Hanging by a (Reddit) Thread:

An Analysis of Gamer Identity Discourse in an Online Forum

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis project explores the nature of power dynamics in the dialogue of video gamers within designated online forums of discussion. Previous scholarly work has noted the lack of diverse representation and tolerance in the gaming community, despite statistics revealing that the video game community is not as homogeneous as it is often represented. Specifically, the prominent literature analyzing gaming culture focuses on poor representations of gender within video games and the gaming community itself, including sexualized and objectified depictions of women as well as prejudice toward women as members of the gaming community. More recent entries to the field of research draws attention to the experiences of other marginalized communities in gaming. This thesis, then, begs the question – what power dynamics emerge in the dialogue of people who consider themselves to be gamers? How are concepts of social identity expressed or constructed in communication, and what reinforces and legitimizes these relationships? This project will review a foundation of literature structuring the framework of this project, propose methodology for data collection and analysis, and explore themes discovered within the data analysis, which support or negate existing research and give insight to the proposed research questions.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the notions of gender, race, sexuality and ability as they are represented in video gamer discourse in an online public gaming forum. The project focuses scrutiny on the way dialogue forms around these concepts and how this influences relationship of power expressed through communication amongst distinct groups within this cultural setting. Particularly, the aim is to interrogate what this means in terms of how the community defines itself and how this is established. Justification for this project is established by the scope of the video game community itself, which is comprised of over two billion people worldwide, with millions engaged online in gaming-specific public forums. Additionally, as a self-identified gamer, I have personal experience with the issues under scrutiny in this project and subsequently have my own interest in better understanding the video game community. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What are the most prevalent themes regarding social identity on an online public gaming forum?

RQ2: What defines a "true" gamer as expressed in online comments?

RQ3: How are the concepts of race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability discussed within the video game community in an online forum?

The subreddit selected for data collection, r/TrueGaming, shows comments with relevance to the thesis project from initial review of various threads and discussions pertaining to issues of social identity. A variety of academic studies were used to establish a framework for understanding these user comments, including scholarly

communications theory, academic understandings of the video game community, and more contemporary popular culture critiques of game developers and gamer culture.

Setting the Foreground: Gaming's Past and Present

Video games - the final frontier, as it would appear, of in-depth role playing and storytelling. As the age of technology has progressed in leaps and bounds it is hard for many to say that they do not partake in video gaming of some kind, with games available on virtually every electronic interface available. As of 2018, over two billion people internationally play video games, and nearly seventy percent of Americans (approximately 211 million people) engage in video game play (Brecente, 2018; Wijman, 2018). Research would suggest that the age of the recluse basement-dwelling gamer has ended, as often depicted in media critical of "gamers" that stereotypes those who play video games as strictly anti-social hermits and not as functional members of society (Paaßen et al, 2017; Kowert et. al, 2014; Kowert et. al, 2012). The explosion of the gaming industry has made way for a new (and young) age of diversity both in the content of video games, as well as within the community itself. This is exemplified in games like Horizon: Zero Dawn and Assassin's Creed: Odyssey, which have diverse representations of women, people of color, and the queer community (Garcia, 2018; Polo, 2017). Horizon: Zero Dawn is firm not just in its depiction of a powerful and smart heroine with her own agency, but also in its inclusion of women and people of color as stakeholders of the main story. Additionally, Assassin's Creed: Odyssey was the first in the franchise to allow for players to select a female as their character to propel the story, and both main

characters (Alexios and Kassandra) are capable of romancing without limitations of gender.

Yet, there still lingers a fierce sense of dread for many who log on and join the vast network of other gamers in online video gaming. Even in worlds of seemingly limitless possibilities and in an age of expanding representation, social minorities and marginalized groups still find themselves humiliated, attacked, and dehumanized in ways that dominant hegemonic groups do not (Gray K.L, 2012; Paaßen et. al, 2017; Williams et. al, 2009). The truth is, the video gaming community as a sub-cultural phenomenon remains overwhelmingly influenced and represented by a very specific population of young, white, and able-bodied heterosexual men that define the label of "true gamers" (Gray, 2012; Paaßen et. al, 2017). More troubling for women, people of color, and other marginalized communities is the acknowledgement that these social spaces online have become colonized with the same ideologies which govern their "othered" existence in real life.

Subsequently, while straight white men are enabled to become immersed in, and empowered by, the narratives that live within video games, marginalized communities are often *othered* in these stories due to gaming's origin in Western ideology and story-telling traditions that are heavily influenced by themes of colonization, divinity, racism, and sexism (Feather & Mckee, 2012; Fox & Tang, 2014; Kilianski, 2003; Paaßen et. al, 2017). Because of this, Gray (2012) argues that minorities are plagued by their lowered social status and therefore lose the ability to anonymize themselves in online gaming engagement (p. 425). Of the existing research surrounding exclusionary behavior and prejudice in the video game community, there is a stark contrast in the amount of work

surrounding the experiences of queer video gamers and people of color who identify as gamers when compared to the growing conversation about standard binary gender inequalities. Put otherwise, a great deal of effort has been made to understand the way women have been marginalized in the video game community and in video game representations, but little-to-no scholarly dialogue adopts an intersectional approach that focuses on other traits of social classification, like race, sexual orientation, disability, and even non-heteronormative gender representation.

In this study, I aimed to investigate dialogical representations of social identity within online gaming forums. This project hopes to gain an improved understanding of the cultural dimensions of the video gaming community and its online performances of various social identities, specifically examining whether power is assumed or dismantled based on race, gender, sexuality, or ability.

This abbreviated discussion of existing literature is later expanded upon in relationship to the full scope of the project; however, initial research reviewed here touches on the focal points of the pertinent scholarly work surrounding video games and the gaming community, as well as theoretical work relating to the construction of social identity. Publications will also be referenced to contextualize the history of video gaming, as well as public opinion of the gaming community surrounding these issues.

Methodology

This thesis project is based in data collected from a popular Reddit forum dedicated to true gaming. The method is iterative, beginning with an exhaustive reading of the forum and moving through distinct phases of abstraction, deductive coding, inductive analysis, and conversation analysis. Reddit threads that invoke themes related

for identity were then selected for extraction and were processed through an open source Python script. The unit of analysis is defined as each Reddit comment. Portions of the analysis are grounded and emergent as I seek to identify re-occurring themes but also will be targeted as I selectively identify comments that invoke social identities for analysis. The process of extracted comments will be largely inductive in nature, with some thematic coding to act as a guideline. While terms will be operationalized in the literature to determine what is meant by video game discourse as it relates to race, gender, ability and sexual orientation, much of the thematic analysis will rely on implicit knowledge regarding what counts as references to gender, race, sexuality and ability. Therefore, the project outlines what counts as an instance of someone referring to gender, ability, race, and sexuality by operationalizing these terms in the semantic context of slang terms, popular culture references, and other explicit and implicit cultural markers relevant to particular social classes of identity. With this framework established in the literature review, conversation analysis of the user comments themselves further develops and refines the investigation of social identity as it is discussed, negotiated, and potentially even challenged, through the discourse of gamers in this public forum. Users in this online public forum will have their identities protected through enumeration and anonymization of comments, with personalized usernames replaced by “User 1, 2, 3” and so on. Comments were also removed from time stamps or other identifiers to further ensure user anonymity.

Chapter Outlines

In chapter 2, I offer context for the development of the video game community over time from its roots in Western ideology and lore, as seen in the table-top role-playing games from which digital video games originated, and how video games lend themselves to Western fantasy and science fiction. This leads to a review of literature which discusses the way this ideology impacts video game themes of exploration, and colonization, as well as how masculinity, race, women's sexuality, and other social issues are conceptualized. Academic work will cover both critiques related specifically to video games as well as critical theory on race, gender, and social dynamics of power. Chapter 3 provides definitions for what counts as instances of discourse invoking concepts of race, gender, ability and sexuality, process for collecting data, and a detailed means of analyzing user comments with examples provided. This section of the thesis also explains how data was collected, recorded, and anonymized through enumeration to protect user identity, while detailing the results of analysis with additional examples. Chapter 4 reviews the results of data collection and thematic analysis, citing the findings of the analysis performed and relating them to relevant ideas discussed earlier in the literature review. Here is where I also make implications about the meaning of these findings and why they are important to understanding how video game discourse affects the community. In the concluding chapter, I summarize the initial goal, key findings of the literature review, methodology, and findings of analysis. The conclusion also explores potential implications for future study and any shortfalls of the thesis project itself.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contextualizing Modern Video Games and their Predecessors

Tracing the origins of modern video games provides a contextual understanding of their cultural influences. Video games as we know them now are not just the culmination of technological advancements, from Pong to in-depth virtual reality, but also owe much of their development to both Western storytelling and table-top board games known as role-playing games (RPG's) (DiLeo, 2017; Sherman, 1997). Video games were originally created with the intention of sparking interest in computers and technology, but in order to sustain excitement in consumers and players abroad, the industry had to recognize that the story element is more crucial for captivating an audience than technological and visual flair alone (History.com, 2017). This realization not only saved the industry from collapse but reshaped the vision of video games into what we see today – a multi-billion-dollar market that draws players from all over the world to a multitude of playing consoles and settings. Gaming has also been redefined as more than a casual pastime or hobby, with high-stakes competitions, professional teams, and large-sum prizes ("Gaming," 2019). Even with consideration for these developments over time, the traditional stereotype of the "gamer" has changed little since its infancy. Once thought of as the basement-dwelling recluse, the stereotype of the gamer was generally considered a straight, white, male, and was typically characterized as unattractive, nerdy, or immature (Kowert, Griffiths & Oldmeadow, 2012). Some of this still holds true in contemporary understandings of gaming culture, but as video games grow in popularity some of the more negative connotations have diminished.

Roots of Gaming Culture and the "Gamer" Stereotype

This gamer stereotype likely derives in significant part from the gendered nature of the field of computer science. The field of computer science has been largely inaccessible to women, people of color, LGBTQ+ and people living with disabilities, with marginalization often justified by claims that people of these social categories hold a lack of interest for science and computing (Funk & Parker, 2018; Jaschik, 2018; Kolhatkar, 2017; Myers B., 2018; Sparks, 2017; Moran, 2017). While STEM fields saw a dramatic increase of female participants in the mid-1980's, the influx just as quickly receded. Now, women make up less than fifteen percent of graduating Computer Science majors and are far less likely to continue onto a career in technology than their male counterparts (Zweben, 2011). Even fewer are students of non-white descent, with black, Hispanic, and Asian students making up less than fifteen percent of Computer Science majors *combined* (Myers B., 2018). The problem with this reasoning, however, is that we are to assume that the lack of participation from minority groups and underprivileged social classes is caused by an innate trait of personality or character, rather than a result of how people are encouraged differently to pursue scientific studies based on their background.

Similar trends of diversity have plagued the genres of science fiction and fantasy, whose plot-lines and characters inspired many computer games. Consider, for example, the gender and other cultural biases encoded in original fantasy works such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Many critics argue that the spaces of fantasy and science fiction have provided creative opportunities for discussion about prejudice and privilege, which should be acknowledged and redressed in more inclusive and critical plot and

character development. For example, fantasy and science fiction can tackle many difficult conversations about race, gender, disability, and even sexuality through their narratives, using, for example, the plight of alien species and magical creatures as an allegory for social inequalities. However, this doesn't mean that these stories are not also prone to use said metaphorical comparisons to accentuate common stereotypes of real-world social groups and communities. Negative cultural stereotypes too often inadvertently find expression in fantasy. For instance, popular publications have recently problematized the *Harry Potter* series for its anti-Semitic characterization of goblins, which are described as hook-nosed creatures with a weakness for gold (Burack, 2019). Although *Harry Potter* confronts issues of xenophobia and fascism, with its blunt comparison of Nazis to Death Eaters and their authoritarian ideals based upon one's "blood purity," it doesn't negate the series' use of problematic stereotypes that are based in real-world constructs of prejudice. It is also difficult to defend the stance that these genres are diverse when people of color are consistently re-imagined into fictional, metaphorical stand-ins, rather than existing at all (Child, 2010). Moreover, equating people of color and other marginalized communities as aliens or other species reinforces their othering and dehumanization.

These issues spill over into the more interactive aspects of fantasy and science fiction, including action-and-adventure role-playing, both in live-action and board-game formats. A classic tabletop RPG that many are familiar with is Dungeons & Dragons, also known as D&D, which was designed by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson and published in 1974. D&D is largely considered the inception of tabletop RPG and other fantasy-and-science adventure games (Appelcline, 2013). It enabled players to create their own

characters with unique attributes and skills, collaborating with other players in a group "party" to complete quests and gain experience points (XP) to level up. Garcia (2017) points out this problematic relationship of D&D with gender and race, which is large in part due to the game's creative influences including literature comprised almost entirely from white male writers (p. 243). For instance, the early renditions of D&D contained masculine-leaning language, using only male pronouns and "men" as descriptors for the various classes, and was even explicitly defended in the game rules due to the common use of male pronouns throughout historic texts and literature (p. 237-238). Women were frequently treated with an objectifying and fetishizing gaze, both as members of the RPG community as well as in their depictions in RPG lore and artwork, which further alienated women from successfully integrating into the genre. Garcia also emphasizes the structure of race as a function in D&D, which sets humans as the default – and with the greatest advantage – while other races, like orcs, dwarves, and gnomes carrying material disadvantages (p. 240). While this can be viewed as a means of critique for real-world structures of privilege, this feature of D&D can also be approached as a more dubious habit in science fiction and fantasy genres (Garcia, 2017; Young, 2016).

In review, analyzing these various and broad areas of focus demonstrate the historical and cultural precursors in which the gaming community has developed. Primarily, the fields of Computer Science, coding, and other technology studies have long been dominated by, and cultivated for, primarily white men, with marginalized communities severely underrepresented. Additionally, the variety of storytelling in popular video games is predominantly steeped in Western tradition of folk tales and ideology, with their fair share of exploration, colonization, damsels in distress, and

heroism (Russell, 2018; Young, 2016; Flowers, 2014). Many popular story-based video games, including The Elder Scrolls, Assassin's Creed, Fallout, The Witcher and most Massively Multiplayer Online RPGs (MMORPGs) use similar structures of leveling up, inventories, and combat that originate in role-playing board games, such as D&D, demonstrating the relationship between tabletop and video game RPGs ("Gaming", 2019; Woo, 2018; DiLeo, 2017). Beyond influences of format, the historical context of modern-day video gaming and gaming culture provides an understanding of its dominant practices and ideological values it has inherited. While this section of the literature review is brief, it provides a necessary backdrop for comprehending current issues with the gaming community.

Moving in the (Alt-)Right Direction? Gaming in Relation to Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Ability

In 2013, allegations against a game developer Zoe Quinn surfaced that claimed she had used sex as a means of climbing the success ladder in the gaming industry, resulting in a viral outpouring of hateful and sexist backlash from gamers across the globe online. Meanwhile, in another corner of the gaming community, Anita Sarkeesian – a feminist writer and vlogger – was receiving death threats for her videos analyzing video games with feminist critiques. These, amongst other stories, compounded into a movement more widely known as the #Gamergate controversy (Dewey, 2014). Nonetheless, #Gamergate was only a symptom of the underlying problem in gaming communities, surrounding the hostility of gamers not just toward women, but to all other marginalized communities as well. These perspectives in gaming are especially necessary to explore, with consideration for recent issues regarding alt-right and Nazi activity in the

gaming community as well as the #SubscribetoPewdiepie controversies (Choksi, 2019; Roose, 2019; Kamenetz, 2018).

Felix Kjellberg, who goes by the internet name of PewDiePie, is considered one of the most popular video gamers on YouTube and one of the most successful Youtubers of all time, reaching 100 million subscribers in the latter half of 2019 with over 20 billion views on his videos (Choksi, 2019; Roose, 2019). Known for his chaotic style of gameplay and his appeal to a younger crowd on the internet, Kjellberg has repeatedly come under fire for the casual use of slurs on his channel, and drew extensive media attention when the hashtag #SubscribetoPewDiePie was used in relation to a large-scale terrorist attack in New Zealand on two mosques which resulted in the death of fifty people in Spring of 2019, where the shooter shouted the phrase on his Facebook live feed before the attack took place (Choksi, 2019). Kjellberg's channel has become representative of the radicalization of internet users, particularly the ability of right-wing extremist movements to capitalize on viral content to disseminate their messages online; especially amongst gaming communities (Kamenetz, 2018). This is demonstrated by the invocation of PewDiePie's name in relation to hate speech or other racially charged online discourse, with the use of the meme #SubscribetoPewDiePie.

Deeply seeded ideological beliefs, derived from influences previously discussed, have shaped both the culture's members and artifacts into the more commonly recognized representation of violent, sexualized games played by recluse, straight, cisgender, white, and able-bodied men (Smith, 2019, Paaßen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, 2017; Phi, 2009; Ruberg, 2018; Cary, 2017; Crooks & Magnet, 2018; Shaw, 2015). #Gamergate also casts a shadow on the hostile and seemingly unsafe conditions for women to

participate in gaming culture in relation to the habits of rape culture that are prevalent throughout the community (Burnay, Bushman & Larøi, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2014; Beck, Boys, Rose, & Beck, 2012; Myers, 2020). Rape culture exists not just in interactions of players and community members, like the use of the word rape as a synonym for defeat or failure – "we just raped them so hard!", etc. - but is also a common theme within games as well. Just last year, a video game named *Rape Day* was released which features a protagonist that rapes women in order for the story to progress (Guggisberg, 2019). Research suggests that playing games which sexualize women or encourage violence against women increases the likelihood of rape myth acceptance (Beck et. al, 2012, p. 3025). Said otherwise, games which objectify women or commit violence against women are likely to endorse dominant cultural narratives of rape culture and can subsequently impose similar beliefs onto players. The prevalence of rape culture in video games and gaming can also be understood as an aspect of the male gaze, which Mulvey (1997) describes as the projection of fantasy onto women's bodies that treats them as innate sexual objects (p. 346). As the male gaze sexualizes the female body, the personhood of the woman inhabiting the body becomes secondary to the pleasure gained from it. Moreover, rape culture and the depiction of rape or use of rape language indicates a form of domination and control over the female image and their sexuality.

Furthermore, this supports the history of research surround the association between aggressive or delinquent behavior in players with exposure to glorified violent or risk-taking behavior in video games (Hull, Brunelle, & Prescott, 2014; Thomas & Levant, 2012; Dill K., Gentile, Richter, & Dill J., 2005; Bartholow & Anderson, 2002; Anderson & Bushman, 2001). This hypothesis, of course, has drawbacks, and has received mixed

criticism over time. While a correlation has been drawn between characters and stories that glorify aggression or violence and deviant player behavior, the literature also emphasizes that this relationship could be mislabeled, and it is equally as likely that those who have pre-existing violent or aggressive tendencies seek out games which fulfill such desires (Thomas & Levant, 2012). This, in turn, arguably means that games depicting rape or hypersexual female characters do not simply increase acceptance of rape myths, but are drawing players who already endorse habits and norms of rape culture. Research also suggests that while this relationship is true of men with traditional beliefs or values about masculinity, it does not necessarily mean that those who do not identify with traditional ideals of masculinity are equally as affected (Bartholow & Anderson, 2002). Additionally, these claims are frequently framed as an indicator that all video games are inherently violent, which is untrue – just as games can influence player attitudes by glorifying risk-taking behavior, rape culture, and general violence, the research also indicates that pro-social reward systems and stories have an equal and opposite effect, encouraging team collaboration and kindness toward others. Finally, the argument that violent video games are responsible for aggressive, sexist, or otherwise problematic behavior removes the players themselves from any means of accountability for their actions or for how they reinforce cultural norms that privilege or marginalize various social groups.

Nonetheless, this thesis is also focused on addressing disparities of race, ability/disability, and sexuality within the gaming community. While most of the literature discussing diversity in gaming is primarily aimed at understanding gender dynamics, less frequently considered are the experiences of people of color, and even less

so those of queer or disabled people. Because the realms of computer technology and action-adventure role play have historically been dominated by white, male participants, the video games made therein served the needs of those making them and reflected their own expectations of storytelling and normative ideology. Moreover, the argument regarding lack of interest from minorities in STEM subjects, fantasy and science fiction, and RPGs is often applied to video games, as is it frequently asserted that games should not cater to a diverse makeup of consumers by reason that those who do not fit the traditional stereotype of a "gamer" lack the interest necessary for diverse video games (Myers M. , 2020; Paaßen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2014; Gray, 2012).

This argument is challenged by data in recent years that shows a growing number of minorities, women, and people with disabilities identifying themselves as gamers and frequently playing video games. In an article by Paaßen, Morgenroth and Stratemeyer (2017), which focuses on gender inequalities in the gaming community, it is stated that women are consistently referred to as a minority in gaming despite data which shows that women represent nearly half of all gamers (p. 422). Regardless of statistical representations of the diverse makeup of gamers as well as efforts to make the gaming community more inclusive, members of the gaming community that lack the privileged status of the "straight, white male" are still minimized.

In a deeper exploration of this stereotype, Kishonna Gray interrogates how the gamer being typified in whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality is reinforced by an absent dialogue on issues of race and other identity traits in gaming (& Leonard, 2018; 2014; 2012). Specifically, K. Gray points out that straight, white, male gamers exist in a

neutral space of identity which renders them invisible, while simultaneously deviating the presence of non-white, queer, or feminine gamers in these online spaces. Gray and Leonard (2018) also emphasize that the neutralization of this position and subsequent deviation of minorities further exacerbates any dialogue on issues of diversity within gaming. Because gaming is defined by a dominant group that is largely considered invisible and unpolitical, discourse about social classes and distinguishing characteristics is inherently limited. These topics are subsequently treated as intrinsically hostile toward the traditions of gamer identity, as addressing the inequalities of race, gender, disability or sexuality threatens the boundaries of hegemonic ideological power. In discussing such issues, Gray and Leonard state:

> Lamenting political correctness, multiculturalism, and the betrayal of gaming tradition, Gamergate also empowered this narrative of white male victimhood. Gamergate was defined by such belief…Seeing change as a threat, they fought to preserve the hegemony of white male hetero gaming and gamers.

When referring to the concept of white male victimhood, the original stereotype of the geeky, recluse gamer comes to mind. It also elicits ideas familiar to Right-wing groups who see diversity as a means of white genocide, and the combination of both influenced the events of Gamergate which depicted the traditional gamer as victims being forced out of their territory.

Because gaming is a disembodied experience, there are natural assumptions of virtual anonymity, which enable gamers in this neutral space to lash out at "othered" bodies in forms such as griefing or flaming, which are different means of antagonizing or

harassing other players either through the game functions themselves or by making some verbal or written attack. For instance, a gamer may be griefing other players in a player vs. player setting if they repeatedly seek out a particular player in order to kill or injure them. Flaming occurs when a gamer uses derogatory or offensive language against another player in order to elicit a response or upset them. Both flaming and griefing are intended to disrupt the virtual space and enforce inequalities, which are characteristic of what K. Gray explains as toxic online disinhibition (2012, p. 414). Through this disinhibition, the dominant hegemonic group is enabled to use prejudiced or inflammatory rhetoric. Just a few of the many results of the culmination of these factors includes #Gamergate and #SubscribetoPewDiePie, and this culture climate is attributed with the resurgence of alt-right and neo-Nazi movements as well as the success of the Trump candidacy (Gray & Leonard, 2018).

The format of discussion should also be considered when addressing the cultural norms of gaming, as the platform where discourse takes place has the potential to influence or shape the content created. Massanari argues that Reddit as a platform acts as a cultural hub that promotes geek masculinity and toxicity in the tech industry through its algorithmic sorting and anonymity (2017). Because Redditors (Reddit users) have usernames and personas, as opposed to traditional networking websites, users have different abilities in terms of interacting with one another, and content is sorted not chronologically but based on virality or popularity. Massanari cites two specific events where this is exemplified, including anti-feminist subreddit activity during #Gamergate as well as the spreading, upvoting, and re-posting of stolen private photographs of female celebrities on r/TheFappening (p. 334-336). Combined, toxic behavior that defaults to the

norms of geek masculinity, geek culture, and tech culture thrive and appear throughout many popular subreddits. Therein, toxicity and aggression towards marginalized groups is widespread throughout the gaming community, but may be particularly amplified on Reddit based on the way the platform operates.

Ultimately, the idealized gamer is a cultural narrative which reinforces itself through the othering of marginalized communities and the claim that diversity threatens the quality of video games and who they are made for. Knowing this provides context for the bodies of literature which examine the relationships between gaming and aggression, as it reframes the perception of the violent gamer as a specific identity which is drawn to gaming for its facilitation of inflammatory discourse or violent media exposure, both of which target minorities across demographic lines. It is important to stress that the large body of scholarly work examining the cultural implications of video games and gaming focuses on the experiences of women, with newer entries giving attention to race and ethnicity.

Discussions on the experiences of gamers with disabilities remains underdeveloped, which may be a result of the disembodied experience of virtual gaming. Virtual spaces have been described as providing an element of anonymity for people interacting with others online, and this element reduces the visibility that usually accompanies socially or medically classified disability. This may grant individuals with different ability greater protection from being “profiled” in the way that women or people of color are in voice chat settings (Gray K. L., 2012). Subsequently, queer discourse in gaming also suffers from a lack of development, though newer studies have emerged which question the necessity of LGBTQ+ representation in gaming, and the safety of

gaming spaces for queer people (Gray K. L., 2018; Ruberg, 2018; Shaw, 2012). It should also be acknowledged that because masculine identity defines itself in homophobic behavior and rituals, the stereotypical association of sexuality with gender issues may result in the two being grouped as a single issue of deviance from masculine norms and ideals (Ruberg, 2018; Pascoe, 2005). Additionally, K. Gray's work in the literature opens consideration to the intersectional realities for gamers who identify across categories of social marginalization, demonstrating that issues of feminism and civil rights in gaming are not mutually exclusive but also benefit from each other (see also Hill-Collins, 1990). These perspectives are critical to acknowledge in this project to provide insight to the more nuanced and complex ways that prejudice arises in discourse.

The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly: Representations of Marginalized Communities

Earlier, the discussion about modern video game precursors acknowledged the influences of Western themes and ideological structures in gaming as a culture. This well of cultural assumptions and values reverberates not just in gaming as a community, but in the types of games that are made and the stories they tell. Sherman (1997) identifies this in the Nintendo franchise Super Mario, which plays on the premise that you, Mario, must rescue Princess Peach from the clutches of the evil Bowser (p. 244). Though intended for children, Sherman argues that the target audience of Super Mario is not only aware of its story influences, but the baggage of cultural norms and ideological messages that come with it (p. 255). By this, Sherman is referring to the traditional gender roles presented in the story of *Super Mario*, amongst other games. Other traditional Western themes, like colonialism, are heavily present in games as a result of their Western fantasy and Science Fiction heritage (Bezio, 2018). Bezio compares the stark contrast of Lara Croft, who is

white, wealthy, and educated, to the enemies she faces in combat who are culturally, educationally, and technologically isolated from modern times (p. 120).

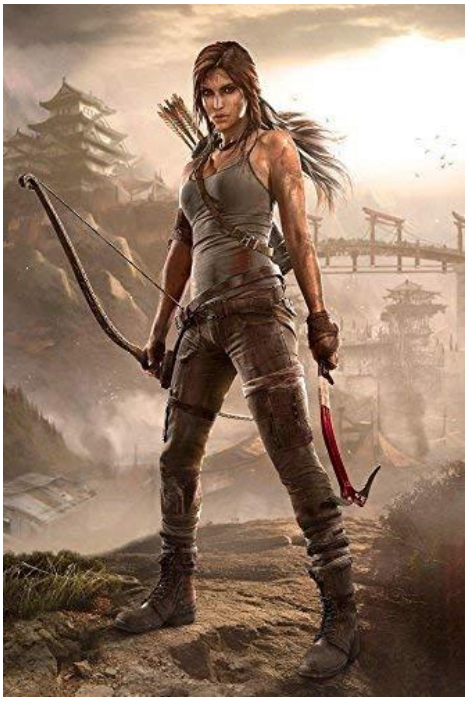


Figure 1 - Lara Croft in Tomb Raider *(2013)*

The archeologist is an archetype in video games which mobilizes and perpetuates themes of imperialism and the "white savior," and appears frequently throughout the fantasy genre and in MMORPG's. These include Tomb Raider, The Nathan Drake series, and others, which inadvertently teach the player attitudes about race, culture, and xenophobia. Other games, such as Call of Duty and Battlefield have much more overt themes of racism, using the generic otherness of the Middle East as the backdrop for their villainous characters (Dill, Gentile, Richter, & Dill, 2005).

Some attempts for inclusive representation also just fall short, or instead are used as a means to encourage participation – and profit from – specific minority demographics. Well-intended efforts in films, television and video game alike may have

poor representation if the character is not well researched or is misinformed, often relying on stereotypes or, as mentioned above, make their appearance in villain-coded settings that place them in the position of the "other." In a review about the disappointing representation of a lesbian couple in *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker,* RedLetterMedia (2019) coined the term "passive progressive," referring to the underwhelming ways that producers and studios incorporate diverse representation. Categorizing the same-sex kiss in *The Rise of Skywalker* as passive progressivism problematizes these dismissive and tokenistic characters or scenes and describes the choice as one of financial incentive rather than being motivated by a need to be inclusive and diverse. Passive progressive inclusion can be distinguished from genuine inclusion when little or nothing is known about the character, or when the audience has little investment in the character. These types of characters may only appear for a few moments or will largely have a background roll, but never play a part in the weighted portions of the story.

One example in a video game that demonstrates a poor attempt at diverse character building is Hainly Abrams in *Mass Effect: Andromeda*. The player very quickly learns in their first encounter with Hainly that she is trans, as she states: "People knew me as Stephan. But that was never who I was. I knew what I could do. And I knew who I wanted to do it as" (Mulkerin, 2017). This interaction quickly received criticism from fans and players, as Hainly felt both tokenistic and was unrealistic in her representation as a trans woman. Particularly, players and trans members of the gaming community pointed to Hainly's open use of her dead name and sharing of personal details as unusual and an inaccurate picture of coming out (Dornbush, 2017; Mulkerin, 2017). We can also consider Lara Croft's character a failed attempt to diversify gaming.

Although Lara appears to be a strong and capable female protagonist, the *Tomb Raider* games are not exempt from their share of feminist or critical intersectional critiques, both of Lara's character and of the others represented in the game.

Of course, the efforts of game developers and producers who do hope to create diverse characters in a respectful and informed manner should not go unnoticed. Gray and Leonard remark several examples of well-crafted characters, such as those in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise (2018, p. 15). Ubisoft's multi-installment universe of highly-skilled and dangerous assassins covers a vast range of time, history and ethnic background, and the developers consult with teams of historians and cultural representatives in each of their games to ensure that the people and settings are both appropriately characterized (Snider, 2012). For instance, Gray and Leonard draw attention to the way Adewale and Aveline de Grandpre in *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag* confront and destroy slavery practices in Haiti and New Orleans.



Figure 2 - Adewale in Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag Freedom Cry *(2013)*

As another example, the third game of the series the plot centers on a Native American protagonist, Connor, during the revolutionary period of American history. At the time, Connor was the only main character in a console game that represented a racial minority,

and not only was a Native American consultant brought on to the team, but a Native American actor was cast to voice the part (Newman, 2012).



Figure 3 - Connor Kenway in Assassin's Creed III *(2012)*

An instance of positive representation for the LGBTQ+ in gaming brings us to Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* series. *The Last of Us* features a young female protagonist in an apocalyptic survival game, with the much-anticipated sequel featuring her as the main character of the story which centers in part on her relationship with a same-sex character. Ellie, who we see at fourteen years old in the first installment, is shown to be incredibly capable, resourceful, and cunning in an otherwise unforgiving landscape. Often, concern is drawn more to her young age than her gender, and both Ellie and Bill – a side character that Joel and Ellie encounter in the earlier stage of the game – are treated without stigma in relation to their sexuality or without being defined by their sexuality. Ellie's romantic interests also resist the common tropes associated with representations of queer women, focusing more on her emotional bond rather than a sexual curiosity.



Figure 4 - Ellie (left) and Dina (right) in The Last of Us Part 2 *(2020)*

While Ellie and Bill's representation as queer characters may be questioned for its understated presence in the first game and associated DLC (*Left Behind*), it is still distinguishable from a more "passive progressive" means of inclusion because the audience has investment in the characters and Ellie plays a critical role in the progression of both installments of the game (Johnson, 2018). Additionally, by demonstrating Ellie's sexuality through events of the story rather than in a "coming out" moment, she avoids the usual traps of tokenism in representing a marginalized community.

This overview of representation in games themselves is by no means exhaustive or conclusive, but instead provides a basic guideline from which games can be assessed on their means of representing marginalized communities. Additionally, Shaw points out that while the concept of precarity still makes representation a critical component of identity building, research also suggests that identity and identification solely based on distinguishing characteristics like race, gender, or sexuality are not the only means for gamers to connect with characters in a video game (2015, p. 72). Meaning, gamers of marginalized communities are not only motivated to play games that represent them through these social categories and *do* connect with characters and stories of other

backgrounds. This should be acknowledged as an extension of the discussion on the traditional stereotype of a gamer and argues the possibility for non-marginalized individuals to identify *with* characters of marginalized backgrounds. When coupled with the discussion on hegemonic cultural habits and the invisibility of the social space inhabited by straight, white, non-disabled men, it can also be deduced that diverse representation which does not meet the expectations of hegemonic narratives are less frequently seen in comparison to characters which endorse these beliefs. Efforts to improve diversity in the gaming community as well as in video game stories are likewise met with backlash that reframes such products as diminishing the gaming experience for "real gamers" who want "real games." With respect to the nature of disability discourse and deficiency rhetoric, positive representation for gamers with physical or mental disabilities in games is almost non-existent – except for the *Sly Cooper* franchise's Bentley, the genius turtle in Sly's thief gang who uses his technologically-enhanced wheelchair to give him an edge against enemies in game.



Figure 5- Bentley in Sly Cooper 3: Honor Among Thieves *(2005)*

Because virtual gaming is often framed as a sort of Utopic setting with limitless possibilities, disabilities may remain subdued as a result of the dominant cultural ideology which treats disability as deficiency (Gray, C., 2009). Rather than being understood as a different kind of ability, disability is often treated as a defect or disease which is to be remedied or fixed – and with consideration for Science Fiction subgenres, such as Cyberpunk, this theme is frequently carried over into stories that "correct" a physical disability via cybernetic enhancement. Therein, representations of mental illness in media are generally negative, and are more closely associated with harmful characteristics which code people with mental illness as dangerous, threatening, or villainous (Shapiro & Rotter, 2016; Wahl, 2003).

Review & Summary of the Literature

In reviewing this literature, the following questions are considered in order to proceed into the method of data collection and analysis: What is a "true gamer" as outlined by the literature? How are gender, race, sexuality, and ability/disability defined in the literature, and how might this be evident in online talk? To summarize, gaming culture as it has been assessed in contemporary studies is found to be largely unwelcoming of marginalized communities, which are identified and reified through the complex network of hegemonic and ideological influences that provide narrative for who should be playing video games and what kinds of video games should be made. These overarching beliefs impact gamers who exist in the margins of the culture by deviating their presence in virtual spaces and as they are represented within the games themselves. Despite endeavors to make gaming a safe space which acknowledges and celebrates differences, the dominant narrative continues to reshape itself and challenge threats to its authority that manifest themselves in large-scale and controversial campaigns of exclusionary and inflammatory rituals.

Women, people of color, the LGBTQ+ community and individuals with both physical and mental disabilities are defined in terms of historical hegemonic discourse and stereotypes, primarily in the representations of characters within video games, but also within the gaming community itself. These characterizations of social distinction become generalized and diffuse in cultural practices that takes such framing of perspective for granted. These groups are also coded in their deviance from the normative and naturalized position of whiteness, masculinity, heteronormativity, and lack of disability. For women, this means definition through traditional norms of domesticity,

care-giving, submissiveness, and sexual objectification and control. Likewise, people of color are distinguished in characteristics that are deemed innate to their biology, which can vary across ethnic and racial classifications. For example, black people are typified by traits of boorishness, delinquency, and are treated as naturally inferior. Sexuality is tethered to concepts of immorality, corruption, and hypersexuality, and is seen more as a crisis of identity ("I had a ____ phase in college") rather than an identity in and of itself. Specifically, in the case of ability and disability, the hegemonic frames disability within terms of deficiency or defectiveness and is considered through medicalized perspectives rather than social or cultural.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

This thesis investigates how identity markers, including race, gender, sexuality, and ability/disability are invoked and contested in a Reddit forum. As with any newly established academic territory, defining a set of rules for data collection, coding, and analysis is critical. As discussed in the previous chapter, a great deal of scholarly work exists analyzing gender dynamics in relation to video games, beginning with studies addressing the early years of video gaming and more current research examining recent events, such as #Gamergate. However, less academic debate has been focused on issues of race, ability, and sexual orientation in relation to video games and gaming culture. This project seeks to remedy this deficit by systematically analyzing comments coded around these identity markers, defined in Chapter 2 as reflecting hegemonic values and normative expectations. Comments will be coded across multiple themes of identity discourse when appropriate (e.g., a given comment serving as the basic unit of analysis coded both as invoking gender and race), with consideration to the intersecting nature of these thematic categories. Additionally, analysis will also be conducted using a grounded approach of emergent themes discernable across collected comments to understand how discourses of identity connect with other thematic discussion issues across the forum. These approaches to analysis will offer perspectives on patterns which arise throughout the discussion forum and disclose how ideas become managed, disputed, or negotiated. Based on the established historical context and exploration of contemporary issues in the gaming community in Chapter 2, this project considered the subsequent research questions:

RQ1: What are the most prevalent themes regarding social identity on an online public gaming forum?

RQ2: What defines a "true" gamer as expressed in online comments?

RQ3: How are the concepts of race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability discussed within the video game community in an online forum?

Data Collection and Methodology

Reddit.com is a social news and public discussion forum website, sorted by subreddits, or topic-specific forums with their own moderators and posting rules. Each posting by a Reddit user acts as what is called a Reddit thread, which will have its own independent comments and discussion pertaining to the original poster's comment. Therein, every comment in the discussion also has the potential to develop into its own separate discussion as a new thread. Reddit threads are sorted through a process of "upvoting" and "downvoting," which determine the relevance or popularity of a conversation rather than sorting chronologically. Said otherwise, a thread with several hundred upvotes or comments will usually appear to an online user before a thread with only a few dozen upvotes. As people use the website, they are not seeing discussions as they have occurred over time but are instead looking at a curation of dialogues that are relevant to the community in their current interests and concerns. This means that a thread originally posted two months ago may be resorted above threads posted two days ago, based upon how popular the topic of conversation is.

The specific subreddit used in analysis is r/TrueGaming, one of many popular gaming Reddit forums. This subreddit was selected due to having a more manageable

size, with just over 500,000 Reddit users subscribed. Other gaming forums have many more contributors, such as r/Gaming with over 23 million subscribers. The moderators (mods) for r/TrueGaming have established many rules, such as "No Circlejerk or memes," in reference to the satirical and political gaming forum r/Gamingcirclejerk. Additionally, r/TrueGaming strictly prohibits prejudice, stating: "Racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, hate speech, using slurs etc. are not tolerated and will result in a ban." While rules like this are often neglected in larger forums, r/TrueGaming may be able to more closely monitor and enforce these rules with a smaller number of subscribers and contributors. This is important to consider when assessing themes in user discourse and forum discussions, as these rules influence what topics the participants can discuss and what can be said in the discussions. For instance, one thread noted that the original poster (OP) required permission from the mods for their topic, as it conflicted with a "no politics" rule in the forum. Also, because the forum restricts the use of memes, visuals including memetic content were not available for analysis within the discussions. Memes often carry a host of cultural content and express messages about race, ability, gender, sexuality and more, and the lack thereof within this forum is notable for the analysis of comments and ideas shared or expresses by the users.

Data collection took place on August 18, 2019, where I selected 31 individual Reddit threads for analysis. Reddit threads were selected for inclusion by looking for relevant user discourse that may be related to our key discussions of race, gender, sexuality, and ability, based on personal experience and understanding of gaming culture. Of the 31 threads, 17 were found to have dialogue relevant to the interests of this study. Once relevance of the threads was established, the 17 selected threads were processed

using a Python script to pull text data from comment messages in a Reddit thread, capturing comments in their succession as they appeared in the forum. Afterwards, data was transferred into a word document format to allow for ease of legibility and coding. As Reddit threads are sorted by upvotes and downvotes, these individual discussions do not have a chronological order and thus have varying origin dates. Some threads that were saved ultimately were not used for analysis in this project, as the discourse was not pertinent to the discussion of this thesis.

Python is an open-source coding and programming language, for which coded guidelines were made to pull data from a Reddit thread, requiring only an identifier in the URL to be able to scan the related forum page and extract user comments in order of how they were arranged in the thread. The purpose of using a Python script was to simplify the process of extracting comment data from each Reddit thread being analyzed and formatting them for key word analysis and themes. While this was beneficial for extracting data into a format that is easier to analyze inductively, using Python did have its setbacks in terms of general organization. Unlike NCapture, which can sort data that is pulled into thematically coded categories, the Python as it is coded extracts all comment data indiscriminately, meaning that comments are not obtained with any parameters for relevance to the areas of interest. Nonetheless, this is an intentional feature of the coding, as context of each user comment is crucial for a grounded approach to thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was performed in multiple stages, using mixed methods to approach the pool of data collected for examination. These steps were conducted as follows:

- Word cloud analysis using word count frequencies to create visual representations of the data
- Deductive coding of comments into the four thematic categories outlined as race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality/sexual orientation, and ability/disability, in four randomly selected threads of the final 17 for in-depth examination
- Inductive analysis of text data for the same four threads using a grounded theoretical approach
- Conversation analysis to examine the pragmatics of interaction between online users in the forum.

Each of these steps provide necessary insights for the data in question, offering perspectives of broad as well as focused analyses. It is crucial to emphasize that subjects of the 17 threads were skewed heavily towards discussions of gender, with nine of the titles making specific reference to gender. Respectively, the key words of race and disability were only explicitly used in the title of one thread each within the data pool. The remaining five threads, however, focus on topics that are generally applicable across the categories of race, gender, sexuality and ability. All discussion threads have the potential to explore topics outside the original post that could lead to discourse relevant to a different thematic category.

Word Cloud Analysis

The first level of analysis, using word clouds, generates visual representations of the most commonly used language within each of the 17 selected threads, using the size of words in each visual as a depiction of word frequency. This initial phase is necessary

for a broad overview of the discussion and for determining prominent or obvious evocations of social markers. In some instances, the word clouds are insightful and bring attention to possible themes of each Reddit thread through word frequency counts and depicting the primary areas of focus as a visual rather than through simple counting. One instance of this is seen in the case of a discussion on whether gamers with disabilities should have the option to enable aim-assist in first person shooter games.

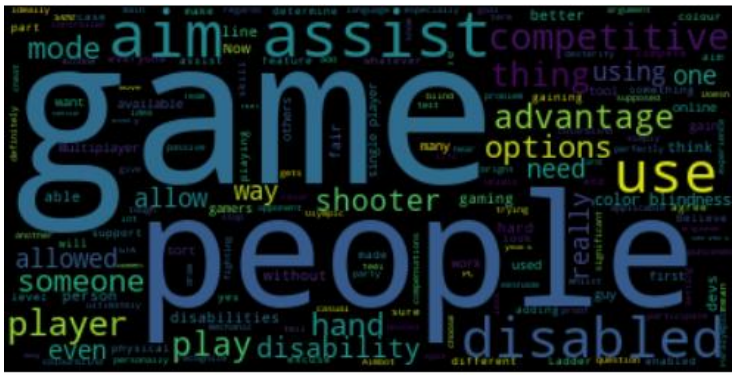


Figure 6 - Word Cloud Representation of Discussion on Gaming and Disability

In Figure 1, some of the more prominent words consist of "competitive," "advantage," and "allowed." Other words identified in the word cloud include "fair," "tool," "gaining," and "fake." All are possibly indicative of the way that disability is discussed in this thread without an in-depth analysis of each comment or reading through all comments consecutively. Through this overview, one possible theme emerges regarding disability and authenticity. Another example of the word cloud representations further demonstrates prevalent themes that can be interpreted from the data in Figure 2.



Figure 7 - Word Cloud Representation of Discussion on Gender Representation in Gaming

In figure 2, there is a strong association between gender, sexism, and "false" or "false premise." Throughout the cloud, "false" and "wrong" appear multiple times, with other notable words involving "try," "actually," and "argument." Additional words that appear in this visual list "feminist," "fact," "fanservice," and "prove," all which have the potential to point to thematic elements of the discussion on sexism in representations of women in video games.

There are several drawbacks to this form of analysis, firstly in the lack of sorting or grouping of words with similar or shared meaning, or the filtering of words that may detract from the focus of analysis, like "game" and "people," which may be outliers and not have any relation to the focus of analysis. Word clouds also remove the context for how these words are used in discourse, leaving room for interpretation as to how "advantage," "fair," and "fake" are used in reference to disability and gaming. For example, a word as simple as "really" may be used to refer to either the intensity or the legitimacy of something, like if playing without aim assist is "really" difficult for those with limited mobility, or if someone is suggesting whether players "really" have a need for a program that helps with steady aiming. Abstracting the raw comment data as a

visual is useful for initial approaches to analysis but ultimately requires further investigation of the circumstantial implications within the discourse.

Deductive Coding of Themes

Next, I moved to the second stage of analysis where I returned to the original text data as represented in the forum and coded comments deductively that make reference to identity markers in four random threads selected from the original 17. In order to code comments according to gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and ability/disability, I needed to be able to identify a comment as invoking these categories. Accordingly, I drew upon the definitions for the thematic categories of how notions of race, gender, sexuality, or ability are invoked within the gaming community. Often, comments were coded as invoking ideas about these specific categories based on tacit knowledge of the nuanced and oblique ways that users can talk about race, sexuality, ability, or gender, without any explicit indication they are doing so. Moreover, it is important to establish that these thematic categories are not mutually exclusive, nor are they exhaustive. Some comments are coded multiple ways for different categories distinguishing what is invoked, and other comments may not be coded at all if lacking relevance for our discussion. It should be noted that of the four threads randomly selected for deductive analysis of comments, two of the original posts explicitly reference race or disability in the subject while the other two explicitly reference gender.

When a comment invoked one or more of these categories, the comment was flagged with color-coded markers, highlighting specific phrases or general inferences in the comment that fit the pre-determined definitions for our themes. For instance, one such

comment that was determined as invoking concepts of race was flagged for both explicit and implicit messages.

> Example comment 1: What matters is if Indians are making games and I can tell you that they aren't. Even if India may pump out the most number of graduates in Stem and the most number of coders none of them are open-minded or self-witted enough to figure out game dev, only a handful are.

Here the commenter is speaking as an individual living in India that justifies the lack of Indian representation in gaming and video games by suggesting that Indians interested in STEM lack the capacity to become game developers. Whether this user is inferencing that this is a cultural attitude, a choice, or an innate characteristic is unclear, but the implications of race and/or ethnicity is still present. Therefore, the comment was coded for both the explicit argument about interest in gaming and game development in India, as well as the possible implicit meanings of what the user is suggesting about race in relation to India. Other comments were coded into multiple thematic categories either for making general references or referring to more than one of the deductive categories.

> Example comment 2: Perhaps I'm the weird one for thinking this way, but I've never cared nor felt compelled to be 'represented' in a video game or a movie. People have a strange fixation on race and identity politics these days, and that seems way weirder to me.

For this comment, though the primary theme identified pertains to race, both concepts of representation and identity politics are applicable across the coding categories of gender, sexuality, and ability/disability. The comment is also making a general reference to

current discussions on issues of representation which concern people across markers of identity in marginalized communities of gaming.

Another contemplation of analyzing the data involves the coding of comments with respect to implicit versus explicit invocation of the thematic categories. Because of the format of discussion that takes place on Reddit, comments can be made back and forth between users on various topics in different segments that break off from the original post. Determining whether the comments counted as invoking ideas of the deductive themes in implicit ways becomes complicated by the lack of context in an online forum, or in other words a lack of nonverbal communication cues which might suggest more about the user's intent or implied meaning. Nonetheless, comments coded as making explicit reference to one or more of the four primary themes of deductive analysis were marked and counted for comparison and examination across themes. The final stage of analysis, where I performed a content analysis of interactional pragmatics, also provides more opportunity to assess the complexity of the implicit messages and ideas that are introduced and exchanged through dialogue.

Thematic Results & Key Comments for Gender

When analyzing the data and coding themes in the deductive analysis, gender was one of the more pronounced categories with at least 13 comments of the 142 analyzed found to have explicit suggestions about gender. Of the comment analyzed, user discussion tended toward a few specific themes: of which language tended toward binary and cisgender framing of gender as men or women rather than gender as a spectrum, with gender and biological sex frequently treated as synonymous or interchangeable concepts. This is demonstrated in the following sample:

Comment 1

> …The point she is making is that this kind of differentiation is bad because it says that women are just men with added on stuff, when the real point is that it's actually hard to perceive gender otherwise in media.

To give context, the discussion this comment emerged in centered on Anita Sarkeesian's discussion of the Ms. Male trope, and this user reasons that added features – i.e. exaggerated qualities of sex, such as curves, breasts, eyelashes, etc. – are necessary to distinguish men from women in a digital gaming medium. This meets the parameters for invoking talk about gender by suggesting that gender identity for women in gaming is made concrete through performance and outward appearance or the perception of femininity.

Comment 2

> …The problem is that women can very much tend to androgyny if the sexual aspects aren't emphasized in design… If you look in the newest Samurai Showdown game, they actually redesigned her to be much more feminine…I don't think Sarkeesian is either a gamer or an artist/designer, so she has little idea beyond theory of the practical problems of this. It's actually really hard to depict gender difference in 2 or 3-d art. I used to play Mabinogi a long time ago, which uses an anime style, and just by making a short haired female character, people assumed my character was male since I wore robes and hid my silouhuette more.

> The exaggeration isn't tokenism or gender holding back, its very much to enable perception of those differences in a limited media form.

Both comments display an assumed connection between women or female identity and qualities femininity, with expectations for gender performance that include certain physical attributes. Additionally, because the comments both argue that without sexualization the female characters may be interpreted as male, it reinforces the default treatment of men within the gaming space, who by contrast do not need physical signifiers of their gender or sex. Naturalization and the use of science or historical context are also thematically connected to the treatment of women in video games and gaming:

> Comment 3
>
> This isn't the result of sexism, it's simple biological math. In the kind of warfare that dominated all of human history before the age of firearms, if a male warrior fought a female warrior he would win the overwhelming majority of the time, all other factors being equal… and if an entire army of male warriors fought an entire army of female warriors, all other factors being equal, the men would win virtually every time. The differences in average physical abilities are enormous. And the other side of the equation is that men are rather expendable, biologically speaking. If a society wins a war but loses 90% of its male population in the process, as long as it took enough spoils in that victory to recover the lack of providers, it can near-fully replenish its numbers within 20 years and be ready for another big fight, but a society that loses 90% of its female population won't recover for generations, if at all. Men can simply impregnate multiple women far

faster than women can deliver babies by multiple men. Putting your women on the battlefield is a much bigger risk than putting your men there.

Comment 4

Surprising news! Males make games that appeals to males! If you want better women in videogames incentive the ladies to enter the videogame industry! The twist? The vast majority of them don't care about games :D Impressive!

Comment 5

IMO, putting something designed to titillate straight men into a video game should not be considered immoral or harmful or disrespectful to women. Even if the scene is specifically designed to reward any straight men playing the game with a male fantasy…

Comments 3, 4 and 5 all employ language that justifies or normalizes the existing beliefs and patterns around the treatment of women as stakeholders in the communities as well as components of the games themselves. In contrast to these kinds of comments, several comments made arguments that women enjoy games depicting sexual or pornographic representations of women.

Comment 6

I think people often assume making games more appealing to women, and making games avoid everything academic feminist media theories claim is bad, are the exact same thing. That anything that helps with one goal automatically helps with the other goal. However, IMO this assumption is false. These are different two very different goals, and things that can help with one goal can hurt the other…One wouldn't look at academic media theories on what type of stuff is

> harmful, written by a social science department, to figure out how to sell lots of video games to men. So why would academic media theories like that hold the answer on how to sell lots of video games to women? Women aren't so different from men they are all morally pure angels only attracted to 'woke' games and are all repelled away from 'problematic' games.
>
> Comment 7
>
> Something that sorta surprised me: I looked at a review for a recent Senran Kagura game. The reviewer said they know it's a pretty dumb series, but they like it as a guilty pleasure and get a chuckle out of some of the dialog, plus some of the "reward segments" are just silly. It seemed like an honest review. It was written by a woman. Meanwhile, the one on my friends list playing the most perverted hentai-esque games is also a girl.

These comments juxtapose women who identify as gamers and women who identify as feminists or may suggest that women in gaming do not share the same goals in relation to changing game content. Comments such as these may also be establishing pornographic or objectifying depictions of women in games as normal to women or inoffensive.

In review, discussions surrounding gender often approached the subject with a cisgender and binary framework, meaning that the arguments frequently brought forward in the discourse were those of men versus women. When talking about women as a social group, users were more likely to disclose information about women they knew, and at no time did a user come forward to identify themselves as a woman. Instead, attributes about the preferences or values of women was discussed amongst the users as outside perspectives. Talk about women invoked idealizations of femininity, sexuality,

appearance, and their role in video games as secondary to male perspectives and experiences. Users also seemed to differentiate between women who enjoy video games and women who critique their content, otherwise framed as feminists or social justice warriors (SJWs).

Thematic Results & Key Comments for Race

Coding for race resulted in an approximate count of at least 15 comments which made direct or more overt statements about race and ethnicity. The thread that resulted in the majority of discussion surrounding race was focused on the lack of representation for Indian characters in video games, and thus many of the comments coded for invoking concepts of race were discussing race specifically in relation to Indian or Asian identity. Findings for themes associated with comments invoking race talk included assumptions about cultural norms and perspectives and a connection between ethnicity and skin color or appearance.

Comment 1

> As an Indian, I honestly don't give a shit if the dude on screen looks like me or not, and I'm sure none of my friends do either. These ideas of "representation" and "inclusivity" are beyond the concern of Indians due to the culture and the country. Living in a third world country is so shitty that we are accustomed to not bother about typical petty first world problems like being "progressive." The high population you mentioned is exactly why we aren't bothered about these things, making a living here is hard enough already, so we're happy with what we have. This might be hard to wrap around the head for a privileged American.

Comment 2

Man, this “representation” and “inclusivity” culture is really grinding my gears. I just got downvoted to hell in r/kpop for saying that not everything has to have “representation” in it, they were arguing that they wanna see SEA and Indian people in more Kpop but Korea has a homogenous culture, Koreans are some of the most racist people on Earth and kpop=Korean pop. They’re already having trouble with Japanese and Chinese people in their entertainment despite being neighbors and looking somewhat the same. I’m South East Asian myself but I don’t give a fuck about about a game character representing my race or culture. I don’t think Indians do too. I play games to have fun not for some dumb politics.

Comment 3

> Make an RPG set in India

> Half of playtime is spent bargaining

All three comments displayed above exemplify the use of stereotypes and generalizations in relation to country of origin, culture, and race. In this case, the users make assertions that the mentioned communities don’t care about their representation in video games, which is framed as an unnecessarily debated problem of identity politics. Comments 1 and 3 raises common stereotypes of Indians through the invocation of language like “third world country,” “shitty conditions,” and “bargaining,” while Comment 2 displays stereotypes about East Asian countries “looking somewhat the same.”

Comment 4

Yep, but close enough that most characters had names very much like Indians and looked like Indians

Comment 5

> Street Fighter has long been the trendsetter for fighting games, and I doubt the devs knew all that much about said history when making it. I would argue that it has a lot to do with the fact that the story in fighting games is largely extraneous. Since you can't make a character seem unique via plot, you do it via appearance. Native Americans are visually distinct and culturally "exotic."

Here race and ethnicity are tethered to appearance, justified by the explanation that representation of race is more visual than it is a component of storytelling. With respect to Comment 5, the user is arguing that the lack of storytelling ability in fighting games necessitates the representation of minorities like Native Americans through appearance, presumably in skin tone, dress, and facial features. It should be noted that this user made a comment in response to a comment that was at some point deleted by a moderator, and thus some of the context for analysis was unavailable. Additionally, several of the comments exhibited throughout this discussion also made assertions about race in relation to Western, European, or white gamers and problematized their attitudes to race or representation, though multiple instances did so to frame Western cultures as being overreactive about identity politics or equal representation.

Moreover, user comments coded for race invoked talk about appearance, such as skin color, features, and dress, as well as character background, in relation to racial or ethnic identity. Comments more frequently invoked negative or stereotypical aspects of identity in relation to race. User comments coded in this category were more likely to disclose personal information about minority identity or their ethnic background, but often did so to support these negative claims or distance themselves from others with the same background of race or ethnicity. Negative talk about race and ethnicity was not

limited to minorities, but also included Western, European, or American identity as well. Comments concerning ideals about Western or American identity, nonetheless, characterized these groups as privileged, but associated privilege more with over-sensitivity or even delusional.

Thematic Results & Key Comments for Ability/Disability

Of the pool of 142 comments, nine were found to have explicit messages about attributes of ability or disability, though it should be acknowledged that only one discussion thread of 23 total comments focused on an issue related to disability, and the number of comments with explicit mentions of disability characteristics relative to the thread length is roughly equal to those of race and gender. Themes drawn from comments coded for invoking ability or disability consisted of equating disability to a frame of mind and consistently were associated with laziness, cheating, or dishonesty.

> Comment 1
>
> In competitive play, how would you be able to determine who to give the advantage of aim assist or whatever to? What would stop other players from doing the same thing? Is it just an “I’m Disabled” checkbox? It’s just not sensible, in the sense that you’d need to create some complicated system so that only those who need it would be able to access it, or would just be an optional setting in the first place.
>
> Comment 2
>
> Meanwhile, communities like speedrunning and fighting games showcase the opposite end – where a guy can speedrun a tough platformer using one hand, and another guy can play fighting games with nothing but an xbox controller and his

face. People with disabilities have it tough, but a lot of them work to overcome them – and that's really empowering to me. I have my own social disabilities, and as a kid I would see others with my same disability simply use it as an excuse to become an asshole, because the whole teaching community would support them in every occasion – "it's hard for him". It's really not the right way to remedy these sorts of things.

Comments such as these seem to look for a distinction between genuine and fabricated disabilities, stating that while some may have a real need for tools which assist gameplay, there should be some means of qualifying or proving disability status. In other comments, users invoke language frequently associated with stereotypes of disability as deficient or lacking ability rather than being differently abled:

Comment 3

Single-player game and Multiplayer (PVE) – sure, and I would even support it. Multiplayer (PVP) – We can't really tell which person need assist and who doesn't, but we can act here just like IRL. Just like the Olympic Games and the Paralympic Games, we separated disable people from the Olympic Games because it wouldn't be fair for them. And so to me it would make sense if we just had two different queues for matches, one for those who doesn't use aim-assist, and a second for those who do use it.

Apart from one comment which referred to mental ability (see Comment 2), comments predominantly invoked ideas about disability framed discussion around physical disability. Subsequently, disability is more or less medicalized rather than treated as a class of social distinction. In contrast to the other categories, however, users seemed to

actively search for an answer to how to make games inclusive for gamers with different abilities, but this was still decisively framed as being on the terms of individuals who lacked a disability.

Furthermore, comments invoking talk about ability and disability were tied to themes of skill, cheating, and authenticity. None of the users in this thematic category self-disclose a physical disability, but, like gender, users would instead refer to individuals they knew with disabilities in order to characterize attributes of the community. Users throughout the discussion characterized disability most predominantly as physical, rather than psychological or mental, and often distinguished between traits of 'real' disability through terms of severity. 'Real' disability was associated with attributes of perseverance or resiliency, while 'fake' disability was associated with laziness and dishonesty. In other words, users in the forum framed disability in terms an innate disadvantage which must be overcome or aided by others and used more sympathetic language for those characterized as having a 'real' disability. Many comments also make suggestions of disability at times being fabricates or exaggerated for the sake of cheating. Users also discussed disability inclusion in gaming in terms of fairness to non-disabled gamers.

Sexuality and Themes Across Categories

There were no comments amongst the 142 found to have significant or explicit reference to sexuality or identities grouped within the LGBTQ+ community, likely due to the lack of formal discussion on an issue related to LGBTQ+ gamers in the 17 threads originally selected. Although other possible causes are not clear, this may also suggest which topics participants of the r/TrueGaming forum may consider to be relevant, or even

topics that are breaking rules of the forum. One user did mention the queer community in a discussion about video game tropes and diversity.

> Comment 1
>
> I do like the idea of challenging the patriarchal view of insert kindness/respect get sex. Having more complex narratives that don't fall into misogynistic tropes sounds great. It could also help elevate games as an art form. But I think banning a trope in video games sounds dumb. Games aren't real life and if I want to spend some time in a gratuitous fantasy world. I should be allowed to do that. However I would definitely like to see more variations in games with exploration of new and different ideas. They shouldn't all be Saint's Row. Like in movies where they've starting having LGBTI+ in blockbusters. So too should games expand and be more than what they currently are. Personally I think the main issue is how toxic tech culture is towards women and LGBTI+ people. Having more variation in work places allows for greater variation in ideas. Art from diversity. I'd much rather see a new and interesting narrative in a game instead another Call of Battlefield Modern Duty IX.

Here, the user is pointing to the LGBTQ+ community and their relationship with gaming, rather than characterizing queer people by any particular traits. Nonetheless, this user's opinion falls in contrast to many of the comments throughout the discussions, bringing me to the discussion of themes found across deductive categories.

Comments across the four categories of deductive coding schemes suggest similar themes of dismissiveness or indifferent attitudes toward concerns of marginalized

communities within gaming, using blanket statements or terms to address efforts for change in the community.

Comment 2

> I never downvoted, but I can probably give you your answer. Politics. Not a very welcome subject in gaming forums. Generally because it can cause issues when forced, like breaking immersion and lore (Battlefield 5 trailer is a good example of this). I for one just like play games to have fun and don't concern myself too much with who or what I'm playing (playing the opposite gender isn't an issue for me to enjoy the game – and that's generally even more contrast than race to me), but yes, there is likely under-representation of some cultures. My thoughts on that is the fact that there aren't many (or any?) games developed in those countries.

This comment amongst others display a prioritization of realism or quality in games over representation and inclusion in games. Like this comment and others exemplified in this chapter, many users take the stance that representation needs to come from those who seek it – i.e. "make your own." In addition, comments across the coding schemes generally abstained from the use of more inflammatory or prejudiced language, even in cases of perceived conflict or a heated debate. This may be another result of the stricter moderating that takes place in r/TrueGaming that is relatively smaller in comparison to other gaming subreddits.

To sum, while no comments were found to explicitly invoke talk about sexuality or the LGBTQ+ community, characterizations can be drawn from the more general themes across all the distinct coding categories. This includes a distancing of responsibility in the dominant group to make games more diverse, as well as attitudes of

dismissiveness to the real concerns of marginalized communities in gaming. This is exemplified in the way comments shared similar language of "make it yourself," as well as the way that improved diversity amongst gamers or in video game representation is seen as an unnecessary complication or disturbance.

Grounded Thematic Analysis and Immersion

The third level of analysis is immersion and a grounded approach to inductive analysis, for which I consulted Charmaz's constructivist approach to grounded theory for developing and interpreting themes from comments. Unlike traditional grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which idealizes the researcher as setting aside personal influences to objectively examine data, constructivism takes steps to recognize the researcher's inherent biases, values, and other factors which may influence their interpretation of the data. Using a constructivist approach acknowledges the subculture and perspective that I as the researcher have shared with the subjects, given that I am already immersed in the gaming community, while also allowing for coding and data analysis to be more adaptable to change (Charmaz, 2008). The process of immersion involves reading and re-reading Reddit comments and noting popular or controversial comments that became sub-themes because of their capacity to generate additional comments, and any emergent themes in and across the comments pertaining to personal identity. Comments such as these were notated in a separate word document organized by originating Reddit thread. In addition to extracting comments for further analysis, I also analyzed these comments in the context of which they occurred. As the forum is more strictly regulated than other online public forums, with rules prohibiting prejudicial language, politics, and other more controversial debate, immersive and inductive analysis

is beneficial to my inquiry to investigate the more implicit or obscure messages throughout and across the discussions.

Emergent Theme: Positioning of Authority

The primary emergent theme found across the discussion threads selected for immersive analysis was the positioning of the idealized "true gamer" as the authority on discussion matters in gaming. In other words, the assumed identity of those participating in these discussions often defaulted to a masculine, able-bodied and straight individual. Additionally, users seemed to act as decision makers or influencers on what games should look like and who they are intended for. Users invoked language regarding what should or should not be allowed in gaming from the standpoint of an informed authority, using anecdotal and generalized experiences as evidence of their arguments being universal truths. This positioning is more or less apparent in various comments throughout the discussions, sometimes only as much as using male-preferential language like he/his/him pronouns when talking about gamers or a hypothetical situation of gameplay. At other times users were more clearly speaking about these social identities as separate to the gamer community.

> Comment 1
>
> I don't think disabled people should have options that is only available to them on official servers/matchmaking. When do you qualify as enough disabled that you require aim assist? If you hand is paralyzed? What if it's only one finger? Or what if that hand just hurts that day?
>
> Comment 2

> IMHO new Sony policy is a decision made because of the minority that cannot distinguish the difference between the real world and virtual fantasy. Violence in videogames was proven by multiple research that it doesn't make people more aggressive or violent in real life then why sexualization is being treated differently. It all feels like a moral panic to me more than anything else.

This assumed identity of the online users is defined less through self-disclosure of personal attributes and more through the oppositional characterization of an "other." Assumptions about gender as defaulting to maleness or masculinity was also tied into assumptions of heterosexuality, though some comments did use phrasing of "straight men" as opposed to just "men." At times when users did self-disclose their minority status – most frequently with race, though this also occurred in a discussion on disability and gaming – it was typically to renounce affiliation with common stereotypes or tropes of such marginalized communities:

> Comment 3
>
> …I'm Asian and I've never had a chip on my shoulder about a lack of representation in Western media. Maybe I'm not an insecure narcissist, maybe I have access to Asian media for whenever I want to look at some Asian representation...

Comments such as these demonstrate a kind of distancing between the user and their minority identity, or to counter the argument for more or better representation in video games. In addition, users who did self-disclose their identity as being of minority status were more likely to invoke negative connotations about others of their shared background than positive ones, or instead of ones which challenge others who endorse such negative

stereotypes. However, it is very possible that users in the forum may not disclose personal information that identifies them as a minority if the space is already perceived as hostile towards marginalized individuals.

Emergent Theme: Make believe is only for real gamers

Several of the comments identified earlier refer to the bounds, limits, and expectations for how video games should look and appeal to gamers. Within these comments a theme emerges about what aspects of a game are considered reasonable or unreasonable, as a peripheral discussion of that makes a game "good" for the idealized gamer. When discussing inclusion of minorities – usually mentioned as a blanket term, rather than specifically referring to a distinct category, though this did at times focus on either gender or race – the arguments for improving representation or inclusivity in a game were often dismissed on the grounds of being unrealistic. By contrast, concepts in video games that were contextually framed as a straight male fantasy were justified because users argued that as the games are meant to explore fantastical or other-worldly possibilities, they are not representative or influential of real-world events, behaviors or values. The dichotomy is exemplified in these two excerpts from comments listed earlier:

> Comment 1
>
> IMO, putting something designed to titillate straight men into a video game should not be considered immoral or harmful or disrespectful to women. Even if the scene is specifically designed to reward any straight men playing the game with a male fantasy…
>
> Comment 2

> …most people's mental image of a combatant defaults to male, because for 99% of human history, that image has been 99% accurate…These differences aren't socially constructed, they are biological, and they are fundamentally immutable…It's not that a man is seen as the default PERSON, just the default WARRIOR. And the reasoning for that is not because of discrimination or bigotry.

This draws once again on the argument of "make it yourself," where users expressed that marginalized groups should be making more games to create the representation or stories they seek. Therein, storytelling in games that is inclusive of the "true" gamer identity are subject to less criticism from gamers that identify as such, and games which deviate from this narrative or focus on stories of marginalized groups are criticized for lack of realism, historical accuracy, or consideration of science and fact.

Ultimately, the emergent themes that come into focus through grounded analysis reveal patterns of language that distinguish the users as authorities or experts on gaming subject matters, who have decision-making power or influence, as well as a pattern of discussion surrounding realism and imagination in relation to gaming. Users frequently make assertions in their arguments of more general, received knowledge about the way things are or ought to be, often based on personal experiences. Talk about the preferences or wishes of marginalized individuals in gaming is frequently associated with a lack of realistic expectations, whereas the preferences of the dominant group in the discussion are less subject to this critique. Instead, these desires are framed as being enabled or enhanced by video games as a form of fictional fantasy and roleplay. Both themes lend

ideas about who might be considered part of the community and who has access to the "gamer" identity.

Conversation Analysis

The fourth and final step of analysis consisted of conversation analysis, wherein I analyzed the comments contextually to study the interlocutions and pragmatics of interaction between users in the forum. I conducted this analysis using a combined approach of critical discourse analysis and interactional sociolinguistics which calls for isolating an interactional sequence based on the natural context that separates it from other interactions, otherwise called events or interactional texts (Gumperz, 2001, p. 223). According to Gumperz, this practice allows for a deeper understanding of the individual sequences while also gaining information about broader or more general patterns and behaviors across a conversation (p. 224). Critical discourse analysis occurs less formally than other methods, and instead is considered a framework of reference through which interactions can be analyzed (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 352). Using a critical lens in tandem with a sociolinguistic analysis of the conversations taking place in this gaming forum connects the data to the themes of the literature regarding race, gender, sexuality, and ability/disability.

The pragmatics of these interactions provides insight for how self-identified "true gamers" respond to assertions made in the discussion forum relating to the themes of interest, and further may indicate how representative a comment is of the forum users' shared beliefs or values. For example, some interactions show users challenging others' arguments:

Example interactional text 1:

User 1: Are you white?

User 2: The dude can have an opinion whether or not he's white. Username *does not* check out.

User 1: Did I say he can't have an opinion?

User 2: I think most English speakers can understand the subtext in your comment.

User 1: It seems like you're missing the mark a lot to me

User 2: Which was?

User 1: if your demographic is often represented, you may not be able to empathise with people whose demographics aren't so much

Here this interactional text displays two users who are arguing over another user's comment asserting that representation is unimportant. This sequence demonstrates contention over both the original comment as well as a response to that comment, creating a segmented dialogue which has meaning as a single interaction as well as a portion of the larger group discussion where general themes and ideas can be discerned. As it would have been difficult to analyze the entire body of data for these sequential patterns or themes, analysis for interactional texts was focused on comments which instigated a series of interactions. This allows for a more detailed examination of specific instances of interaction than if the entire thread were treated as an interactional text.

Thematic Results & Key Comments in Conversation Analysis

Conversation analysis of the comment data from r/TrueGaming revealed patterns of users interacting in both collaborative and dissenting contexts, with the most controversial comments predominantly originating in comments on the subject of race.

Interactional Text 1

User 1: Man, this “representation” and “inclusivity” culture is really grinding my gears. I just got downvoted to hell in /r/kpop for saying that not everything has to have “representation” in it, they were arguing that they wanna see SEA and Indian people in more Kpop but Korea has a homogeneous culture, Koreans are some of the most racist people on Earth and kpop=Korean pop. They’re already having trouble with Japanese and Chinese people in there entertainment despite being neighbors and looking somewhat the same. I’m South East Asian myself but I don’t give a fuck about a game character representing my race or culture. I don’t think Indians do too. I play games to have fun not for some dumb politics.

User 2: OOF dude.

User 3: ?

User 4: Basically China, Korea and Japan all hate each other and are horribly racist towards each other. If you go and tell a Korean dude that he looks Chinese, there’s a good chance he’ll either punch you in the face or take it as a grave bloody insult towards him and his entire family. Similar attitudes exist in Japan and China towards the other countries. It’s really kinda funny to see how strong identity politics and counter racism movements are in the west, while in the meantime Asia is just racist as fuck.

User 5: public enum WittyReplies {Oof, Yikes, Toxic, Gross, Problematic}

In this specific sequence of interactions, the first comment receives the initial focus, but it is one of the responding users’ comment of “OOF dude” that actually draws more conflict in the proceeding replies. In the context of this conversation, User 5 of this

interaction is criticizing User 2 for challenging the first comment with a “witty” reply rather than a structured argument and cites a series of words that may be used in this manner. Additionally, User 4 supported User 1’s comment regarding racial or ethnic tensions across Asian cultures, with both comments making the claim that Asian countries are less opposed to racist behavior or beliefs than Western or European countries. Combined, the users show a greater conflict with those in disagreement with the claims put forth.

Interactional Text 2

User 1: As an Indian, I honestly don’t give a shit if the dude on screen looks like me or not, and I’m sure none of my friends do either. These ideas of “representation” and “inclusivity” are beyond the concern of Indians due to the culture and the country. Living in a third world country is so shitty that we are accustomed to not bother about typical petty first world problems like being “progressive.” The high population you mentioned is exactly why we aren’t bothered about these things, making a living here is hard enough already, so we’re happy with what we have. This might be hard to wrap around the head for a privileged American.

User 1: With that being said trying to represent India is like answering what is the color of Human skin, there is no right answer and you are always wrong. In a country with more than 6400 ethnic groups, who is really the “Indian” that the devs are supposed to portray? Is it the stereotypical brown Indian dude/girl like in BigBangTheory or TheOffice? There are white skinned Indians if you didn’t know. The nation has 21 recognized languages and thousands more unofficially,

which is the Indian language? Is it Hindi like all the westerners already think? People are fighting with their lives everyday to make sure that Hindi is not imposed on them and to make sure their culture isn't destroyed along with their language. In a diverse country like India, you have no idea about the scale of conflicts, so not representing the nation would be better for all parties involved, considering the only Indians portrayed by Western media are the NRI (non-resident Indian) population which is like saying Americans are Europeans as the Europeans are the one who migrated to Americas in the first place.

User 2: You can have more than one Indian character in a game you know.

User 3: Yea I never meant to imply if a single character comes out they represent all Indians. All the more reason to have a lot more.

User 4: And the Indians who live in first world countries? It honestly sounds like you're saying your used to dealing with shit conditions, so you don't really care if you're subjected to further shit conditions. Edit: then again apparently being progressive is a "petty first world problem" so idk what your stance is.

User 5: >"Living in a third world country is so shitty that we are accustomed to not bother about typical petty first world problems like being 'progressive'" – You ever think maybe these two things are tied together?

This text exemplifies multiple comments made in response to a controversial post that challenge User 1's claims or views, pointing out what they may believe are flaws in User 1's argument. Some of the ideas contested includes how Indians can be represented, the views of other Indians who disagree with User 1's claim that representation is petty or unimportant, or pointing out that poorer life quality or socioeconomic status may impact

political views or perspectives. Without the context of vocalics or other nonverbal qualities of communication, it is difficult to assess with conviction aspects of this conversation like sarcasm or passive aggression, at times leaving it up to interpretation as to whether some comments are genuine or cynical.

In the key interactions examined, overarching themes of conflict arose around discussions of diversity, inclusion, or issues of prejudice within the gaming community. Comments that were considered too controversial, whether the controversy was calling out arguments that were strongly for or even against diversity and inclusion in gaming, were emphasized or called out in a somewhat routine manner. Generally, two sides emerged in these interactions – pro-change, or anti-change. One method that comments or discussions suggesting increased inclusion were challenged was in the generalizing of social justice efforts – including that of race, gender, ability and sexuality – to be frivolous or un-related to "true" gaming issues. Others include the minimization of gamers who identify outside the idealized gamer majority, claims of threat to quality of product, or providing counter examples. Comments against inclusion or changes to video games as they are were typically challenged for not considering other possibilities, or for having unsubstantial justifications against improvements to games or the gaming community. Users of pro-change comments were characterized in responses as easily offended, immature, or misinformed, while users of more anti-change comments were characterized in responses as prejudiced, ignorant, or unkind. Some comments demonstrate a more thorough response than others, displaying what may be more or less effort to challenge a comment or possibly a range of disagreement that varies from mild to strong.

Conclusion

Each stage of the analysis revealed different aspects of the data, from broader to more narrow themes in the language and conversation between and across users of the forum. Word count frequencies depicted in a visual representation of word clouds displayed possible key words and areas of focus within each Reddit thread, offering an abstracted interpretation of the texts. The second phase of data analysis, which included the coding of comments into categories outlined by the literature review, contributed to a deeper and more nuanced examination of the comments. Here, comments coded showed themes within and across the categories, relating to more negative expectations of social identity and assumptions of values or behaviors. Themes emerged in the third phase of analysis, used a grounded approach to the data, of talk amongst users that positioned themselves as authorities or experts in gaming, as well as undertones about the dichotomy of imagination and realism in video game stories. Gamer identity is reinforced through the othering of minorities considered to be outsiders and places the stereotype of the "straight, white, male" as a decision maker on what gaming should look like, including what fantasies or fictional representations are considered reasonable. In the final stage of analysis, a critical sociolinguistic lens was applied to frame the user discourse as interactional texts, through which their conversation was analyzed to understand how ideas in the forum are shared, supported, challenged, or dismissed. This phase demonstrated an apparent split between what can be classified as pro- or anti-change arguments, and ways in which each of them were challenged. More frequently, the pro-change comments of users were subject to criticism, and users who endorsed pro-change messages were characterized as being immature or overly idealistic. Users who expressed

anti-change sentiment in their comments were more likely to receive support from other users within the interactions. In Chapter 4, these findings will be placed in conversation with the literature review to discuss possible implications and meanings.

Chapter 4

DISCUSSION

Thus far, this thesis has mapped the body of existing literature with a focus on the pre-existing conditions which inform cultural norms in the gaming community, as well as current events in gaming that exhibit its issues with diversity and persecution of marginalized communities. The literature currently is largely preoccupied with the dynamics of gender in gaming, particularly about sexism and misogyny, and newer works have taken intersectional approaches to how gamers are affected across race, gender, and even sexuality (See for example Gray, K.L. & Leonard, J., 2018; Gray, C., 2019; Shaw, 2015 and 2012). Academic discourse on the position of disability in the gaming community is far less developed, and these perspectives on gaming culture have not yet been subject to the same level of analysis. With this established, data analysis took place to examine discourse within an online forum dedicated to gaming, through multiple phases of analysis including word cloud visual representations, deductive coding, Grounded inductive analysis, and conversation analysis. This discussion will review the data analysis and engage the themes within the data with the established body of literature. More specifically, this chapter will evaluate the research questions in comparison to the results of the data pertaining to the relevant themes of discourse withing this gaming forum, the formation of the gamer identity and what defines a “true” gamer, and how concepts of race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability/disability are talked about.

Returning to the Research Questions

The first research question is concerned with what themes are most prevalent in an online forum about gaming, and the analysis found multiple themes throughout the user discourse. Namely, the broader discussion was primarily concerned with matters of what types of games are made, how social groups are represented in the games, and player enjoyment of games. Within this, users made assertions about who has a say in how video games are created and who they believe has an interest in gaming. These prevalent themes were also applicable to the third research question, concerned with how users in a gaming forum talked about the concepts of race, gender, sexuality, and ability or disability. Women, people of color, and people with disabilities were talked about not as stakeholders in gaming, but as outsider groups with needs that interfered with regular gaming habits and gamer preferences. Little to almost no discussion at all directly addressed the queer community as possible stakeholders or as a group with interest in gaming, though discussions on the sexualization of women arguably represents the users as largely heterosexual at an implicit level. More specific themes also emerged through the analysis, like the idealization of the feminine, sexualized and submissive woman, Indian people being framed as poor or dirty, as well as the framing of some disabled people as inherently lazy or dishonest. Language that situated women, people of color, or people with disability as an outsider or "other" reaffirmed the gamer identity as more masculine, able-bodied, straight, and white by default.

This brings us to the second of the three research questions, which focuses on how the "true" gamer identity is defined in comments in the gaming forum. Rather than more directly defining the gamer as what it is, the users seem to establish the gamer

identity instead by what it isn't – namely, not feminine, queer, or disabled. In the comments analyzed for this project, race is less pronounced as a defining term in the gaming identity, though people of color are still othered in the discussion and are considered to have less interest than other unspoken parties (presumably their white counterparts). Though women are discussed as having interest in video games, this is still seen as a peculiarity rather than a normal trait. Likewise, individuals without disabilities are more likely to be treated as the default, as users discuss inclusion of disability as a departure from previous customs within video games that foster normative values of competition and skill. Sexuality was also an unspoken assumption amongst the users, as comments never directly addressed the users' sexuality or the sexuality of other gamers, but the discussion on women as a reward in video games defaulted to the discussion of objectified or sexualized women as items for the consumption of men. This heteronormative framework of thought perhaps removes the necessity to talk about sexuality at all, and thus sets the default gamer as straight. Through process of elimination, the identity of a "true" gamer is reified in the characterization of "others" that places whiteness, non-disability, masculinity, and heteronormativity in a neutral position within the discourse.

Engaging with the Literature

In recalling works within the literature review, the results from the data analysis bring back the discussion of the historical context of video games and the gaming community itself. As discussed previously, many of the cultural and social influences of gaming as it exists today – including STEM fields, roleplaying games, and Western literature and fictional works – often neglect to include people of color, people with

disability, queer people, or women in positive roles, if at all (Woo, 2018; Funk & Parker, 2018; Garcia, 2017; Young, 2016). This is demonstrated in the literature to impact the visibility of these groups within video games themselves, which often rely on stereotype and othering to depict marginalized communities. In line with the literary discussion on othering of minorities in gaming (Burnay, Bushman, & Larøi, 2019; Paaßen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, 2017; Gray K. L., 2012; Braithwaite, 2014; Fox & Tang, 2014; Phi, 2009), this analysis found that these norms are reinforced through dialogical narratives, as users justify the absence or poor representation of these groups through a number of practices. Frequently, users made claims in their conversations that certain minority groups lacked the sufficient interest in video games to be represented within the culture, or alternatively instances where persons of a marginalized identity held interest in games were treated as out of the ordinary or as special circumstances. In some of the exemplified comments, forum participants claimed that Indians held no interest in gaming development, thus explaining the lack of Indian characters in video games.

Furthermore, these stereotypical narratives bring the discussion back to the hegemonic and the dominant influences of gaming and gamer identity. As mentioned previously, the hegemonic operates at an implicit level, and negotiates its boundaries appropriately to maintain the hegemonic narrative as one which is natural and accepted as an objective reality. Comments displayed anecdotal assertions, unsourced references to scientific or statistical data, or personal experiences that acted as factual depictions of the reality of gaming culture, but *do* reflect hegemonic assumptions and ideological constructs about gender, race, and disability. For example, comments expecting female characters in video games to be feminine, sexual, or docile show acceptance at some level

of the hegemonic gender expectations of women (Shaw, 2015; Braithwaite, 2014; Fox & Tang, 2014; Fox & Bailenson, 2009). One such comment that reflects these ideas states, "IMO, putting something designed to titillate straight men into a video game should not be considered immoral or harmful or disrespectful to women…" Here, the user is expressing a hegemonic norm of the female body as a sexual object to be seen or to gain pleasure from. Even when users didn't treat their statements as universally true, like the idea that women being treated as sexual objects is inoffensive, they were *accepted* as such by other users. At times participants of the forum discussion would share details of their own identity as a minority in terms of race or even disability, and yet users mostly did this to support negative connotations about the group, such as describing Indians as residents of a third world country or assuming that people who have a disability are dishonest about their status or the extent of their disability. This was also used as a distancing tactic, where a user would describe a negative characteristic associated with their social class of identity and then exempt themselves or remove themselves from that narrative. For example, when a user in the discussion stated, "I'm Asian and I've never had a chip on my shoulder…", it's not just a descriptor of themselves but of others who identify as Asians that *do* apparently "have a chip on [their] shoulder." This type of language still functions as a component of othering, even if it comes from a user that does not align with the idealized "true" gamer, by specifically criticizing characteristics associated with their own race, ability status, or other quality of identity that is decidedly not white, masculine, straight, or able-bodied. By highlighting these negative stereotypes about their race, they display an implicit support of this ideal which excludes marginalized communities.

Nonetheless, comments that reinforced these ideas were sometimes challenged or otherwise resisted. Some users chose to respond at greater length, to point out flaws in a user's argument or contradict their claims, and others responded in a manner so brief that it only conveyed a feeling of disappointment, anger, or some other discontent with the original comment. For instance, one comment describing all Asian countries as being racist toward one another despite "looking similar," another user responded only by saying "OOF dude," as a way of displaying a disagreement with this claim. Other comments would go further to challenge negative comments, asking "And the Indians who live in first world countries? It honestly sounds like you're saying your used to dealing with shit conditions, so you don't really care if you're subjected to further shit conditions." The effectiveness of these comments as challenges to hegemonic norms within gaming culture is arguable and differs case by case. What is visible, however, is the greater number of users participating in the discussions that supported traditional values over those which challenged or contested these ideas. Roughly 23% of the 142 comments analyzed discussed ideas that reflect normative hegemonic beliefs, while comments that challenged these notions or presented counter-hegemonic arguments ranged closer to 7-8%. For example, more users would support the notion of using women for reward or disability being used as an easy out for those who want to cheat. Frequently, interactions showed more favorable responses for comments which evoked language that prioritized gaming traditions over diversity and equality in gaming, with fewer interactions displaying users in agreement about changes to habits in the gaming industry or community.

In other parts of the literature, scholars focused on the intersectional nature of oppression and how many experience prejudices from multiple sources and at varying intervals (Gray, K.L., 2018; 2012; Hill-Collins, 1990). Hill-Collins describes this as a matrix of domination, where oppression cannot be universally understood and siloed into distinct groups but is unique at the individual level and can be generalized into nuanced phenomena (1990). Moreover, women of color are usually not just victims of racism *or* sexism when interacting with others, but a combination of both. The analysis displays some of the ways that the groups identified in the literature cross over and connect to one another. For instance, I mentioned earlier that none of the data selected for analysis contained more explicit talk about sexuality or the LGBTQ community in gaming or within video games. However, attitudes about queer identity can still be understood from the normalized position of heterosexuality and the use of male gaze within gaming content and in the ways that users describe gamers' preferences for female appearances in video games (Mulvey, 1997). In a discussion on the ethics of using women as a reward in video game stories, the default assumption was often that this reward was intended for heterosexual men rather than gamers of other gender identities or sexual orientation, and that the purpose of these female characters was to be a pleasure source for men. In this sense, norms of both gender and sexuality are implied because women are framed as a sexual object, but only on the terms of straight men who are enacting this gaze. This is a key point of the data analysis, as it provides insight to the way that sexuality is defined through means of binary gender expectations in gaming (Ruberg, 2018; Fox & Tang, 2014; Fox & Bailenson, 2009; Burgess, Stermer, & Burgess, 2007; Mulvey, 1997). Sexuality, then, becomes invisible in the discourse of representation because hegemonic

assumptions do not provide options outside of heteronormative romantic or sexual interest. In other words, gamers of the LGBTQ community are excluded from the dialogue as a result of the heteronormative masculinity that prevails in the ideal gamer.

Moreover, the data points to ways in which the "true" gamer emerges through discourse – not in a definitive outline of what it *is*, but in the othering and shaming of what it *is not*. There are multiple instances in the analysis where this is arguable, across all the major coding categories. Though no user strictly states that gaming is mostly white, comments instead point to people of color for not being interested as much in video games. None of the users suggest that only non-disabled people are "true" gamers, and yet several comments critique gamers who require assistance for disabilities that limit their participation. These kinds of discussions occur all throughout these comments, as users negotiate who should be portrayed in video games and why. Based on the framework established by the literature (Gray, K.L. & Leonard, 2018; Paaßen, Morgenroth, & Stratemeyer, 2017; Shaw, 2015), this maintains the pre-existing notions which stereotype the gamer as white, masculine, straight, and even non-disabled. The literature also emphasizes the neutral and invisible position of the "straight, white, male" that take the foreground in the gaming community, as a sort of "normal" position from which other groups of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or ability are judged or politicized. Because of this, the true gamer identity emerges not through clear statements of what it is, but through negations of what it is not – meaning NOT female, NOT disabled, or NOT raced. The comments described here support this notion and demonstrate how the ideal gamer is reinforced even inadvertently. As a consequence, the existing inequalities in gaming for representation of marginalized groups as well as their

participation in the community are rationalized through external factors of their otherness, and efforts to include these groups are framed as overtly political or guided by ulterior motives.

Additionally, by normalizing the gamer as someone who identifies as straight, masculine, white, and able-bodied, the desires and preferences of this group are also privileged over those of minorities in the ways that stories are told within video games. Video games are often treated with a sort of utopic lens which frames gaming as a space of opportunity and imagination – unlike the real world, video games indulge the impossible and explore a seemingly limitless curiosity. And, unlike film and literature, players are further enabled by the ability to participate in and interact with these fictional worlds. Unfortunately for minorities, however, the analysis would determine that not all dreams are created equal. In my analysis of the comments, a contradiction emerged over what fantasies and stories are realistic enough. When discussing representations of women that are preferred by male gamers, several individuals argued that this should be allowed in a fictional, made-up world. Alternatively, other users pointed to historical context or other anecdotal evidence as sufficient grounds to not include women or people of color in certain stories to maintain accuracy, like one user stating, "this isn't the result of sexism, it's simple biological math." This harkens back to a similar discussion of the literature, where K.L. Gray argues that deviant bodies in the gaming community are not granted the same level of anonymity and inclusion as the normative and dominant group. The existence of men throughout video games is never questioned or challenged in the ways that women consistently are, and their position within games either as protagonists or side characters is taken for granted as a normal part of the setting. As such, women as

deviant bodies are alienated from having the same level of acceptance in various genres of gaming with the exception of fulfilling some need of the straight male gamer or other male characters. Moreover, a consequence of the negative definition I outlined is that the utopic aspects of gaming become limited to only those considered to be a “true” or “real” part of the community.

As I reviewed the data, the analysis found that comments consistently abstained from more offensive or aggressive kinds of language, as depicted in the word cloud representations of the discourse which revealed no blatantly offensive language or slurs. An influence of the forum discussions that I had not previously considered is that of the moderators, who do not appear themselves within the interactions but do have power over what can or cannot be shared in r/TrueGaming. The work of K.L. Gray explores toxic online disinhibition as a contributing factor of the aggressive or violent nature of gaming interactions, with one of the components being a lack of authority in these digital spaces. As the presence of authority dissipates, people online are further enabled to behave in racist, sexist, or otherwise prejudiced ways without fear of punishment or consequence. Conversely, this subreddit has a very clear presence of supervision from these moderators, and the effect is seen both in the way that comments in the discussions are removed, as well as the possible policing of language from the users themselves. Understanding the way that toxic disinhibition fuels inequalities in gaming makes the role of the moderator significant in the online forum, as a barrier to aggression for marginalized groups. However, users still find ways to invoke ideas about these social classes without seeming overtly racist, sexist, ableist, or homophobic. For instance, one user who argues that feminists and female gamers have very different goals is still

making the implication that feminists work against the wants and desires of the gaming community is making the implication that feminists do not have a position within the community as gamers themselves.

In the case of disability, many of the comments approached individuals with disabilities not as a social class but with some degree of medicalization and sought to determine what is "disabled enough" to allow someone to use tools like aim assistance or colorblind visual modes, such as arguing that gamers should have to provide "proof of disability" in order to use aim assistance. The comments coded in this category demonstrated a paternalistic attitude towards individuals with disability and characterized those without serious physical limitations as being lazy or taking advantage of others. These kinds of attitudes fall in line with existing research on disability as a social class, where disability is seen as a deficiency from a standard point of ability rather than a range of different abilities. Narratives like bootstrapping were also commonly used in these comments, as users would describe scenarios where specific individuals were able to "overcome" their disability and even outperform those without disabilities, like one user who stated, "another guy can play fighting games with nothing but an xbox controller and his face. People with disabilities have it tough, but a lot of them work to overcome them." These stories were told not to frame disability identity in more positive attributes, but to distinguish those who are disabled and requiring some form of assistance as lesser than those who surpass systematic limitations. It can also be argued that representation of disability in video games is neglected because users reinforced ideas around disability of deficiency or inadequacy, equating disability with something that needs to be remedied or fixed.

Implications of the Analysis and other Considerations

Much of the findings are consistent with the existing literature on gaming culture and the toxic behavior towards minorities. It would appear natural for gamers who align with a narrow definition of identity display hostility toward that which is deemed "other," and given the rigid qualifications this hostility isn't hard to come by even in the most civil of discourse. r/TrueGaming, unlike many gaming forums on Reddit, holds true to its moderators' rules that restrict prejudiced or offensive language. Users at multiple instances cited that the mods all but censor some topics of discussion, and more sensitive subjects considered to have a political tone are subject to scrutiny and approval before they can be posted. Because of this, r/TrueGaming hosts a more balanced and fair discussion in many ways than other areas of gaming forums. The prohibition of hostile language or treatment of users is minimized, and this enables gamers on Reddit who might otherwise be hesitant to speak out to participate in the discussion. Even so, this subreddit was not devoid of its own aggression toward marginalized communities, even if subtle or implied.

Themes produced from the analysis of comments coded for race, gender, sexuality and disability reinforced literary works which assert the hegemonic nature of how these social identities are characterized and treated. In the comments analyzed, discussions generally talked about these groups, but did not always seek out input from individuals of these groups. While existing literature has mostly explored the experiences of women in game as an aspect of gender dynamics, less has been dedicated to the experiences of people of color, queer people, or differently-abled people. Research has investigated the ways that people of color are frequently profiled and deviated as

outsiders of the group, though this is usually instigated by individuals of the dominant group. What is interesting in the analysis performed for this thesis is that most of the negative comments about race originated from users who themselves were minorities. Even more curious is the association of Americans or Western European groups as being privileged – not for being treated better on the basis of race, but for their concern regarding political correctness and racial equality. When users would argue that Americans were privileged to be concerned with diverse representation, it was often done to point out diversity as a superficial problem in comparison to more primary issues facing people of color or people of ethnic minorities. Comments on disability supported scholars like C. Gray who argue that disability is frames as a deficiency rather than a different kind of ability, or in other words a deviation and deficit from the normative expectation of our bodies (2009). Users showed empathy for the idealized community of people with disability, or those they felt had a genuine disability that severely hinders their mobility or individual capabilities, but showed caution and even hostility toward those they assumed were exaggerating or lying about their disability. Comments in this category only viewed disability as a physical phenomenon (rather than mental, psychological, or social experience), and took a paternalistic attitude of how and when gamers with disabilities should be allowed to have assistance in competitive gameplay.

This also gives pause to the comments and discussions which were deleted or removed by moderators for rule-breaking behaviors within the forum. Although their contents cannot be analyzed, it can be argued that users even in a forum considered to be "tame" tend to speak or engage with other users in a hostile manner. And what, then, is considered too political or offensive? As the literature points out, gaming culture has

been acutely vulnerable to right-wing movements and has often adopted or incorporated beliefs of these groups as well as practices commonly used in authoritarian speech. Knowing this, comments or discussion topics removed for being too political may not actually be derogatory towards marginalized communities but may instead be considered too threatening to the traditional norms of the hegemonic. Therein, group sentiments on diversity and inclusion may not be fairly represented in the discussion forum, and moderators may consciously or unconsciously favor discussions that align with their own beliefs and values. It also should not go unnoticed that r/TrueGaming is considered one of the smaller forums on Reddit for gaming, which may indicate that more gamers prefer to participate in discussions where their comments go unchecked by any form of supervision. If more users subscribe to forums known for prejudice or violent behavior towards minorities, should more be done to moderate these other spaces? Additionally, should some level of transparency be required on the part of the moderators to ensure that their means of selection are fair or unbiased? These are all considerations for the way that Reddit as a forum shapes the existing discourse on gaming and thereby have the capacity to manage or maintain gaming culture.

Equally essential to this discussion is the emergence of authority amongst users in the analysis of comments in the forum. Throughout the discourse examined, comments would express language that invoked a level of decision-making authority amongst self-labelled gamers on gaming issues. This was especially common in the discussion in aim assistance for gamers with disabilities, where decidedly non-disabled individuals took the authority to decide what they felt was fair, appropriate, or allowable in terms of disability assistance. Of course, it should be acknowledged that the innate purpose of discussion

forums is to provide a space where ideas can be shared or challenged, including arguments about what individuals feel *ought* to be. This is not to suggest that users in the discourse who make suggestions about how games should be developed are intentionally telling other users how they should play and participate in video games. Nonetheless, these arguments depict a privilege of the "true" gamer identity on who has a meaningful say in what video games are made and who can play them. If we also consider that many of these forum moderators are also invested in gamer identity and cultural norms, it can be argued that an unconscious bias leans the discussion toward a discourse which protects the traditions of gaming rather than creating a fair and open space for individuals to speak and engage with others on these issues.

Additionally, the literature and the analysis both emphasize the critical role of video game representation in promoting diversity amongst gamers. Generally, in the conversations examined, users were primarily concerned with the contents of games over who actually plays them, but these contents have a demonstrable influence over who is free to express interest in and partake in gaming. Though the assumption is that interest and participation from marginalized groups must preface the diversification of gaming content, as exemplified by several comments in the analysis, it is strongly suggested that the reverse is more likely to be true. Yes, groups from these communities do create content in order to establish their own spaces within the larger gaming culture, but it is the depiction of characters who act as positive representations for these groups that enables a wider audience to join. This is not to suggest that women, people of color, people with disabilities, or the queer community *only* enjoy games they see themselves

in, but the visualization of these groups in video games reinforces their legitimacy and helps to humanize minorities who have been neglected in the dominant narrative.

Ultimately the findings of the analysis are largely supported by the existing research, with some findings providing new perspectives on the discourse surrounding other aspects of identity like sexuality, ability and disability, which remain to be more thoroughly investigated in relation to gaming. The role of online disinhibition is also contemplated in the dynamic between moderators and users on Reddit, as some forums have more structure and supervision than other spaces for discourse. Lastly, the comment data examined in combination with the literature review underpin the importance of representation of minorities in the stories of video games in order to promote a more inclusive and welcoming environment in the community.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

This project set out to examine the interactions of users in an online public forum dedicated to gaming to contemplate the way that gamers talk about subjects of gender, race, sexuality, and disability and how this relates to power dynamics in the community and how gamers come to identify themselves. In this, the following research questions were proposed:

RQ1: What are the most prevalent themes regarding social identity on an online public gaming forum?

RQ2: What defines a "true" gamer as expressed in online comments?

RQ3: How are the concepts of race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability discussed within the video game community in an online forum?

Existing research on the subject establishes contemporary gaming culture as more hostile and aggressive toward those who do not fit the parameters of the idealized gamer, which has been decidedly framed in whiteness, masculinity, straightness, and non-disability. Historical influences on modern gaming, including Westernized storytelling, role-playing board games, and STEM studies all play a role in shaping the norms of who plays video games and who should be in them.

The key results of the data analysis support the literature in the way the various social classes of identity are defined through user dialogue, including the traditional hegemonic narratives surrounding women, people of color, disability, and sexuality. These types of comments reinforce beliefs about women as sexual objects or sources of pleasure, people of color (in this instance, Indian, Asian, and Native or Indigenous

people) as poor or lower in education and status, and people with disability as dishonest or misleading. Further examination displays how users reify the straight, white, male gamer stereotype in more nuanced and subtle ways as a result of greater supervision within the discussion forum. Other themes like users assuming authority over other groups and the gatekeeping of fantasy storytelling emerged in the analysis, as well as patterns which show users to more frequently support arguments against change in gaming traditions as opposed to efforts of diversity and inclusion in gaming. Analysis also identified new possible themes on the position of disability and queer identity within the gaming community, as well as the need for increased and improved representation of diverse characters in order to promote inclusion within the community itself.

Limitations of Research

This thesis and the research therein were limited in respect to resources for time and technological capabilities for logging and analyzing comments. Because this project approached the data with mixed methods of both quantitative and qualitative styles of analysis, examining the comments in detail absorbed greater resources of time and thus the scope of the number of comments and threads collected for analysis was limited. Analysis may have provided a more accurate and richer exploration of gamer culture as expressed in comments with a greater number of threads undergoing detailed examination, including the coding of comments along lines of race, gender, sexuality, and ability/disability. Data collected seemed to have a skew toward discussions on gender and may have been limited in its ability to review these categories with equal representation, and moreover is not entirely representative of the forum and its ensuing discussions. In analyzing the way these concepts are talked about within these forums, establishing a

process for obtaining a more equal number of comments coded to the respective categories may prove beneficial.

Though it was acknowledged earlier in the description of the grounded theory approach to analyzing data, this research is also limited by the researcher's ability to objectively assess comments for coding and inductive analysis, as I have extensive personal experience as both a self-identified gamer and a minority of race, sexuality, and gender. These persona aspects influence my natural reaction to comments and threads of discussion in the forum, and therefore skew data which I may deem relevant to the research and the conclusions drawn from the data. I also have mentioned previously that one of the problems of coding these comments is that, in a forum where prejudiced language is banned, online users are very adept at getting a message across with ableist, sexist, homophobic, or racist undertones, without at any time actually *saying* anything that is outright offensive or even suggestive. Moreover, being a self-described gamer and having spent years of time engaging with others in this space, my ability to identify seemingly biased or prejudiced language becomes tacit and limits my ability to code on more regimented definitions of what qualifies as invoking these social categories. Developing a process or a means of mapping this type of language would prove highly beneficial as researchers dive deeper into gamer culture and the digital gaming space.

Directions for Future Research

Future research on the dynamics of identity and gaming would benefit from a deeper investigation of ability and disability, and the ways video games may represent this social distinction in a manner that reifies existing hegemonic beliefs about disability. In conjunction, research aiming to shine light on the perspectives of gamers with

disabilities should assess the inclusion of this group not just in terms of the material accessibility, such as tools or modes which assist various forms of disability, but how games approach individuals with disability as a social class. In doing so, scholars can learn about how disability can be responsibly and accurately depicted in games while also prioritizing the humanity of those with disabilities over the need to measure their ability. Additionally, further research on gaming and disability may provide insight on how the element of competition is used to exclude people with disabilities, as skill and competitiveness were frequently brought up in discussion with disability assistance.

Another focus of future research might examine various gaming forums to assess how discussion is moderated and what impact this has on the types of ideas and language exchanged in the forum. Though it is understood that increased supervision usually results in more amicable behavior between users, scholars should lend thought to whether this moderation also prevents marginalized communities from advocating for diversity and more inclusive treatment in gaming as a result of being "too political." Additionally, this research should compare different websites to determine whether discourse is local to specific areas of online engagement. Though it was not prioritized here with consideration for the scope and resources of this project, a deeper assessment comparing chat in-game between gamers and conversations in a forum could offer another perspective in the role of anonymity and online disinhibition.

Lastly, one final area to consider for future research may include the role of socioeconomic status and consumer authority in the shaping of the gaming industry and gaming culture. By nature, video games are a hobby of luxury that often requires a great deal of investment, both in time, money, and space. Contrary to traditional hegemonic

understandings of privilege and ruling class norms, gaming culture has largely opposed the concept of loot boxes and other microtransactions which promote a "pay to play, pay to win" opportunity amongst gamers. This may be due to the cultural values surrounding skill and natural competition on player vs. player settings and gives an interesting opportunity for researchers to assess the dynamic of financial accessibility and socioeconomic status in relation to the "true" gamer identity. Subsequently, research would benefit from a better understanding of the consumer authority of gamers as consumers of content and the means by which consumerism influences the types of games created and the diversity of representation within those games.

Who Dangles from the Thread?

While this project initially set out to determine how concepts of identity are talked about in gaming forums – and then, in turn, understand how gamers shape the identity of a "true" gamer – the dialogue ultimately pointed to a battle between a protection of traditions in gaming and a welcoming of the new and different for game development and gaming communities. Underlying all of this exists some notion that the "straight, white male" is a dying breed of gamer, and more and more people of diverse makeups and backgrounds are finding their place in the gaming world. Does this hold true? Given the ease at which Right-wing and white supremacist ideology have seeped into the culture, the very idea of shifting the paradigm may only further validate and strengthen those who endorse beliefs of white male victimhood and exacerbate the already precarious disputes between marginalized groups and those who claim to be "true" gamers. The kindling for tensions between a dominant class and the subsequent marginalized groups are reflected in the contextual disposition of gaming culture which places the industry and its

community in opposition to diversity and inclusion. This much is not new – the last decade of events related to gaming culture have displayed a fierce protection of the traditional values which situate the gamer as predominantly white, masculine, able-bodied, and heteronormative. But as the struggle escalates and the dominant group sees more resistance to the way things are, the greater the possibility for violence and aggression toward minorities and vulnerable populations who have an equal investment in video games. Perhaps this is a sign of success and an example of the deteriorating boundaries of hegemonic cultural influence – and perhaps this also makes gaming culture that much more dangerous to the marginalized groups that become collateral damage in the territorial war.

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