queer friends and allies, rather than relying on physical queerscapes for the safety and security that these spaces may offer a more ‘conventional’ queer populace, or environments that cater to more archetypal queer activities. Undoubtedly, the fact that such niches within the queer community comprise a comparatively small percentage of the overall queer population - an already fleetingly small percentage of the population - naturally lends itself to individuals turning to digital technologies unrestricted by geographic constraints, so that a sparseness in distribution in the real-world geography does not need to hinder the fostering of friendships and support networks that Ingram et al. (1997) identify as being necessary to the survival of these marginalised groups.

The formation of queerscapes that also incorporate other interests that are otherwise removed from sexuality or gender are therefore doing the exact thing that Ingram et al. (1997) state is necessary for survival. These spaces are dedicated partially to the aforementioned survival: in some capacity, such networks offer the potential for support that some individuals may not be fortunate enough to have in their ordinary lives, and providing the chance for such marginalised groups to be able to enjoy their favourite hobbies in relative safety is certainly important. However, these groups for the most part appear to offer not survival, but the potential for their members to ‘expand their influence and opportunities to live fully’ (Ingram et al., 1997). For members whose base survival needs have been met, such groups *do* provide the possibility for their members to live social, fuller lives than those who have been ostracised through their gender or sexuality.

There are many ways to resist assimilation and marginalisation, however, and while queerscapes by definition resist these processes, how they do so differs considerably. In expanding upon Ingram’s concept, David Bell (2001) describes how studying queerscapes is a

study of shifting sands, that queer geographies are inherently ‘a space of flows’, always in motion and fluctuation. Despite there being notable ‘gay districts’ in western metropolises, Bell - like Ingram - agrees that these spaces are intermingled with heteronormative spaces, creating a ‘paradox of queer visibility’. By providing a queerscape overlay on top of heteronormative spaces, these spaces both blend into, and coexist alongside, the heteronormative spaces of a city. Bell argues that the historical criminalisation of homosexuality has played a large role in the formation of these queerscapes, even in places where being openly gay is no longer criminalised, as queerscapes were forced to constantly shift from one location to the other: ‘increased hostile attention at one site leads to its desertification, while new windows of opportunity open up elsewhere’ (p90). Instead of being fixed in this sense, gay tourist practices contribute to the formation of one form of transnational queer culture (p98), leading some cities towards becoming points on a global map of queer sex zones. Christopher Reed (1996) identifies this as an ‘ontological problem...Some would argue that queerness, as an ineffable ideal of oppositional culture, is so fluid and contingent that the idea of a concrete queer space is an oxymoron’, an adaptive (survival) technique that results in ‘an invisible queerness’ (p64).

The formation of these ‘spaces of flows’ that Bell describes need not be necessarily rooted in the realm of the physical. Rather, being constrained to the physical would contradict the very essence of what Bell attempted to describe: that these spaces are inherently ephemeral and elusive. In this way, even as early as 2001, Bell is acutely aware of how the formation of queerscapes in urban geography resembles the way that communities form over the internet and in digital spheres; Bell writes: ‘Thinking of the city as a “space of flows” also immediately calls to mind cyberspace because the disembedding effects of new communications technologies have been widely cited as offering opportunities for reconfigurations of identity and (virtual)

community' (p98). If this concept of the 'space of flows' is indeed central to queerscape formations, then we should expect that a progression towards the formation of online/digital queerscapes would have been a natural step for queer communities to have adopted digital and online technologies, inhabiting these domains that are functionally spaces of flows, anonymous and ephemeral. Conceptually, the use of the queerscape to understand physical, geographic and architectural usages of spaces through a queered lens is of great value when analysing how and why queer communities form.

These theorisations of queerspace by Ingram, Bell and others thus far highlight that these spaces are inherently political, but are difficult to locate. These descriptors begin to conjure imagery of guerrilla warfare: where queer individuals flicker in and out of sight, able to find shelter and form resistance, but are nonetheless decentralised, disorganised and unable to be seen. This depiction is reinforced through Reed's description of queerscapes as 'imminent', a concept that Reed (1996) uses to describe the nature of queer spaces as always ready to emerge, 'threatening' to loom over, to take place (p64). Indeed, as Reed argues, 'no space is totally queer or completely unqueerable, but some spaces are queerer than others' (p64). In acknowledging this, we can begin to understand how queerscapes emerge in spite of attempts to assimilate or isolate them. The very shifting sands nature of these queerspaces and queerscapes is what allows for them to exist despite the hostile hegemonic culture.

If queerscapes are ready to evaporate and re-emerge in a continuous cycle, how could such sites offer resistance to pervasive heteronormative practices beyond immediate survival if this is the case? Ingram attempts to address this by making a distinction between what he identifies as the more survival-oriented 'places' and the political 'spaces' that may be used for organisation, mobilisation and political action. Using the terms 'placemaking' and

‘spacemaking’ (Ingram, 1998), Ingram describes ‘space-taking [as] embodied overt resistance to a political economic status quo vis-à-vis sexuality. In contrast, placemaking seeks gaps and vacuums, "open niches" ...where heteronormative controls are less effective’. This distinction allows for queer spaces to be varied in their purpose and usage, but is still vague in how these different places/spaces function, and how we should differentiate between them.

2.4 Variations of Queerscapes

In order to find a better taxonomy of these queerscapes, we need to turn to frameworks that acknowledge the different types of queerscapes, and identify how they are used. After all, there are many ways to resist marginalisation and assimilation. Certainly, there are those that are necessary for survival and self-actualisation, and these may overlap with those that enable the leisure activities that Rojek consider so central to human life, but how can we distinguish between them in a meaningful way? In attempting to find a more suitable and specific framework that differentiates between the different uses and purposes of queerscapes, we turn to a specific framework articulated by Cottrill (2006), who approaches these concepts through a post-structuralist and architectural lens, attempting to locate and identify the different ways that queerscapes have been utilised throughout literature on queer architecture. His framework identifies three primary formations, each with their own specific motivations, practices for continued survival, and goals. They are:

- 1) Sexualised spaces, which Cottrill describes as ‘a mythic space where morality wanes and the body becomes an absolute creator of space...space appears for a moment then fades through gestures, acts and occurrences’ (p362). These spaces form an ‘invisible network’ of people and places, and can be spaces that serve multiple independent functions, one of

which is to act as a space for sexual encounters. These can be the dark concealed corners of parks, the truck stops, and other barely-visible ephemeral spaces that facilitate the expression of alternate sexualities, but do so discreetly. However, as a consequence of their high-invisibility, these spaces (and the participants who make use of them) do little to actively become involved in political life.

- 2) Sexualised-political spaces. These are areas where the ‘space is not ephemeral and invisible, but real and visibly apparent’ (p363). Such spaces are visible in the sense that they do not need to be concealed, and are often places that conduct business, such as gay bars or sex-toy shops. These spaces are both physically located over a sustained temporal duration, as opposed to the fleeting sexualised spaces above. They are also implicitly tied up with the concept of queer identity to some degree, but also function as spaces that are sites of resistance to dominant, hegemonic and policing forces of sexuality.

Sexualised-political spaces are frequently associated with the ‘visible’ queer culture, such as the bars and sex-toy shops previously mentioned, the flamboyance associated with mardi gras floats, and may be extended to television that surrounds gay culture (such as *RuPaul’s Drag Race*), but are ultimately aimed at cultivating and servicing the queer culture itself. While not explicitly addressed by Cottrill, this sexualised-political space would appear to utilise spectacle as a core feature of political engagement, using shock, colour and humour to engage with the public more broadly.

- 3) Political spaces, where the spaces themselves are disassociated from the realm of sex, despite forming around themes specific to non-heteronormative sexualities. Cottrill uses the examples of lesbian spaces, which have historically been omitted from discussions of queer architecture. This, Cottrill argues, appears to be a conscious decision as a response

to the tendency for hegemonic structures to reduce lesbian experience (as well as queer experience more broadly) to only the experience of sex. Drawing from Joey-Michelle Hutchinson's *Lesbian Space* (1999), Cottrill describes these as 'visible, permanent and defined, allowing a lesbian life to exist' (p363); these are places where non-lesbians are not necessarily denied entry but 'must follow lesbian rules upon entry'. Hutchinson's argument forms around the idea that through rendering queer identities visible through their sexuality, they are solely associated with sex to the surrounding heteronormative population, a situation that Hutchinson claims leads to the marginalisation that queerscapes struggle to survive around. Therefore, through the dissociation of sex with these spaces, lesbian communities are able to claim physical space and experience empowerment that is otherwise denied to other queer identities. Such spaces are thus able to be used to further political causes in that they can allow for political organisation, such as for lobbying, to combat the gradual gentrification that threatens queer life in urban centres, and so forth.

Using these categories, Bell's queerscapes as 'shifting spaces' only neatly fits into the first category; shifting spaces are by their nature ephemeral and unseen, failing to meet the requirements of Cottrill's sexualised-political or political spaces. However, all three of these spaces are capable of being 'imminent' using Reed's terminology, as any place could be repurposed as a queerscape, even though some places are more plausible than others. Meanwhile, Ingram's 'placemaking' serves as an analogue to the sexualised spaces, the 'space-taking' as the political spaces, and the sexualised-political as functioning somewhere between these two. Thus, this terminology that Cottrill provides helps us to categorise queerscapes by the two axes of

intention and usage. The benefit of this can be seen if we are to accept Cottrill's argument that for any queer space to have productive power, they need to be seen and felt. Using this taxonomy, the sexualised spaces that Ingram describes are but one small fragment of queerspaces, even though they have historically have been the focus of much of the study of queerscapes. Further, studying *only* these sexualised spaces avoids more complicated aspects of queer culture, ignoring questions about where queer identified individuals congregate, and what they do in such spaces.

While a comprehensive overview of the existing literature, Cottrill's attempt to identify how queer spaces have been used within literature finds a resolution to the apparent paradox of these appearing to be incompatible and mutually exclusive understandings of how queer identities exist. Cottrill writes 'Each of these modes validates one type of queer space, but none fulfill an absolute idea of queer space' (p363). To unify these, Cottrill positions the three spaces as layers of a culture, with the outer layer (as 'transparent') consisting of the stereotypical, visible aspects of queer existence best typified by the sexualised/political space. Inside this layer exists the 'translucent' layer - the political spaces - which exhibit the 'realities of the culture of each queer space' (p365), while the innermost layer, the 'opaque' layer, is where the intimate relationships of the sexualised spaces lie.

This understanding presents us with a better vantage point for exploring the nature of queerscapes. Understanding that there are multiple ways of existing and co-existing within queer spaces, we can acknowledge that for some, the de-sexualisation of their queer identity is an important facet for their empowerment in removing avenues for the dominant culture to marginalise them; for others, reveling in their queer identity *is* their form of empowerment, turning shame, humiliation, and trauma from their youth into a shield with which they can

mature and thrive as adults; yet again, for others, their queer identity may go no further than their sexual behaviour within sexual spaces, and form no significant part of their cultural identity. Any single reading presents far too simplistic a view of the multiplicity of queer existence, to say nothing of the expanding range of experiences that the queer umbrella has adopted since the theorists Cottrill cites were writing. Thus, we will incorporate these three usages - the sexual, sexualised/political, and political spaces - as the three base forms of queer space within this chapter, and will use them to demonstrate the range of ways that queer individuals can embrace the multiplicity of spaces available to them to engage in social (and leisure) behaviours, rather than remaining marginalised, isolated, or assimilated.

Do all of these various spaces truly challenge the political status quo? Ingram states that his concept of the queerscape *implicitly* challenges attempts to assimilate or isolate queer identities, but Cottrill differs, arguing that 'In order to critique heteronormativity, queer spaces must have a permanent presence. Queer spaces hiding in the underground of cities and towns create nothing more than apparitions to be forgotten and erased from culture' (p364). Therefore, while sexualised spaces may resist heteronormative assimilation and erasure, thus fitting into the model of the queerscape, it is their fleeting nature that limits its ability to be a potential tool for political change. This criticism of the theory of queerscapes, while perhaps too extreme in its willingness to minimise sexualised queer spaces in the pursuit of the study of the sexualised-political or political, does nonetheless help shift some of the focus of the theory from the more conventional (and ironically, more 'visible') aspect of queerscapes - such as the gay bars, the nightclubs, the drag shows, and the truck stops - and towards the more embedded, non-sexualised usages, including spaces designed for safety, survival and cooperation.

Cottrill's focus on positioning sexual and political spaces as oppositional raises the question: is it not possible for a queerscape to be apolitical and asexual? Cottrill briefly flirts with the idea of a 'blank zones' by examining the gaps between the works of other theorists, but leaves this question largely unfulfilled. Setting aside the larger theoretical question of whether it is possible for *any* space to be depoliticised - a position Rojek rejects entirely in claiming that even something that may seem as frivolous as 'leisure is always and already, political' (2005, p24) - from this point forward we will acknowledge that while there may potentially be such a space, it is yet to be seen convincingly, and if it were, it would have little consequence to this thesis where the focus is on exploring spaces that subvert and contest the dominant gamer subcultural identity. Similarly, while sexual spaces may be of key importance in some studies of queerscapes, we will acknowledge their features, but these are not of primary interest in the rest of this chapter. As such, we will primarily be focusing on these sexual-political and political queerscapes from this point forward.

In discussions of queerscapes, it's important to acknowledge that these spaces did not emerge in a vacuum. While there may well be hard-coded, inherent ways of 'being queer' - although this would be difficult to verify - the formation of queerscapes has historically occurred in opposition to conventional, heteronormative spaces. Ingram and Bell note that the 'shifting' nature of queerscapes has typically been a response to the criminalisation of homosexuality, or due the scandalous nature that same-sex encounters would bring. It should be made clear, however, that the nature of these spaces, and the activities that might occur within them, are not necessarily things that 'only' homosexual or transgender people do. The sort of activities we see in the 'sexualised', the 'sexual-political' and the 'political' queerscapes may have a distinctly queer angle to them, or focus on issues specific to queer communities, but these spaces

nonetheless exist around, and still facilitate, activities that are a part of heteronormative culture more broadly. The sexualised spaces, spaces that are used to engage in serendipitous sexual encounters, may occur in known 'gay' spots, but these sorts of encounters happen between heterosexual pairs no less frequently. However, these encounters need not be confined only to the dark corners of parks or the bathroom of a known gay bar. Where Reed claims that all spaces are *potentially* queer spaces, just that some are more likely to emerge as queer spaces than others, the potential for a space to become a heterosexual-sexualised space is much greater. While known gay bars may be a place for mingling and meeting other gay people, a (non-gay) bar may be used as a place for any number of functions, from the sexual to the social.

Thus it is apparent that spaces that are 'heteroscapes' - which is perhaps a superfluous term, but one that may prove useful in contrast - are spaces in society more broadly where the full range of human interactions can (and are expected to) occur. Sexual encounters, socialising and meeting new friends, formation of groups around hobbies and leisure activities, organising political protests, and everything else that has been discussed in relation to queerscapes, happens in these 'heteroscapes' without sexuality or gender necessarily being encoded within the spaces. Queerscapes don't necessarily allow for activities that are otherwise not performed by the population at large - although there may be subdivisions (eg. kink communities) that do engage in activities considered 'unusual' - but they *do* allow for certain types of individuals to participate in these activities with a comparative degree of safety. Queerscapes allow for gay men to meet at bars, for lesbians to organise a political movement, for transgender individuals to go somewhere to just 'be themselves', free from the threat of reprisal for discharging of social energies or accumulation of social capital.

2.5 Digital Queerscapes in a Gaming Context

This examination of leisure studies suggests that while there are often gatekeepers to leisure, access to leisure is an intrinsic part of human development and social function. Access to leisure is therefore not so easily dismissed as a frivolity, but better understood as an important, if not necessary, part of social existence. Where leisure spaces have historically been policed through the dominant values, power structures, ideologies, and histories of the community that have had access to these particular leisure spaces, we can view queerscapes as being locations that facilitate leisure and social formation in ways that challenge these power structures and ideologies, existing in parallel to the dominant leiscapes. However, it is in mapping these spaces and structures onto the digital sphere that we can see how these formations can be found within and around gaming spaces, and can resist the assimilation, isolation, and marginalisation of the dominant gamer identity while still participating in these leisure activities.

In this section, we wish to look not just at physical queerscapes, as Ingram et al.'s research in 1997 did, but also the digital ones that have since adapted to their respective online technologies. These spaces include chatrooms, open ended online games and simulations such as *Second Life* (2003) or *World of Warcraft* (2004), message boards, subreddits, Discord channels, and potentially unlimited other spaces that cater to community needs - however niche - through the adoption of online technologies. These digital queerscapes have occupied a rather frontier-style position in media and popular culture that is reflective of their anonymous, lawless, and fragmented nature. Lauren Rosewarne's (2016) study of media representations of sexuality, including queer sexualities, in online digital spaces is expansive, listing countless examples of the chatroom-(or *Second Life*, or any other of the myriad online virtual reality or communication tools)-as-performative, with characters utilising these technologies to play, experiment, and

perform different roles to discreetly indulge in sexual fantasies or identities. She describes the ‘affordability, accessibility and anonymity’ (p10) aspects of digital and online technologies as playing a crucial role in reducing many of the barriers to sexual experience to a negligible point. While physical queerscapes have played an important role in queer dating, casual encounters and other experiences, Rosewarne cites psychologists Michael Ross and Michael Kauth, who argue that:

For men struggling with their sexuality, going to gay bars, bookstores, or support groups makes a public statement about self-identity that can be risky and frightening. However, accessing sexual images on the Internet or participating in male chatrooms entails less personal risk or stigma. (Ross & Kauth in Rosewarne, 2016, p197).

While queerscapes have been often relegated to unsavoury depictions in media, it nonetheless stands that digital queerscapes feature a layer of safety from prejudice that existence in the physical world does not offer. These spaces offer their users a chance to be ‘themselves’, to explore their identities and sexualities in ways that Ingram’s physical queerscapes might not. The risk *and* severity of any punishments in engaging in such relationships online is greatly reduced, although by no means completely mitigated. In addition, many of these ‘safety’ aspects of queerscapes seen in the physical world are also able to be directly overlaid onto digital ones. The shifting nature and ephemerality of physical (particularly sexualised) queerscapes is seen through the many media depictions that Rosewarne (2016) identifies in queerscapes online; the use of chat rooms, of dating apps, of virtual reality, and of anonymous image searches in a sea of data flows is a natural defense to evade punitive reactions to subversive modes of sexuality.

Where physical spaces have historically relied on their shifting nature to evade negative repercussions of subversive sexualities, digital spaces are *inherently* shifting. Without any requisite physical meeting location, the IP addresses, chat locations, and virtual spaces that host these environments are fluid and dynamic due to their very nature of being anonymous, ephemeral and decentralised. It is of little surprise that internet environments would be suitable for the transition from physical-sexualised to digital-sexualised queerscapes, however, the permanent presence that Cottrill demands in order to have productive political power is challenged by the transition to this digital online medium. In this sense, it seems as though digital online political queerscapes are able to take the strengths of the sexualised queerscapes and use them to not only survive, but to thrive, to mobilise and to counter hegemonic cultures.

While queerscapes are often established in order to subvert these values and ideologies, the long history of queerscapes as often hiding in plain sight means that digital queerscapes, much like their physical antecedents, are often more subtle in their existence than it might at first seem. Physical queerscapes often needed to be prepared to vanish and re-emerge, or have a less formalised leadership structure in order to avoid targeted reprisals. In much the same way, digital queerscapes can inherit this fleeting, almost invisible nature, offering their participants an implicit assurance that these spaces will not be hostile to those who join them; that in adopting a shifting sands approach to their existence, that safety can be mostly assured, that bonds between individuals may be possible; that sexual relationships can develop, even if in a purely digital sense. In this regard, the purpose of queerscapes in digital leisure spaces remains primarily to ensure that individuals can engage in activities to discharge social energy, to generate social capital outside mere financial transactions, and to feel a sense of belonging to a group that may otherwise not occur in conventional leisure spaces. It is certainly likely that these spaces will

implicitly be charged with a 'queer' twist, but these are typically a consequence of, rather than a defining feature of, queer space formation.

As previously discussed, Ingram (1998) notes that queerscapes are established to 'embody processes that counter those that directly harm, discount, isolate, ghettoize, and assimilate...constituting a collectivity, involving multiple alliances of lesbian, gay men, bisexuals, and transsexuals and supporting a variety of activities, transactions, and functions...[and] nearly always overlaps with and is surrounded by social groups where heterosexuality is supposedly the norm' (no page). Thus, we should remember that queerscapes are inevitably embedded within a realm where heterosexuality (and the modes of existence involved in its processes) is the norm, and queerscapes must work to challenge this from within. It is with this in mind that an analysis of how queerscapes may be utilised within gaming spaces, as a counterpublic - that is, a space aware of the dominant forces that surround the space, but nonetheless subvert it - in order to offer the more full range of experiences that Rojek and others suggest is key to a social existence.

To illustrate how these spaces may play out in a gaming context, three examples are provided that align up with Cottrill's taxonomical divisions. The first, the sexual space, is perhaps best represented in digital spaces by the anonymised chatrooms and Tinder-like apps that enable quick access, fleeting stays and very few personal details. However, in game spaces, these have also found locations that are functionally less ephemeral than their physical counterparts, and have greater longevity. While such spaces often run afoul of the terms of service of a given gamespace, many services tend to turn a blind eye to such forms of sexual interaction if sufficiently isolated. To demonstrate how such a queerscape as a sexual space can

exist within a digital realm, we will examine the case of the ‘Goldshire Inn’ on the Moonguard server of *World of Warcraft*.

2.5.1: Sexual Spaces: Goldshire Inn

It is important to note that for many MMORPGs, including *World of Warcraft*, players choose to create characters on certain servers, and players are usually restricted to interactions between players who also exist on the same server⁶. While a player can potentially play different characters across multiple servers, which server one is currently playing on changes the agreed upon dynamics of the social world. Some servers allow for players of the opposing faction to always appear hostile and attackable, encouraging a focus on player vs player combat, while some disable this feature and place their focus on collaborative and cooperative monster slaying, forcing all combat to occur between players and the server itself. Meanwhile still, others servers host an environment that diminishes the importance of combat, and instead encourages players to create elaborate backstories for their characters, with players encouraged to converse with other players not as the player, but as the character. These servers are known as Role-Playing (RP) servers, attracting communities that have an interest in maintaining a thriving, bustling, organic world within digital space.

The ‘Goldshire Inn’, a normally quiet building in a hamlet in one of *World of Warcraft*’s low level zones that new players often travel through as one of their first major adventures in the game, is generally viewed as a favourable leveling experience, with most players forming positive memories of it as one of their first town encounters within the game. Enemy players

⁶ At time of writing, *World of Warcraft* is no longer solely limited to server-specific player interactions due to the nature of cross-realm zones and inviting players to temporarily join a server through forming a group with others from different servers, but this was not the case for the majority of its history in which this section examines.

rarely appear in this area, and players begin to come to terms with the base mechanics of the game, including how to accept and complete quests, and how to play their chosen character class. Occasionally high level players visit the space as a place to duel others, a practice that allows players to fight but not kill each other. In this sense, the town of Goldshire, and its inn, act as a nexus for new players to enter the world, and for high level players to return to socialise.

On one RP server known as ‘Moonguard’, Goldshire Inn takes on a distinct identity that subverts the developer’s intentions of this town as a gentle introduction to the game. On this particular server, players are greeted not with low level quests and the occasional request to duel, but with essentially naked player characters engaging in acts of simulated sex at any hour of the day. As such, this particular space has earned a reputation as ‘the unofficial swinger capital of the famous online role-playing game’ (Schott, 2017), and while the origins of this location - the how and why it came to be the hotbed of promiscuous and lewd behaviour - are not well documented, it has gained notoriety for this reputation over the years. It remains a notorious example of a sexual space that blurs the lines between queer and straight, kink and vanilla, and even at times, consensual and unwanted, as new unassuming players are often confronted with the decadent nature of this location due to the conventional quest design in the area encouraging them to complete quests in the area. Curious tourists, too, are often drawn into requests to engage in simulated sex, and while the act of sex forced upon a player in a digital sphere is in many ways qualitatively different from its occurrence in the physical world, its existence demonstrates an apparent lawlessness within this particular area; an isolated bubble of debauchery in an otherwise cohesive fantasy world of faction wars and dragon slaying. The fact that the majority of roleplayers in this location are assumed to be male, too, despite the prolific usage of female avatars, is a quirk of these digitised forms of sexual encounters.

As an infamous space within the game's community, it has certainly not flown under the radar of *World of Warcraft*'s developer, Blizzard Entertainment. In 2010 a Blizzard representative acknowledged complaints about the location, particularly the accessibility of this particular inn in a low level area that anyone may accidentally stumble across. Instead of outright banning the repurposing of this particular inn as a sexual space, Blizzard cited the preference from the moderators to encourage a 'safe and accessible environment for play' that required individual users to help police the behaviour of those in the community (McCurley, 2010). This echoes much of the sentiment of police towards gay locations and red light districts in the mid-late 20th century in Western nations, including after the decriminalisation of homosexual behaviour in these locations. While these spaces may be 'deviant' and undesired, they remain confined. If this particular inn *were* closed down and surveilled more closely, it is incredibly likely that it would see Bell's 'shifting sand' model applied, and a new hotbed would emerge in a similar location on another server, in spaces that Reed would identify as 'imminent' queer spaces.

What is it about this particular location that allows it to function, seemingly serendipitously, as a sexualised space and a queerscape? These spaces are also, much like the physical sexualised spaces Cottrill mentions, unorganised, with no 'leadership' or agenda, so how did they come to exist? And if this behaviour occurs on a role-playing realm; should it not be considered merely a more extreme form of role playing? Lee Sherlock's 'What Happens in Goldshire Stays in Goldshire' (2013), makes clear that while there is a clear dichotomy that is well understood within the game space between 'role-playing' and 'cybersex' (p167), these role-playing realms offer an opportunity for these lines to be blurred between role-play, erotic role-play ('ERP'), and cybersex, with lines differing between participants based on how the actions

the established character(s) would fit given their histories and motives. This corresponds with this chapter's assertion that the potential that role-playing - particularly within virtual realms - has had for those within the queer community to safely play with latent or closeted elements of their identity. These experiences in Moonguard's Goldshire Inn are queered by their very nature: an evergreen orgy of unknown identities and unknown genders, sometimes for in-game gold, participating in sexual experience that exists well outside the charmed circle.

Here we can see the overlap between the leisure studies and the framework of queerscapes into the digitised realm. These spaces are, in their very essence, a space for discharging social energies, for connecting to others, in a way no less 'real' than Cottrill's physical sexual queerscapes, or Ingram's concept of 'places'. Within the playerbase, however, these spaces are often rebuked. Yet, it exists almost invisibly were it not for its reputation, surrounded by non-sexual spaces, or 'heteroscapes'. One visitor to this inn comments 'I wondered, how do people find out about these things? I can't imagine that it's written up on any popular websites anywhere. It must be one of those secret dirty things that everyone seems to know about, but nobody talks openly about' ("What's so special about Goldshire Inn on Moonguard?", 2012). These spaces, knowledge of which spreads through word of mouth (and keyboard), thus remain mostly off the radar, making them difficult to lock down and study as a discrete event or space. This corresponds closely to Cottrill's sexualised space: people visit it for a time, leave when they're fulfilled, and nearly all trace of their visit is gone. Thus, these spaces fit the idea of being 'ephemeral', with the knowledge that if such a place were shut down by the game developers or community managers, it would likely re-emerge in another unpredictable location.

While this particular inn on this particular server is not inherently a ‘gay’ space, the subversive expressions of sexuality in an otherwise ‘safe’ location transgress the boundaries of acceptable sexuality, placing it within the outer limits of acceptable sexuality, and it is for this reason that we can regard it among Cottrill’s classification of a sexualised digital space. Whether or not it meets strict requirements on if this can be considered an LGBT space, it still functions as a sexualised space outside the charmed circle, where transgressive sexual behaviour (and same-sex encounters nonetheless occur regardless) repurpose the same style of architectures typified by queerscapes, and as such serves to demonstrate the way in which sexualised spaces have become more grounded, permanent and stable in the digital sphere.

2.5.2: Sexual/Political Spaces: Networks, Guilds, and Social Media Technologies

The sexual/political spaces present an important realisation of the theory seen from leisure studies earlier in this chapter. While the sexual spaces allow for a discharging of sexual energy in spaces that do not necessarily heed social or legal taboos and resituating ‘outer limits’ style sexual interactions as normative, the sexual/political spaces are better seen as those spaces that are established to facilitate the growth of communities that exist in the state of the counterpublic. Aware of their subordinate position within society, these users still desire spaces that allow for camaraderie and accumulation of social capital amongst others whose identities place them outside the charmed circle. While the gamer identity may police the boundaries of who ‘should’ or ‘should not’ be a gamer (whether intentionally or not), these sexual/political spaces allow for both embracing queer identities as a fundamental component of the player’s identity, while also allowing it to be the springboard from which players can participate in and excel at their chosen hobby.

With this understanding, LGBT gamer groups - those that exist both in-game, and on platforms that exist in conjunction with their associated games - are the best aligned examples to demonstrate the sexual/political component of digital queerscapes. These are spaces in which users or players come together under a mutual group identity for some purpose. In the case of LGBT guilds or clans, these groups typically form in order to tackle challenges in a multiplayer game that are difficult to do solo, but for any number of reasons, the individual users prefer to complete these tasks with other queer-identified individuals rather than a random selection of players of that particular game. Many of these guilds or groups also advertise themselves through repositories of queer-identified guilds/websites such as gayguilds.com, functioning as a beacon to guide other queer-identified players towards a welcoming new home in their game of choice. Further, by consciously disassociating with the greater gaming community and instead opting for a more insular experience, this may help reinforce the separation of the individual from the broader understanding of (and identification towards) the 'gamer' identity.

While these sexual/political spaces can exist within games themselves, as with guilds and clans, these sorts of spaces are also commonly experienced as adjuncts to the digital gaming spaces themselves. Facebook, Steam, and other social media based groups use these spaces as collectives that use gender or sexual identity as group cohesion tools for those who wish to discuss or celebrate their mutual leisure activities. Where many of the more mainstream gaming Facebook or Steam communities may inherit the dominant gamer subculture and ideology, these are spaces that can reject the components of it that they find undesirable. As such, they can function as 'places' (as Ingram defined them) that offer respite from harassment, and allow for participation in gaming that is comparatively safe. These spaces exist to support, augment, or

enhance the core experience of gaming, while understanding that ‘outer limit’ experiences do not ostracise others from participation within these activities.

The ‘Australian Gaymers Network’, with numerous city-based chapters (Sydney Gaymers, Melbourne Gaymers, Perth Gaymers, and Brisbane Gaymers), is an example of these sorts of sexual/political spaces within gaming communities. Organised primarily through Facebook pages and Twitter, the primary stated aims of these groups are to function as ‘an all-inclusive community’, where members can be assured an environment free from sexism, racism, biphobia, transphobia, harassment, as well as language, jokes, slurs, and stereotypes that target marginalised groups ("Resources – Australian Gaymers Network", 2019). As an inclusive and harassment free environment, these groups foster discussion and friendship formation within the queer gaming community, not just through online spaces, but also through the organisation of meetups for its members which take place in physical queerscapes (such as known safe gay bars). Alongside regular recurring social meetups, this network also invites people to special friendship-forming events such as ‘Speed Friending’ (Sydney Gaymers, 2019). The expansion of this network into the hosting of Discord servers also facilitates this social networking for those who wish to network primarily through online avenues, allowing for players to easily jump into text and voice chat with each other.

While these groups function as smaller-scale, city-wide ways for people to locally meet and socialise, there are also larger events that tie together these smaller chapters. Conventions such as ‘GaymerX’ function similarly to other fan conventions such as ComicCon. However, with a specific focus on the queer community, GaymerX ‘seeks to make the gaming world safer and more inclusive to marginalized people, especially those in the gender and sexuality spectrum’ ("About Us – GaymerX: Everyone Games", 2019). It argues that ‘Gaming,

socializing, and partying can be effective avenues to engage in social conditions that favor diversity and inclusiveness', that it wants to create 'better practices for safety and inclusiveness in physical and online gaming spaces', and to create 'a unique positive atmosphere of comfort and inclusiveness'.

Similar in nature to the Gaymer networks, Sherlock's 'What Happens in Goldshire Stays in Goldshire: Rhetorics of Queer Sexualities, Role-Playing, and Fandom in *World of Warcraft*' (2013) also discusses the significance of queer-identified guilds within gaming spaces. Sherlock notes that the formation of most (non-queer) guilds revolve around a shared goal or interest rather than 'real-world' identity; 'Most guilds, for instance, do not constellate themselves around real-world identity markers at all, let alone something as potentially transgressive as queer sexualities' (p170). Instead guilds tend to form around the degree to which investment is expected or assumed: Sherlock notes these could be the common interests (such as raiding or player-vs-player content), skill levels/time commitment (such as a 'hardcore' vs 'casual' guild), or occasionally, Sherlock also acknowledges that 'real world' identity such as 'preexisting social relationships (family, friends, coworkers, etc)' (p170) can also be a key to guild formation. It is in this much smaller subset of group formation that the sexual/political queerscapes exist. In resisting the assimilation and isolation of which queerscapes are key, it also disincentivises wider participation from those outside this community. Where groups and guilds traditionally 'constellate' around goals, the queer guild forms around gender and sexual identity. This presents the two methods of group formation as occurring along two different axes. The more 'hardcore' queer gamer would have to weigh up participation in such a queer-oriented group versus a (non-queer) group oriented towards success, whereas the queer player who requires and prioritises social participation over serious time investments and high level play would find

themselves at home in such a guild. While there is no reason that these two factors could not occur in unison - after all, there is nothing inherent in the queer player that excludes them from high level play - it demonstrates the role that queer identity may play in reinforcing viewpoints about the role of identity in play.

Thus, this model of counterpublic formations of digital queerscapes, so Sherlock and Warner would argue, implies that queer-identified guilds - and similarly, the Gaymer networks - are acutely aware of their subordinate status within the dominant gaming space and gamer culture. If queer-identified guilds establish themselves in order to offer a place to exist without the pervasive hostility of the dominant culture, then the formation of these guilds occurs - at least in part - as a response to this hostility. Thus, these spaces are established for similar sets of reasons that Cottrill's gay bar and sex toy shop are. Some of these spaces are set up to help provide a safe, nurturing 'survival' environment, subverting the charmed circle such that the 'outer limits' are no longer seen as transgressive within these groups, and queer identities are not vilified amongst its patrons. These spaces thus allow players to participate in their chosen hobby without harassment, and even enable and facilitate the social non-pecuniary and reciprocal interactions to help build social capital. Unlike sexual spaces, which are deliberately kept as places only visited fleetingly and often anonymously, these sexual/political spaces allow for longer-term relationships being established. As with the Gaymer networks, most of these groups do so through repurposing in-game tools for the users to team up, such as by granting access to a guild-specific chat function or a private group message board. Access to these spaces thus tends to be given on an invite-only approach, making accidental access to the group unlikely, and ensuring that hostile actors are able to be removed and unable to easily find a way to return. In doing so, this further reinforces the insular nature of these groups, as those who participate in

these groups may find themselves eschewing the larger gaming community in favour of these groups.

These stated goals of both the Gaymer networks and the GaymerX organisation and conventions align perfectly with Cottrill's conception of the sexual/political space, providing the ability for otherwise disconnected communities to form and foster relations, relatively free from hostility. Not only that, but in the shift from physical queerscapes towards digital ones, we can see a significant departure in how hostility is encountered. While those who make use of physical queerscapes generally have to traverse 'heteroscapes' between the comparative 'safe zones' of the queerscapes, these sorts of hazards can be minimised once an individual has access to a network of digital queerscapes, able to access one or multiple simultaneously without requiring interaction with the larger (non-queer) community. This is the largest advantage of the shift from physical to digital queerscapes; heteroscapes are rarely necessarily traversed, and if so, may be done voluntarily. In staying within environments where one's gender or sexual identity is normalised, rather than ostracised, it can also reinforce within the individual a destigmatising of their identity, leading to the positive benefits such as social engagement, the formation of social bonds, and so forth, that this chapter has sought to find through the combination of leisure and social spaces.

The sexual/political spaces we have examined so far are inward-facing, providing safety and networking opportunities for individuals within the confines of the queerscape, while still embracing their sexual/gender identity as a point of pride and a focal point with which to resist marginalisation. However, the ability for such spaces to act as advocates for the queer community outside of these insular spaces is often limited. The last space we will look at in this chapter is designed with the opposite intention in mind, finding ways to interface with the

broader community in order to change the quality of life for the affected communities on a larger scale.

2.5.3 Political Spaces: The Queer Gamer as Game Developer

The purpose of the queerscape-as-political space differs greatly from that of the sexual or sexual/political space. While both of these spaces are aimed at increasing the ability for individuals to survive, thrive, and integrate within society uninhibited by their gender or sexual identity, political spaces do so through the collective reclamation of spaces, in ways where sexual behaviours are not an outwardly visible component of their identity. In our examination of the digital queerscape, we will be following Cottrill's understanding of Hutchinson's work, whereby lesbian spaces exist as a subtler occupation of space in a desexualised context, in order to be seen as legitimised by a dominant culture that frequently reduces the lesbian identity to its fetishised and sexualised stereotype. It is for this reason that political spaces are best understood as the movement of queer identified individuals into spaces where they may occupy a position that allows for them to affect political, cultural, and legal change within this realm.

Clear delineations between the sexual/political and political spaces are harder to draw in gaming spaces themselves. However, much like sexualised/political spaces, the adjuncts to these games are as important to analyse as the game spaces themselves. Thus, in attempting to locate the political queerscape within a digital/gaming context, we need to find places where queer identified individuals begin to occupy roles that carry with them the potential to reshape the political/cultural/legal terrain of the gaming industry itself. It is through this understanding of the political queerscape that we can see that the act of going into video game creation/development and the industries that surround it that we can see a network of likeminded individuals able to

begin to produce these changes, in order to begin to challenge pre-existing paradigms on how queer representation is handled within game worlds, or to enact rules from the developer side that identify and limit homophobia and transphobia within gaming spaces. In this sense, the movement of queer players into positions such as the game developer itself enables these networks to spread and hold sizeable influence. In much the same way that Hutchinson's concept of the lesbian space is one in which non-lesbians are not denied entry, but must follow the rules, we can see how the integration of queer identified and allied individuals within these spaces leads to an atmosphere where this network can set the rules for these spaces.

Viewing the political queerscape as the movement of groups of likeminded individuals into positions of influence in order to enact and affect change is one way in which the trajectory of the gaming industry, and indeed the cultural identities that form around it, can change. While this visualisation of political queerscapes has potential to, over time, affect change within gaming spheres to challenge ingrained ideologies and identities, such as the gamer identity itself, we cannot ignore that political spaces exist as a privileged form of queer identification. The occupation of these positions - of game developer, of media reviewer, of advocate - do not exist in the same way that the ephemeral 'shifting sands' sexualised queerscapes do. Rather, political queerscapes *require* their fixity to enact the long term structural change that they desire. Political spaces often work within the political or legal system to enact change, rather than existing in opposition or resistance to these systems. However, these queerscapes still challenge the assimilation, isolation, and ghettoization, of the dominant culture, and are still aware of their 'subordinate' existence within a counterpublic. As such, these spaces can channel resources and effort into these conflicts, focusing on the bigger picture, while the sexual and sexual/political spaces focus more on the immediate needs of the queer community.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter set out to establish a framework for conceptualising and analysing queerscapes, demonstrating how they can serve numerous functions based on the needs of the participants. Extrapolating this body of theory on to digital spaces helps us to understand the mechanisms that factor into the formation and regulation of these spaces. In addition, understanding that leisure activities are not just mere frivolous tasks people do in order to pass the time away, but function as important elements of social life and development, forces us to recognise that the conflicts over the gamer identity have impacts beyond the mere usage of a label. Strategies of disempowerment seek to not only reduce the agency of individuals and groups within a given domain; they also limit their ability to engage in the generation of social capital that is a necessary component of social life. The level to which people feel capable of integrating into these social environments - and the degree to which they can identify with the surrounding culture - greatly impacts the extent to which this social and personal fulfillment can occur. Further, the concept of the charmed circle highlights the significance of understanding marginalisation as occurring across multiple axes, and spreads this experience of 'queering' of even non-LGBTIQ identities to those who land outside the inner circle. In this sense, disempowerment is a strategy that may intentionally affect one group, but incidentally affect a much broader range of for any who step outside of this charmed circle into the outer limits.

These concepts of queerscapes may hold great significance for those who experience some degree of ostracisation or discrimination due to their gender or sexual identity, but also has implications for those whose lives and leisure activities fall outside the charmed circle, and for our purposes, when those leisure spaces intersect with game spaces. It is not only queer identities

that are at risk of existing on the periphery of acceptability, and while cultural norms and values do shift over time, there is no guarantee that other forms of sexual behaviour, experience, or identity, will not come to refill and replace the outer limits as certain forms of sexual and gender expression become normalised and destigmatised. Thus, outside of the standard heteroscape exists a range of spaces that not be properly encompassed by the term ‘queerscape’, but nonetheless act as subaltern counterpublics, and more importantly, as spaces that embody a resistance to assimilation and offer a site of political protest to hegemonic and heteronormative expectations.

By utilising digital spaces to construct queerscapes, it allows for individuals to become engaged in these environments without leaving oneself vulnerable to the kind of physical and legal consequences that physical queerscapes faced throughout history. Unlike physical queerscapes - which Bell described as a ‘space of flows’, blending between heteronormative - and which Cottrill described as ‘sexualised’ spaces, digital ‘scapes’ do not require one to place themselves into a position of extreme vulnerability when entering such a space. Further, in using Cottrill’s taxonomy for queerscapes, this multifaceted approach to queer existence and survival within digital gaming environments demonstrates not only that this taxonomy is functional outside of its original scope, but also allows for us to meaningfully apply different approaches to digital queerscapes, depending on their form and function.

The next chapter in this project seeks to integrate the usage of video game spaces as tools for sexual, sexual/political, and political queerscapes into a more specific case study. While this chapter saw queerscapes as physical or digital spaces that had repurposed the architecture of a given space for fulfillment of queer needs, these spaces nonetheless function within, and as such are subject to the rules of the game space. To show the productive power of gaming at work, the

frameworks established in this chapter will be used to show how games themselves can be reconstituted into a form that befits the needs of a community through the potential of participatory culture.

Chapter 3: The Productive Power of Modding

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Play Practices, Playbour, and Modding

3.3 The Sims Modding Community

3.4 The Sims 4 Mods as Cultural Artifacts

3.5 Mods, Politics, and the Civil Rights of Sims

3.6 Conclusion

3.1 Introduction

This project has understood that while there exist gamer identities and subcultures, these are vastly different from game communities: the tighter-knit groups that often share a mutual goals, such as the sharing of knowledge, the generation of social capital within a small group, an emphasis on self-improvement, and so forth. In this chapter, this distinction becomes necessary as one particular community takes a central focus. As the common thematic element underlying project has been locating ways for those who exist outside the hegemonic identity and dominant subculture to utilise the architecture afforded to them creatively to resist their marginalisation, the range of methods one may employ in doing so is as varied as these communities themselves, from the repurposing of spaces to suit the needs of the user (as in sexual spaces), to engaging in acts of visibility and activism (sexual/political spaces), to the collaborative efforts to change the legal landscape through the occupation and reclamation of space (political spaces). These political spaces within the realm of the video game industry includes the gradual occupation of the various roles that allow for individuals to form networks that are capable of challenging the status quo, including the occupation of roles that affect the development of video games themselves. While

the gamer identity espouses a certain set of ideologies, it is in embracing these digital forms of political spaces that we can see challenges to this identity truly flourish. In continuing this theme into this chapter, we will turn towards one specific form of playful repurposing of the game space in a way where subversive play practices can be embraced through the practice of modding.

The dominant gamer identity as explored in this thesis is seen to offer an alleged universal understanding of the gamer, who exhibits traits within what can be considered the ‘charmed’ circle of gaming, and where failure to exhibit these traits leads to the rendering of the individual as unintelligible as a gamer. Chapter 1 introduced the concept of disqualification as a strategy to delegitimise certain individuals for not being ‘a real gamer’, as well as certain forms of play practices (such as ‘casual’ play) that was seen to not constitute playing a ‘real game’. While this act of delegitimation seeks to exclude certain people from challenging values intrinsic to the gamer subculture, this chapter will demonstrate the potential of a community to actively thrive even while the game, and its players, are marginalised and exist on the periphery of gaming. As such, this chapter will present possible pathways through which the gamer identity *could* resignify itself, if earnest attempts to revitalise this identity were made. We have already seen there are innumerable ways of which one can approach, participate in, and enjoy gaming, many of which deviate from this privileged mode of play, and while these different approaches to play can coexist in the same game space, the very way that a game is played is capable of changing the nature of the game itself. In her analysis of the gamer in relation to fandoms, Hanna Wirman (2007) argues that the act of play itself is instrumental to the ‘life’ of a text; so much so, in fact, that ‘by playing [a game,] the player is actually partly responsible for the game as a cultural text’ (p380). This reframes games as more than simply ergodic literature: to Wirman, games are produced (as textual productivity) through the *act* of play. Rather than viewing the gamer identity

as singular, Wirman differentiates between two types of self identifying gamer: the first is the ‘power gamer’, often regarded as the ‘hardcore’ gamer (and the antithesis of the ‘casual’ gamer), where one chooses to engage in ‘instrumental productivity’ (p380), by which one sifts through databases, adds third party modifications to the game, and performs other tasks external to the game that assist in performance and efficiency within the game itself; the second is the ‘fan’ gamer who, rather than prioritising efficiency, is concerned about ‘expressive productivity’ (p381): or the narrative elements of a game, whether intrinsic or emergent, and who help create and augment the narrative or aesthetic components of games. For some, this may be the compilation of information to appear on wikia pages for games, while for others, this may take the form of creating fanfic, or attending conventions for their favourite cultural products.

Wirman’s subdivisions illustrate that these different interpretations of how a gamer views play allows for different elements of the medium and of the community to play a role in their own identification with a video game. As such, these two forms of identification in relation to a game present two alternative modes of ‘being a gamer’. While the power gamer and the fan gamer incorporate these attributes into their enjoyment of the game (and game worlds) in different ways - the power gamer may do so through the creation of a set of spreadsheets to help optimise damage output or economic efficiency within a game, while the fan gamer may create elaborate backstories for characters that tap into the lore of the world - they nonetheless draw from their similarities with fandom subcultures in their esoteric knowledge of fictional universes. Wirman argues that how gamers describe their own affiliation to a certain game should ‘lead us to reconsider fandom also as a scholastic definition when studying contemporary computer games’ (p377). Thus, where the previous chapter demonstrated that queer practices with game spaces can lead to alternative engagements that utilise these spaces for sexual, social, and political purposes,

Wirman describes the process through which fan gamers will engage in creative works using game assets, such as through the creation of machinima, discussions of lore, fan fiction and other creative works; play practices that escape the idea of play as being self-contained, apolitical, and rooted in mastery over the game systems. To the fan gamer, the extensive databases and mods to improve efficiency hold little meaning in their appreciation of a game; instead, the value of the text lies in its potential for narrative and aesthetic experiences. However, this form of gamer was hardly represented in our examination of the dominant gamer identity, to whom competitiveness and compliance to geek masculinity were the privileged modes of being. Thus, in this chapter, it is proposed that the fan gamer, whose primary concerns are about expressive productivity generated through the game, offers an alternative heritage of the gamer that is often disqualified, sidelined, and ignored, even in critiques of the gamer identity that would benefit from such an exploration.

If, as Wirman claims, consumption of the text produces textual productivity, we can treat engagement with game worlds as part of a practice of consumption that is also capable of creation. We can visualise the formation of queerscapes in game worlds as embodying this process: through the formation of an LGBT guild in the game space, an otherwise ordinary part of gameplay within many games, it changes the nature of the game for those for whom they are a part of it, and potentially even changes it for those external to these guilds too through in-game interactions. Similarly, through engaging in same-sex romance options in games that offer them, the act of pursuing these options leads to the active creation of this narrative to the player for whom it is their canonical play experience. This sort of personalisation of the game space helps express the player's relationship to the game more fully.

As a tool that facilitates not only the interaction with, but the generation of, textual productivity, the practice of modding presents a prime example of how the user can become intimately involved in the creation of expressive productivity. In turning our focus within this chapter to this particular area, we wish to look at not only how modding offers solutions to enhance and expand upon the queerscapes that we explored earlier, but also to examine how modding, as a labour practice, can reshape and subvert the dominant gamer identity's need for homogeneity through the creation of cultural artifacts can actively resist these hegemonic gamer ideals. However, these labour practices stem from a fundamental shift in how labour can be shifted from the professional to the end-user. This shift, often referred to as 'participatory culture', comprises a range of practices, from simple remixing, to the creation of creative deviations (such as fanfics), and of particular significance to this chapter, the act of creating content that modifies an existing game either through provided toolkits (user-generated content) or modding tools. In examining this practice as an adjunct to play, it will also position it as an increasingly powerful tool for creating bespoke game spaces that suit the needs of the user, rather than relying on them being provided by developers. This chapter will therefore begin by understanding the link between modding and participatory culture, and tease out the complexities that surround the ethics *and* the political importance of these practices as outsourced labour. In so doing, we will apply this theoretical approach to one particular community that primarily produces expressive productivity mods: the modding community of *The Sims 4*.

3.2 Play Practices, Playbour, and Modding

The concept of participatory culture and participatory media are revolutionary inasmuch as they have changed the landscape for how people receive, respond to, and contribute towards

cultural production and consumption. The mainstream adoption and ubiquity of technologies such as the World Wide Web and smartphones fundamentally change the way that information is distributed, as well as our expectations of customisable and robust platforms that allow for its users to have a personalised experience. As a consequence, it has allowed for individual users to disseminate ideas to other users, circumventing the use of gatekeeper services like broadcast media channels in the form of newspapers, television, and radio. Steering away from these technologies towards more peer-to-peer forms of media consumption is not simply a shift in convenience; rather, some theorists have proposed that it is a fundamental feature of a new information era. Media scholar Lawrence Lessig (2008) argues that the act of cultural creation and distribution typically occurs through one of two paradigms: ‘Read Only’ culture and ‘Read/Write’ culture. A society exists within the ‘Read Only’ paradigm when its cultural artifacts are produced almost solely through production houses, publishers, studios, and the like, and are relatively uninfluenced by their audience, who are almost entirely to be considered passive consumers. ‘Read/Write’ culture, on the other hand, allows for participants - the consumers themselves - to reshape the culture through the production of their own artifacts, remixing and reproducing to produce novel, often non-commercial products. YouTube vlogs, remixes, memes, Facebook groups, and other forms of peer-created content, are some of the features of our contemporary Read/Write culture; as are, of course, mods.

Where the 20th Century saw much of its media existing in this ‘Read Only’ form, the integration of digital and online technologies saw a shift towards a Read/Write culture. This also carries with it a change in our expectations of cultural artifacts, to appreciate the messy, the collaborative, semi-professional (and sometimes, downright amateur), in its production of its cultural artifacts. In reveling in this grass-roots approach to cultural creation, participatory

culture radically reshifts the trajectory of cultural consumption by enabling the consumers of culture to also play a significant role in the creation of culture. However, instead of viewing this practice of Read/Write culture as novel, and as distinct and new to the 21st Century, Lessig (2008) notes that it is in fact the Read Only model of media consumption that is an historical anomaly, enabled through the uncontested broadcast media of the 20th century, and the professionalisation of entertainment that came along with it. Lessig writes that ‘Never before in the history of human culture had the production of culture been as professionalized. Never before had its production become as concentrated. Never before had the “vocal cords” of ordinary citizens been as effectively displaced...The twentieth century was the first time in the history of human culture when popular culture had become professionalized, and when the people were taught to defer to the professional.’ (p29). Thus, the adoption of Read/Write culture should in fact be seen as reversion to a more traditional form of cultural creation that considers its participants necessary to this process.

Additionally, not only does this paradigm permit the non-professional individual to participate in cultural creation, but it also shifts the drivers of culture from the older members of society, for whom cultural production is a *techne* that has been perfected over decades of refinement, towards its youth, who can create a cultural artifact (even if unprofessionally) that has significant reach and impact. Lessig notes that the “young people of the day” add to the culture they read by creating and re-creating the culture around them. They do this re-creating using the same tools the professional uses’ (p28). As such, Lessig paints a picture of Read/Write culture as being not only a force that allows individuals to reclaim the tools of cultural production, but it allows for the ‘young people of the day’ to meaningfully impact the values that a society adopts, or to offer challenges to the dominant ideologies that leave the youth unsatisfied

with the direction that society is moving towards. Culture in this sense is malleable, and not at all monopolised by the elite. While pirate radio, bootlegging, and other practices of subversive media replication and distribution did exist that could challenge the will of the media producers, this one-to-many model of media distribution had the potential to control the flow of information without substantial possibilities for resistance. The digital and online tools that the late 20th/early 21st century brought to the public's disposal began to change the way that consumers of media could participate in *how* media is consumed, and what is done with it once it has been received by a consumer.

This is not to propose an uncritical or romanticised view of the technologies of Read/Write or remix culture. Certainly, these technologies are not without their hazards; the memes that proliferate social media technologies can propagate false information and harmful ideologies, or can serve to reinforce dominant paradigms, just as easily as they can challenge and subvert dominant media technologies. Yet, it is through the rebalancing of the power of cultural creation from producers back to the individual that participatory culture can affect cultural change. As the adoption of the tools of participatory culture further increases, the role that individuals can take in the repurposing of technology and media - and in our case, a game - has become gradually more integrated into these business models.

The practice of modding is perhaps the best example of how a participatory culture, armed with the tools of the day, can reshape a game space by making adjustments that suit the needs of the user without relying on the author or the professional to do so. As a practice, modding is performed by non-developers of games - that is, the players and enthusiasts themselves - who wish to enhance, augment, repurpose, or otherwise alter the game experience, and do so by creating patches that alter the base game's files in some way. Definitions of what

constitutes a mod, and who counts as a modder, vary, but Alexander Unger (2012) provides a functional definition that allows for a rather expansive scope on modding that will be useful in our examination of mods. To Unger, ‘a mod is any form of noncommercial modification of a proprietary digital game. To be more precise, any modification of the software code of a proprietary digital game made by nonemployed fans or gamers that is produced and distributed via the WWW’ (2012, p514). Therefore, we can view modding as needing to fulfill two primary criteria: it needs to modify an existing game in some way, and it needs to do so without explicit expectations of remuneration, including as part of a contract or condition of employment.

While the first of these conditions is fairly straightforward - one could hardly be said to be a modder if they do not modify a game at all - the second one raises an interesting point. Modding is to be performed by those non-professional enthusiasts, those for whom engagement in participatory culture holds appeal. However, it is also understood to be a ‘labour of love’, whereby hobbyists and enthusiasts dedicate their spare time to the enhancement or augmentation of a product they already enjoy, and the absence of any remuneration is assumed and unchallenged. Hector Postigo’s (2010) usage of modding understands it as more than just a fun pastime for enthusiasts, offering two different readings of modding as a productive force. Under a political economy/neo-Marxist perspective, Postigo sees modding as a way to encapsulate player passion into commodifiable products; as such, ‘modding straddles the lines between professional production and amateur contributions more thoroughly...They are a potential source of legitimate content, a potential labor pool (both for free and recruited paid labor), and active innovators’ (para. 2). Yet, it can also be viewed as an inevitable component of participatory culture, reframing this labour as a form of end-user empowerment: ‘fans of media content who actively remix and reshape their favourite television shows, graphic novels, and video games are

seen as empowered and their appropriations interpreted as resistive, pushing content in new direction and challenging categorical representations in media...fandom can be read as empowering and with its resistive and situated re-workings of commercial content can push against prescribed meanings' (para. 8). These two readings are not mutually exclusive, of course. As Postigo further states, 'Mods can be resistive and purely an outcome of hobbyist intentions while at the same time that they are part of the cultural industry' (para. 10). In identifying these two distinct (but overlapping) narratives, we can see how modding is both a way of harnessing labour at little cost *and* a way for fans of a game to participate in its life cycle. The tension between these two coexisting readings is one that we will see underpinning much of the debates around participatory culture.

Media theorist Kuchlich (2005) errs towards this negative reading of participatory culture, identifying modding as a form of fan appreciation, but one that harnesses a form of 'free' labour that enhances the variety and versatility of a product by avid fans of any given game. In acknowledging that the history of modding has long been associated with outsourcing unpaid labour, Kuchlich refers to the genre-codifying first person shooter *Doom* (1993) which contained an editor utility that enabled any player with access to the game to create their own content. In so doing, it benefitted the developer/producer (id Software); 'to enjoy all the free fan-created content now coming available, you first had to pay your toll to id and Apogee' (Kuchlich, "The History of Modding", para. 2). Similarly, *Quake* was shipped with level editors to facilitate fan created content, creating a trend; the revolutionary *Half-Life* (1998) began as a *Quake II* mod, and in turn *Half-Life*'s level editors were used to create *Counter-Strike* (1999), arguably 'the most successful mod in computer game history' ("The History Of Modding", para. 4). The usage of modding to create total-conversion mods - whereby an entirely new game is created through

the assets and engine of an existing game - has shown that the scope of modding can range from the minor (bug fixes, aesthetic content), to the expansive (including total conversion mods). In this sense, modding has enabled rapid iteration and development of existing games to produce new content that could not have been possible to create in isolation, but are instead *reliant* upon each other in their development.

This form of rapid modification of a base game as a process through which new content (if not a standalone title entirely) is created demonstrates how modding provides a more complete, unpaid form of the finished product of the developer's game without any cost to the developer, and can also act as a form of recruitment for producing further products. If a dedicated fan can produce a more complete, finished product than the developer's team - and will do so for virtually no reward other than a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment - who better to employ for future products? Game design is still subject to the economic practices of business, and cheap, resourceful, and efficient labour will always be desirable, particularly when fans of a given game series may be honoured to have their content legitimised. Kuchlich considers modding in this sense to be seen as a form of 'playbour', a form of labour that is 'simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited' (Terranova, 2000, p32 in Kuchlich, "Modding as Precarious Labour", para. 1), an exploitative aspect of unpaid labour that 'renders it unclassifiable in traditional terms of work and leisure' (Kuchlich, "Modding as Precarious Labour", para. 1). Certainly, if a lone fan can generate content for a game that is enjoyed to the extent that it can become a standable title, it might seem to challenge traditional economic models with respect to the creation of creative content, offering a low cost buy-in to the world of content generation. This concept of playbour also encompasses user-generated content more broadly, as it describes the practice of converting unpaid labour into an enhancement to a

product. It either enables the fan to become an extension of the existing company - who manage to retain the rights to all content generated under the licences of the software - or it enables the fan to become the producer of new content. In this sense, 'playbour' offers a pathway through which the line between amateur and professional can be blurred, and removes expectations of remuneration in favour of self-satisfaction.

Kuchlich's usage of playbour considers it an inherently exploitative practice, and while it gives us insight into how these mechanisms harness user enthusiasm into increasing the value of a product, in so doing, it also minimises the positive potential this can also offer. Playbour *does* enhance the value of the original product, and often at the expense of the unpaid labourer's time and creativity. However, if we accept that playbour is an exploitative practice of the labour of the modders, then we must also consider that this exploitation need not be a one-way street.

Un beholden to the parent company, modders have the potential to intervene in game assets and narratives in a way that the developers might never have approved.

It is this latter perspective that we wish to follow in this chapter. While the limitations and its shortcomings of playbour as an outsourced and unpaid labour source are apparent, it suffices for us to acknowledge that while there are potentially exploitable properties inherent in the communities surrounding the practice of modding, these are not the focus of this chapter. Instead, we will turn to these productive properties of modding that allow for this form of resistance, and analyse how it can embody subversive play practices that disrupt the narratives surrounding gaming cultures and identities. We also do not want to omit the practice of user-generated content that does not require any modification of the game code, but rather uses in-game features (such as character creation, map-building modes, and the like) to augment the content of the base game without any technical requirements. However, for the most part, we

should understand modding and user-generated content (UGC) as roughly equivalent in their goal, as cultural artifacts created by end-users to enhance, update, or complete the base game in some way; whether the tools were supplied by the developers or not is less important than the creation of these artifacts themselves.

Further, it should be noted that while the project to this point has primarily examined interactions within and surrounding game spaces by the end users, this marks a point in the project where the focus shifts somewhat from the players-as-users to an examination of the makers of these cultural artifacts. However, these should not be seen as incompatible focuses of study: T.L. Taylor's *Play Between Worlds* (2006) provides a important justification for why examining play culture and maker culture alongside each other – if not interchangeably – is critical to a full understanding of play practices. Maker culture, an ill-defined concept that could be used to describe a range of practices from asking questions on message boards, to making FAQs to help fellow players, to even the formation of in-game structures (such as guilds) all blur the line between what constitutes play and what could be seen as 'labour'. It is in understanding play practices as existing along a continuum of labour that it is possible to view modding as a natural part of play practices surrounding games. These two components are, then, difficult to consider distinct and separate, and thus to examine the modding practices of players can be considered to be a suitable extension of the previous chapter's examination of in-game behaviours, group formations, and so forth.

The range and scope of mods is as expansive as one's imagination allows. In his investigation of mods, Scacchi (2010) notes the sheer variety of types of mod, from user interface customisations, to total conversion mods, machinima/art mods, as well as extending the term to encompass non-software purposes when customising PCs. The ways in which one can

participate in the act of modding are vast, and signify a dedication to the game (or software, or hardware) that goes beyond merely enjoying the source material. Modding allows for players to take apart a game and rework it, such as by addressing flaws or insufficient information in the user interface, by completing unfinished components of the released game, or by utilising the base engine to produce an entirely new experience. Far from being a one way street, with free labour siphoned from end-user to developer, modding exists on a spectrum of this power relationship, where developers both siphon the labour of their users, *and* in turn the product is changed by this labour. Fans have the power to reshape the game space to their liking, within limitations. Sotamaa (2010) describes mods as ‘an intriguing and long-lasting form of player production and have been an essential part of PC gaming for over a decade now’ (p240), and indeed, the modding communities that have sprung up around various (sometimes unexpected) games have demonstrated the amazing creative and productive potential that the end-user can have on games without being a part of its core development at all. To Sotamaa, ‘modders’ - those who participate in the creation of mods for games - are intriguing objects of study ‘not only because the modder culture is a fascinating subject of study in its own right but also because they offer a telling example of the contemporary overlap between media consumption and production’ (p240). This is why any simple reading of playbour as exploitative demands context: it also acts as a basis for user empowerment in challenging the narrative of users as passive consumers of media.

It is also important to note that modding need not be a subversive play practice in the slightest. It need not defy the developer’s expectations, or offer options that the developers would not have included, had they had the time, development resources, and scope. However, modders tend not to have these sort of restrictions, with deadlines usually a non-issue, performed

at low cost (with the major cost an opportunity cost, as a labour of love that consumes time), and can include whatever scope is within the modder's desires and proficiency. Indeed, there are many reasons *why* someone may choose to engage in modding of a game, and Sotamaa identifies five primary motivations behind why modders chose to participate in this practice:

- 1) **Playing:** These are players that appreciated the core game, but found it to be 'incomplete' and wanted to help flesh it out, and so became modders.
- 2) **Hacking:** These are the sort of modders that enjoy taking apart a system and find out how it works; in so doing, they like to see what the limitations of the system are.
- 3) **Researching:** These modders focus less on the building aspect of modding in favour of examining a system that reflects some technical proficiency in the real world. Sotamaa uses the example of how interacting with the systems underlying *Operation Flashpoint*, as a military simulation game, can be a learning experience.
- 4) **Artistic expression:** For some, modding itself is an act of creation, and allows for a modder to engage in using the game as a canvas on which to paint.
- 5) **Cooperation:** The last type of modder identified is one who, above all else, enjoys the collaborative part of modding, and appreciates the opportunity to take part in the camaraderie that teamwork requires to produce a product. Part of this is also seen to be 'a need to transcend alienation'.

(Sotamaa, 2010, p246)

This taxonomy of modder mindsets allows us to understand the various ways in which modding can be seen and approached. It also shows that there can be some overlap *between* the mentalities - one might adopt modding as a pastime to be part of a collaborative project *and*

because they want to see their favourite game more complete - but it also lets us visualise modding as a hobby that a variety of people can engage in for a variety of purposes. Modders embrace a range of practices that specifically cater to the instrumental and the expressive, the hardcore and the casual, the self-identified gamer and the disqualified 'casual' player.

In this chapter, we will be looking at a particular subset of modders that facilitate 'casual' and 'fan' play, and do so through moving into positions that are digital equivalents to the political spaces. Where the dominant gamer identity privileged certain forms of play practice over others, this section will focus on forms of playbour that shift away from competitiveness and efficiency in favour of using game spaces as tools for Wirman's expressive productivity.

3.3 The Sims Modding Community

The remainder of this chapter will serve as a close analysis of one particular modding community that has grown over almost two decades. This community in question is for the game series *The Sims* (2000-2014), and has managed to challenge the dominant gamer ideology without necessarily confronting it directly; rather, it does so through its mere existence, and through the creation of mods that reject notions of instrumental productivity in favour of expressive productivity. This series has been widely analysed and has retained a place in popular culture, and it is in looking at how the modders approach this game series that we can start to see just how much a community can begin to function as a political space, in order to commandeer a product and help steer it in the direction that they wish to see it heading. So much so, in fact, that to analyse *The Sims* game series in isolation from its modding community is to ignore that which gives it its identity. While a game may be representative of a team (or a director's) perspectives, its mods illustrate how it is received, to whom it is significant, and how it can be repurposed.

The original incarnation of *The Sims* was first published by Maxis in 2000, but has continued to publish direct sequels (*The Sims 2* (2004), *The Sims 3* (2009), *The Sims 4* (2014)), as well as expansion packs that provide additional content (such as *The Sims 2: Pets* (2006) and *The Sims 3: Ambitions* (2010)) and various spin-offs (including *The Sims Online* (2002) and *The Sims Medieval* (2011)). As one of the best selling and most popular game series of all time, *The Sims* series deviates significantly from many other best selling genres, choosing to provide a sandbox experience with virtually no explicit goals set. Instead, much of the focus of the game series rests on its extremely customisable character creation, the navigation of social relationships, home development and decoration, and the development of skill sets and career objectives. Where Jenkins (1998) critiqued the proliferation of games focused around ‘boy’ play practices of exploring, dominating, and exploiting spaces, *The Sims* instead prioritises creation, nurturing, maintenance, and growth. The fact that *The Sims* remains one of the most popular game series of all time to this day gives some indication to the timeless appeal that this game series offers, whether it is used by individuals as a form of wish fulfillment - say, for those who long for home ownership - or as a form of escapism.

Understanding *The Sims* as an open-ended sandbox game - or as a ‘software toy’ as lead designer Will Wright describes it (Consalvo, 2003b, p5) - points to its purpose as not existing to necessarily challenge the player, but to allow them to indulge in their creativity, or to embrace what Jenkins describes as emergent narratives (2004), those that result through versatile unscripted character interactions, rather than pre-scripted explicit narrative and dialogue. It is in this open-endedness in character relations that it presents itself as a possible queerscape, enabling playspaces that offer character interactions that can supercede the prejudices of the ordinary world. Mia Consalvo’s *It’s A Queer World After All: Studying The Sims and Sexuality* (2003b)

demonstrated the potential for the game series to reframe queer sexualities, even back in its initial incarnation (*The Sims* (2000)). Consalvo highlighted its ability to engage in extensive creation possibilities for Sim appearances, and noting that ‘Sexual orientation in *The Sims* is set adrift—detached from identity or essence [sic] —it is something one does, rather than what one is’ (p34). Indeed, this performative nature of *The Sims* is a significant component of the play it offers as a sandbox game, and in offering ways to ‘queer’ the play experience without it being a hard-coded aspect of the game experience, but rather part of the emergent narrative that organically evolves through character interactions. These dynamic and robust relationships have remained the foundation of *The Sims* gameplay throughout the series, and all other features - from the way a house is built, the furniture purchased, and the skills (e.g. artistic, musical, physical skills) acquired - play a role in how these character interactions occur.

For all the appeal these games hold on their own, though, the modding community that has formed around *The Sims* is breathtaking in its creativity and devotion to augmenting the already saturated game series. By 2006, Prügl and Schreier (2006) identified that the modding potential for *The Sims* games was seen as a ‘promising means of opening up the innovation process to customers’ (p237), with the ideas generated and realised by the fans and modders becoming an integral part of further official content produced by the developers, a process they refer to as ‘community sourcing’ (p238). While we have presented the idea that modding as a form of playbour can be exploitative, and should be approached with a critical eye, the major benefits that this offers is that of user empowerment: ‘Such tools enable customers to create a product in response to their individual needs’ (p238). These tools were found to be sufficient to turn the game into its own ‘self-generation content system’ (p246), being able to rely almost completely on their fans to help drive the cycle of content development as required for users.

This sort of software development cycle - where the developers release a product (with a toolkit), the toolkit is used to generate content, this content is repackaged and recycled into official content, and so on - hints towards a form of feedback loop that directly involves the users. In this sense, the modding community is inextricably linked with the game's content itself; the authors of future content for *The Sims* expansion packs or standalone titles are partially, even if indirectly, the modders themselves. This opens up the doorway for us to understand the current incarnation of *The Sims* - that is, *The Sims 4* (2014) - to be not just the result of a game development team working in isolation, but a process of iterative design that is infused with the ideas, artwork, and potentially even the very politics, of the modders themselves. This is why it is impossible to ignore the modding community when looking at *The Sims* as a product; the mods themselves can, and often do, become legitimised through the content creation cycle.

In studying the modding culture surrounding *The Sims* as a game series, our focus will centre around the mods available to *The Sims 4* (2014), and will also limit our focus to the PC version of the game due to limitations with modding on the console versions. However, it should not be seen as a subculture; there is no synthesis of style or bricolage at play here. Instead, this should be understood to be a community, a small but interconnected group of individuals whose contributions are seen to benefit the group as a whole. While a more historical examination would be well suited to starting with the mods from the very first *The Sims* game in 2000, this chapter intends to engage in some degree of textual analysis of these mods, focusing on the cultural properties of the mods, as well as their impact on the game series, rather than any strict historical analysis, although in some cases the history of some mods will be significant in relation to their present day politics (as is the case with mods surrounding same-sex marriage and gender presentation). Our focus in such an analysis is to examine how one particular modding

community can exist at the periphery of what is seen as legitimate gaming, due to its ‘casual’ label. As such the mods we will examine will demonstrate how modding, as a cultural practice of production and consumption, can be used to produce experiences and communities - including queerscapes - that are not necessarily intended by the developers. We will focus more on how the contemporary culture functions, how the relationship between developer and modder exists in this iteration of the game, what philosophies underpin it with almost two decades of growth, and how these mods are financed. Broadly speaking, the trends we see around *The Sims 4* and its modding community are echoed in its earlier incarnations, even though the specifics of how they interact may be different (eg. communicating primarily through forums between the years 2000-2010 rather than posting on Tumblr). However, by selecting to focus our scope on *The Sims 4* in particular, we can see that this continues to be a thriving community to this day that embraces a distinct and divergent form of play(bour) from that of the dominant gamer culture.

Before examining the cultural artifacts of the mods themselves, it is important to understand the economic system in which these mods are produced. In examining Unger’s definition of modding, Unger claims that modding relies on a noncommercial creation and distribution of fan content. However, particularly within the modding community of *The Sims*, it seems as though modding does not simply rely on the noncommercial distribution of content, but that payment and remuneration are often seen as antithetical to the concept of modding itself. In the early days of *The Sims* modding, Prügl and Schreier found that ‘users actively exchange the files they create, meaning that there is also an ‘online community market’ for the files themselves. However, there is no traditional market mechanism – users generally do not ‘charge’ anything for their files (e.g. monetary compensation, barter trade), that is, these exchanges are predominantly free of charge’ (p245). This form of fan creation reflects an economy that is

largely driven by a desire to help fellow players to create more fulfilling and expansive worlds, rather than to do so for financial gain.

However, it is also important to note that these mods exist in a state of precariousness; the mod economy exists under the assumption that mods only exist, legally, so long as they explicitly *do not charge* for their content. By its very nature, mod content breaches almost all End User Licence Agreements (EULAs) automatically; Michigan Technology Law Review (2012) describes mods as ‘exist[ing] in a consistently shifting legal grey area’, due to the fact that essentially ‘all modifications [are] infringements of copyright, as they are code-based adjustments to an existing computer program’. This means that ‘mods are “legal” only insofar as game developers suffer them to be so; the moment a developer finds a mod distasteful, it can be found to infringe copyright’ (para. 5). This precariousness of mods lends itself to a ‘live and let live’ approach; so long as addons stay under the radar - or if they do not, they align with the politics of the developers - they rarely see legal consequences for breaching their EULAs. This places mods that do *not* fly under the radar in an interesting position. For mods that manage to earn a high profile but are not sent legal action to cease distribution, are these granted tacit approval by the developers/publishers?

Regardless of the legal status of mods, or of the legalities of seeking payment for mods, we can also see how the modding community of *The Sims 4* can be self-policing when it comes to its economy. Despite some modders and sites requiring pay to access their content, it appears to be quite a rare occurrence, and is not only not supported by the developers, but has generated backlash within *The Sims* modding and gaming communities themselves. Some users see the locking of user generated content/mods as so antithetical to this community that they respond through mass distributing paywalled custom content from modders as an act of resistance to this

practice, adhering to the philosophy that mods should be freely available to all⁷. EA's Global Community Manager 'SimGuruDrake' has directly addressed the issue of remuneration for modders on the official *The Sims 4* forums, clearly stating that while 'Creators cannot lock content they make using our game behind a paywall', they do accept that it is reasonable for modders to find alternative methods of income in acknowledgement of the time and resources spent by the modders to help enhance their products.

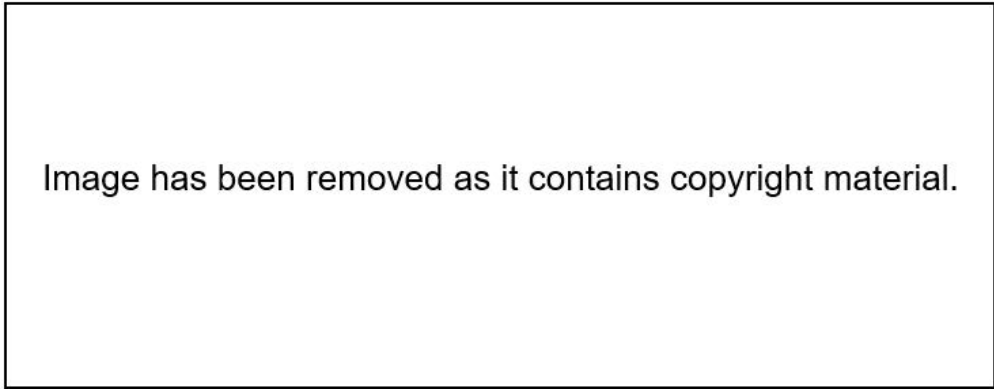


Image has been removed as it contains copyright material.

Image 2: A Community Manager from EA confirms what payment options are permissible for modders of *The Sims 4* ("EA it's time you start doing something about the entitled cc creators in the Sims community! - Page 3", 2017).

One of these other methods for remuneration for modding to help finances their projects through the website *Patreon*, which allows for supporters of their favourite content creators to help fund the development of mods, primarily through alleviating the day-to-day costs of living that would otherwise necessitate a primary source of income. However, it is rare for these to see

⁷ At time of writing, <http://www.downwithpatreon.org/> hosts content that is locked behind the paywalls of Patreon accounts. Users that have downloaded these mods through a paid account submit them to this website, which hosts them to be free for all.

much success, with the largest supported mods on the *Patreon* website often struggling to reach over 100 regular patrons. Of the top 1000 Patreon accounts for all content (not only video game related content), only 6 Sims related mods occupy these slots. Of these, the top three fit within ‘NSFW’ categories, featuring content that EA could not release without the game receiving a mature (18+) rating. These include mods to simulate sex, horror themed mods (eg. ‘Possessed Child’ mod), and mods that implement illicit drugs and psychedelic effects into the game. The subsequent three top Patreon-funded modders focus on fleshing out story progression, mods to increase stylish clothing options, and other various mods (such as ‘Snapchat filters’ for in-game character photos). Of these modders, all of them still embrace this noncommercial philosophy. The second highest earner, ‘Sacrificial’, allows for their patrons to receive content early, but releases any new mods to the public 2 weeks later for free ("SACRIFICIAL is creating The Sims 4 Mods | Patreon", 2019a). The fourth highest earner, Deaderpool, writes on their page that ‘The public releases for my mod will always be free. Mods should always be free, I think, and mine is no exception’ ("Deaderpool is creating MC Command Center Modules for Sims 4 | Patreon", 2019b). At least to these modders, it appears to be less of a legal question of whether mods should be free; to these modders for whom a monthly income is already assured, they are satisfied to adhere to the philosophical position that mods should be free, however donations are welcome.




Image has been removed as it contains copyright material.

Image 3: The Patreon Top 1000 list only contains six entries specific to *The Sims* modding.

As a rare exception of a developer making a sizeable income from their mod through Patreon, the developer for the ‘WickedWhims’ mod (username ‘Turbodriver’), has been able to use the popularity of this mod to sustain a monthly income of in excess of \$18,000 a month through Patreon as of December 2018, ranking it as the #67 highest supported Patreon account over all categories. However, while updates and previews are locked behind a Patreon subscription, this modder still provides their content for free to all, hosting all downloads on their own website, and listing it as a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International public license ("Terms of Use — WickedWhims", 2019). As such, other users are free to collaborate with the project to enhance it further, or to translate it to other languages to improve its accessibility (‘TURBODRIVER’, 2019).

While there are outliers that can maintain an income from the popularity their mods generate, it is exceedingly rare for it to be a lucrative source of income; of those that do, they primarily do so through voluntary donations that are not necessary to access their content. In this way, *The Sims 4*'s modding community appears to hold true to this ideal of modding as a non-commercial practice; instead, modding is better seen as a tool for enrichment, to enhance the landscape of the game space, and to suit the needs of the players for whom these mods find a use.

3.4 The Sims 4 Mods as Cultural Artifacts

The Sims game series has developed a unique culture surrounding it that focuses much more on the fan gamer than the power gamer. As a sandbox game, *The Sims* game series does not have explicit win *or* lose conditions. Players are free to pursue any goals that they wish, including romance options, career paths, and skill developments, and while the base game provides an enormous number of possibilities for play, this potential is enhanced severalfold at the point at which a player begins to experiment with mods. Many of these offer simple modifications of in-game assets, allowing for new hairstyles or lipstick options that would be otherwise unavailable in game, and would fall under Sotamaa's 'artistic expression' category of mod. However, some of these mods alter the game significantly, allowing for greater customisability, new game modes, themed assets (such as Halloween or Christmas furniture or clothing options), and mods that enable features that would otherwise never pass through a advisory ratings board (such as the 'Basemental' Drug mod or the 'WickedWhims' sex mod).

In discovering such a broad range of mods that allow for customisation of everything from the minor cosmetic to enabling graphic sexual encounters, it highlights an important fact

about this community. While the interactions of many other game-oriented subcultures may focus around the interactions between players in game - particularly for MMORPG, MOBA, and team-based shooter games - *The Sims* as a game series has retained its focus on a distinctly single-player experience. Certainly, *The Sims Online* (2002) attempted to broaden the experience of the game series into the multiplayer/MMO game space, but the interactions between players are perhaps less telling about how the culture functions than the artifacts that the culture creates, values, and shares. In this sense, *The Sims* modding community is a culture of artifacts, and we can learn much about this culture by looking at the popularity, distribution, and content of these mods. For example, in looking at how widely a sex mod is used by its players, we can gauge the relative interest in this form of play. Similarly, if a certain mod that allows for high definition hairstyles is particularly popular, we can make assumptions about how this culture privileges aesthetic play. If a mod enables certain types of hair or facial features specific to a particular ethnicity, or allows for customisation options that are emblematic of certain subcultures (such as tattooing, piercings, or coloured hair), then it also provides insight into the need for these markers of ethnicity or subcultural styles to be present and visible within the game space.

Treating *The Sims* communities as a culture of artifacts is not to suggest that those who play and mod the game do so in complete isolation. Far from it, in fact: these games have active communities that engage with one another outside of the game. The official forums (forums.thesims.com) and the subreddit ([/r/thesims/](https://www.reddit.com/r/thesims/)) are both active places to converse, share screenshots, suggest ideas, and so forth; the major mod specific websites (thesimsresource.com and modthesims.info) also have continuous discussion flowing; similarly, there are many Discord servers specifically for *Sims* related discussions. Fans of certain mods contribute to the Patreon pages of their favourite modders, and share content with each other through social media

and comments sections of the occasional news article about one of these mods. However, this section will particularly focus on how these mods are used, looking at their relative popularity, as well as what they offer to the community, and how the relationship between modder and fan is maintained.

As we have already seen, there are countless types of mods available, and they offer such a range of experiences that it is hard to directly compare one mod with another. As such, we will categorise these mods into four categories. These are:

- 1) Cosmetic mods: Mods that allow for greater customisation of the appearances of characters or environments in game (eg. terrain, clothing, tattoo, furniture mods)
- 2) Control mods: Mods that help address frustrations within the game to help players exercise greater control over their play experience (eg. enhancing the responsiveness of input commands, or altering values that dictate the probability of events occurring)
- 3) Gameplay mods: Mods that add new dimensions to existing play (eg. the aforementioned sex mods, or a mod that enables ‘educator’ as a new career path)
- 4) Expansion mods: Mods that provide content that is significantly novel or divergent from existing forms of play (eg. the ‘Possessed Child’ mod that initiates a survival/slasher style game mode)

These four categories allow us to see broadly what sort of play experience is gained in engaging with the modding community of *The Sims*, and we can see that through Sotamaa’s motivations of modders, Control and Gameplay mods would largely feed into the ‘Playing’ modder motivation (where the modder seeks to augment a game that might feel otherwise incomplete) and Cosmetic mods would largely feed into the ‘Artistic Expression’ modder

motivation. Hacking as a motivation may be of interest to some, and the desire to contribute to a team effort may occur on some level, but given the tendency for modders to produce a mod alone, these would not appear to be primary motivations for our community (or at least, would occur outside simple observation). Interestingly, these categories are radically different from what we would see in other mod-heavy games. In games that feature competitive multiplayer game modes like *EVE Online* or *World of Warcraft*, there are a far greater number of instrumental productivity mods, which aid the player by provide additional information to help them optimise and maximise efficiency (eg. ‘DeadlyBossMods’ which informs the player of when enemy boss abilities are about to be used, and ‘WeakAuras’ which allows for sounds to be played or notifications to be displayed on screen when certain events occur, such as an ability becoming available for use or to track the duration of spell effects). However, as massively multiplayer games, addons can only affect client-side events, as the server must be able to regulate player behaviour to avoid exploits that can harm the wellbeing of the game (for example, it is not possible to use a mod that tweaks the buy price of an item in *World of Warcraft*, but such a mod would be perfectly acceptable in *The Sims 4*). In this sense, as both a single player and offline game, *The Sims 4* presents a greater sandbox for mods than some other heavily-moddable games, both due to its single-player and offline nature, and since the core gameplay does not revolve around efficiency and does not require finely tuned balance.

The scope of each mod can vary wildly. Mods that fit into the ‘control’ category include the ‘MC Woohoo’ mod, a customisation mod that allows for the player to change the probability of their Sims getting pregnant (between 0-100) after various ‘woohooing’, which is always a small (but non-zero) chance in the base game when ‘woohooing’, regardless of whether the player chooses the ‘Try for baby’ option or not. In providing this option, it also functions as a

form of reliable birth control (if the values are set low enough). The same mod also comes with a feature that permits teenager sims to fall pregnant, a feature that was otherwise absent from the base game. Similarly, the ‘MC Command Center’ mod allows for players to customise the likelihood of certain events occurring, such as NPCs showing up wearing certain types of clothing. This is useful for players that wish to have a certain type of themed town, where certain clothing is thematically or seasonally inappropriate. It also allows the player to reduce the chance of certain events (such as an alien visitation) occurring, helping to customise the type of play experience the user desires, and potentially help pursue an in-game narrative.

These types of mods may seem at first glance to function as remedies that ‘fix’ the game, using Sotamaa’s taxonomy. However, there is more to this than simply functioning as fixes. For the MC Woohoo mod, it indirectly addresses assumptions about who can (or who should) become pregnant. Allowing for this sort of customisation over pregnancy options not only permits the player to represent an infertile female Sim - which would otherwise be impossible, as the possibility for conception is always non-zero in the base game - but it also allows for gender to no longer be a limiting factor in who can or cannot become pregnant. The various functions it enables, such as the ‘Risky Woohoo’ percent chance that allows to heighten or reduce the risk of pregnancy, allows for the player to decide to what degree pregnancy is an issue in their Sims’ lives. For teen Sims, for whom the base game does not permit the possibility of pregnancy, the omission of this could be easily explained as a way for the developers to avoid having to address potentially controversial and legally murky territory; after all, depictions of minors engaging in sex can have major legal consequences, even if only through digital depictions of fictional characters. However, it nonetheless stands that teenagers in the real world often do engage in sexual behaviour, and *do* become pregnant. The choice to prevent teen pregnancies in *The Sims*

game series is thus likely a conscious and deliberate choice, but one that restricts narrative expression, and for some, their ability to recreate their own narratives within this game. In allowing for depictions of sexual behaviour that omit the possibility of teen pregnancy, it also forces those who do seek this experience to turn to alternative measures to enable this mode of play.

The desire to create a narrative around the experience of teen pregnancy is shown through Jackson's Kotaku article 'Inside The Taboo World Of Teen Pregnancy In The Sims' (2016). Here, Jackson discusses the fictionalised Let's Play style narratives of Instagram user 'foreignSimmer' (foreignsimmer, n.d.) and YouTuber 'kiwisimming' (kiwiswimming, 2016). Jackson observes that 'These people don't see themselves as reflecting or emulating real life. They see themselves as storytellers, using The Sims to entertain others. The creativity of these young women — and they are young, most listing their ages in their profiles ranging from mid teens to early 20s — is inspiring' (para. 9). foreignSimmer's Instagram in particular illuminates this potential for storytelling well, with screenshots and associated captions being written through the words of the Sim herself. The fact that this form of narrative creation is not just socially subversive - in that tells the story of fictional teens who become pregnant - but that it is *also* popular, and that it is created by and popular for a female audience, demonstrates that these sorts of desires and curiosities are rarely met in other game forms. This form of expressive productivity where narratives are created by its individual users is itself a form of fanfic, where the mod itself acts as the foundation for the narrative possibilities.

This affordances of a mod like this - the myriad ways in which it can be used - also reveals the implicit, embedded societal politics that exist as a consequence of disabling teen pregnancy in the base game. Not only does it offer a commentary on the society in which such a

feature is disabled by default, but it also comments on the importance and desire for this feature to be possible. As a cultural artifact, the existence of this feature within the MC Woohoo mod is representative of its core goal: to expand upon the customisation of the player's experience such that they can create the type of experience they wish. This appreciation for, and desire to expand, the player's own customisable narrative experience is the kind of political dimension that this chapter seeks to find; while not all mods exist as reflective of a desire to subvert cultural taboos, here we can see that even simple, seemingly apolitical control mods such as MC Woohoo are designed to allow the player to choose which taboos they retain and which they discard in the pursuit of their own customised play experience.

Cosmetic mods, on the other hand, tend not to alter the core gameplay in any way, but introduce new art assets into the game that help customise the aesthetic of a character, house, or town. Of all the mods on thesimsresource.com, these are by far the most downloaded mods; of the top 20 downloaded mods for *The Sims 4*, all of which have between 500,000 and 750,000 downloads as December 2018, 19 add detailed hairstyles and colours to the game; the lone non-hair mod in this list adds the option of nose piercings to character customisation. Cosmetic mods go beyond simply superficially changing the appearance of a Sim: one addon allows for much greater variation of skin tone options, allowing for more realistic skin tones, with finer levels of detail, than that which the game comes with⁸. Another skin tone mod, 'Vitiligo Overlay' ('Benevolence-c', 2017), enables Sims to choose to have vitiligo-textured skin. Much like MC Woohoo's ability to customise pregnancy rates and possibilities, regardless of the intention of omitting these from the base game, it is in the construction and distribution of these mods that we see it reflective of a broader politics of the playerbase that demand this level of fine

⁸ 'Skintone Set V3' by 'Ms Blue', offers '34 new non default skintones with highlights [sic], shadows and redness added to achieve a more realistic and vibrant look'. ('Mr Blue', 2016)

customisability. Other cosmetic mods increase the amount of clothing available to the player, creating styles that are chic and fashionable, or that go beyond the basic textures the game shipped with. Examples include mods for skinny ripped jeans ('Sims2fanbg', 2016), crop tops ('Sentate', 2015), or even clothing options (sweaters, bow ties, wings) for pet dogs and cats (Sims 4 Pets, n.d.). The fact that these cosmetic mods constitute above and beyond the majority of downloaded mods is indicative of a desire on behalf of both the playerbase, as well as the modders themselves, to create and play with these types of mods.

Gameplay and Expansion mods often push the boundaries of the existing game engine, instituting animations, functions, and features that were not intended to be possible by the developers. The 'WickedWhims' mod, which we will consider a Gameplay mod, enables various sex acts to be rendered possible within the game, and is much harder to track in terms of absolute downloads as it is hosted on neither of the two major *Sims* mod sites. Instead it is hosted privately, likely due to the mature nature of this mod. However, we can see that it is the most supported Patreon account of any *Sims* modder, demonstrating the enormous desire for this work to continue to be supported and updated. Similarly, Expansion mods such as Sacrificial's 'Possessed Child', are hosted privately and supported on Patreon rather than being uploaded through the major two mod sites.

This diverse range and popularity of these types of mods present just within this one game (and game series) demonstrates the range of the unfulfilled wishes that the base game offers. In this sense, an unmodded *The Sims 4* offers a foundation upon which the player can build their own experience through the gradual accumulation of mods. In so doing, the player begins to take on this architectural role themselves, constructing a personalised experience that is

representative of their play preferences. In this regard, we should consider the mod developer as a core component of this experience.

3.5 Mods, Politics, and the Civil Rights of Sims

As a major video game series spanning almost two decades since its first release, the gradual inclusion of features intrinsic to queer existence, such as same-sex marriage and non-binary forms of gender identity, has a history that is thoroughly entwined with its modding community. This chapter has already seen the immense variety of mods that exist that serve to enable as customisable a play experience as possible, and while the base game already presents a potentially endless list of things to do, even the simplest mods can open up possibilities even further. Expansion mods can help create experiences that substantially change the play experience and play expectations, turning *The Sims 4* into a tool for subversive narrative storytelling, an interactive pseudo-pornographic film, or a survival horror game. Meanwhile, cosmetic mods can allow for a personalised experience that better reflects one's own reality, particularly for minority populations for whom media representation is a constant political issue. In order to examine how the modding community responds to the needs of these users, this section will examine the ways in which the creation of mods allows for a sense of social justice to be integrated into its mods, as well as the media (including distribution and advertising) surrounding it.

In the previous chapter, Cottrill's (2005) usage of queerscapes were seen as potential reconfigurations of existing spaces in order to fulfil the needs of a queer community, whether that be through the provision of spaces for sexual, sexual/political, or political ends. In this section, particular focus will be given to a mod that allows for *The Sims* – an otherwise relatively

desexualised game – into a venue within which queerscapes can take root within this particular game space, to a degree determined by the player. As the first example, the WickedWhims mod presents a particularly interesting case study of *The Sims 4* mods and the mod community, offering an augmentation to the game that many see as being unfulfilled through unmodded play. It does so through adding a sexual dimension to the game far beyond the standard censored ‘Woohoo’ing and childbearing of the base game. It adds many forms of sexual encounters, allows for undressing, methods for orgasm, strap-ons, autonomy for the Sims to choose when to have sex, sexual desires (eg. exhibitionism), polyamorous opportunities, and penis options (including ‘Support for all genders’) (‘TURBODRIVER’, 2019), although this list is far from exhaustive, and does not include the collaborative mods that enable further extensions of these functions. As a financially successful and constantly updated mod, WickedWhims is representative of a kind of mod that addresses a very obvious omission from the base game, but does so not through a simple fix (such as uncensoring the already implemented ‘Woohoo’ options), but by offering a comprehensive suite of features that can meet the desires of the most niche tastes.

This popular, well-funded, sex positive, and queer inclusive mod, then, would appear to be a successful example of a mod that exists to not only fill in the gaps that are omitted by the base game’s developers (and rightly so - were such features implemented in the game, it would not only likely face media controversy, but would also restrict sales to adults only), but as a mod that places heterosexual encounters as no more or less ‘natural’ than homosexual ones, or between non-binary Sims, or between aliens or ghosts. In this way, the WickedWhims mod enables the game space offered by *The Sims* to become one that embraces queerscapes, and the user is given full control of the extent to which they are integrated into the play experience.

Additionally, the nature of this mod allows for the ‘outer limits’ (Rubin, 1981) forms of sex and sexuality to become further normalised as part of this mod’s usage. The popularity and widescale usage of this mod has also caused it to receive publicity through Kotaku.com (Hernandez, 2016, Hernandez, 2017, Jackson, 2017a), and describes the mod developer as inadvertently adopting a position as an officiator of permissible sexual encounters within the game space. ‘Turbodriver’ notes that ‘What happens is that some suggestions have people against adding them and then I become the person that decides what is right and what is wrong,’ Turbodriver said. “I have to approve of your sexual fantasies.’ (Hernandez, 2017). In this sense, we can see how a mod creator can become a de facto adjudicator of what politics are acceptable within the modding community. For example, in adding penis ‘support for all genders’, it implicitly endorses a politics of trans-inclusivity in much the same way that EA has done through the inclusion of gender customisation options within the base game.

For all its popularity, however, the mod does not always fulfill the needs of its users. While this addon exists in a constant state of development, one of its main criticisms is in its depictions of sex as feeling like ‘living in a surreal porno. Everyone is always horny, and everyone is always down. Rather than being arousing, it's terrifying’ (Jackson, 2017s). Gita Jackson of Kotaku.com writes of her own experiences with the mod that the level of intimacy she desired from her Sims’ sexual encounters was conspicuously absent: ‘Not once did Marvin or Miranda fall asleep after orgasming, or offer to clean each other up, or giggle on their beds while they looked at funny tweets together. They didn't get turned on by their partner's idiosyncrasies or habits.’ (Jackson, 2017a). Thus, while this mod may occupy an important place within *The Sims* modding community in facilitating sexual spaces within game spaces, it lacks features that are characteristic of other queerscape types. In any critique of creative content such

as this, it is important to understand the limitations in both scope and possibility of mods like these, and while the creator ('Turbodriver') is not necessarily beholden to those who may wish for the creation of sexual-political or political spaces, we can see how a mod such as this functions within limitations. We have already seen that mods exist in a precarious state of legality, and a mod like WickedWhims walks an even narrower path; as a popular mod, the developers are aware of its existence⁹, and as an arbiter of sexual permissibility, it needs to meet the needs and desires of its many supporters. These constraining factors would appear to throttle the creative content generation of this mod; however, WickedWhims occupies a unique space: it offers functionality that cannot be supported by the developers (due to the nature of its content), and yet it manages to be one of the most financially lucrative addons to date. WickedWhims nonetheless serves an important purpose in normalising sexual encounters that exist well and truly outside of the charmed circle, and in this way allows for sexual spaces and 'outer limits' forms of sex to become an integral component of gameplay for those whom desire it.

This mod, however, is hardly the first to comment on and facilitate sexual acts within the game that are disabled or prohibited by the developers. Indeed, as a long-running game series, *The Sims* occupies a unique place in contemporary culture with regards to its commentary on same-sex relationships. While Consalvo (2003a) praises the open-ended nature of the first game in the series, *The Sims* (2000), appreciating the opportunities it enables for some forms of queer play, she also notes the limitations of these very same opportunities. In *The Sims* (2000), while same-sex roommates can kiss, sleep in the same bed, and adopt a child, presenting a progressive (for the turn of the millennium) game, only opposite-sex couples have the ability to be wed. She also notes that the manual conflates gender and sex, asserting that selecting a sex for a Sim is one

⁹ Patricia Hernandez of Kotaku.com writes that 'Turbodriver says he changed the name to WickedWhims to avoid legal troubles.' (Hernandez, 2017)

of the first steps to take, and that ‘gender is a pretty basic constituent of self from which to build a personality’ (p184). In this vein, she also critiques what she calls the ‘gay window’ - a concept that has also been referred to as the ‘gay button’ by game designer Anna Anthropy - whereby queer content is often obfuscated or hidden from view, unless one looks in the right window (or presses the right button) (Adams, 2014, p43). Such content straddles the lines of progressive politics: it does not necessarily ignore the fact that queer relationships and lives exist, but it also relegates these existences to a hidden realm, where ‘homophobes need never see or encounter gay Sims in their own creations’ (Consalvo, 2003a, p188).

No matter how much it is possible to mod around these limitations (and certainly, this was done a long time ago: a ‘‘Gay Marriage’ hack’ has existed at least since 2005, when this ‘hack’ was last updated (Sims downloads: Essential Hacks, n.d.), these mechanical issues can become a central tension between developers and modders. The evolution of marriage within *The Sims* games demonstrates this push-and-pull, with *The Sims 2* adding the option for same-sex couples to be wed, and would then enter a ‘joined union’, which Adrienne Shaw notes ‘was procedurally the same as marriage—the option granted to heterosexual couples—except in that joined unions accrue fewer “aspiration points” (points accrued by achieving Sims’ wants which can then be spent to purchase rewards) than marriage’ (Shaw, 2016), a controversial ‘equal but different’ option that was similarly modded through the ‘Same Sex Marriage’ mod (‘twojeffs’, 2008) that replaced these ‘joined unions’ with the default marriage sequence. By *The Sims 3* (2009), this distinction between same-sex relationships and opposite-sex relationships had vanished entirely, requiring no active modding to enable same-sex marriage.

The game series has continued to evolve since then, and since patch updates in 2016, *The Sims 4* has allowed players to select on a Sim-by-Sim basis the physical frame (masculine or

feminine), clothing preference (masculine or feminine), whether it can get pregnant, make other Sims pregnant (or have no role in pregnancy whatsoever), and whether the Sim can use the toilet standing, as well as including non-gender-restricted walk styles and voices (Electronic Arts, 2016). In taking steady steps towards LGBT inclusion in this game series, we can see that the politics of the game series has evolved in alignment with a progressive politics of the 21st century, appearing to understand well Consalvo's critiques of the first game. The exact degree to which the modding community has influenced these design decisions is difficult to ascertain, but the gradual arc of the politics of the base game has followed the path established by its modders since the very start of the series. By demonstrating a desire for mods such as gay marriage hacks, or mods that replace joined unions with an undiluted marriage option, modders have led the charge for an inclusive, progressive politics within the game series since its earliest days. While these sorts of representations of queer identities and relationships certainly exist within this 'gay window' - one need not encounter it if they never peer through the window - the inclusion of these increasingly robust options recognises a need from the playerbase to have these options available. In this sense, the politics of *The Sims* is not necessarily embedded in what content it contains, but rather, in what content it does not prohibit, and it is in this lack of prohibition that the potential for the queerscape emerges.

It would be short sighted, of course, to pretend that this desire for queer and sexual content is somehow unique to *The Sims* modding community. We can see in looking at virtually any other game that allows for modding that inevitably some user will create some form of content that fits this bill. We can see a parallel between the 'gay marriage hack' from *The Sims* (2000) and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*'s (2011) 'Gay Allure' mod that allows a perk that would ordinarily grant the player price reductions to vendors of the opposite sex, to also allow this perk

to function on vendors of the same sex ('The Psycho', 2018). In *Harvest Moon: Friends of Mineral Town* (2003), the game would ordinarily require a player character to only wed other characters of the opposite gender, and yet mods exist that create gender swap mods once again akin to the 'gay marriage hack' that enable 'same sex' romances (Shaw, 2015b), as does *Mass Effect 1* (2007) ('rondeeno', 2019), a game series that is also otherwise known for its possible depictions of queer relationships throughout the series. This is how playbour can be seen to exist beyond merely exploiting players for their time and labour. Where a developer may be unable or unwilling to include queer content, the playerbase can repurpose the platform for their own needs, and we can see this across a variety of titles and genres. The desire to portray gay relationships or queer identities in a game space is not unique to *The Sims* game series in any way. However, it is one of the best examples of how a community can take the tools of the game to embrace a progressive politics that seeks inclusion of non-traditional forms of romance, cohabitation, gender presentation, and so on. This represents a rather explicit way in which these mods allow the player to reconstruct the very experience of play through the adoption of mods that fit their political environment.

It is not merely through the artifacts themselves that a cultural and political impact can be seen. The modding communities also cultivate their own set of politics through the ways in which these mods are curated. We have already seen that specific mod sites like thesimsresource.com and modthesims.info tend to feature cosmetic and control mods, and these sites do display featured content that acts as a form of 'window shopping' for mods. However, some modders have chosen to curate these mods in a different way. *The Interview* ('The Interview', n.d.) is a magazine that covers news pertaining to *The Sims 3* and *The Sims 4* mods specifically. It is in itself a fascinating product of the modding community as a collaborative

effort. Functionally, the magazine - distributed electronically through issuu.com - showcases various mods produced by *Sims* modders. Other *Sims* modding magazines have also emerged, such as *Hype* ('Hype Sims Magazine', n.d.) and the *de roche // DRXGON collection 2017* (Isaderoché, 2017), but *The Interview* remains the most followed of these magazines. What is particularly interesting about this collaborative effort is that it repurposes the genre of the fashion magazine, showcasing the latest clothing, hair, makeup, and furniture mods as though they were a spinoff of *Vogue* magazine, or perhaps part of a summer clothing issue, or even the latest Ikea catalogue (when showing furniture).

The magazine presents idyllic imagery, but does not lose its political leanings in lieu of pursuing the aesthetics of a lifestyle magazine. The following images demonstrate that the magazine clearly mimics the format of a high fashion magazine, but in so doing also includes interviews of modders who share their own political beliefs. It also exhibits a more zine-like quality, as might be expected with a collaborative, DIY production like this.

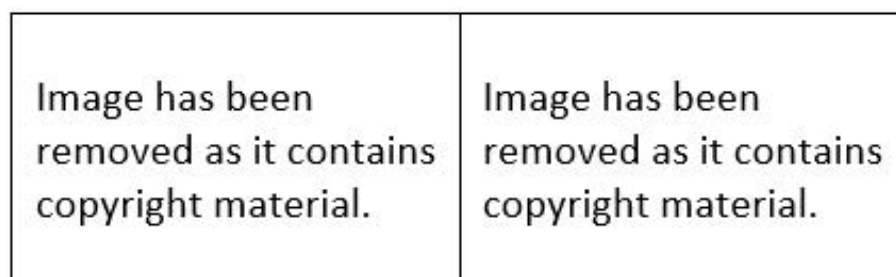


Image 4: The Interview Issue V (2016, pp10-11 (left), pp98-99 (right))

In *The Interview*, Issue VII, pp4-5 (2017), directly after the table of contents page, a non-*Sims* related page greets the reader, instead showing a black and white page with a heading ‘You are work of art’ [sic]. The marked lack of relation to *The Sims* is apparent - there are no images of any Sims on the page, nor does it touch on any issues pertaining to *The Sims*, let alone its mods. Instead, it serves to merely welcome the reader with a well-intentioned wish, and an apparent desire to acknowledge the issue of eating disorders, or body dysmorphia.




Image has been removed as it contains copyright material.

Image 5: *The Interview* Issue VII (2017, pp4-5).

Other sections of the magazine dedicate entire pages to directly addressing political issues, with one page (pp70-71) of the publication presenting an unattributed quote from what we are left to assume is a modder, who addresses the prevalence of homophobia in Brazil. Meanwhile, pages 72-73 feature an editorial-style argument surrounding the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement next to the image of a black female Sim character. These articles are blended into the showcasing of modded clothing, hairstyles, furniture, and other aesthetic mods.

While it may be a small scale collaborative effort, *The Interview* magazine is emblematic of an underlying politics of *Sims* modders that calls back to the DIY-style zines of the 1990s, distributed on a small scale to help inform others of important (and often political) events happening within the community. The desire to acknowledge and address political issues, including homophobia and the racial politics around the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement are indicative of the relationship between modding as a virtual product, and constructing a more idealised world. *The Interview* is not just about the latest mods, but also about creating queerscapes (and other -scapes) that we saw in Chapter 2 as being an imperative first step in creating safe environments in which individuals can form communities. While some modders have been actively subverting the forced game mechanics - as was the case with the gay marriage hack in *The Sims* (2000) and removing joined unions in favour of only one type of marriage in *The Sims 2* (2004), these modders saw ways of encouraging queer inclusivity and dialogue around race politics through a form of expressive productivity.

The Interview, as a publication that draws from this modding subculture, functions on multiple levels of Sotamaa’s taxonomy of modder motivations. We can see that it celebrates the aesthetic motivation most apparently, but it also functions as a way of connecting modders (and their mods) together. In this sense, it functions as a collaborative tool. *The Interview* demonstrates how this community, who would otherwise experience the play experience of *The Sims 4* in relative isolation, can be part of a larger connected community. This publication therefore helps connect gamers to experience a shared experience, utilising mods as a connective apparatus. In so doing, the political stances of the publishers become a part of this shared experience, helping to integrate their stances on LGBT inclusion and racial diversity into the

very fabric of the game itself, and thus allow for queerscapes to emerge in response to the needs and demands of its users.

3.6 Conclusion

The modding community for *The Sims 4* presents itself as a radical shift from what we might expect from a simplistic understanding of video game culture, and of a singular catch-all gamer identity. In privileging expressive productivity over instrumental, this particular modding community demonstrates the productive potential of a motivated collective of people. Despite existing on the periphery of what video game culture legitimises as valid play practices, *The Sims 4* - and indeed all the mainline *Sims* titles - demonstrates the possibility for a group of players to go down their own path and not only eschew the values of geek masculinity and reject the structures that rely on the subjugation of the other, but form a community of active content creators that ensure that their own values are enshrined in the future of the game series. In this regard, the modding community in particular has formed its own subaltern counterpublic; a group that, aware of its own subordinate status, instead constructs its own social formations, its own curated distribution sites, its own channels for discourse, and so forth. This robust community is so extensive, to say nothing of the level of detail and effort that goes into the development of these mods, that Alice Bell of *VideoGamer.com* argues ‘Why does EA need to make a Sims 5 when fans have sort of done it themselves?’ (Bell, 2017). A more cynical view would see this as a feature, not a bug, of playbour: the creativity and countless hours spilled into these mods keep the base game alive well beyond its normal lifespan at little to no cost on the part of the developers. The variation of these mods, from simple UI customisation and control mods, to additional features and content, to improving the graphical fidelity and improving

aesthetic customisation options, demonstrates a level of expressive productivity that can only come from a truly dedicated fan base.

While this community's productivity in content generation is certainly impressive, we can also see that there is something special about this specific modding community that runs in opposition to the dominant gamer identity and subculture. Despite forgoing almost every criteria of a hardcore game, *The Sims* as a game series has managed to exist - and be financially successful - in spite of the practices of disqualification that relegate games like this to the realm of the casual ('not a real') game. Rather than embracing the gamer subculture, with its styles, its sets of values, and its rituals and performances that signify a gamer identity, the modding community of *The Sims 4* instead appears to exist almost completely independent of this subculture, inheriting a progressive politics that might be seen as unusual within gaming spheres. It embraces LGBT politics, racial political movements like 'Black Lives Matter', and body positivity, with many of the mods functioning, intentionally or otherwise, as queerscapes. Even the more popular and sexually-oriented mods, like WickedWhims, includes various ways for Sim characters to experience any number of non-heteronormative sexual experiences.

While this runs counter to many of the embedded politics within the dominant gamer identity and subculture, it is crucial to acknowledge that this is *not* an unusual or uncharacteristic set of politics within gaming. Instead, it represents a hidden heritage of gaming that has historically been unaccounted for: a blind spot in our narrativisations of gamer culture, as a masculine domain within geek culture. Not only have gaming cultures frequently omitted it from their own histories, often through relegating it to the 'casual'/'not-real' gaming, media discourses too have neglected the potential enrichment that these modding communities, communities dedicated to the expressive productivity of games, in favour of simplistic narratives about the

dominant gamer identity. Indeed, this very chapter has attempted to view its differences as significant, but it does so in the attempt to view it as *not* aberrant or fringe, but as a significant part of gaming's history that offers an alternative narrative of gamers as distinct from the gamer identity.

The popularity of these mods indicates a desire for content that runs the full gamut of what mods can offer. The mods we have examined in this chapter demonstrate a desire for a more 'complete' game experience, including those mods that allow for experiences that would ordinarily occur at the periphery of acceptable play practices, potentially bordering on the taboo. However, the many supporters of these mods also demonstrate that these potentially taboo topics are far from fringe: they represent an incredibly large, unanswered desire from their consumer base that can only be met through modding. Sex, drug, and horror themed mods manage to be lucrative through donor systems, enabling a viable path for modders to see their content become a means of living without needing to forsake the concept of modding as an intrinsically non-commercial practice. Meanwhile, for many other modders for whom income is not a concern, the distribution of their mods through more traditional non-commercial websites enables their creative content to reach those for whom it enriches their play.

This project has thus far has demonstrated that there exists a privileged form of the gamer identity, whose values aligned more with the power gamer, and we saw how self-identified gamers tend to see themselves as competitive. Privileging one form of play over another - let alone the academic study of it - is a fundamental misstep. We have seen in this chapter that *The Sims* has been, and continues to be, one of the highest grossing video game series of all time, and it manages to do so without any explicit focus on the power gamer, with a de-prioritisation of the ludological in favour of fostering meaningful organic emergent narrative, and in generating an

aesthetic experience that is impossible to quantify. The seemingly timeless popularity of *The Sims* as a game series demonstrates a counter-narrative to the narrative of the power gamer - the 'hardcore' gamer - as the ubiquitous, homogenous archetype of the gamer, and it is through its mod community and the cultural artifacts it constructs that we can see this alternative gamer as a force for creativity and construction. Further, it demonstrates a desire for experiences that incorporate the queerscape into forms of play. These mods are not fringe desires or experiences, even if they may offer somewhat unsavoury or lewd experiences. In creating these artifacts, modders tap into the needs and desires of their fans and create content that sometimes drives the development cycle of the official licenced game, and sometimes contributes what the developers and publishers cannot.

This chapter has demonstrated that gaming contains within it the potential for the creativity of its users to be instrumental in determining the trajectory of a game series. Where the dominant gamer subculture can be seen as inheriting a system of hierarchical value towards certain play practices - particularly those that incorporate exploration, exploitation, and domination of others - this chapter has shown that such a view of gaming is incredibly narrow in light of the enormous potential for game spaces to offer alternative narratives. Video games do not just offer one type of play experience, and the modding communities allow for this multiplicity of play practices and experience to become even more robust. In particular, we have seen that queerscapes allow for those who have historically been excluded from society to find safety, to acquire social capital, and to take steps towards self-actualisation. As such, it is of no surprise that modding - a practice that fundamentally exists in order to personalise the play experience - is a key way that queer content can emerge or exist within a game space without needing to appeal to wide fanbases, financial interests, or to receive ratings board approval.

Ethically, we can see that while modding *can* be (and to be sure, is on some level) an exploitative tool for outsourcing labour, it also gives the player a foundation, a set of blueprints, and free reign to reshape the game as they see fit. It also allows for collaborative projects that can generate the social capital that is central to functioning in a community, even one as esoteric as a modding community. The desire to be part of a team that constructs a new feature for a game can be an incredibly fulfilling pastime, as Sotamaa saw. For those for whom social ostracisation is a reality, fulfillment in this area might even occur through the simple act of contributing their own queer or racially diverse mod to the mosaic of mods that have already brought this politics to the forefront of *The Sims*. In addition, as a tool that exists in a state of legal precariousness, this unrecognised status, often the result of game developers turning a blind eye, can also be used as a protective measure for modders to be experimental and to push the boundaries of the game (and the politics that such a space encompasses) without provoking much media attention, allowing these mods to fly under the radar. It is in this way that we can view the movement of individual users into the role of modder that we can see a very real form of the political space emerge within *The Sims* modding culture, impacting the game series as a whole, even to the extent of creating ephemeral and transient sexual spaces within the game world that can be turned on and turned off at the mod selection screen.

This chapter's examination of *The Sims* and its modding community demonstrates that no single prescriptive analysis of gamer identity will suffice. Chapter 1 showed that journalists and academics alike saw the 'death of the gamer' as an inevitability, a result of an identity in crisis and unable to adapt. While these understandings of the gamer identity were attacking the gamer as an embodiment of geek masculinity, these narrow depictions of gamer identity (which were, undoubtedly, encouraged by the identity in question) served to omit the wealth of diverse play

practices that exist directly subvert the performative aspects of this identity, such as the practices of the modding communities of *The Sims 4*. Interestingly, the play practices that are central to this modding community present an avenue through which the gamer identity *could* experience a process of intervention and resignification, in order to form a new gamer identity. Rather than a culture entrenched in competitiveness and hyper-efficiency, the modding community of *The Sims 4* embodies a more relaxed approach to gaming, as well as a more inclusive version that encourages play to be seen as something that can embrace being exploratory and customisable, rather than a prescriptive list of essentialised characteristics.

The purpose of studying this particular modding community, then, is to underscore just how unrepresentative the gamer identity had become, as it ignored games that encouraged expressive productivity over instrumental, or relegated them to the status of ‘casual’ games. Yet, the modding community for *The Sims 4* serves to show how inclusive and expansive a game space can be for diverse audience in spite of media discourses of the gamer. These mods, and the communities that surround them, contribute to a rich tapestry of play practices that subvert expectations of who and what a gamer is, and what a gamer wants; in so doing, they further call into question the validity of this identity, and present possible pathways through which the gamer identity could be resignified.

Chapter 4: Becoming the Architect

4.1 Introduction

4.2 Politics of Indie Games: Case Studies in Subversion

4.3 Indie Game Development as Produsage

4.4 Produsage as Part of Platform Capitalism

4.5 Complicating Produsage

4.6 Conclusion

4.1 Introduction

The concept of modding has been explored in substantial detail in this project. While modding serves many important purposes as a way of customising play practices and of helping shape the future direction of games, in this chapter, modding will be viewed as existing within a broader set of practices of fan labour whereby this labour is harnessed to produce a creative product. In this sense, this chapter will see modding as a stepping stone; a practice that leads individuals from creating mods for a game, into an authorial role within the video games industry through the creation of independent video games. Where modding enables the individual to reshape a game or series, small independent game development allows individuals to move into a position where they can begin to create their own niches within established game genres. Modding might allow for queerscapes, such as sexualised spaces, to emerge within a specific set of conditions, but these possibilities are broadened considerably if one is capable of creating their own game, embracing the values they consider important, and repudiating those they find abhorrent. This chapter will focus on the rise of the indie game, as a subcultural movement, and

as a fan response to the industry that is capable of changing the perception of gaming as the domain of geek masculinity. In relying upon creativity rather than high production values, and frequently harnessing a retro aesthetic reminiscent of gaming as it was in the 1980s and 1990s, the characteristics of the indie game are capable of challenging mythologisations of gaming that have persisted over the decades. Additionally, the popularity of indie games in recent years has played an important role in the facilitation of queerscapes within gaming, as well as rejecting or subverting the traditional play practices and genre expectations found in larger, studio-produced games. In this sense, the indie game functions as a way for its own fans to locate alternative narratives and heritages of play.

In this chapter, the concept of the indie game, and the developers who produce them, will be used to explore how this subset of the industry can be used to reshift the perception of gaming as a stagnant, domain controlled by geek masculinity. Where the last of the strategies of marginalisation introduced in Chapter 1, controlling perception, is used to deter individuals from entering gaming spheres based on preconceived ideas about gaming as being spaces that are explicitly coded as masculine, this is where the strength of indie gaming can play a significant role in offering an alternative model of what gaming is about, and for whom it is intended. In this regard, while Bryce & Rutter (2005) observe gaming as exhibiting gendered content, as gendering the spaces it occupies, and as encouraging gendered activities, these qualities have the potential to be substantially challenged by indie games. As a subset of the industry that is marked by its 'anti-mainstream' themes, aesthetics, and philosophies, indie games are in a prime position to reconceptualise and promote gaming as spaces for the subaltern counterpublic of gaming to congregate around, as these spaces *should* be more inclusive and less gendered environments

than their mainstream counterparts. In this way, indie games *could* function as a point of intervention that prompts a resignification of how gaming is coded, and how it is perceived.

The environment in which these developers have arisen, in technological, economic, and social terms, has had a strong influence on the sort of content these developers have produced. Thus, to understand the importance of these developers, an understanding of the systems that allowed for indie gaming to flourish is needed. This chapter therefore proposes that to enact real meaningful change within the video game industry, whether it be to tell the stories of the marginalised and hidden gamer, or to confront issues that are taboo within society, an occupation of the means of production of video games - by its very fans, no less - is required. As one crucial mechanism through which this can be done, the concept of ‘produsage’ will be used to show how individuals can become active participants within their own culture, moving into positions where amateurs and non-professionals can move into game development positions. Through readily available tools for amateur developers, the proliferation of digital distribution methods, collaborative design, and iterative development, produsage permits cultural artifacts to exist even in spite of their apparent economic viability, so long as they meet the needs of its contributors, or its ‘producers’. Through these mechanisms, it is possible to begin a process of seeding a new and diverse set of politics that challenges established gamer ideologies from within gaming communities, and that diverges from normative assumptions present in contemporary game logics. As a consequence of this occupation, it also enables the formation of a new political space within and surrounding the video game industry, one where fans can converge around their appreciation and support for these unconventional games, and is capable of reframing gaming as a more democratic medium, representing its needs and wants, than its mythologised counterpart would concede. In particular, by turning away from traditional sources of financing in order to

retain creative independence of their product, the fan-turned-producer developer are comparatively more free to experiment with risky concepts than studio-produced video games.

Despite the creative and subversive potential of this subset of the video game industry, however, it is important to note the environment in which these games are produced and distributed. The rise of indie gaming is part of a larger system that harvests the creative potential of its content creators to generate profit. The radical shift that has enabled produsage to function as a mechanism for video game creation is not so much a fortunate coincidence, so much as a strategy from emerging platforms to harvest the content of its smaller contributors. Where Kuchlich saw playbour as exploitative, harnessing fan labour to expand the capabilities of a game for no remuneration, platforms such as Steam become have become almost a necessity for indie game developers to advertise and distribute their content. While produsage may be seen as a tool to engage with subversive or taboo ideas, it is these platforms, corporate service providers with their own agendas, that utilise their unique roles as intermediaries for content to function as new media gatekeepers, and subsequently as the primary beneficiaries. As such, this chapter will examine the interplay between the technologies that utilise produsage-based practices as a form of participatory culture, and the platforms that regulate and harvest this enthusiasm from its developers. While these platforms have largely content-agnostic approaches to the games they distribute, it is nonetheless crucial to acknowledge the relationship between developers and their ideas, and the platforms that enable their ideas to be seen and heard.

This chapter, then, will function as a culmination of this project. In searching for alternative play practices that are frequently omitted from discourses about the gamer, the indie game developer will be used to demonstrate the impact that dissatisfied fans can have in rejecting commonplace sexist, homophobic, or heteronormative conventions that have

contributed to the mythologisation of gaming as an intrinsically masculine domain; in so doing, these same fans can create their own games that better foster an inclusive set of politics and project these ideas into the broader public sphere. The technological and social shifts seen through produsage-based game development has also facilitated an increased level of participation in game development through reducing barriers to entry, allowing game development to be more representative of its diverse demographics. In addition, through identifying the indie game *player* as a particular type of consumer, one that differs substantially from the archetypal gamer, it further highlights the cracks in the mythologisation of the gamer, reflected through the shifting tastes that cannot be sufficiently accommodated through more mainstream gaming consumption practices. However, it is still important to note the role that these subversions play in a broader system of economics that strives to capture the economic potential of these ideas. In the harvesting and commodification of subversive play practices, as well as more conventional games, platforms benefit through reinforcing contemporary gamer identities, even while they accommodate the riskier but still sizeable market of indie games. In this way, the indie game developer may have agency to affect the play spaces available, but this can only occur within a system that permits it to be so; whose primary source of income is generated through servicing the dominant gamer identity.

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the concept of the indie game before engaging in two case studies of indie games, both of which draw inspiration from existing genres, but also were born from a desire to polish, refine, and subvert the stale tropes of their progenitor games. In examining these games, as well as the produsage-based practices they embrace in their development, it will be shown how these developers create game spaces that suits their own needs, while navigating the forces that shape their creation.

4.2 Politics of Indie Games: Case Studies in Subversion

The concept of the ‘indie’ game is a nebulous term, and is often used to refer to a certain *type* of game with a certain aesthetic, as well as a statement about its production value, rather than a specific genre. While media theorists Garda & Garbarczyk find ‘no theoretical consensus’ as to what the term means (2016, para 1), they assert that it is not simply an abbreviation of the word ‘independent’; a game may maintain financial, creative, or publishing independence but not be ‘indie’; similarly, a game may be ‘indie’ but be restricted in one or more of these ways. Instead, they suggest that an indie game should be used to refer to a specific type of game, located within a certain temporality and spatiality - that is, the mid-2000s within North American culture as a consequence of the economic, social, and technological frameworks that emerge in this period (‘3.1 The Difference Between Broad and Narrow Understanding of Independent Games’, para 2).

Other accounts of what makes a game ‘indie’ tend to be based on principles of exclusion: Lipkin (2012) argues that ‘[a]t its simplest, indie media is defined by what is not mainstream’ (p10). This may be a rather simplistic definition, but it also indicates that there is something qualitatively different about the production of games that occur outside of mainstream processes, such as the budgets and scope that mainstream gaming development can draw from. Fisher & Harvey (2012) expand upon this idea further, arguing that concepts such as ‘indie’ and ‘mainstream’ are almost mutually exclusive; the very concept of indie gaming ‘implies a particular political position; one that is held in opposition to what mainstream games culture represents, sanctions, promotes, and protects’ (p27). In this sense, indie games are *defined* by their ability to challenge established tropes, to subvert conventions, or through the rejection of

graphical fidelity in favour of a more ‘raw’ product. Where the mainstream industry maintains expectations of cutting-edge graphics, a certain degree of polish for a finished product, and palatable depictions of male and female bodies, Fisher & Harvey view indie games as adopting an ‘amateur kitschy style that evokes a homemade aesthetic, “regressive” 8-bit styles that are re-appropriated as a nostalgic celebration of early games culture, and even illustrating characters whose bodies challenge hegemonic expectations of how men and women should be represented’ (p27). Lipkin also acknowledges this nostalgia exists as a ‘result of the political protests against the mainstream in the form of a return to blissful youth’, a desire to revert to the ‘DIY indie rock scene of the 1980s’ (p10). However, it is in the anti-authoritarian resistance to the leviathan of the gaming industry that Lipkin finds the most intrinsic part of the indie game developer, observing that ‘It is equally defined by the existence of a subculture that seeks and supports that media’ (p13).

This ‘subculture’ that Lipkin describes - much like the punk subculture, or the DIY indie rock scene, or indeed the gamer subculture itself - is as much a product of the signifiers of its subculture as it is the politics that underpins it. The aesthetics that Lipkin and Harvey & Fisher claim are a key component of this indie subculture are therefore also representative of a defiance of the broader gamer culture. Brendan Keogh (2015) agrees with these assertions, arguing that ‘the relationship between “Triple-A” and “indie” development will contrast the risk-adverse, conservative design of the blockbuster studios that, ironically, comes hand-in-hand with technological innovation, with the rise of “indie” games that set up a fruitful antagonism with the large studios.’ (p153). In positioning these two types of game development as oppositional, Keogh also agrees that ‘The rise of “indie” challenges many of the Triple-A industry’s core

values, with individual developers making names for themselves by refusing to look “forward” but instead aiming to replicate a “golden age” of videogame nostalgia’ (p153).

The invocation a late 80s/early 90s retro video game aesthetic in this genre thus functions as a signifier of its expectations, communicating to its audience that this game will inherit these same attributes that Keogh, Lipkin, and Fisher & Harvey all acknowledge as being central to the indie game: a celebration of DIY culture, resistance to mainstream representation and narrative devices, and so forth. These examples of indie games as embodiments of an anti-authoritarian love letter to the 1980s and 1990s do appear to outwardly ignore (if not defy) the trends within mainstream Triple-A gaming, but in much the same way that Hebdige argues the signifiers of subculture become recuperated and subsumed within the dominant culture, Lipkin acknowledges that the romantic notion of the indie developer as anti-establishment through their mere existence may be restricted to a specific period of time (p21). The retro-themed, small-budget games that so embody this indie aesthetic can become commercialised in such a way that they no longer necessarily represent a resistance to the mainstream, but rather run parallel to it. In finding their niche within the gaming industry - often by filling in gaps that the mainstream market fails to address - indie games have cemented themselves as mainstays of contemporary gaming culture.

Even so, there continue to exist independent and ‘indie’ titles and developers that resist the monetisation of their products entirely and eschew the more conventional platforms, in favour of making political statements. Anna Anthropy’s suite of explicitly queer oriented games include the 2012 title *dys4ia*, which continues to remain a free flash game to this day, offering a crudely drawn, pixel-based set of microgames that depict the experiences of an individual commencing hormone replacement therapy as they transition from male to female. Similarly, Anthropy’s *Queers In Love At The End Of The World* (Anthropy, 2013), allowing the player to

attempt to receive or convey as much information about their loved one through text choices before ten seconds elapses, and the game(/world) ends. These games, part of a body of queerscapes in their own right, defy genre expectations - if there were even genres to fit them into - and refuse to become part of the traditional economic model of distribution by way of the fact that not only are they free to play, but are also accessible directly via flash hosting websites. In this sense, indie production and development certainly *can* function as both a resistance to the economic norms of game development, but also expectations of play experiences, and expectations of heteronormative narratives.

The focus in this chapter, however, is not on these microgames – often disqualified from holding ‘legitimate’ places within video game culture entirely – but on ones that exist as both indie titles *and* within the broader consumer culture of video games. While games like Anna Anthropy’s *dsy4ia*, *Queers In Love At The End Of The World*, and even Zoe Quinn’s *Depression Quest* are often remarkably subversive, creative, and genre-bending, they are also disqualified from holding these legitimate positions as bona fide ‘real games’. It is for this reason that this chapter acknowledges the important contributions these titles have had, while also recognising that there are similar games that fit within frameworks of legitimacy of the gamer culture that still engage in these processes of resistance and subversion.

This, then, positions indie games as experiencing a tension between the very independence through which the term originates, through which a ‘fruitful antagonism’ with large studios occurs, and the desire to produce a game that is capable of finding a consumer base. To what extent can indie developers push the boundaries of genre or narrative if they wish to market their game through the more family-friendly Nintendo eShop? If the only method of subversion and anti-mainstream politics in an indie game is its aversion to high-end 3D

environments and subsequent adoption of a retro aesthetic, are these games functionally anti-mainstream in any meaningful way, particularly when enormously successful companies like Square Enix can produce a game like *Octopath Traveler* (2018) that embraces the 16-bit 1990s JRPG aesthetic that has become such a crucial signifier of the indie aesthetic?

In this section, we will examine two examples of games that embody this supposed quintessential nature of the indie game as a rejection of the mainstream, beyond merely adopting the visual aesthetic that has become synonymous with indie gaming. While each stem from different genres, they both offer a unique critique on the industry as a direct consequence of their method of production, as well as the movement of the fan into a position as amateur game developer. Here, the focus is on what these games provide, and to understand how such titles could be made that contribute to a slow shift in the perception of gaming.

Stardew Valley (2016)

The first title we will examine is the multi-platform game *Stardew Valley* (2016), which has already become a staple in the ‘farming sim’ genre. Created by its sole developer, Eric Barone, *Stardew Valley* takes inspiration from the *Harvest Moon* series, allowing a player to establish a farm and commit to all the mundane tasks this entails: planting seeds, watering crops, feeding farm animals, weeding, and so forth. Visually, the game adopts a pixel/sprite-based 16-bit Super Nintendo art style, in homage to the retro-nostalgia that Fisher & Harvey and Lipkin argue is so emblematic of the indie genre. The game begins with the player character sitting in a lifeless job in a stand-in megacorp call centre, and immediately offers a call to return to the simpler life upon hearing of the death of the player character’s grandfather, and the bequeathment his farm, leaving a note reading:

If you're reading this, you must be in dire need of a change. The same thing happened to me, long ago. I'd lost sight of what mattered most in life... real connections with other people and nature. So I dropped everything and moved to the place I truly belong.

— Grandpa's Letter (White, 2018, para. 8)

Stardew Valley, then, invites the player to treat the game similarly, temporarily forgetting the concerns of the modern world in an attempt to reconnect with 'what matters most'. Thus, it offers a narrative that functions on two levels: while the game explicitly rejects the heavily corporatised modern world that the player character is stuck in, it also encourages the player behind the screen to do so too, by taking part in the game world. Encouraging a life of hard but structured work, it revels in its ability to offer the player fulfilment through the simple pleasures in life: of bountiful harvests, of the birth of farm animals, and the seasonal social events with the townsfolk of the valley, with whom the player can potentially romance.

While *Stardew Valley* is a clear homage and love letter to *Harvest Moon*, *Harvest Moon* had not been left fallow since its glory days. The *Harvest Moon* series has had in excess of 20 titles (not including spinoffs) since its original Super Nintendo debut *Harvest Moon* (1996), but some fans felt as though the series has lost the magic that had made it so special in the first place. Barone comments that 'I felt like the series had gotten progressively worse after *Harvest Moon: Back to Nature* [(1999)]...I searched all over the Internet for a fan-made alternative but never found anything satisfying. So when I set out to make a game of my own, I decided to make the *Harvest Moon*-esque game I had always longed for.' (Barone in Lin, 2016, para.4).

This admission from Barone is instrumental in *Stardew Valley*'s concept creation and design. Acknowledging that the *Harvest Moon* brand had lost its way, an individual fan put their skills to work to create an improved version of the original. What, then, constitutes the *Harvest*

Moon-esque game that Barone had always longed for? What was missing from these games that warranted a four year commitment in development time that Barone could do better himself?

Gamasutra's article on Eric Barone's process of development states that

The first step was admitting that the game he idolized could be improved upon. "The gameplay in Harvest Moon was usually fun, but I felt like no title in the series ever brought it all together in a perfect way," says Barone. "My idea with Stardew Valley was to address the problems I had with Harvest Moon, as well as create more 'purpose' with tried-and-true gameplay elements such as crafting and quests." (Gamasutra, 2016, para. 5).

While the game offers a simple premise that doesn't stray far from its *Harvest Moon* inspiration - that is, a single player experience¹⁰ that revolves around planting crops, feeding livestock, harvesting goods, and selling them - along with its 16-bit aesthetic and cheery chiptune soundtrack, *Stardew Valley* appears at first glance to be an enjoyable, idyllic, if not saccharine, experience. It offers the ability to befriend townsfolk NPCs, and adults that are single are eligible candidates for marriage with the player character, regardless of their (or the player character's) gender. This inclusion of the potential for same-sex relationships can be considered a direct critique of, and improvement upon, the *Harvest Moon* series. Consalvo (2003a) notes that earlier versions of *Harvest Moon*, in particular, *Harvest Moon: Back To Nature* (2000), explicitly averted queer relationships, instead including a mandatory marriage component between the player (a default male protagonist) and a female character in-game. However, these games, too, have seen their own modding communities form, with some individuals creating gender swap

¹⁰ Initially, anyway: as of the game's 1.3 patch released August 2018, *Stardew Valley* has implemented a multiplayer function.

mods that enable ‘same sex’ romances much like the same-sex marriage hack in *The Sims* (2000)¹¹.

In this sense, *Stardew Valley* breaks from the tradition of mandating heterosexuality to the player, and adopts the ‘gay window/button’ approach that allows for queer content to exist if the player so chooses it, or allows for a completely romance-free play experience if desired. This in itself is indicative of its creatively independent origins; in retaining creative and publishing independence, Barone was able to normalise same-sex (or even bisexual) relationships, itself a draw over its *Harvest Moon* predecessors. Rather than acting as a point of controversy, this potential for queer content has not interfered with its ability to appear on any platforms, including the traditionally more conservative Nintendo eShop.

However, this break from traditions of heterosexuality within the farming sim genre is far from its only point of deviation from traditional farming sim games. The saccharine depiction of rural life begins to sour as the player interacts with the townsfolk past a certain point of intimacy with each character. Surprisingly deep interactions begin to emerge, with one character suffering from what one might assume to be PTSD from some rarely-mentioned war; another character is homeless and subsists through scavenging food from bins out of shameful necessity, and pleads for the player to keep this secret; a third character struggles with issues of self-worth stemming from protracted unemployment due to an implied economic recession. These social elements present in the game offer non-traditional narratives from its spiritual forebears, and given its popularity and wide acclaim, it demonstrates the potential for a single developer to make an impact in an industry for those willing to include those less frequently told narratives in their own products. Further, it also demonstrates that dealing with more serious themes, even in an

¹¹ As a quirk of enabling same-sex marriages, it also subsequently removes ‘opposite sex’ relationships (Shaw, 2015b)

otherwise cheery and simple game can be well received and integrate well within multiple platforms. To Barone, the darker thematic elements are an important part of his desire as a video game developer to create content that resonates with his playerbase: ‘To me, that includes going beyond the normal confines of what is expected from a video-game character. People struggle with personal issues, and I wanted to portray that. I think it makes the characters a lot more relatable...not just these ideal abstractions of people that are sometimes found in games.’ (White, 2018, para. 10).

In addition, *Stardew Valley* is also a product that is both to the player, and in the mind of Barone, constantly in development. Despite its official release on Steam in February 2016, it has since been ported to various consoles, and has had numerous patch updates and beta versions, ensuring that the game is kept ‘alive’ to its playerbase. As of 2019, it would appear that it is unlikely to slow down in this regard any time soon, with sizeable new features being released periodically in content patches that substantially change the level of interaction the player can have with the game. On December 14th 2018, Barone announced his intention to consider *Stardew Valley* a work effectively in perpetual development:

While there have been times in the past where I felt burnt out, and maybe even said that I wanted to move on, I always find myself coming back to Stardew Valley. For one, I keep getting new ideas for ways to improve and expand upon the game. This world is so full of potential, I could probably work on it for the rest of my life. There’s also such a wonderful community surrounding the game... and I like making you guys happy. I’m extremely grateful to all of you for supporting my work and creating this wonderful Stardew Valley community. I wouldn’t be where I am today without you. And knowing that there’s still tons of people out there who love the game and would be extremely

happy to get new content motivates me to keep working. In short, what I'm saying is that I am going to keep making new content for *Stardew Valley*.

(ConcernedApe, 2018)

Naturally, there will eventually come a point where the game reaches its final revision for one reason or another, whether due to Barone moving on to other projects, a shift in interest away from the game, or some other unanticipated factors, but by intending to keep *Stardew Valley* always in development ensures that it functions as an organic, evolutionary title. In this sense, it can be continually enhanced, improved, and updated for a new audience or a new era. However, this is not the only way in which *Stardew Valley* is kept continuously in development. The PC, Mac, and Linux versions of the game have had toolkits and support for modders since the game has been released. As such, *Stardew Valley* is designed to be kept updated, this time not by Barone, by *its own* fan community. This demonstrates that even when an indie game developer creates a product that may intended to function as a standalone product, it will rarely function as a singular act of content creation. Instead, with mod support, it may allow for its modders and fan community to 'take over' the game. In addition, updates are provided free of charge, with the only requirement an internet connection to download and install the patch as they become available. The direct interaction that Barone offers through his blog, his twitter account, and other social media avenues ensures that a direct line of communication is kept available between developer and end-users, and the modders within the *Stardew Valley* modding community too.

Stardew Valley is a nostalgia-based game that repurposes the farming sim genre and the 16-bit aesthetic so popular with indie gaming, into something that can genuinely challenge

thematic conventions, notions of narrative, of implicit and assumed heterosexuality, of the relationship between developer and end-user, and even allow for the end-user to become an active creator within this community themselves. *Stardew Valley* is a perfect example of how the lone indie game developer can reclaim game spaces (and more specifically, an entire game *genre*), repurposing assets, genre conventions, and even nostalgia itself, in order to tell stories previously unheard of within this genre. *Stardew Valley*, then, is a game that is capable of changing the perception of gaming as the realm of geek masculinity by including content that is *not* gendered as masculine, and whose spaces are *not* intended to be solely inhabited by men. Instead of merely functioning as a total conversion mod of a *Harvest Moon* game, *Stardew Valley* shows the potential that a single fan can have in reorienting the genre towards a trajectory that fulfills their own criteria, rather than being passive consumers of the products that the industry produces. *Stardew Valley* was capable of not just repurposing the concepts and aesthetics of *Harvest Moon*, but it also allowed for (degendered) content that deviated significantly from the expected tropes and conventions of the base game.

Doki Doki Literature Club (2017)

For the next example, our focus will turn toward an indie game that exists primarily as a gaming experience that deviates so far from the expectations of its base genre that it could not justifiably exist through a traditional production model. *Doki Doki Literature Club* (2017) is a game in the form of a dating visual novel, a genre that has historically been popular in Japan but less so to western audiences. Visual novels typically feature a faceless (almost always male) protagonist that acts as a surrogate for the player who is thrust into adventure at the start of the game. In the case of the dating visual novels, the narrative gravitates around a number of

potentially dateable characters and encourages the player to actively seek out the affections of their preferred partner. This requires the player to carefully choose dialogue options that will entice their preferred partner, which requires the player to become attuned to the quirks of the object of their affections.

In adhering to these conventions, *Doki Doki Literature Club* (hereafter referred to as *DDLC*) introduces the player to four female characters, all of which seem at least somewhat romantically interested in the player/character. However, after a lengthy introduction sequence with some light flirting, followed by heavy foreshadowing of some serious themes (including depression, suicidal ideation, self-harm and parental abuse), *DDLC* enacts a genre shift from romance to psychological horror, substituting traditional anime genre tropes for heavy metafictional elements, forcing the player to abandon any pretense or possibility of romance. Instead, the player is presented with a game experience where the game world begins to fall apart - quite literally - as the other remaining characters gradually lose control of their own dialogue and bodies at the hands of a puppeteer character. These unsettling elements became an important factor in the popularity of streaming Let's Plays of *DDLC*¹², where YouTube personalities would live stream a blind playthrough of the game, allowing their audiences to either experience the game collectively together, or to vicariously re-enjoy the thrills and twists of the narrative. Through clever use of unsettling glitch effects, forced data file manipulation by the game, and fourth-wall breakages that fuse the player-character with the player themselves, *DDLC* not only raises questions about the ethics of toying with complex, life-like characters - even if they are ultimately artificial constructions of code - but also serves to harshly critique the ethics of the

¹² Some of the more popular Let's Play streamers have had millions of views of at least part 1 of their play experience, with 'PewDiePie' sitting at 7 million views (PewDiePie, 2017), 'jacksepticeye' at 6.2 million (jacksepticeye, 2017), and 'Markiplier' at 4.1 million (Markiplier, 2017) as of July 2019.

dating visual novel genre. As a genre that is usually replete with tropes of clumsy girls falling head-over-heels for emotionless, aloof, and callous male characters, the game's sole developer, Dan Salvato, adds a dimensionality to these trope-filled characters in a way that renders their flaws as not just a feature of hackneyed writing, but as perceptive observations of human behaviour.

This deceptive, subversive, genre-shifting, and ultimately self-aware approach to storytelling offers an experience that stands out in stark contrast to other narrative-focused contemporaries. It is likely that, as with *Stardew Valley*, *DDLC*'s ability to offer such a reflective experience is in large part due to it being produced almost entirely by one developer, Dan Salvato, previously known for his extensive work for the *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* (2007) mod, 'Project M'. Frustrated by the shallow depictions of romance and care given in other dating visual novels, Salvato's 'love/hate' relationship with anime tropes encouraged him to consciously choose to subvert these genre expectations (Jackson, 2017b). In Salvato's Ask Me Anything (AMA) post on the *DDLC* subreddit, one user asked questions about the behaviour of the protagonist, who is oblivious to the interpersonal issues plaguing the other characters: "Was the protagonist intended to be a huge jerk from the start, or did that develop over time? There was plenty of moments where I loathed the protag." To this, Salvato responded,

MC [Main Character] was designed to behave like a typical VN [Visual Novel] protagonist, which, in the end, makes him pretty unlikable as a person. His interactions with the club members are based around what you'd expect from other romance games. He's blunt and a little mean to the childhood friend. He teases the tsundere¹³

¹³ 'Tsunidere' is a common anime archetype where a character appears initially cold, distant, and hostile, but gradually warms up to the cast, 'Thus, tsunderes are often stuck-up on the outside but loving on the inside'. (Eisenbeis, 2013).

girl. He's warm and more confident toward the shy girl. And he's not confident toward the popular/star girl. MC is designed as one of the satire points toward typical romance games and how a lot of bizarre or questionable exchanges somehow lead to the girls falling in love with you. I think I've seen a lot of experienced VN players doing a lot of "Hah, yeah, of course that happened" whereas a lot of non-VN players have been going "WHY would you say/do that to her??" I'm glad that it's getting some attention, because it might be a worthwhile statement to think about when it comes to visual novels.

(Salvato, 2017)

This awareness of genre expectations, many of which would ordinarily be established as vehicles for the player to engage in vicarious romantic/sexual behaviour, are instead consciously established as points of critique of the genre, highlighting the often inexplicably positive responses the love interests give towards the player/character despite their callous behaviour. The excessively sleepy, overly-saccharine character is not (just) that way to fulfill an anime trope, but consequences of her depression, especially as it becomes increasingly manipulated towards an extreme point. The aloof tsundere character is not (just) that way because the trope demands it; it is a consequence of heavily implied domestic abuse and neglect from her father that prevents her from forming attachments to others. These themes, teased out partly through dialogue and partly through the game's poetry-crafting and sharing mechanisms, begin subtly but become increasingly hard to ignore as the game progresses into its true genre of psychological horror. While the format of the visual novel is not usually used to tell darker or more tragic stories (although dark visual novels certainly do exist), Salvato notes that it actually was an

effective method for integrating these deeper, more dialogue-focused explorations of experiences such as depression. When asked by another user, ‘I feel Sayori was written very well. Have you had experience with people with this type of depression?’, Salvato responded,

Yes, I have used real-life experiences as the basis for Sayori's behavior, as well as various traits that the other club members exhibit. I think because of that, it felt very natural for me to write the characters like I did, with those kinds of conflicts. I was very moved when I found out how strongly people related to some of the characters' insecurities, and I think that wouldn't have been possible had I not been so closely acquainted with similar people in my own life. (Salvato, 2017)

As a genre that is heavily rooted in gendered (masculine *and* heteronormative) content, Salvato’s choice to use the dating visual novel as a vehicle for these deeper explorations of serious themes functions to challenge the perception of this genre - not to its outside observers (who would be unlikely to ever try an anime dating simulator unless they were aware of its twists) - but to those already exposed to these niche genres. Where this project has seen the perception of gaming as a strategy to exclude would-be gamers from entering gaming spaces, a game like *DDLC* has the potential to demonstrate to its primary gamer-identified populace that games are not solely to provide titillation, as apolitical experiences just ‘for fun’, but can be used to develop empathy towards characters for whom the player has begun to form attachments over; as a chance to experience the heartache of having a friend with depression who you care about, but cannot help, or to experience the unsettling reality of codependence and obsessive/controlling behaviour of the antagonist towards the player. *DDLC* prompts the player to engage with it as an opportunity for introspection and reflection, characteristics that explicitly

go against Bryce & Rutter's (2005) observation of games as masculine in their gendered content and activities.

As a subversive and genre-shifting experience from dating sim to psychological horror, *DDLC* undermined the expectations that the first half of the game set up to such an extent that Salvato did not feel it was possible to justify any form of payment from its players prior to play. As such, the game itself was released both on Steam and through Team Salvato's website without any cost, and without utilising in-game transactions or other 'freemium' methods to fund the game. Given the critical praise that *DDLC* received in the months following its release, in the Reddit AMA, one user asked why *DDLC* was free, to which Salvato responded: 'One because I knew it would attract the attention of a lot of people who would never pay a cent for an anime romance game. Two, because I felt that it would be wrong to sell a game that is simply not what is being advertised.' In this response, Salvato demonstrated an awareness that as a developer, it would be unethical (if not possibly a legal concern) to sell a game that presents itself on the surface as a typical anime dating simulator, but has a genre shift that - amongst other things - runs the risk of being psychologically damaging to the player. Instead, Salvato requested donations from fans, and produced a 'Doki Doki Literature Club Fan Pack' that was purchasable on Steam and through their website that contained digital non-essentials: a soundtrack, high resolution wallpapers, and an art booklet, but no in-game content. Through the solicitation of donations and sale of a fan pack rather than making the base game cost money to play, *DDLC* subsists on what is essentially a patronage model of services.

While *DDLC* already stands apart from most other genre-shifting games or visual novels in many ways, it adds one final twist to the play experience: it has hidden within it an Alternate-Reality Game (ARG) embedded into the game files. As a game that explicitly required the player

to engage with meta-elements of the game to complete it, including accessing data files outside the game to change certain values and status effects within the game, it also beckoned players to become engaged with the code of the game itself. Dedicated teams of collective intelligence worked to uncover the secrets of *DDLC*, running game files through QR code scanners, converting files to .wav and performing spectrum analyses, and running code through hexadecimal conversion programs to make sense of the cryptic data contained within. This additional layer to *DDLC* encouraged the fan base to become not just passive consumers of the game, but to become investigators into the hidden elements of the game to uncover details about the characters and the world in which they inhabit. The curation and cultivation of these cryptic artifacts by fans, the collaborative sharing of information, and the speculation as to what future clues remain undiscovered, fully embrace its participatory culture, allowing for a small scale indie title like *DDLC* to establish a legacy from which other fans can draw inspiration.

Since its release, *DDLC* has managed to introduce video game culture to a substantially different experience than that which is often promoted within dominant gamer cultures. It encourages its playerbase to genuinely care about the characters - not just because of their value to the player in the gamestate, but because the player begins to view them as complex individuals, complete with their own histories, desires, and shortcomings - alongside the metafictional elements that critique genre tropes or that allow for players to become active investigators into the hidden ARG elements. *DDLC* has also recently seen the release of a fan-mod, *Doki Doki: Encore!* (Hawkins, 2019), where the metafiction elements are removed in favour of a more traditional visual novel experience where the player's choices have meaningful impacts on the outcome; itself a subversion of Salvato's intention, but indicative of the role of modders in keeping these small independent titles alive. In these ways, *DDLC* challenges the

idea that gaming cannot, or should not, address emotional content by sliding the depth of the content behind a seemingly shallow, trope-laden facade.

These two examples demonstrate the potential of contemporary participatory culture to allow a lone developer with sufficient proficiency to adopt a role in reshaping the terrain of the industry, to encourage its end-users to become content creators in their own right, and to demonstrate the potential for genres (such as farming sims or dating visual novels) to explore narratives that have historically been off the table for discussion within their confines. In this way, we can see the movement of fans into the role of independent developer as a way of forming new political spaces: as more indie developers show the inclusion of queer relationships in gaming as no longer a negative, but as a neutral or positive aspect of the game, it can signal a change in the political stances of the playerbase, and directly address the perception of gaming as gendered. As these games begin to show that genre tropes can be defied, and serious topics can be addressed, it demonstrates a maturation of not only the genre, but of the players that appreciate these themes being incorporated into the living worlds that have been crafted. Further, through finding methods of financial support that allow for developers to receive remuneration even for subversive and experimental products, indie developers can eschew traditional business models that require a split between the developer, the publisher, the distributor, and the consumer, directly releasing products for little to no cost, and using the enthusiasm of the fanbase to provide a return on their invested time and resources. In disrupting the linear path from producer to consumer, Barone and Salvato have become a producer of the content *they* wish to consume, and lead the path for other fans to do the same.

4.3 Indie Game Development as Producership

Both *Stardew Valley* and *DDLC* are relatively recent, independent (both almost entirely created by one person), and subversive play experiences that fall within the ‘indie’ category, and utilise tropes and conventions from their original genre to create a more fulfilling, engaging, and ‘authentic’ experience than their progenitors. This is not to say that *DDLC* or *Stardew Valley* are *completely* unique experiences that could not have existed prior to the widespread usage of participatory media. Certainly, genre shifting experiences have existed in cinema and video games prior to *DDLC*, and dealing with serious themes in media with a seemingly light-hearted facade is not anything that either *DDLC* or *Stardew Valley* can claim as uniquely theirs either. What *is* novel about these titles is that they are created by individual users that are fans of their forebear genres, not as professionals, but as amateurs.

These case studies demonstrate the agency that individuals can have in changing the perception of what a game can be to their audiences, with both Barone and Salvato seeking to address blind spots within the genres of their respective games. In this way, indie game developers can have a very real impact in reshaping the gaming industry by shifting acceptable topics of discourse within the play experience. The independence of these developers also means that risks, including financial ones, are far reduced and often restricted to one person compared to that of a studio. The opportunity costs in lost income can be considerable for the individual developer, but without having to be held accountable to shareholders or managers, the single indie developer can afford to be experimental and deal with mature content, or to subvert genre expectations without the same sort of economic or legal risks that a studio would face if it misrepresented a game to its consumers.

It is apparent that the financial and publishing independence of these fan-turned-indie developers allows for an almost completely different model of product creation and refinement compared to larger studios, for whom development requires the organisation, approval, and funding of entire teams to function. This model allows for a single developer to create content that fans - including themselves - would wish to see, and thus the financial independence of solo game developers carries with it an opportunity for a freedom to experiment with mechanics and themes in a way that meets fan demands. This divergent pipeline of content creation, then, appears to be a crucial factor in fan-made and grass-roots approaches to game design, even while restricted by the logistics and economics of everyday life. The greater the freedom of the developer, the fewer the restrictions on the type of content that can be made, the more experimental it can afford to be, and the less it need to conform to norms of gendered content. Thus, this section will attempt to locate a set of practices through which this kind of development can be fostered by turning towards the concept of ‘produsage’ as a set of practices through which users construct and refine cultural artifacts that meet the needs of these same users.

The concept of ‘produsage’ was created by Axel Bruns to describe the set of practices that embody a form of collaborative and collective development. In this way, produsage forgoes traditional economic and development practices that seek to create a product for sale. Produsage functions as a ‘new hybrid form of simultaneous production and usage’ (2007, p2), a process through which users are both producers and consumers of a product. This concept positions the end user as the architect of their own cultural consumption, rather than relying on a distinct, separate producer to create products and experiences for them. Produsage, Bruns argues, is largely led by the platforms that have by now become so thoroughly integrated into our technological and social lives, such as social networking tools (e.g. Facebook), geo-mapping

tools (e.g. Google Maps), and many-to-many forms of communication that serve to disseminate ideas (such as blogs and Wikipedia). However, Bruns sees the user-oriented nature of these tools to allow for an engaged, creative citizenry to capitalise on the tools the platforms provide.

Building off Alvin Toffler's existing concept of the 'prosumer' (Bruns, 2007, p3), where a consumer of goods would also be involved in the production of these goods, the concept of the produser does not rely on the traditional linear model from producer to consumer, where producer produces a product, which is then sent to a distributor, and is then sold to an end consumer. Instead, produsage allows for a blurring of these lines, and in so doing challenges the assumed linear path from production to distribution to usage. Bruns defines the practices that constitute produsage as follows:

- Produsage no longer requires dedicated individuals and teams, but instead distributes and generates content through its participants,
- Produsage has no formal structure; instead, produsers are fluid in their movement between roles, and may include a variety of skillsets and experiences (from professional to amateur),
- Artifacts are considered 'always unfinished, and continually under development', making this an iterative process of production,
- Credit for the artifacts are based on merit more than ownership; while authorship is acknowledged, it prefers 'open source' forms of collaborative development (Bruns, 2007a, p3)

These criteria set out by Bruns provide a framework for a less traditional form of concept creation, development and distribution, where each individual criterion constitutes a significant

departure from traditional forms of product development and distribution. Bruns uses the example of the wikipedia page as emblematic of the concept of produsage; while a traditional product comes into existence as a ‘discreet, apparently finished version’ (p4), a wikipedia page is constantly in the process of being updated, revised, and corrected by its numerous anonymous editors. If one were to look at any particular instance of a wikipedia page, they would see a perfectly functional artifact that attempts to uphold a standard of accuracy and professionalism, but it is never in its ‘final’ version, and can always be updated if new, more accurate, or better worded, information can be added. Instead, the process of produsage allows for any current version of the page to be as much a ‘final version’ as any other, updated as necessary when new information changes the truthfulness or completeness of the page. Where traditional forms of product design and distribution may struggle in an increasingly digital age, produsage allows for a product to always be ‘in date’, ready to adapt to the needs of its users - who, as it turns out, are also its architects, designers, labourers, and caretakers.

Produsage, then, can *only* function through an enthusiastic fanbase, dedicated enough to donate their time and expertise to a project. As these fans generate content for the development of produsage artifacts, they act as labourers who are not only unpaid for their contributions, but perhaps even more ethically dubious, unattributed. It is for this reason that the theoretical and ethical considerations that lie at the heart of playbour should not be seen as a separate consideration from produsage, but in fact an integral component of it. While this is important to acknowledge, it is also equally important to recognise the potential that these pipelines from fan to contributor offer. The modders of *The Sims*, through their unpaid labour, were able to address political issues within the game space that were significant to the fans. So too are the unpaid and unacknowledged contributors of produsers capable of affecting large-scale cultural change,

depending on the artifacts that are cultivated through produsage. In this regard, we cannot ignore the creative and political possibilities that emerge through practices of produsage, which - much like modding - can be seen as empowering the user.

The idea of ‘perfect’ produsage, whereby all four criteria are strictly adhered to, can certainly be achieved in some instances, such as the Wikipedia page. However, not all industries should (or even *could*) implement ‘true’ produsage into their practices. Where Wikipedia may thrive on the collective intelligences that contribute to it, medical research and practice does not¹⁴. In this sense, video game production - even by an indie game developer - may not strictly meet *all* the criteria of produsage as Bruns intended it, but this should not disqualify it from being seen as incorporating practices of produsage within its design. The creation of *Stardew Valley* may be attributed to Eric Barone, but it harnesses open source, participant-generated content from its fans to keep the game thriving and alive. The degree to which any of the practices of produsage can (or should) be implemented into the development of a cultural artifact depends on factors such as the degree to which it is intended to maintain the creative vision of the originators of the concept. Perhaps more importantly for game design, the movement of individual amateurs into the act of cultural creation is a far more appropriate application of a produsage-based criteria, as is the iterative nature that sees a game always in a process of refinement. We can see these occurring through both *Stardew Valley* and *DDLC*, both of which were created with the singular vision of its creator, saw an amateur fan move into the position of developer, encouraged their users to become active participants in the continuation of the game’s

¹⁴ This is not to suggest that produsage is entirely useless in such fields; the harnessing of collective intelligences to problem-solve medical problems (such as DNA pairing and RNA folding) has seen moderate success through the implementation of game-like puzzles. (Burnett, Melvin, Furlong, & Singiser, 2016)

longevity, and through maintaining their creative independence, managed to offer experiences that could afford to go deeper than a conventional game within the genre would.

This project therefore differentiates between produsage as an ideal, and produsage as a set of practices through which users become active participants in cultural creation. In differentiating between the two, it is possible to understand the limitations that the idealised form of produsage places on this user-led form of content creation - including an all-too-optimistic utopian narrativisation - while still using the concept as a framework through which we can analyse these practices. It is important to note that produsage is not the only framework for understanding participatory culture, but what it offers is a terminology that best describes the set of practices this chapter wishes to explore. Even if each particular cultural artifact falls short of the idealised form, viewing game design through a lens of being produsage-based or produsage-inspired allows us to see how it offers avenues for user-empowerment that have been historically out of reach of all but the studios themselves, or in rare circumstances, the most technologically savvy individuals.

It is this potential to empower the (prod)user that gives the rise of indie gaming the potential to reconceptualise game content, game spaces, and game activities, as being the domain of the gamer, and in particular, as being coded as masculine. While this project is specifically focused on the relationship between video games and our culture, the larger cultural impact of produsage - of which video game creation, play, and modification nonetheless plays a part - is in ensuring a citizenry that becomes actively involved in the process of cultural 'creation' (or perhaps more accurately, cultivation). Producers can begin the process of normalising alternative play practices as a viable market, and normalise minority gamers that do *not* fit the model of the mythologised gamer through these pathways into game development. The blurring of these

boundaries is key to the political goals of produsage; to Bruns, the delineation between politicians, journalists, spin doctors, and the 'average' citizen is maintained through structures and hierarchies, and it is only through blurring the boundaries between participant and politician, of citizen and journalist, such that 'a shift towards produsage may revive democratic processes by leveling the roles and turning citizens into active producers of democracy once again' (p7, 2007a). In this way, Bruns sees produsage as a practice of seizing the tools of cultural generation, and using them through a grassroots approach to participation - where one is both a creator and consumer of culture - and thus to serve as a check against the stranglehold on the production of media and of information by centralised entities. It is through this decentralised approach to creation that games like *Stardew Valley* and *DDLC*, whose creators are both fans and critics of a genre, can move from citizens into active producers of their own culture.

The real benefit to incorporating a produsage model of content creation into this project, then, is to expand the pathways through which an individual can become an active participant in their own culture, and to enhance the impact these amateur developers can make. Easier access to the tools of game development should, ideally, see with it a change in perception of *who* makes games, as well as the kind of content these games create. While the gamer identity sought to use strategies of marginalisation to create a perception of gaming being a masculine hobby based on their content, or based on who occupies gaming spaces, producers have the tools and the presence to challenge these expectations by enabling greater participation within content creation, and by positioning themselves in roles in which they can generate content that contests these expectations, instead meeting their own needs and desires.

4.4 Produsage as Part of Platform Capitalism

The development of indie-styled productions, through games, movies, music, and other media, are not unique to the new millennium. Small scale productions, independent games, garage bands, and so forth, have always existed in some form, even if their cultural impact remained localised or minimal. As a form of DIY culture that seeks to reclaim modes of cultural creation, produsage is not necessarily a *new* concept, even though produsage-based practices in the development of games have been facilitated by the existence of certain technologies: tools that enable collaboration, that allow for the democratisation of information, and so forth. These forms of cultural production that eschew traditional business models presents an inherent challenge to these industries. For some industries, these challenges have been substantial and overwhelming; the success of Wikipedia has diminished the importance of, and reliance upon, traditional encyclopaedias, for example. Despite this, as practices of user-led produsage have increased in scope and usage, other industries have reconfigured their operations in ways that sees produsage not as a challenge or a threat, but as a tool that facilitates, harnesses, and profits from the benefits of produsage.

This reconfiguration of business operations has been identified by digital media theorist Nick Srnicek as a paradigm shift in economics and culture that occurred around the same time as the rise of the indie game movement - the mid-2000s - in moving from a goods-focused economy to a data-centric one within the western world. Coining this new paradigm 'Platform Capitalism', Srnicek describes this as an era where users are encouraged to participate in using 'platforms': digital infrastructures that 'position themselves as intermediaries that bring together different users: customers, advertisers, service platforms, producers, suppliers, and even physical objects' (2017, p24). These platforms include social media technologies, search engines, internet

browsers, and smartphone apps, where usage is often offered for free to the user, but in turn, through their usage the user generates meaningful data for the platform. These platforms are often built from the ground up in such a way that they are intended to not just be used or consumed, but are actively enhanced by its users; Srnicek states 'More often than not, these platforms come with a series of tools that enable their users to build their own products, services, and marketplaces' (p24). This intention for users to improve the product of the platform - whether through usage and consumption (and thus generating data) or through active development is therefore employing a practice not dissimilar to playbour, in that the enthusiasm of a user for the platform generates usable (and marketable) 'data' for the platform. Thus, platforms offer their services to harness the enthusiasm of their users for personal/corporate gain, and to further the reach of the platform, rather than through an altruistic desire to connect people.

As users become actively become involved in the technologies they use (such as through status updates on social media, the development of extensions for browsers, or the development of apps for a brand of smartphone), users are able to customise the experience that they have to technology, and in turn, enable others to have an increasingly customised and personal experience. In this way, platforms not only facilitate, but actively encourage practices of produsage, as they improve the value of the product of the platform at no cost to the platform. However, Srnicek understands these technologies as not just participatory and full of possibility (although this certainly is true) but as part of a new shift of organisation and control. The emergence of platforms as a new basis for economic growth and stability harnesses these factors - the move towards flexibility, the reliance upon digitised data, and the desperation of the modern workforce post-2008's financial crisis - in a way that allows for its users to feel empowered by the opportunities these platforms offer. Platform capitalism thus represents a

fundamental shift in the relationship between the audience, the users and consumers of products, and the distributors, who harness the creative potential, labour, and desire for an ease-of-use experience, for their own benefit.

In this sense, platform capitalism *is* an inherently exploitative set of practices that, much like playbour, siphons the work of individuals into a benefit for the company. A game developer may wish to port their game to a new console, and in so doing, expand the reach of their game, but this also enhances the available library of the platform (the console) that can access this content. While video games and Srnicek's concept of the modern platform could, and did, exist without each other, the marriage between them occurred much more organically than it did in other industries. Video games saw an organic adoption of platforms that became mutually beneficial for both; so much so that video gaming prior to the rise of platform capitalism was already a proto-space for platforms: the implementation of Steam as an all-in-one gaming distribution platform pre-dated the financial crisis that Srnicek sees as critical to the rise of platform capitalism as a dominant economic paradigm, and video game consoles have already fulfilled the role of 'platforms', both literally and as a theoretical construct, with the home video game market relying upon the sales of consoles through which consumers can access their content, even prior to the mainstreaming of internet usage. To that end, platforms are so enmeshed within the distribution and marketing of video games that it is difficult to think of how the industry would function *without* them. In this way, any examination of indie gaming needs to account for the role of platforms in the advertising and promotion of these games, the platforms willing to host them, as well as the awareness that platforms are usually happy to host most games, indie or otherwise, so long as they serve as profitable for the platform.

On the surface, platform capitalism and produsage initially appear to conflict in their view of participatory culture. Where produsage is idealised as a set of practices that facilitate participation and the empowerment of the user, taking the tools of creation back from studios and production houses and becoming an active participant in their own culture, platform capitalism frames participation as little more than reinforcing the economic paradigms that benefit the elite, as users work for free to funnel money to the platforms, who do not need to actively create content beyond site redesigns and refining algorithmic parameters. However, these two viewpoints should be seen as complimentary. Where platform capitalism provides a canvas for its users - even as it funnels data and intellectual property to a central company - produsage sees these same platforms as enabling the individual to become involved in an increasingly accessible technological world, with a diminished emphasis on concepts such as ‘ownership’, instead prioritising participation. While they may *appear* to be offering vastly different perspectives on the usage of technology, it is crucial to understand that the two are not in opposition to each other, as though they were at opposing ends of a spectrum. Rather, the two play into each other; the services and platforms that platform capitalism offers provide new avenues for individuals to become involved in the creation of culture; meanwhile, produsage encourages a more involved role in the creation of cultural artifacts, which are then readily absorbed into platforms to further improve their services. In this sense, produsage is not a ‘solution’ to platform capitalism; its ability to disseminate a set of politics that challenges dominant ideologies hardly presents a challenge to platform capitalism at all; after all, the adoption of produsage further enables the reach of platform capitalism through its users adding data/improvements/modifications to these platforms. Instead, produsage should be seen as a way of using the tools that platform capitalism

offers, as a way of maneuvering through a new system that is still in its infancy, working within its constraints to produce artifacts that better reflect the will of its users.

Indeed, produsage artifacts frequently become readily subsumed within platform capitalism. Bruns refers to four ways in which produsage can be used or integrated by mainstream commercial forces, some ways of which can be benign, while others can be more malicious and outright hostile to the contributions of the producers. He refers to these as: Harnessing the hive (when the produsage artifacts are used by an organisation, as might happen if an organisation uses an open-source suite of work-oriented tools), harvesting the hive (when produsage artifacts are sold by an organisation to non-producers), harbouring the hive (when value-added services are placed into the produsage community to facilitate its growth and potential) and hijacking the hive (when produsage artifacts are 'locked-in' for financial gain by an organisation) (2007a, p5). This affords a range of interventions that can either support or destabilise the produsage community around any artifact. While harnessing or harbouring the efforts of a produsage community may help it grow (eg. through freely available modding toolkits), the harvesting and hijacking - if say a game developer took ideas from its modding community and resold them as expansion packs without attribution - may make a game more polished, but does so through an undermining of the producers that brought these concepts to light. These mechanisms through which produsage becomes a part of platform capitalism also show how the way that a developer, a corporation, or a platform interacts with its producer community can either help to cultivate or to extinguish it for financial gain. Produsage, therefore, is not to be considered separate from platform capitalism, but as a mechanism of navigating through it.

This ability to navigate platform capitalism will become increasingly important as platform capitalism continues to expand into more facets of our lives. As platforms control more of data, and as they become progressively more mandatory to social existence, it also opens up doorways for the development of content (such as indie games) that could never compete in a pre-platform, digitised data-driven world. Thus while Srnicek takes a cynical view of platforms as all-encompassing, monopolised powerhouses - which they undoubtedly are becoming - their desire to harvest as much data as possible also allows for produsage-based practices to thrive. The content-agnostic nature of platforms, where the nature of the data and content created is less important than being able to access and utilise it to expand the platform, means that producers can easily find platforms that are willing to host their content. While a pre-digitised, platform controlled era would be unlikely to take a chance on the manufacture and physical distribution of games like *Stardew Valley* or *DDLC*, the desire of platforms to have a controlling share of content available leads to these platforms willingly. In this regard, platform capitalism provides spaces for indie games where they are not marginalised or delegitimised by corporate powers, ensuring that these games experience a less precarious existence.

This need for platform capitalism to harvest the hive (of produsage) is thus a weakness that producers can exploit in order to use platform capitalism as a vehicle for their own purposes. If produsage truly functions as an equalising force for the development of cultural creation, then we should also expect to see the effects of this populating the platforms we use, and in turn, affecting the perception of video games. While platforms like Steam will readily market blockbuster and Triple-A titles, it should *also* be willing to host content from producers, as it has with both *Stardew Valley* and *DDLC*. In this way, producers have an avenue through which they can visibly change the content that platforms host. Platforms will still retain the right to curate

and market games as they see fit, but if these produsage-based games are to be seen as financially successful - whether through sales, or through driving traffic - then we should also expect for platforms to willingly promote these same games. Produsage and platform capitalism, therefore, are not antagonistic to each other, but symbiotic: each thrives through the opportunities each other offers.

4.5 Complicating Produsage

In attempting to understand the conditions within which games such as *Stardew Valley* and *DDLC* were created, this chapter has identified the paradigm of platform capitalism, as well as the practices that fall under the umbrella of produsage, as offering two complimentary readings of participatory culture: the re-imagining of the relationship between the user and the producer (as produser), and the provider(/platform) as a new market force that has new sets of rules for what content is available, and through what means. This allows the shift towards participatory culture to be seen as feeding into the desires of platform capitalism, for whom the benefits of outsourcing content generation are massive, but through which is potentially a symbiotic link. In viewing participatory culture (through produsage) in this more positive way, it also forces us to ask whether the such easily attained access to content creation that Bruns sees as so important to challenging the status quo truly improve the overall state of the politics present within video games and the culture surrounding them? There are several complications that this framing of participatory culture must address.

This chapter, and this entire thesis more broadly, has looked for the potential within video gaming to challenge the mythologisation of the gamer identity through providing visibility to marginalised play practices and people. This chapter's contribution has been in tracing the

connection between the indie game, as a beneficiary of tools of produsage, to better meet the needs of its (prod)users, as Barone did through his desire to create the ‘perfect’ *Harvest Moon*-style game, and as Salvato did through his love/hate relationship with dating visual novels. In allowing users to move into roles of game development, it also begins to change the perception of game content and encourages more inclusive game spaces. However, to assume that adopting practices of produsage will necessarily lead to a more representative process of media creation may be too optimistic. While access to the tools of produsage may be legally and technologically open to all, this does little to reduce other barriers to entry, particularly social and financial requirements. Despite their interventionist work to support the entry of women into the indie game community, Fisher & Harvey (2012) cite a persistent gender imbalance in game development. Women frequently found a lack of access to tools, few visible role models, intimidation by programming (p30) to be active deterrents from entering into game development, with some declining participation outright due to the sexism, misogyny, and marginalisation women experienced when actively participating in game development (p31). In this sense, the perception of game spaces as gendered, as well as the threats of disempowerment and disqualification, are factors that contribute towards the indie game development scene maintaining a significant male presence to this day. Even when indie gaming and the factors that contribute towards its development are *intended* to be used to enable participation from a more diverse range of individuals, Brendan Keogh argues that we see the opposite effect, with this new industry further entrenching the dominance of middle and upper class white men:

If the casualisation of videogames sees them being produced for wider audiences, then the nascent DIY scenes related to but excluded from “indie” are about videogames being produced by wider audiences. As a medium that emerged from

science departments that privileges programming and technological virtuosity, videogame development has been traditionally dominated by those middle-to-upper-class (mostly white) men that can afford to and are encouraged to enter science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) university courses. This is no less true of the supposedly more democratic indie scene as for corporate Triple-A studios. (Keogh, 2015, p158).

Here we see that even in the supposed ‘democratic’ availability of technologies, of grassroots game development and user-led production, there is still entrenched a privileging of traits held in high esteem by geek masculinity, and these permeate the indie game subculture as much as it does the dominant gamer subculture. It may appear as though the dominant gamer culture and industry are contrasted against the indie scene: anti-mainstream, contrarian, anti-authoritarian, and nostalgic for the ‘golden age’ of gaming, and producing content that can actively challenge the perception of gaming as gendered, but even with this in mind, this subculture is still heavily entrenched within a male bias. The factors that allow for indie gaming to exist, including the produsage-based factors, still privilege the same groups that the gaming industry as a whole do. The potential for the technologies to embrace new inclusive sets of politics is only effective if they encourage those who have been traditionally or culturally denied participation to engage with the medium. No matter how progressive, inclusive, or democratic the politics of Barone and Salvato, they nonetheless are beneficiaries of these factors that entice men into video game development while discouraging women into the same roles. It is with this in mind that despite embracing this ‘indie’ ideal, this project does not want to suggest that these case studies are counter-cultural, nor are they intended to be regarded as such. In this way, the

usage of *Stardew Valley* and *DDLC* demonstrates that the produsage-based factors that may have aided in their development may encourage a pipeline through which individuals can become cultural producers, and move into roles in which these developers can actively begin to shift the perception of what kind of content games can address, but the ability for any given developer to do so may still be limited by factors such as gender, ethnicity, and other factors of identity that produsage should (arguably) help mitigate. Video game theorists Tulloch, Hoad & Young (2019) argue that this is a reflection of the embrace of neoliberalism within gaming and its emphasis on choice, and as a consequence ‘systems unfairly reward certain participants (often white wealthy males) and the expense of others (women, the economically disadvantaged, people of colour, etc.), but such biases are ignored or framed as natural and reflective of effort and talent.’ (p341).

Thus, so long as these logics are ingrained within game design and play, we are unlikely to see major cultural shifts in *who* designs games, even if the tools are made seemingly available to all. In the face of such biases, the dominance of men in this industry becomes even further self-reinforcing. Surely, women can choose to enter the field of indie game design and development, and the tools are there; if they are not engaging in this field, then it is viewed as a consequence of the choices women are making, rather than the socio-political factors that play a significant role, including the frequent disqualification and disempowerment of women within these spaces. In addition, solo indie game development also requires a certain level of time availability and financial stability that is not afforded to those needing to work multiple jobs; after all, the effort required to produce an indie game - even collaboratively - is still considerably higher than that of editing a Wikipedia page. As such, these economic realities that are frequently omitted will still inevitably systemically affect minorities and economically disadvantaged individuals the most.

Even if such technologies could truly be perfectly inclusive and encourage participation from such a wide range of users, this concept is not without its own set of problems. A substantial portion of this project has attempted to show the enormous creative and productive potential of minority groups working collaboratively to reshape the terrain of the video game space, the trajectory of a game series, or of the industry itself, in order to embrace a more progressive set of politics. However, it does not necessarily follow that this end result is the consequence of an increased range of access to these technologies. *Stardew Valley* and *DDLC* demonstrate the positive potential of individuals adopting produsage-based practices to become engaged in the creation of cultural artifacts that are more reflective of a contemporary politics than conventional gaming tends to permit. However, presenting these games as representative of what can go right when individuals become actively involved in their participatory culture also infers that greater engagement with the technologies of cultural creation may also result in an engaged set of users that embody sets of politics that are reflective of the dominant gamer identity. A fully realised produsage-based approach to game design would also see a similarly representative subset of indie gaming reflective of these sets of exclusionary politics. Certainly, the participation of queer-identified individuals, or of developers like Barone and Salvato, has helped to broaden the horizon of gaming practices and politics, but the increased adoption of such technologies should also see an embrace of games that reflect an antithetical set of politics: an anti-queer, anti-subversive, anti-critical set of politics that retain a limited and essentialised viewpoint of what a game ‘is’. This rhetoric was seen in Chapter 1, where the dominant gamer identity saw itself as an authority over what constitutes a game, favouring attributes that were exclusionary, privileging mastery and esoteric knowledge.

Encouraging all gamers to become actively involved in the practice of video game development also comes with an inevitable encouragement for these exclusive ideologies, such as those enmeshed within the alt-right, as legitimate and viable ways of expanding the scope of what a game can be. Rather than seeing the increasing access to mods as an emancipatory shift, then, it must be understood to be a double-edged sword that also enables ideologies that may be antithetical to the goals of this thesis to be easily produced and distributed. The titles *Ethnic Cleansing* (2002), *Zog's Nightmare* (2006), and *Muslim Massacre* (2007), while potentially predating the typical timeframe for the indie game development era, demonstrates one such downside to the ready availability of game development tools, with each offering a play experience that uncritically allows for the player to shoot Jewish, Muslim, and other ethnic minorities (Khosravi, 2017a). Meanwhile, mods to existing games such as *Doom*'s 'Stormer Doom' allows for players to shoot hordes of Jewish enemies, and mods like the 'Euro-Solarian Empire' mod for *Stellaris* allows for players to experience a galaxy that fully embraces the ideals of white nationalism in space. Journalist Khosravi writes that the description for the mod sets the scene: "The Euro-Solarian Empire is united by the beauty and superiority of the white race," adding that all races are "subservient yet united under the rule of white European descended peoples...The great destroyer and cancer of feminism has been wiped out and women are back in their rightful place subservient to men" (Khosravi, 2017b, 'The Euro-Solarian Empire: Nazis in space', para. 2-3). While Khosravi also notes that this mod has since been refused by developer Paradox Interactive from being hosted on Steam - an example of a point where a platform might find it disadvantageous to harvest certain forms of content if it generates social or legal backlash towards the platform - it demonstrates that while the tools of participatory culture may be used to broaden the scope of what a game can be, it may also come at the cost of further radicalising

individuals for whom these ideologies are already attractive. It is with these considerations that it should be naive to suggest that through produsage alone, we may finally see a society where control of culture is handed over to the citizens. The availability of tools such as modding kits and indie game production tools such as Unity also means an inevitable usage of these tools for a set of politics that not only encourages animosity between ethnic and religious groups, but also restricts, discourages, and excludes sets of the population from wanting to become involved with these games.

Even in such a world where all forms of produsage were positive and inclusive, such a world would still have great need for professionals. Andrew Keen warns that the adoption of participatory culture also comes with the downside of democratising information, such that society shifts from a 'dictatorship of experts' to a 'dictatorship of idiots' (2007, p59). The rise of the amateur also brings with it a reduction of overall quality, whether of information, of services, or of standards. Where traditional journalism ensures at least some standard of quality, citizen journalists can make unsubstantiated claims, and are unlikely to be held accountable for writing false or defamatory material. The democratic principles behind Wikipedia, while 'noble', also enable unfactual edits or surreptitious jokes to be inserted without consequence. Theorists such as Keen therefore warn us that praising the 'noble amateur' as a paragon of the digital era comes with its own set of concerns, and this too applies to game development.

These frameworks for understanding participatory culture are useful in shining a light on the benefits and the pitfalls that the adoption of such technologies, but the enthusiasm for these technologies swings wildly from theorist to theorist. Where Lessig (2008) saw promise in participatory culture in returning a voice to the people, Keen sees it as a set of technologies that reduce the emphasis on expertise, even in domains that should rightly revere it. Kuchlich views

playbour as an inherently exploitative practice, whereby developers can outsource free labour to their participants, a practice that Bruns sees as a net positive that empowers users; meanwhile, Srnicek cynically - if not understandably - understands these practices as feeding into the economic dominance of corporations within their respective industries. These discussions of participatory culture often fall far too heavily into a set of binarised arguments: that participatory culture is leading us towards either a utopia or a dystopia. Yet, no matter how menacing the dominance of platforms may appear, it is crucial to remember that they are, above all else, content agnostic. This is why the optimism that Bruns has for produsage is so important: produsage-based practices may never ultimately threaten these platform superstructures, but that does not mean that they are not powerful tools through which users can take some degree of control of their own media. Indeed, so long as these produsage artifacts remain useful and profitable (and unthreatening) to a platform, they are unlikely to be challenged, and so the content can become harnessed and harvested within them.

To imply that produsage-based practices offer a counter-proposal to platform capitalism is not the intent of this chapter. An even-handed appraisal of produsage requires acknowledging that it is not the sole answer to the stranglehold that media corporations and platforms maintain. It is for this reason that Bruns' praise of the collaborative and user-led content production environments such as YouTube (Bruns, 2007b) is tempered by the acknowledgement that it may well be 'no more than a stunt - an attempt by a corporate media organisation to reconnect with a section of "the people formerly known as the audience"' (Rosen, 2006, in Bruns, 2007b, p1); that is to say, feeding into the goals of platform capitalism regardless. Certainly in the decade since Bruns' writing, participatory and Web 2.0 technologies have long since past expanded their scope to become dominant media forces unto itself, with few regulations placed upon it, to say

nothing of the disregard for content creators whose livelihoods are often caught in the shift of policy changes (such as 2018's demonetisation of small YouTube channels (Alexander, 2018, Kain, 2018)). This is not to suggest that produsage is not *effective* - in fact, quite the opposite, considering how many small, collaborative, open-source produser-oriented tools (such as Wikipedia, the open-source suite OpenOffice and its successor LibreOffice, and the web browser Firefox) have risen since the early 2000s into a position of cultural prominence. Somewhere between these two extremes of produsage as a tool for the distribution of cultural creation, and produsage as a tool of platforms to concentrate data, lies the productive potential of this model of content creation. While neither extreme is perfect - true produsage artifacts can be limited in their reach, or accountability, or ability to grow, while platform-centric participatory culture often leaves developer rights and creative freedom at the mercy of the platforms - Bruns acknowledges that these tensions require constant vigilance to avoid a complete collapse of the project:

[Wikipedia's] very success is a threat to its future survival, if it means that there is a growing disconnect between middle and upper levels of Wikipedia's administration and everyday users and contributors. The project has been remarkably resilient to internal and external threats, of course, but that doesn't mean that it will continue to weather any storm that comes its way. In particular, I would argue that Wikipedia should work to enshrine the prerequisites for produsage as absolutely fundamental, inalienable principles of the project, and protect them even against well-meaning suggestions for change. (Bruns in Jenkins, 2008, para. 2).

Thus, produsage can be seen as a delicate balance of forces that requires maintenance and stewardship to ensure that the core values that allowed it to thrive in the first place do not see it corrupted or destroyed. To retain the beneficial effects that produsage offers, it must continue to allow for participation from amateurs, and be prepared to constantly or cyclically be in the process of creation and recreation. Produsage, therefore, presents us with an interesting set of practices through which we can navigate the new economic, technological, and social components of platform capitalism. However, it is far from a foolproof method through which we can see a utopian society emerge. The availability of technologies may seem on the surface as a positive aspect of platform capitalism - and in many ways it is - but it comes with a number of drawbacks that will, rather than breaking down barriers of race or gender, will serve to reinstate and reinforce them. Meanwhile, games such as *Stardew Valley* and *DDLC* present comparatively radical forms of politics that are rarely seen within traditional video game development, and it is largely through platform capitalism that such games could be created and supported. However, while the produsage-based practices may permit or even encourage subversive content that embraces progressive politics, the economic system in which these games were created or cultivated does not care about their politics, only their profitability and ability to draw a consumer base.

4.6 Conclusion

Indie game development has accrued its own form of subculture that borrows from its forebear indie scenes, including its reversion to a DIY ethic, an aesthetic appreciation of the crude and unpolished, a romanticisation of an era that evokes a nostalgia within its core audience, and an embodied political message within the art that is produced in resistance to the

mainstream. In this sense, indie game development finds itself in a position where its very act of creation and distribution *is* political; unable to compete with the budgets of major publishing houses, indie gaming finds its niche in these environments where it can repurpose a genre, reclaim an outdated art style, and exercise its own creative and financial independence through a more fluid approach to design, such as those seen within produsage. In this regard, indie gaming is in a prime position to revise the scope of games and challenge the perception of gaming as a space that upholds the ideals of geek masculinity. The indie game developer can create spaces for the subaltern counterpublic, and challenge the perception of gaming as a domain set up exclusively for those willing to subscribe to geek masculinity.

While the practices of produsage would seem to imply that an increasingly active and involved populace can become engaged in the practice of video game production - as well as numerous other forms of cultural creation - nothing in this chapter should suggest that produsage, and produsage alone, is the pathway through which truly experimental, defiant, anti-authoritarian, or even representative games can be produced. Indeed, such a universalising statement is hardly defensible; not only are there major game developers that continue to produce controversial, experimental, or subversive experiences, but there are ample indie developers that do not consciously integrate produsage into their process of game development at all, or for whom the grassroots appeal of produsage can be used to add layers of racism, sexism, and other politics rooted in exclusion to a game or genre. Despite this, factors that lead to a produsage-based development can help ensure this financial, creative, or publishing independence can be maintained, allowing for this subset of developers to find alternative methods to source ideas, funding, collective labour power, and so forth.

In much the same way, there is no assurance that through produsage, cultural artifacts that can push the boundaries of gaming, or that facilitate the production of queerscapes, or that encourage a modding community to make the game their own, will inevitably be produced. Produsage only functions, after all, while the community in which artifacts are produced have a desire to see ‘building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement’ (Bruns, 2007a, p3). *Stardew Valley* functioned using this model in no small part due to Eric Barone’s desire to see a better *Harvest Moon* game, and *DDLC* was successful as a result of its ability to offer a fourth-wall breaking critique of its own genre, inviting players to become producers of their own. These designers were able to take the components of the former games that they liked, improve upon them, critique their flaws, and then re-release them in an improved state. While these motivations worked well for these two games, we should be cautious to consider produsage as any sort of salvation, or answer to the gamer culture, or as the path towards embracing queerscapes, or as a way to subvert and thwart platform capitalism. Even so, it is important to acknowledge the impact that this subset of the industry has, and how the tools and practices of produsage - particularly through the repurposing of genres, aesthetics, and thematic conventions - can feed into these processes to facilitate a new conversation that declares not what a game *is*, but what a game *can be*. The tools that platform capitalism provide may be done in the self interest of these companies, but they nonetheless *do* provide tools for users to become active participants in their own culture, for better or for worse, and it is through these tools that a greater range of participants can engage in game development that meets their own needs.

The current state of game development is a field that presents the idealist with great hope for what the future may bring. While the 20th century gave birth to the gaming industry *and* the

anomalous stranglehold of Read Only culture, we have returned to an era where professional development is no longer the only way to become an active contributor to culture. As a result, we see a diversity of narratives and creativity that can draw from, build upon, and extend far beyond the mainstream industry, and these products can reach critical mass of a playerbase in a way that would have been unthinkable at the turn of the century, largely through the ubiquity of platforms that benefit from hosting large amounts of content. Indie game development has flourished, and with it, the intrinsic assurance of some degree of financial, creative, and publishing independence by small scale producers in a big ocean of Triple A developers, regardless of the omnipresence of platform capitalism. After all, so long as these indie games are profitable, the platforms that enable them remain indifferent to the content they address.

Where Garda & Grabarczyk (2016) see indie gaming as an isolated pocket of time and space, and Lipkin (2012) sees the end of indie gaming as it becomes incorporated into the mainstream, this chapter views indie gaming more optimistically; not so much as a way to ‘resist’ mainstream gaming, but as a pathway through which a new forms of discourse surrounding gaming can occur. We should consider early 2010s critiques of ‘indie’ gaming as temporally and spatially confined to this particular time period as a mischaracterisation of the conditions in which indie gaming emerged as a response. The ability to offer gaming experiences that can afford to be experimental and subversive, such as through practices of soliciting donations rather than requesting payment for the product, draws from a practice of produsage as community-oriented, and in this sense they provide a service that enriches the community and meets their needs and desires first before receiving remuneration, sourcing ideas from the needs and desires of the userbase. However, these experiences are still being offered *within* platform capitalism, and its desire to acquire content. It is for this reason that this chapter attempts to

position produsage as a means of navigating within established systems. While we are unlikely to see an end to this present paradigm, produsage-based practices can still allow for individuals to create new political spaces within industries, gradually shifting the politics of an industry, particularly by presenting an array of games that challenge the perception of gaming as gendered.

In so doing, producers of culture can become architects of the culture themselves, as grassroots cultural production feeds ideas and experiences from the ground up, rather than from top down, using the tools of platform capitalism to their advantage. It is through this lens that we can see the work of creators such as Barone and Salvato as beginning to confront issues left unaddressed by contemporary culture. Producer-developers acting as architects that survey the land, develop insight into how the landscape can be utilised, and begin to encourage others to participate in taking steps towards having the stories told that *they* want to be told. Produsage-based practices present an opportunity for cultural creation to occur through the hands of the consumers of culture themselves.

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Introduction

This project has addressed the ongoing tensions within gaming cultures, understanding the conflicts and crises over the gamer identity as part of a rejection of an intervention into resignifying who and what a gamer is. While this project did not initially intend to examine GamerGate as a focal point, it was nonetheless important to understand the tensions within this conflict as representative of larger cultural conflicts over the relevance of identity, of the role of gatekeeping within hobbies, and of changing cultural perceptions of geek culture as not an exclusively masculine domain. Indeed, since 2014, the topic of GamerGate has been a topic that has seen much discussion within academic literature, and for good reason. Not only do the egregious instances of harassment reflect a harnessable force that could, and seemingly has been used for other political purposes (Snider, 2017), but analysing these conflicts have proven immensely useful in pinpointing the underlying tensions and insecurities, and thus provide avenues through which they can be challenged.

Yet, in all these discussions, the focus is often so heavily centred around the dominant gamer identity and its structure, its impact, and its tensions; so rarely in comparison does the focus shift towards those marginalised by this identity. Peering beyond this narrative reveals the formation of subaltern counterpublics, of queerscapes, of modding communities largely disconnected from gamer culture, and of users-turned-indie developers that challenge the assumptions about games culture and the games industry. The gamer that does *not* fit into the gamer archetype, often disqualified or disempowered by the gaming subculture, offers an alternative narrative of the gamer that does not stem from, or adhere to, heritage of geek masculinity, but finds its way into technological and digital spaces through other means. In contrast to the pervasive narrative of the gamer within video game culture, there continues to be a strong desire for experiences, narratives, and spaces for those within the ‘outer limits’ of culture to exist. It is in these margins that we can see that these identities complicate simplistic narratives of ‘the gamer’ as a singular identity.

It is for these reasons that this project has attempted to uncover these delegitimised voices - in particular, the queer gamer and the casual gamer - as well as the voices of those capable of reframing gaming as a medium that better represents the wants and needs of its vast and diverse players. Shining light on these marginalised perspectives is key to challenging these strategies of delegitimation, and in so doing, also assists in dismantling the ability for insular gamer identities to control the perception of gaming as the exclusive domain of geek masculinity. Indeed, this project has demonstrated that far from there being one legitimate type of gamer identity, video gaming is a medium that flourishes through its diversity of players and their diversity of playstyles. Not only are video games an important part of contemporary social life

for many, but are also avenues through which individuals become active participants in the creation of culture.

This project, then, sought not to ignore or undersell the significance of the infiltration of alt-right signification into gamer spaces, or to disregard the impact that such a culture may have on excluding rightful participation within these spaces, but instead to optimistically view the ways in which game spaces are already rich with these creative, subversive, and paradigm shifting approaches to play; practices which fulfill the needs of the user, whether that be through sexual fulfillment, social fulfillment, a need to be engaged in the political sphere, or any number of other purposes. It is for this reason that this project turned towards the marginalised and delegitimised groups whose very existence in these game spaces destabilises and diminishes the power structures of geek masculinity. Therefore, examining this culture and the crisis of the gamer identity was crucial in order to better understand how this identity marginalises other groups, in order to understand how these marginalised groups respond and adapt to gamer culture.

The presence of alternate play practices and social configurations is important in demonstrating that there are alternative ways to view and approach gaming that need not adhere to the structures and ideals of the gamer identity. However, simply pointing out these play practices does little to actively dismantle existing subcultures. Where many gamers may have de-identified with the cultural baggage of the label and identity around the time of GamerGate, this crisis provided a potential moment for intervention and resignification that was not met with a shift towards a progressive politics, but an intensification of an exclusionary set of politics. In so doing, the gamer identity further pushed these delegitimised play practices into the margins, rapidly adopted alt-right signifiers, and further normalised these processes of exclusion. This

swing towards maintaining a homogenous culture within gaming - despite the opportunity to shift trajectory completely - is thus a reminder that processes of resignification need to be introduced gradually, so as to not be rejected suddenly and violently.

While the strategies of delegitimisation and marginalisation wielded by the gamer identity may have been effective in reinforcing the construct of this identity to some extent, the fact that this identity ever reached a point of crisis is indicative of the fact that the fundamental assumptions upon which this identity rests - which this project has identified as being part of geek masculinity - are challenged by the mere presence of those outside the charmed circle of gaming, co-existing within and around gaming spaces. Recognising the persistence and defiance of those typically disqualified or disempowered within gaming spaces demonstrates that no matter how exclusionary these spaces are, and no matter what historical factors contributed to the conflation of gaming with masculinity, the medium of the video game will continue to be a site of tension and resistance, until eventually a new process of intervention and resignification can fully take root.

It is in understanding the lineage of video games, and the cultures behind them, that we can be assured that some degree of optimism for the medium is not *entirely* misplaced. No matter how obstinate the dominant gamer identity may be, or how frozen in time the subculture is, an identity rooted in a mythologisation will inherently experience a tension between the idealised version, and the real-world counterpart. In this sense, the tensions that led the gamer identity to a point of crisis will not vanish without engaging in a process of resignification; in the absence of such a resignification, this project has shown how the presence of queer gamers, the persistence of 'casual' gamers, and the creations of indie game developers - as only three examples that this thesis focused on - can serve as a constant challenge to this identity. In this regard, the gamer

identity in crisis can be seen as not just a response to a particular community inhabiting game spaces, but a realisation that the gamer identity is inherently in conflict with the nature of the medium itself. As virtual spaces that can be inhabited and used to facilitate social interactions, and customised to suit the wants and needs of its users, the players of video games will always find play practices that run counter to the perceived 'legitimate' purposes.

Contributions to Video Game Studies

This thesis draws from the work of dozens of important figures within video game studies, and it is the hope that this thesis can contribute to this body of work that seeks to understand the people who play games, particularly those whose accounts are often left untold. It is also hoped that through this project, the seemingly disparate bodies of literature between leisure studies, queer theory, and video game studies will be one step closer in being bridged. One of the key objectives behind this thesis was to address the comparative lack of focus on marginalised communities within video game studies, particularly given the tendency for issues pertaining to these groups to be addressed through concerns over in-game representation of characters rather than the real-world marginalised individuals behind the screen, a frustration shared by Ruberg & Phillips (2018). It is through uncovering play practices that persist despite (and in spite of) strategies of delegitimisation that we can see the enormously diverse range of participating in a culture that represents the needs of the communities it serves, despite the subcultures that visibly occupy this seemingly claimed ground.

Despite the complexities of the subject material within this thesis, many of these ideas become immediately more accessible and tangible if we have a vocabulary with which to discuss them. In this regard, some of the key contributions of this project are in disambiguating key

concepts, allowing them to be addressed with greater specificity and precision. The taxonomy used for the strategies of delegitimisation demonstrated that not all instances of marginalisation function identically, and provides a much needed framework for how instances of harassment and threats of violence have consequences over multiple axes. Further, it allows us to see how these techniques do not simply do harm to the targeted individuals; rather, they demonstrate how they function to police the borders of the subculture, to internally regulate it, and to address the more abstract role of deterrence in ensuring homogeneity within these subcultures.

While this project began in 2016, it was clear even then that there was still a dearth of literature on the play *practices* that inform the player's experience, particularly when taking into account the subjectivities specific to each individual. How one should engage with these various play practices, from a theoretical and methodological standpoint, will vary with the nature of the content. It is for this reason that this project also saw to introduce multiple frameworks that had been otherwise absent from video game studies, not only because they were suitable to the analyses within each chapter, but also to reframe the way that we think about these concepts. While Cottrill's taxonomy of queer formations has received little attention from academia, it provides a depth of understanding of queer spaces as not singular in their function or their composition, but as comprised of 'multiple alliances of lesbian, gay men, bisexuals, and transsexuals and supporting a variety of activities, transactions, and functions' (Ingram, 1998, no page). While Ingram's queerscape, strictly speaking, allows for this diversity, it is through the classification of queerscape usages as sexualised, sexualised/political, and political, that we can better grasp the variety of ways in which these spaces can be repurposed and utilised, and how they can overlap and be integrated with each other.

Similarly, it is through the complication of concepts such as playbour, and its connection to produsage, that we can see that practices such as modding are not *simply* exploitative. They definitely can be, but they also allow for the radical potential and reshaping of a video game that could not happen without modding. Incorporating this nuanced discussion of playbour within our exploration of produsage, and more specifically, produsage-based practices of development, also allows us to see how video game production can be complicated along several axes to incorporate grassroots development in a variety of ways.

Towards a Process of Relegitimation

Throughout this work, multiple frameworks for analysis were used to help contextualise and frame the issues surrounding the core themes of this project. In particular, the strategies of delegitimation (disqualification, disempowerment, and controlling perception) established in Chapter 1 were used to help identify three axes along which delegitimation and marginalisation can occur. In boiling these strategies down into three categories based upon their impacts, it provided greater nuance in addressing the various effects of these behaviours, rather than treating marginalisation as a singular event that affected all individuals identically. In so doing, the following three chapters were used to show how various communities within game spaces actively and passively contest these different processes. However, none of this was to suggest that these strategies of delegitimation were used individually each time they were engaged. Indeed, as seen in Chapter 1, many instances of harassment from the GamerGate movement served to utilise all three strategies: to disqualify certain individuals from having a voice within gaming culture, to ensure that gamers on the sidelines were complicit to avoid the same attention drawn to them, and to deter non-gamers from wanting to enter gaming spheres, reminding them

of the hostile, exclusionary, and pervasive gamer identity that ran uncontested in these spaces. These three axes of delegitimisation may have different intentions and effects, but the consequences of one instance of delegitimisation will also usually engage the other two to some extent.

This awareness of the interwoven nature of these strategies should make it apparent that the responses to these strategies should *also* be seen not as simplistic solutions to tremendously complicated situations. While the exploration of queerscapes was used to show how disempowered individuals within game spaces can still utilise these spaces for their own needs, these same spaces can also be used to re-engage previously disqualified and deterred queer individuals by providing them with spaces they can inhabit. Similarly, while the exploration of *The Sims* modding community was used to show how disqualified ‘casual’ gamers march to the beat of their own drum, creating vibrant, expressive worlds for one another, this practice also plays a role, however small, in challenging the perception of what games ‘should’ be. Indie developers may have an impactful role in challenging the perception of what gaming is about, but the same tools of produsage that allow for indie development to exist as it does, are also capable of encouraging previously disqualified individuals to become cultural creators of their own (and indeed, modding incorporates produsage-based practices in its own way). In this way, while each chapter attempted to address each strategy individually based on their relevance, all of these processes are capable of challenging the dominance of the gamer identity and subculture. So too can we infer that no one single process should be seen as a magic solution to resolving the tensions within gamer culture; the perception of games as a masculine domain cannot be challenged without also inviting and women and queer individuals to these spaces; challenging the disqualification of certain types of games (and gamers) cannot happen effectively

without also empowering these individuals so that their preferences and play practices are considered as legitimate as any other.

Contextualising the Research

This thesis has had to balance its idealistic optimism with a grounded realism. In the three years since this project commenced, the political landscape both within gaming and outside of it has become even further polarised. While academics have presented challenge after challenge to the GamerGate in post-mortem, the construct of the gamer identity as it was understood during GamerGate remains relatively static. The role of female gamers within this culture is still one that is comparatively disempowered, with expectations of maintaining the hegemonic gamer value system, or as disqualified as not ‘really’ a gamer because of a preference for ‘casual’ games. The presence of queer gamers within game spaces is still largely absent; an irony given the frequency with which gay and transgender identities and rights are positioned as sites of moral panics, particularly when a character is codified as gay or transgender by developers.

Fortunately, even in the most oppressive of environments, the repurposing of spaces by a subaltern counterpublic will always be possible, if not likely, to facilitate the wellbeing and survival of its members. The formation of queerscapes in particular have been used to show how these spaces are used to resist the assimilation or isolation of their members in order to not just survive, but to transcend these basic needs and begin to use these spaces as sites for social and political development. The creation of queerscapes, whether sexual, sexual/political, or political, are emblematic of the forms of resistance that flourish in the face of an ideologically homogeneous environment. So long as the conditions that necessitate these formations exist, such as a hostile culture towards queer experience, queerscapes will continue to emerge to fill the

various needs in this community's existence. In this sense, no singular demographic can maintain a complete stranglehold on a medium. It is for this very reason that this thesis focused so heavily on methods for repurposing game spaces and mechanisms for the needs of the user in spite of the cultures that seek to ostracise, isolate, or assimilate the individual, and why the theory on leisure studies and queerscapes is well suited to be framed as a response to the stagnant gamer identity.

Thus, this project maintains an overall positive outlook towards the future of video gaming, irrespective of the setbacks it is likely to incur in the coming years. While the dominant gamer subculture may remain static, the world around it will most definitely not, and despite the strategies of delegitimisation that may function to discourage and deter individuals from actively challenging gaming culture, this project has shown that there are far more subtle and passive mechanisms through which the face of gaming can change. The framework that Cottrill (2006) provides demonstrated how queerscapes can be as simple as passively occupying spaces, effectively reshaping the political constituency of a space, and in turn can have much larger effects in addressing policy and culture. Meanwhile, the potential for users to become participants in the creation of their own culture through produsage is constantly increasing, with new techniques embedded within our participatory culture offering ways to influence gaming from the inside out. Between the rise of accessible video game software development packages such as Unity, as well as the relative affordability of computers and devices that allow for the creation and play of these games, the broad range of social, technological, and economic factors that have contributed towards the flourishing of this industry mean that it is hardly surprising that the once-strict line between professional and amateur video game developer has diminished, paving the way for a produsage-based approach to video game development. While this may seem like a substantial shift, we should remember that the dominance of Read Only/broadcast

media is better understood as an historical anomaly than a standard paradigm, and so we can consider the proliferation of modding, of indie games, and of produsage itself, to be a return to this state where participants of their culture are also the active producers.

On one hand, this return to user-led participation is a positive change for users whose needs are not, or are rarely, met by traditional industries. This thesis demonstrates a strong belief that a diversity of ideas brought to the industry of gaming should be embraced, and in shifting the terrain from a Read Only form of culture to a Read/Write culture, ideas that could never be financially viable can see the light of day through small scale game developers embracing financial, creative, and publishing independence. Individuals able to create an experience that reflects the game they wished to play, or an experience that forces the players to critique their own assumptions about play, are becoming more common as the tools and resources become increasingly ubiquitous. These indie games are able to genuinely challenge the status quo of gaming, and of gaming cultures. They are able to allow for ‘gay buttons’ to exist in games, and even in challenging assumptions about compulsive heterosexuality within gaming, these independent productions show that a large budget is not a prerequisite for creativity or subversion.

This is not to suggest that the future of gaming, or of participatory culture, is to be a utopian dream. The same benefits that platforms offer for users to become producers *also* enhances the reach of these platforms, through the accumulation of political and economic power. Where participatory culture offers a decentralisation of cultural production, it also comes at the cost of an increased economic stratification of western culture between producers of content, and the platforms that host and enable them. It is not the intention of this thesis to posit that indie gaming will somehow fulfill a narrative that functions as the saviour of a stale, tired

industry, but its existence and lineage infers a continuation of a practice of resistance within gaming; after all, the process of Hebdigian recuperation ensures that the anti-authoritarian signifiers of the indie gaming subculture either become commodified, or fade into obscurity. Similarly, modding may face increasingly complex and restrictive legal barriers to hijack the creations of its userbase, especially as knowledge and technical barriers to entry continue to subside. The cyclical arms race between experimental and normative, between resistance and hegemonic, affects video game development no less than it does other subcultures, but no matter how subversive these subcultures and practices are, processes of recuperation ensure that if tapping into these aesthetics and styles becomes profitable, they will be hijacked and commodified until the next set of subversive practices emerges.

In much the same way that this process of resistance and assimilation is cyclical, we should not be so certain that the narrative of civil rights and acceptance in a digital realm is a linear path either. This project explored how queerscapes and the realm of the ‘outer limits’ existed out of necessity in eras where homosexuality was illegal and sodomy laws were enforced. Gradual social and political shifts began to move these practices within realms of permissibility if not acceptability, steadily allowing for less survival-oriented and more politically motivated queerscapes to form. However, while platforms may themselves be politically content-agnostic (so long as they are profiting from the content their users create and host), there is no guarantee that they must remain so. Particularly as legislative shifts occur, this ‘bottom line’ approach to content can actively stifle the creation and distribution of queer content. Tumblr, long seen as *the* online platform to embrace digital and radical queerscapes, (or of race-oriented-scapes, or sex workers), enacted side-wide bans on all ‘adult content’ in December 2018 ostensibly as part of its agreement to crack down on both child pornography and

online sex-trafficking (Darby, 2018). While Tumblr exists almost solely through its users collaborative produsage of content to draw traffic to the site, all forms of adult content that met the algorithm's terms, including many innocuous images that somehow met the criteria (Liao, 2018) was automatically flagged as explicit and removed, including (but not limited to) explicitly queer content, as well as information and resources on safe sex work practices.

It is therefore important to remember that queerscapes, no matter how 'permanent' their structure, always exist in a state of precariousness, with legislative changes - even well intentioned ones - potentially uprooting them. Sandra Song of Papermag.com comments that 'For Tumblr to censor that means it's harder for young queers, and for that matter, older queers, to discover more about themselves and connect to communities' (2018); indeed it appears as though the decade-long construction and maintenance of queerscapes within the digital landscape of platforms such as Tumblr can be uprooted as a consequence of policy changes in the physical world. This new policy subsequently forced sex workers to disengage from this medium, and has already seen an exodus of individuals for whom Tumblr was used as their primary form of pornography intake, whether queer in nature or otherwise, and some *The Sims* modders saw their Tumblr pages flagged or deactivated as a result (Pixelated, 2018). In this sense, retroactively viewing Tumblr - or indeed, any singular platform - as a reliable solution to the need for queerscapes would be short sighted. As the wealth of queerscapes are removed or censored from the website, inevitably, pockets of them will re-emerge on the platform, finding ways around the site bans. However, so too will the individuals that make use of these spaces find new places to emerge, reverting to the 'shifting sands' model of survival to ensure a continued existence.

We are thus likely to continue to see queerscapes and subaltern counterpublics exist in one form or another in and around game spaces for some time to come. So long as there exists a culture that attempts to isolate, marginalise, and assimilate queer identities, the counterpublic, aware of its subordinate status, will still exist in and around these same cultures that exclude them. However, we should be reassured that even in domains as esoteric as *The Sims* modding communities, or indie game jams, or the Moonguard Goldshire Inn, that there will be the desire to create and engage with digital queerscapes so long as queer individuals continue to inhabit these game spaces.

Future Research

This project has presented some promising possibilities for the future of both the gaming industry and the cultures that surround it, but the work started here is far from complete. It has been shown *how* resistance to this dominant gamer culture can occur through the construction of queerscapes, through the process of modding, and through the adoption of practices of produsage, but we have also seen that the strategies of delegitimisation, particularly the controlling of perception, have kept worked effectively to keep the realm of gaming as part of the domain of geek masculinity. Theorists like Adrienne Shaw (2012) noted the tendency for women and queer-identified individuals to experience a de-identification with the gamer identity, or a reluctance to immerse themselves into gaming entirely. Harvey & Fisher (2012) demonstrated the difficulty with which women find themselves when attempting to become involved in the indie gaming scene. Simply having access to the architectural tools that will help articulate the stories and provide the experiences these demographics require is not sufficient. A culture-wide shift in the gaming industry is required, and while this thesis has attempted to

understand these axes of marginalisation in such a way that they can be responded to appropriately, actually addressing the culture directly, let alone finding solutions to it, is *far* beyond the scope of this thesis. Encouraging women, queer, people of colour, disabled, and other minorities to enter the position of game developer is a difficult ask, given the culture of the industry and the consumers stacked against these groups, to say nothing of the *actual* access minority groups have to these tools. The relative affordability of computers and software is irrelevant to the chronically ill or the poverty-laden individual. The barriers that blind or deaf individuals face in these entrepreneurial endeavours are rarely, if ever, discussed.

The issue of race, ethnicity, disability, and other avenues of disadvantage were also hardly touched upon in this thesis. While the potential for the concept of queerscape can be generalised to other -scapes that could include race-oriented spaces, and some of the diversity of *Sims* mods showed the desire for modders and users alike to play with a broader range of skin tones, including characters with vitiligo, the broad corpora of post-colonial studies and black feminist theory was an avenue with little room to be explored in this thesis. There is much theory from these fields that could be incorporated into such a study of modding, or of produsage, or of spaces created for survival or formed to generate political change. The gamer subculture analysed was also unambiguously seen as white, and this assumption is certainly understandable inasmuch as the marketable gamer identity is broadly white, as are the cultural issues that affect and engage this subculture. However, the exclusion - or perhaps, inclusion - of nonwhite individuals into this subculture (including Asian geeks and nerds, of which there persists a pervasive stereotype in media) was not a focus of this thesis. The queer identities explored were similarly presumed white, and located in western cities and nations, and much of the techniques for survival and political organisation may change if this assumption were to be complicated.

This thesis has also attempted to approach grand narratives beyond the scope of video game cultures with caution. Despite this, it is difficult to discuss issues pertaining to gamer cultures without also acknowledging the connection between this culture and the rise of political movements like the alt-right, or to ignore the importance of platforms and technologies that are fundamental to the social experiences of video game play practices. The interplay between games and the culture they are played in, or the shifts in technologies that change the play experience, or the labour practices that act as barriers to participation, are all important considerations in fully understanding these issues. In this regard, the taxonomies provided throughout this thesis may prove useful in helping address issues pertaining to these political issues, and how they can be mitigated through responsive strategies of resistance.

Conclusion

The terrain that surrounds video games, its constituent playerbase, the identities that congeal within it, the subcultures that police it, and the communities that reshape it, are all phenomenally complex topics. However, this project has taken steps to offer various ways of framing about these issues, from a range of disciplines that usually function at the periphery of video game studies. Through this, this project has opened up frameworks for analysis that may prove useful when discussing gaming identities, play practices, social formations, and development practices, and in so doing, it has also located otherwise obfuscated practices and peoples that exist at the margins of play. Rather than being seen as unusual or illegitimate play practices, this thesis has argued that it is in these margins of play that real productive, radical potential is so frequently capable of manifesting. In focusing not so much on the textual elements of games, but the social and cultural ones that surround them, hidden worlds are made visible,

and alternate configurations of gamers that contest the mythologisation of the gamer-as-geek become apparent.

Through reconceptualising gaming as not a homogenous monoculture, but a space of creative potential, of cultural creation, and of resistance to assimilation and isolation, it is possible to reframe video gaming as something that far exceeds the limitations placed upon it by its dominant subculture. In this way, game spaces can never be completely owned or claimed, and it is in locating these mechanisms of resistance that we can better understand the game space as capable of serving the needs of its diverse playerbase. While the political landscape may continue in its polarisation and further exacerbate the already exposed rifts within video game culture, these frameworks for understanding alternate play practices can serve as useful guides for analysing how, no matter how overbearing the dominant gaming subculture may be, there will always be ways to occupy these game spaces, and to make them serve the needs of their communities.

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