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Finding the Invisible Player and Understanding Women's Experiences in Online Multiplayer Video Game Environments

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Abstract

There is no clear definition of what qualifies as a hardcore game, yet there is significant speculation around who qualifies as a hardcore gamer. Constantly relegated to the casual gaming market, women are assumed to dislike and shy away from hardcore games because of the difficult and competitive form of play such games require. Women are rendered invisible in traditional and competitive gaming because of assumptions and stereotypes surrounding women gamers, dismissal from game developers, and hostility in gaming culture. This research study explores how the invisible women gamers navigate and negotiate their gaming experiences while playing competitive online multiplayer video games. With attention to team-based online, multiplayer, combat, and battle arena games, this study attempts to bridge the gap concerning women gamers and their experiences in highly competitive, violent video games. Utilizing a combination of in-depth qualitative interviews and textual analysis of participant journals, this thesis examines the complex dynamics at work in constructing and defining women's gaming experiences for sixteen female gamers.

Findings reveal that intense power dynamics, exhibited through harassment, discrimination, and hostility, serve to reject, or at best tolerate, women's gender performances. There are many ways women are both denied and forego female gender performances in gaming spaces. Lastly, women actively attempt to distance themselves from the "girl gamer" stereotype while simultaneously imposing it on other women.

Finding the Invisible Player and Understanding Women's Experiences
in Online Multiplayer Video Game Environments

by

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B.A., Franklin Pierce University, 2010

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Syracuse University

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Acknowledgements | iv |
| Table of Contents | v |
| Chapter 1: Introduction | 1 |
| Competitive Multiplayer Games | 2 |
| Gaming Culture | 2 |
| Who is a Gamer? | 4 |
| Women and Gaming | 5 |
| Looking for the Invisible Player | 6 |
| Chapter 2: Literature Review | 8 |
| Previous Research on Gender and Identity | 8 |
| Gaming Culture | 10 |
| Gender in Online Gaming | 14 |
| Other Masculine Cultures | 16 |
| Chapter 3: Method | 19 |
| Sample | 19 |
| Data Collection | 24 |
| Data Analysis | 27 |
| Chapter 4: Findings – Gender and Gaming | 30 |
| Participants’ Context of Gaming Spaces | 33 |
| Navigating Within the Power Dynamics | 35 |
| Navigating with Usernames and Communication | 45 |
| In Summary | 51 |
| Chapter 5: Findings – Agency in Gaming | 52 |

| | |
|--|----|
| Gaming Space Expectations | 53 |
| Negotiating Harassment and Gender | 59 |
| Overcoming Obstacles and the “Girl Gamer” Stereotype | 63 |
| In Summary | 73 |
| Chapter 6: Conclusion | 75 |
| Implications | 77 |
| Limitations and Future Research | 79 |
| Appendix A: Recruitment Blog | 81 |
| Appendix B: Interview Materials | 84 |
| References | 86 |
| Vita | 91 |

Finding the Invisible Player and Understanding Women's Experiences
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“QUADRA KILL!” booms from the in-game announcer and resonates through your headphones. A short, squeaky, cartoonish character, carrying bombs and a propensity to incinerate things, managed to kill four opposing team members in a row. This player just helped the team to win the game and no one knows who is actually behind that character, controlling the spells and movement, appearing just in time to save a teammate from being ganked by the competing team trolling through the crevices of Summoner's Rift.

Competitive games, like League of Legends, have millions of players and with the overall hundreds of millions of video game players around the world, it is hard to imagine that the stereotypical gamer actually makes up a significant portion of the gaming population. With gamers around the world, the concept of the stereotypical white, heterosexual male gamer seems to be losing ground. In fact, studies show that many individuals who self-identify as a gamer defy the assumptions and stereotypes (Williams, Yee & Caplan, 2008; Dill & Thill, 2007; Norris, 2004; Taylor, 2006; Shaw, 2012). One group in particular are female gamers.

Through a feminist theory lens, this study explores how women gamers navigate and negotiate their gaming experiences in competitive online multiplayer games. Since there is a large variety of games that fit this description, from here on these games will be referred to as battle games. Many studies have been conducted on the various aspects of women in gaming, particularly women and gaming culture (Schott & Horrel, 2000; Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Taylor, 2008; Yee, 2008); women's motivations for play (Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, & Consalvo 2007; Poels, De Cock & Malliet 2012; Taylor, 2003; Lewis & Griffiths, 2011); identity and gender (Hayes, 2007; Shaw, 2012); and gaming stereotypes

(Williams, Yee & Caplan, 2008; Dill & Thill, 2007; Norris, 2004). These studies attempt to address the complex underpinnings of female gameplay, and many of these studies also include or address, the assumptions and stereotypes surrounding females and gaming.

Competitive Multiplayer Games

This study attempts to bridge the gap concerning women and highly competitive, violent video games; specifically focusing on women who enjoy playing online multiplayer combat and battle arena games. Research on women and gaming typically revolves around only three types of gaming: general computer and video games (Schott & Horrel, 2000; Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, & Consalvo 2007; Kerr, 2003), casual games (Lewis & Griffiths, 2011), and massive multiplayer online (MMO) and role playing games (RPG) (Eklund, 2011; Williams, Yee & Caplan, 2008; Poels, De Cock & Malliet 2012; Taylor, 2003; Williams, Consalvo, Caplan & Yee, 2009; Hayes, 2007). What is left largely untouched are women's experiences with combat and battle arena games such as League of Legends, the Halo series, the Call of Duty series, and Left 4 Dead.

These games are both cooperative and competitive with certain gameplay modes allowing players to work as a team to complete an objective either against the game itself, or against other players. These games take on several forms, such as first-person shooters or top-down battle arenas. All of these games have online multiplayer capabilities that offer a combination of competitive and cooperative gameplay options. What seems to set these games apart is their propensity for violence and the hostile interactions between players.

Gaming Culture

For this research study, gaming culture refers to the traditional gaming community as a whole, whereas game culture pertains to the culture and community surrounding a particular

game or series. Each game has its own nuanced culture, vernacular, and player community, yet, many people cross those boundaries and play multiple games. This thesis explores women's behaviors and experiences that stretch across games but are still bound within the competitive, multiplayer nature of battle games.

Female gamers as a whole are frequently dismissed as “gamers” and relegated to the casual and “girl games” market (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Taylor, 2006), despite the fact that women tend to be more dedicated and play RPGs for longer periods of time than men (Williams, Consalvo, Caplan & Yee, 2009). All-female gaming groups and guilds do exist; however, women are still seen as an exception, an anomaly in gaming culture (Taylor, 2006). Not surprisingly, women's existence in this culture is assumed to be limited, thus any women choosing to partake in competitive gaming is an exception to women video game players in general. Taylor (2008) explains how women in gaming are also glamorized in a way that emphasizes women do not belong in gaming culture. Women's personal accounts with gaming harassment, discrimination, exile, and glamorization can be found through several current websites and blogs, such as Not in the Kitchen Anymore (NotintheKitchenAnymore.com), Feminist Frequency (FeministFrequency.com), and Fat, Ugly or Slutty (FatUglyorSlutty.com). In fact, many scholars cite examples of the culture trying to push women out altogether (Schott & Horrel, 2000; Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Taylor, 2008; Yee, 2008). The toxicity and hypermasculinity of gaming culture seems to intentionally drive women away from video games, and the threat of gender based harassment and discrimination is a significant deterrent for women who want to play video games. Contrary to many assumptions, women are not inherently put off by difficult game controls. Yee (2008) explains that gaming culture, and not game mechanics, deter women from participating in such game environments.

Who is a Gamer?

In a rudimentary way, gaming culture assigns both games and people into a hierarchy. The hierarchy determines which games qualify as real games and who is considered to be a real gamer (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Vanderhoef, 2013). By relegating women to a casual gaming market, gaming culture denies women the distinction of being a real gamer. The hostility of gaming culture embodies a hypermasculine mindset (Salter & Blodgett, 2012) and a dominant ideology that is constantly both reinforced and challenged (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006). Some women play video games in a way that deliberately challenges gender norms and expectations of gaming culture (Royse et al., 2007). However, the ideology is reinforced through the demeaning discourse that takes place during online games (i.e. FatUglyorSlutty.com). Despite the fact this dominant ideology establishes the white, heterosexual male as the iconic “real gamer” (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006), many studies claim actual video game players defy this stereotype often (Shaw, 2012; Lewis & Griffiths, 2011; Hayes, 2007; Williams, Yee & Caplan, 2008) and still identify themselves as gamers.

Shaw (2012) identifies gender as a key factor in whether an individual self-identifies as a gamer. The concept of gender varies widely and often depends on the researcher’s perspective. For this thesis, I am looking at gender not through the masculine to feminine binary, but through the lens employed by Foss, Domenico, and Foss in *Gender Stories* (2013). As the authors explain, one’s gender is constantly in flux; changing and shifting to suit the moment; it is not determined by physical genitalia or hormones, but rather it is an intricately woven, socially constructed aspect of one’s personal identity (2013). Gender helps determine the lived experiences, knowledge, and values of an individual player.

Women and Gaming

Assumptions that all women dislike certain types of games (Taylor, 2006; Schott & Horrel, 2000), or the assumption that women have common interests and motivations (Taylor, 2006; Taylor 2008; Yee, 2008), contribute to women's invisibility in gaming culture.

Presumably, these assumptions lead many male gamers to believe women have no interest in participating in first person shooter, combat, or battle arena games. Furthermore, these assumptions oversimplify female gamers by narrowly defining and generalizing both girls' and women's interests and motivations, thus recreating the gender binary and serving to reduce females' agency, delegitimize them as gamers, and render them invisible.

Female gamers are further made invisible by the "girl games" and "pink games" market. The girl games market caters to rudimentary, stereotypical, 1950s traditional feminine interests, which exaggerates or creates differences between boys and girls (Yates & Littleton, 1999; Gilmour, 2004; Taylor 2006). Categorizing games with hardcore and casual distinctions reflects on the players of these games, who are also categorized into hardcore and casual players, where hardcore players are considered to be "real" (i.e. dedicated) gamers (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006). Unfortunately, since men's epic combat games occupy the hardcore distinction, the male players are assumed to be the "real" gamers, whereas the assumption that women only play casual games leaves women excluded from being considered real gamers.

Girls and women also face social and cultural barriers in order to play video games. Social and cultural restrictions prevent many girls and young women from participating in video games (Lin, 2008; Taylor, 2008). As a result, these barriers are often misinterpreted as a total lack of interest in games (Yee, 2008). Rather, the social stigma of girls playing video games can

lead to social isolation (Lin, 2008) through a closeted gamer identity (Taylor, 2008), or potentially expose themselves to harassment and discrimination (Yee, 2008).

As a result, women may change the way they participate in video games. Online competitive video games offer a number of features to personalize or enhance gameplay. For instance, players can customize their user accounts with a specific user name and avatar. Thus, heavily gendered user names or humanoid avatars may reveal the player's real life gender. Another way to augment gameplay is to use a microphone or headset to communicate with other players, which can also reveal a player's gender through the sound of his or her voice. Since the gaming environment can be quite hostile to women, a female player may cater the way she plays to create a more enjoyable gameplay experience.

Looking for the Invisible Player

Taylor (2008) suggests that studies on women and gaming need to put women at the center of the research, which this study does. Shaw (2010) explains that to study gaming culture, the researcher must situate the phenomenon within the relevant cultural context, which means taking into account how gaming culture relates to and reflects the broader culture it exists within. Essentially, this study looks at women players of competitive online games that focus on multiplayer combat or battle gameplay. As stated above, women are typically invisible in this domain and revealing one's gender can result in harassment and discrimination. To explore this idea, the first research question asks:

RQ1: How does a woman's gender impact her gaming experiences?

Furthermore, the threat of discrimination and harassment based on gender, which is prevalent within gaming culture, prevents women from further pursuing video games (Yee, 2008). As such, women may augment their gameplay experience to better suit their gaming

desires. In line with feminist standpoint epistemology, this thesis examines what women do within a competitive gaming space. The following research questions ask:

RQ2: How do women video game players navigate their real world gender in battle games?

RQ3: How do women video game players negotiate their gameplay experience in a potentially hostile gaming environment?

The intent of this study is to understand women's experiences with identity in competitive online multiplayer gaming environments. Through qualitative in-depth interviews and participants' journals, this study seeks an understanding of women's personal experiences. This information could help others to navigate a culture that deters so many individuals from participating in video games.

The following chapters delve further into the study of women's experiences in competitive online multiplayer gaming. Chapter two elaborates on gender, gaming culture, and women's position in the gaming community while expanding upon the existing body of literature on women and gaming. Chapter three goes into the methodology decisions and lays out the rationale behind conducting qualitative, in-depth interviews with women gamers. The findings are split between chapters four and five to thoroughly address how women's gender impacts gaming experiences and how agency plays a role in women's choice to navigate and negotiate gaming spaces. Chapter six concludes this thesis with a discussion on the implications of this research and paths for future studies.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter addresses the theory and literature I draw upon in this study. I seek to understand how women navigate and negotiate online gaming experiences. In order to examine and articulate the factors contributing to women's gameplay experiences, the literature highlights areas related to women, gender, and video games, while identifying gaps this thesis will address. First, the chapter reflects on previous video game research on identity and gender. The following section inspects the intersection between the hypermasculinity of gaming culture and women gamers. To evaluate the role gender plays in gaming experiences, the next section defines the performance of gender. Lastly, to analyze how women operate within masculine game spaces, the literature peers into how women adapt to other masculine spaces.

Previous Research on Gender and Identity

There is no single game type that this study looks at, however this study does exclude one game type that has received significant scholarly attention: roleplaying games. Women and role playing games are at the center of many video game studies on identity creation and gender. Hayes (2007) conducts interviews to explore gendered gaming practices in the role playing games *Elder Scrolls: Morrowind*, which results in an example of character creation following typical gender roles and the attempt to avoid violence in the game. However, it is important to note that the women she interviews play the game as part of a graduate course assignment rather than of their own interest. Gaming, and subsequently character creation, as an assignment is quite different from pouring hours of one's personal free time into an adventure.

Another venue where gender and identity creation is explored is *World of Warcraft*. Here, Eklund finds that women's choices in character creation reflect traditional gender roles and the desire to identify with the character (2011). When she says several women choose to play

support and healing classes, she is creating the assumption that the women are not playing the character classes to their full capacity, and inadvertently drawing the conclusion that these women do not readily take advantage of damage potential these classes are capable of (which may be the case). Poels, De Cock, and Malliet explore the gender identity of female players of MMO RPGs along the lines of whether they identified with masculine or feminine gaming characteristics (2012). As seen above, these studies tend to show how character creation can reinforce the masculine to feminine binary and expected gender roles of players.

In an early study, Taylor (2003) takes another perspective in examining women's experiences with the game *EverQuest*, finding that women tend to play the game even if they may disagree with the representations of females in the game. Success and mastery of the game are key goals for these women players, and combat specifically serves as a pleasurable experience and a marker of success and mastery of the game. Players identify with their characters' in-game achievements and mastery of the game, yet bracket their experiences by ignoring the representations of female characters. An exception to RPG research, Taylor does a thorough job of exploring and understanding women gamers' relationship with *EverQuest* and the experiences and choices women desire from role playing games (2003). While there are always new perspectives to pursue and gaps to fill, role playing games are clearly a well-researched area of video games. Thus this thesis focuses on battle games outside of the RPG realm.

Other studies expand upon gender, motivations, and interests surrounding casual gaming (Juul, 2010; Lewis & Griffiths, 2011) and gaming in general (Schott & Horrel, 2000; Royse, et al., 2007; Terlecki et al., 2011). Social interaction and communication are frequently cited as women's key motivation in video games. However, social interaction is a significant driving

force for men as well (Poels, De Cock & Malliet 2012; Williams, Yee & Caplan, 2008). Often women's interests are narrowly defined ((Dovey & Kennedy, 2006) and broadly generalized to the point where girl's interests are extrapolated to grown women (Taylor 2006, 2008). Critiquing arguments emphasizing the disparity of interests between men and women, Yee says it best, "These arguments lead us to believe that creating games for the 'female brain' is the only sensible solution to attracting women to play video games; there is a particular set of "feminine" game mechanics that we simply haven't found or perfected yet" (Yee, 2008, p. 83).

Gaming Culture

In MMO environments gaming culture is a significant deterrent to women pursuing video games (Yee, 2008). Gaming culture can be quite diverse, yet there are pockets that exemplify hypermasculine tendencies (Taylor, 2012). As Dovey and Kennedy point out, computer gaming culture, which can be extrapolated to all of gaming culture, is not gender neutral. Instead, there are marked gendered expectations for play and access to games (2006). For women, access to games and legitimization as a player is conducted through male counterparts, such as a boyfriend, brother, or father (Schott & Horrel, 2000; Yee, 2008; Taylor, 2008). The hypermasculine nature of gaming culture attempts to forcibly exclude women and others not willing to conform to the culture (Taylor, 2012).

To discuss gaming culture it is important to address who is included in the culture. "Real" gamers make up the population of gaming culture. Beyond the white, heterosexual adolescent male stereotype, Juul identifies the stereotypical "real" gamer as having "a preference for emotionally negative fictions," violent and difficult games, and will spend a considerable amount of time playing such games (2010, p. 29). On the other hand, women are the primary audience for casual games (Jenkins & Cassell, 2008; Lewis & Griffiths, 2011), which unfortunately leaves

all women relegated as casual gamers, despite their diversity of interests. Casual games and gamers stand as polar opposites to hardcore games and gamers; where hardcore games are violent, emotionally heady and quite difficult, casual games are pleasant, simple to learn, and easy to set aside (Juul, 2010). Distinguishing between hardcore and casual games leads the front in determining who can be considered a real gamer (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006).

Not surprisingly, several studies dismantle the gamer stereotype and highlight a substantial portion of the gaming population that self-identify as gamers, yet do not necessarily fill out the gamer stereotype (Williams, Yee & Caplan, 2008; Dill & Thill, 2007; Norris, 2004; Taylor, 2006; Shaw, 2012). In the spirit of defying gender roles and stereotypes, Williams et al. (2009) reveal interesting information that contradicts many preconceived notions of gender roles and gaming. Comparing self-reported survey data with behavior data collected from *EverQuest2* servers, Williams et al. find women underreport their gaming habits more severely than men and contrary to popular opinion, women actually spend more time playing, have more characters, and are more committed to the game than male players. This may not be the case for all traditionally hardcore games, but it leaves a new avenue of research to be explored.

Hypermasculine culture. Gaming culture has many ways of telling women they do not belong. As such, this thesis seeks to understand how women adapt and navigate gaming spaces where their overt gender conflicts with the expectations of the culture. Analyzing a case within the gaming community, Salter and Blodgett illustrate the hypermasculine discourse that frames women as the enemy, deliberately ostracizes them, and makes them unwelcome within the community, especially when women chose to speak up about the culture (2012). Taylor discusses the “pro player talk” of e-sports athletes as “smattered with misogynistic or, at the least, retrograde notions about women,” where women are inherently and always will be inferior

game players (2012, p. 117). This type of discourse is frequently seen in competitive multiplayer gaming environments.

In her book *Raising the Stakes*, Taylor discusses and connects the relationship between traditional masculinity and the geek masculinity of gaming culture. Geek masculinity, still forming and carving its place, challenges traditional masculinity for a place among traditional masculine pursuits (2012). Taylor describes how this “new twist on hegemonic masculinity” manifests,

The fag jokes, athletic/star posturing, sexist language and objectification of women (often, devastatingly, of female pro players), and trash talk are part of performing a masculinity that seeks to simultaneously inhabit traditional forms of privilege while shedding the outsider status and marginalization geek identity has long held (2012, p. 118).

As I interpret it, the hypermasculine pockets of gaming culture are a means of overcompensating for being in the lesser position of masculinity. For these male gamers, the desire to be seen as masculine results in an overemphasis on masculine traits and harshly punishes those that do not conform. This begs the question, what compels women to participate in these spaces?

Every aspect of hardcore video games is coded as masculine, including marketing, content, and booth babes at conventions (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006). The masculine construction makes it clear who the target audience is and who are considered an added bonus. Developers of such games are keenly aware of the intended and desired audience. A June 2013 talk by the *Dragon Age* games lead writer David Gaider addresses the production of sex and sexuality in video games. Talking about women, minorities, and the overall non 18-25 year old male demographic, Gaider says, “We know they play our games, we can see that they do. The figures

support the fact that they do. But it's not because anyone invited them to play. In fact, in a lot of cases, it's clear they play despite it being made plainly obvious to them that they're not the intended audience" (D Gaider, 2013). In terms of content, Dovey and Kennedy relate game designer Sheri Graner Ray's explanation that hypersexualized female characters provoke sexist responses which in turn "can lead to in-game harassment which can significantly alter the experience (and pleasure) of the game" (2006, p. 93).

Women in gaming culture. The ideology of the hypermasculine nature of gaming culture defines who are acceptable players, how they are expected to act, and the players' access to gaming space (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006). Since the player is assumed to be male (Yee, 2008), women wanting to enter this space must first be legitimized by male counterparts (Yee, 2008; Schott & Horrel, 2000; Hayes, 2007; Eklund, 2011). As children, girls tend to gain access to video games through male relatives (Schott & Horrel, 2000; Hayes, 2007). As they get older, boyfriends and male friends introduce women to games (Taylor, 2008), but also serve to legitimize a woman's real world gender to other players (Yee, 2008).

Women gaining entrance into gaming culture are seen as an anomaly (Taylor, 2006; Taylor, 2008), an exception to women as a whole for defying what the general population of women want in favor of male pursuits. Other players, marketing, and popular media also call attention to and glamorize female players (Taylor, 2008), which emphasizes female players' alleged uniqueness in gaming culture and thus their lack of belonging. Nevertheless, women are acutely aware of their position within gaming culture (Schott & Horrel, 2000; Taylor, 2008). In fact, women gamers deliberately challenge gender norms (Royse et al., 2007; Taylor, 2003), and play ironically to challenge the culture (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006). That is to say, gender plays a

key role in women's gaming experiences, which opens up the need to explore how women gamers navigate their real world gender in these games.

Gender in Online Gaming

According to Shaw, there is a strong correlation between gender and whether or not an individual self-identifies as a gamer. The only other strong factor is time spent playing video games (2012). Even though interviewees tend not to articulate gender's role in his or her own gameplay experience (Shaw, 2012), as articulated above, gender holds a prominent spot in research and in all aspects of gaming culture and video games. This thesis draws upon two key sources to examine women's gameplay experiences.

As a basis for looking at gender I borrow the lens from Foss, Domenico, and Foss's book *Gender Stories*. The authors explain an individual's gender is experienced many different ways by the individual and by others. Not only does one's expression of gender change throughout his or her lifetime, but gender also changes several times throughout a single day in accordance with the social context (2013). In essence, one's gender is constantly in flux and adjusting to fit or reject expectations.

Gender identity can be quite difficult to negotiate in some social contexts. Adjusting to others' expectations may require compromise to participate in that space (Foss, Domenico & Foss, 2013). The authors elaborate on how one's agency assists with negotiating gender in social contexts: "Agency is the capacity to act or make a difference; to have agency means to feel or to believe that you can change things that matter to you" (Foss, Domenico & Foss, 2013, p. 16).

Components of agency--influencing others, reframing, and enactment--describe the degrees to which an individual negotiates gender in a certain space (Foss, Domenico & Foss, 2013, p. 16). Reframing is particularly relevant to negotiating gender in video games because it

relates to the various ways in which women bracket their gameplay experiences, such as ignoring the hypersexualization of female characters or withholding their real world gender (Taylor, 2003; Eklund, 2011). According to Foss, Domenico and Foss, reframing means changing one's own perspective of a situation in such a way that opens up options for new interpretations of the situation (2013). An individual is able to reevaluate her situation and structure her outlook in a way that she gives herself agency. Reframing can be seen among women who experience other masculine dominated spaces and is addressed later in this chapter.

Performativity. To adequately examine and understand the role of gender in women's gameplay experiences, I incorporate Judith Butler's concept of performativity into the lens. Butler writes, "Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions" (Butler, 1990, p. 140). Performativity addresses how gender is made up of repetitive acts performed by an individual to denote inclusion within the hegemonic gender binary (Butler, 1990). Performing gender means repeatedly reenacting a socially established set of meanings (Butler, 1990). One's gender shifts constantly depending, in part, on group identification and who he or she is interacting with at the moment (Foss, Domenico & Foss, 2013), those acts, even as social context change, reaffirm one's portrayed gender. Performativity allows for the observation of how a woman gamer reproduces the illusion of the dominant gender through her gameplay choices.

Performing in battle games. It is important to note how gender is performed and expected to be performed within the confines of gaming culture. As explained above, gaming culture can be hostile and unwelcoming to different expressions of gender which can (and often does) result in the expression of misogynistic and homophobic attitudes. Competing in e-sports,

Taylor describes what women pro players will do as a “survival strategy” to adapt and integrate into the culture. Women will hide their gender through the use of gender-neutral online names or lack of voice communication, or in a “yeah, get over it” manner, address the issue outright (Taylor, 2012, p. 122-123). The performances of gamer women seem to run in two strains; one where they compensate their feminine side through sexually attractive avatars or emphasizing other, more traditional feminine activities; the other where women take on a more dominant, hypermasculine affinity. Taylor concludes, “Some try to simultaneously enact both ends of the spectrum -- a dazzling display of performative agility where they come to represent both a hyper masculinity and femininity (kick ass and take names while dolled up)” (2012, p. 123).

Through this lens, this thesis will explore how women players’ gender shifts depending on the context of the gameplay experience. Additionally, it will become apparent how women perform their gender in the context of the battle game interactions. For example, within the MMO RPG environment, the combination of playing characters classes reflecting traditional gender roles and joining a boyfriend in gameplay, gender is performed in a “heterosexual social context [where] others assist in creating a coherent gender performance that can be understood according to normative values” (Eklund, 2011, p. 329). As indicated previously, studies on gender and identity creation within RPGs tend to reflect traditional gender roles and stereotypes. In contrast, battle gaming environments, such as e-sports, reveal a spectrum of gender performances, as such, I intend to look at how women actively negotiate their gameplay experiences in these environments and what role gender plays in defining the experiences.

Other Masculine Cultures

Finally, this thesis looks at how women operate in other masculine environments. Historically there are a number of cultures that have been adverse to the entry and leadership of

women. In particular, the US military and armed forces faced considerable opposition to the integration of women. The symbolic “glass ceiling” is a metaphor for the abrupt limit on women’s career advancement in the corporate world (Klenke, 2011). In these particular instances, it is necessary to note how women advance and succeed in their careers.

In brief, initially there was considerable negative reaction to the integration of women in the military. The early days of integration saw from some a fear of feminization (Titunik, 2000), vocal opposition, and an assumption of women’s lack of capability (McCone & Scott, 2009). The military, and more broadly war, is seen as a masculine pursuit and exclusive of women, yet war itself is not inherently adversarial toward women (Titunik, 2000). In order to acclimate and being accepted in the military, McCone and Scott note “female cadets describe instances of discrimination but fail to see or define them as such, preferring instead to reinterpret them as hardships and obstacles” (2009, p. 235). Here, the young women reframe the situations as obstacles rather than seeing themselves as victims of discrimination. In fact, some women take on a more masculine stance which can have negative repercussions, such as being thought of as “inauthentic” or “ineffective.” Trying to conform to military norms, the authors continue that other female cadets intentionally try not to draw an attention to themselves (McCone & Scott, 2009, p. 236). While McCone and Scott address young women entering as cadets into the military environment, Guy (2008) examines older women negotiating military careers. In Guy’s article about women engineers in the military, the emphasis is place on overcoming the struggles between career and family, and crucial supportive partnerships between husband and wife (Guy, 2008). Essentially, Titunik explains, “women have fit extraordinarily well into the military culture and have quite successfully internalized its norms” (2000, p. 247).

More and more women are able to crack the “glass ceiling,” but what is it about these women that motivates them to do so? Zweigenhaft and Domhoff elaborate on the immense pressure women feel to assimilate into the masculine culture of the corporate world. Companies want to retain the homogenous environment and hire like-minded individuals, so there is considerable pressure to conform and reproduce the expected behavior. Similarly, taking part in the social behaviors and informal networking, such as playing golf, to build business relationships (1998). Stereotypes are persistent, and women in corporate environments struggle to overcome stereotypes, retain their femininity but also be seen as “one of the boys” (Klenke, 2011).

As stated above, previous research on gender and identity heavily focuses on avatar creation within RPGs and needs to expand to other multiplayer game types. The hostile, hypermasculine pockets of gaming culture beg for a vastly different gender performance than RPGs. By looking at the various ways one’s gender performance can shift according to social contexts and how women are able to succeed in other masculine cultures, it helps to build an understanding of how women perform gender within battle game spaces. The following chapter lays out the method for exploring and understanding women’s gameplay experiences in battle games.

Chapter 3: Method

This thesis seeks to grasp an understanding of women's experiences in battle games. The purpose was to examine and understand the meaning of women's lived experiences within competitive online video game environments. Using a feminist theory framework to explore the hardcore gaming community, interviews provide a vast amount of information surrounding women's lived gaming experiences. Feminist standpoint epistemology calls for examining women's concrete experiences through their actions and knowledge of the world around them (Brooks, 2007). Moreover, a feminist perspective examines a "double consciousness" (Brooks, 2007), where women are fully aware of their position in the masculine nature of game culture and their relationship with male gamers. Feminist standpoint epistemology allows this study to focus on the unique experiences of women specifically surrounding hardcore gaming environments. As such, interviews allow for an honest look into participants' general experiences with gaming, hostility, and gender. Supplementing the interviews with journaling, the participants used the journals to reflect on their gaming experiences after our initial conversation. In addition, shorter follow-up interviews were used to discuss events and interpretations of the journaling process.

Sample

To explore women's gaming experiences, this study sought out women who are familiar and competent with the gameplay mechanics of battle games and actively participate in the online multiplayer game modes. The focus of this study is to examine player interaction with game culture, particularly experiences derived from the intersection of online multiplayer game modes and player gender. Therefore, it is necessary to seek out women who actively participate in online multiplayer game modes because multiplayer game modes are where hostile gaming

environments may develop. To do this, a short survey was used to identify qualified individuals. Sixty people completed the survey and twenty-two women were asked to participate further in the study. A total of sixteen women participated in the study, thirteen of whom completed journaling, and twelve participated in a follow-up interview. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym for themselves, those who did not respond were assigned a pseudonym.

Table 1

Participants, ages, and time spent playing relevant games.

| Participant | Age | Games | Platform(s) | Minutes/week Spent Playing*** |
|--------------------|------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Allison | 21 | CS:GO*; L4D*; TF2*; Halo* | PC**, Xbox 360 | 660 |
| Amy | 25 | LOL*; Street Fighter; Guilty Gear | PC, Arcade, consoles | 630 |
| Annie | 28 | LOL; TF2; L4D; | PC**, Xbox 360 | 800+ |
| Cass | 19 | LOL; Smite; | PC | 3,000-4,000 |
| Cat | 40 | COD*; Halo | Xbox 360 | 1,500 |
| Charlotte | 25 | LOL; Halo, TF2 | PC**, Xbox 360 | 3540 |
| Emily | 35 | L4D; Halo | PC**, Xbox 360 | 360+ |
| Gwen | 32 | COD | PS4*, PS3, Xbox 360 | 1,700 |
| Jean | 25 | DOTA2* | PC | 600+ |
| Jess | 19 | TF2; CS:GO; L4D | PC | 1,200-2,000 |
| Jo | 25 | TF2; Halo | PC**, Xbox 360 | 1,200 |
| Laquita | 28 | LOL; CS: Source*; Battlefield* | PC**, PS3 | 2,400 |
| Nora | 23 | COD; Battlefield; CS:GO | PS4, PC | 300+ |
| Rain | 24 | LOL; COD; Battlefield; DOTA2; TF2 | PC**, Xbox 360 | 2,800 |
| Sis | 24 | L4D; TF2; CS:GO; DOTA2; | PC | 2,400 |
| Zoey | 22 | L4D; LOL; Battlefield; CS:GO | PC | 1,500 |

Note. *CS:GO: Counter-Strike: Global Offensive; L4D: Left 4 Dead series; TF2: Team Fortress 2; Halo series; LOL: League of Legends; COD: Call of Duty series; DOTA2: Defense of the Ancients 2; Counter-Strike: Source; Battlefield series; PS: PlayStation.

**Preferred gaming platform.

***Self-reported estimate of minutes spent playing battle games each week.

Participants were selected based on the types of games they play, the amount of time they spent playing competitive multiplayer video games each week, and how often they play these games online with strangers. Participants spend roughly between five and seventy hours a week

playing competitive multiplayer video games with the average being just under twenty-seven hours a week. The most popular games among participants relevant to this study are League of Legends (n= 7), Team Fortress 2 (n= 6), the Left 4 Dead series (n= 6), Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (n= 5), and the Call of Duty series (n= 4), although nearly all expressed interest in playing a variety of video games. Participants reported playing with strangers or using the in-game random matchmaking option on a frequent basis; for most participants nearly every match was played through random matchmaking.

Individuals' age and occupation also factored into selection in order to offer a more diverse range of experiences and perspectives. Ages ranged from 19 to 40 with the majority being in their 20s. Occupations were used to avoid only capturing experiences from college-aged women. Participants' occupations included an independent contractor, a preschool teacher, an attorney, a waitress, graduate and undergraduate students, among others. Race or ethnicity was not taken into account and as a result most participants were Caucasian or Asian. Future research would benefit by specifically exploring the gaming experiences of a more racially and ethnically diverse sample.

Popular games. League of Legends (<http://na.leagueoflegends.com/>) is a fantasy combat, top-down battle arena, computer game. Players may choose from a large variety of characters, each with a unique ability set. Text chat is the only means of in-game communication and team matches can consist up to 10 players. Team Fortress 2 (<http://www.teamfortress.com/>) is a first-person shooter, where players may choose from a selection of class types, such as pyro, medic, scout, or soldier. It is available as a computer game, on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, and in-game voice chat is available on the various platforms. Team games generally have up to 24 players, depending on the platform. Left 4 Dead (<http://www.l4d.com/blog/>) is a zombie themed

first-person shooter for the computer and Xbox 360. Players can choose one of four characters to play the different game modes and can communicate through in-game voice chat. Competitive versus modes allow for 8 players. Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (<http://blog.counter-strike.net/>) is a tactical combat first-person shooter on the computer, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360, where up to ten players compete on either the terrorist or counter-terrorist team. Players are able to communicate via in-game voice chat. Call of Duty (<http://www.callofduty.com/>) is a long running, war combat-based series with third-person and first-person shooters generally consisting of twelve to eighteen players, depending on the game mode. It is currently available for Windows computers, Xbox 360, Xbox One, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, and Wii U with in-game voice chat capabilities.

Recruitment. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling were used to reach out to potential participants. Following approved Institutional Review Board procedures, initial efforts to recruit participants involved attempting to solicit individuals through blogs, forums, and social media. Participants were recruited through female gaming groups on reddit.com and Facebook.com, but not before pursuing other, more diverse online gaming communities. Soliciting blog authors and forum moderators for large gaming related websites proved unsuccessful. Blog authors were contacted through email with an explanation of the research study and a request to notify potential participants through the blog, but no response was received. Posting on gaming forums such as Destructoid.com and Co-optimus.com resulted in very little interest from readers. Larger forums, such as the Activision forums for Call of Duty, offered no response to requests to post a recruitment notice. Posting a recruitment notice on such forums resulted in the post and account being deleted.

Turing to reddit.com's subforum /r/GirlGamers resulted in a significant amount of feedback from which eleven participants were selected. Since several of the reddit participants mentioned avoiding games like Call of Duty, and the current lack of Call of Duty and overall console players in the study, social media recruitment efforts focused on female oriented gaming groups on Facebook, with one specifically catering to Call of Duty players. This also resulted in a significant number of potential participants from which three were selected. The final two participants were recruited through snowball sampling.

In addition, it became clear that the language used to recruit participants was inadvertently deterring some players from applying. By describing the games as hardcore, some individuals misconstrued the game description as applying to players as well, thus deterring those who do not identify as "hardcore" gamers. As a result, changes were made to the recruitment materials to better describe the games as competitive and team based rather than hardcore. All changes to recruitment materials were approved by the Institutional Review Board prior to implementation. Lastly, to provide potential participants with a thorough understanding of the study, I created a blog explaining the study, the desired participants, and the full consent form (Appendix A).

In exchange for their time and contributions, participants were offered an Amazon gift card in graduated amounts. For participating only in the initial in-depth interview participants received a \$10 email gift card. For taking part in both the initial interview and journaling participants received a \$15 email gift card. And those who completed the study received a \$25 email gift card.

Time frame. Recruitment and data collection took place between November 2013 and March 2014. The five month span allowed for successful recruitment of sixteen participants.

Initial interviews took place between late December and the end of February while the final participants concluded journaling and follow-up interviews in early March. Participants were asked to journal their gaming experiences for two weeks, however actual journaling time varied depending on the amount of time the participant could dedicate to the task. Some journals ran shorter than two weeks while several ran longer.

Data Collection

Since interviews are a key way of understanding individual experiences with a phenomenon, the primary source of the data collection was through semi-structured, in-depth, qualitative interviews with women video game players. Schwandt describes interviews “as a means of gaining direct access to an interviewee’s experience” (2007, p.162). He goes on to write, “The interviewer aims to ask the right questions so as to elicit responses in the form of authentic feelings and meanings of the interviewee” (2007, p. 162). Similarly, Brennen states qualitative interviewing, “strives to understand the meanings of information, opinions, and interests in each respondent's life.” Furthermore, it explores respondent’s feelings, emotions, experiences, and values” in a way quantitative interviewing cannot (2013, p.28). Essentially, qualitative interviews allow the researcher to explore and understand the meaning of a participant’s experiences and the significance those experiences hold for the participant.

Brennen stresses that the researcher must remain open and flexible to the unexpected turns interviews tend to take (2013). This means listening well and following up with meaningful questions to elicit better responses. Consequently, the relationship between the researcher and interviewee is key. Since the power dynamic between researcher and interviewee can create asymmetry and result in an uncomfortable interview, Creswell suggests collaborating in the discussion (2013).

To explore women's motivations and identity in gaming, several other studies have conducted interviews. Schott interviews women and girls to examine their motivations for playing video games and their relationship to game culture (2000). Taylor uses interviews to explore women's motivations for playing MMORPGs (2003). Royse et al. use interviews to determine why women choose to play or not play video games (2007). Finally, Shaw (2012) explores gamer self-identification through interviews with individuals who defy the gamer stereotype. Overall, interviews are useful in gathering data rich with meaning directly from individual players.

In order to conduct a semi-structured interview, several initial questions were posed to get a sense of the participant's overall experience with competitive multiplayer online games. The first section establishes how the participant prefers to play video games, such as platform and game preference, who she prefers to play with and against, preferred match type or game mode, and what draws her to playing these games. Second, the interview delves more deeply into her overall battle game experience, exploring the relationship between her, her gender, and other players. Finally, the initial interview addresses her experience with gaming culture and her thoughts on the "girl gamer" stereotype.

Creswell discusses the challenges in qualitative interviewing, which tend to fall on unexpected participant behavior, the researcher's ability to phrase questions and elicit responses, and technical issues with equipment (2013). The quality of the interview relies on the researcher's ability to ask questions and negotiate responses while staying responsive to sensitive issues (Creswell, 2013). Technical and transcription issues may arise that are seemingly unavoidable, but can be thwarted with proper preparation and testing of equipment prior to the interview taking place. Even so, the audio for two interviews was lost due to technical issues.

However, detailed field notes were helpful in rectifying some of that lost data and both participants completed journals and follow-up interviews.

Skype was used to interview fifteen participants since each were located in various regions throughout the United States, Canada, and Belgium. Despite geographical differences, all participants are fluent English speakers and writers. The final participant lived locally and was interviewed in-person. All interviews were recorded on the computer, using the recording software Camtasia. Initial interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and an hour and twenty-five minutes. Follow-up interviews lasted between thirty minutes and an hour.

Field notes were crucial to finding connections between participants' experiences, as well as help in the process of transcribing interviews. Field notes were taken throughout the interviewing process, on the journal entries, and during the transcription process to accurately depict and record women's experiences. These notes served as a reference point between interviews, noting key points, trends, potential quotes, and links between participants' experiences.

To thoroughly examine women's experiences in multiplayer gaming environments, participants were asked to keep a gaming journal for two weeks immediately after the interview. The journal prompts can be found as part of the recruitment blog in Appendix A. The gaming journals are used to supplement the interviews and gain a new perspective on women's experiences as they happen. Additionally, the main interview was conducted prior to journaling because interviews expectedly revealed participants' initial perceptions and experiences with battle games. According to Creswell, journaling is often used and works well to supplement interview data (2013). The data from the journals was compared and contrasted to the initial interview data. Lastly, a short follow-up interview was conducted to discuss journal content and

address any changes and new experiences. Twelve of the thirteen participants who completed journals also completed follow-up interviews.

The journal was used to record and collect recent gameplay experiences and immediate reactions. It was also a way for participants to reflect on the conversation during the initial interview within the context of battle games. The participants were asked to record who they played with and against, any conversations or dialogue that took place, their gameplay experiences, and any actions or moments that stood out to them. Additionally, women were given the option to change up from their gameplay habits and record the new experience as journal entries. Changing gameplay habits may involve simply using a microphone to communicate with teammates when she otherwise would not. However, using a microphone comes with the risk of harassment and discrimination, the likes of which can be seen on the Fat, Ugly or Slutty blog. Questions for the follow-up interview were determined by the journal content. The questions addressed any differences or similarities between the first interview and the journal, as well as inquired about certain events and experiences that occurred while journaling. Journal data is incorporated throughout the results chapters. Follow-up interview questions were based on journal entries and so references to that data may include quotes and paraphrasing from the journal, the follow-up interview, or both.

Data Analysis

Throughout the data collection process, data was analyzed using Dedoose. After an interview was transcribed, it was entered into Dedoose and coded for major themes and useful quotes. Journal entries were also be input into Dedoose for analysis. Coding and analysis took place throughout the data collection process so that major themes stay fresh, minor themes are easier to identify, and time was used more efficiently.

Several major themes were initially coded: personal experiences, navigating the space, negotiating the space, gender performances, and gender fluctuation. Participants' gaming experiences were noted to gain an overall grasp of some of the significant gaming experiences these women faced in competitive online multiplayer environments. While being a target of harassment is absolutely unpleasant, it is not the same as being targeted because of one's gender. It is also important to note how each woman navigates these online spaces, such as communicating with others or participating in the game, in particular how she responds to harassment in hostile gaming environments.

To further explore the role of gender in women's multiplayer online video game participation, it is important to examine how women use gender, in part, to determine their video game experiences. Gender performance includes what these women do and how they present themselves within gaming environments, particularly whether or not they decide to disclose their gender. Gender fluctuation refers to how gender performances change depending on the circumstances, such as moments that result from other gamers' actions towards the participant because of her gender. This can include praise, disbelief, discrimination, harassment, or a myriad of other actions that result from other gamers being aware of the woman's presence in the game, as well as the salience of self-efficacy in these situations.

After the first round of coding was complete, a second round took place to identify specific topics the women brought up, such as instances relating to skill, stereotyping, invisibility, and disclosing gender. This allowed for a more refined analysis of participants' data. Through the second round of coding new themes emerged, leading to a better understanding of women's gaming experiences.

Researcher role. With a passion for video games and a competitive edge, I wish to impress that I am more than just a researcher to the participants. Shared experiences or common interests in video games helped put the participant at ease and under the impression that I am approaching them as a peer and fellow gamer rather than solely as a researcher. While I enjoy playing battle games, I am aware that not all other women have the same experiences in hardcore gaming that I do. Semi-structured interviews removed the limits or restraints I may unintentionally impose on pre-determined questions and leaves room to explore those experiences and attitudes I have not encountered.

Chapter 4: Findings - Gender and Gaming

This research study explores women's experiences within battle game contexts. In particular, the following chapters illustrate how women's gender performances shift depending on the contexts within multiplayer interactions and what roles their gender plays in defining those experiences. Drawing on Goffman's work, Foss, Domenico, and Foss (2013) explicate setting, audience, and performer in terms of gender performance. In this study, the majority of interactions take place within an online gaming setting. Although the settings for specific games vary, usernames, text and voice communication, and player interactions are common threads throughout. Additionally, under the context of the gaming community, battle game settings lead to assumptions about who participates in these spaces and what their characteristics are. As such, the perceived audience, those who are assumed to most likely be participating in these spaces, reflects the male gamer stereotype of young, heterosexual, cisgender, and (predominantly) white. Thus a performer in these settings enacts a unique gender performance based on, "at least in part, a response to the immediate context of the other people present in a setting" (Foss, Domenico, & Foss, 2013, p. 175), meaning female video game players understand and interpret the context of the setting and audience in order to inform the construction of their gender performance and navigate gaming spaces.

Women's gender disclosure. This is a general overview of how the participants perceive their own gender disclosure. These women's accounts place them into one of three categories: first is usually being open and making no attempts in hiding their gender; second is being moderately open about gender, which largely depends on individual circumstances; third is nearly always hiding one's gender, except within certain situations. Since the following descriptions are self-reported, they are limited to the participant's own perception of how she

operates in familiar gaming spaces. Thus, the descriptions offer biased perspectives of gender performances, and cannot be fully and accurately documented without observational data.

Throughout the data, no participant claims to always disclose her gender. Instead, even those who frequently play in ways that reveal her gender, such as through voice chat, still mention having limits. Cat and Gwen, both console-based Call of Duty players, occasionally resort to closed party chats with friends when they want to avoid negative attention. Allison, a PC and Counter-Strike player, who is also generally open about her gender on voice chat, is sometimes discouraged when she plays poorly. To prevent herself from reinforcing the “girl gamer” stereotype, explained in chapter five, Allison will occasionally hide her gender by refraining from voice communication. Amy, on the other hand, enjoys playing fighting games that take place in-person at friends’ houses, arcades, and tournaments. She does not conceal her gender in these situations. However, in playing League of Legends, Amy, like several others, does not reveal her gender. As stated previously, League of Legends is the only PC game without a built-in voice communication feature, which means it is not necessary for players to reveal their gender through their voice.

Zoey, Charlotte, Laquita, and Rain, all League of Legends players, among other games, exhibit the most explicit variance in gender performances, usually depending on the game and situation. In particular, these women mention they are generally open about their gender in gaming spaces, but will not reveal their gender unless the situation necessitates it, such as using voice chat or being introduced to a new person. For Zoey, Charlotte, and Rain, hiding means withholding from voice communication if there is a “weird vibe” or the space appears unwelcoming and unsafe. Laquita’s gender performances, however, are somewhat contradictory to her perception. Although she says she is generally open about her gender in League of

Legends, the nature of League of Legends does not require her to reveal her gender unless she is asked, which still constructs a male gender performance. Similarly, Laquita hides her gender in other games, specifically by using closed voice communication systems with her friends, such as Skype. Thus, she seems to hide her gender just as most other participants do.

Annie, Jess, Nora, Emily, Jean, Jo, Sis, and Cass mention actively trying to hide their gender in games, except within specific situations. As explained later, friends play a significant role in these women's gender performances. Jo, Jean, Cass, Annie, Sis, and Nora explain they are unwilling to participate in voice communication without a friend's presence, and in some cases, will only use closed third-party systems with friends, such as Skype or TeamSpeak. Emily and Cat comment about intentionally indicating their gender through other means. Although Cat is open about her gender and Emily hides, both use their profile to construct a subtle female gender performance through the use of avatars and written descriptions.

Most participants indicate avoiding negative attention as the reason for concealing one's gender, which is largely related to using voice communication. The amount of time spent playing each week does not seem to correlate with whether or not these women decide to disclose gender. Those who frequently conceal their gender except when playing with friends range from playing between five and sixty-seven hours a week. Those who appear more likely to disclose gender play between eleven and sixty hours a week. The following findings elaborate on these women's experiences with gender in gaming spaces, the limitations of gender performances in gaming spaces, the reactions to female gender performances, and the construction of gender through usernames and voice communication.

Participants' Context of Gaming Spaces

Over and over, the concept of “normal” resonates throughout interviews and journals, indicating points of tension female players must work around. The hostile online gaming environments have become so commonplace that, although participants see them as unfortunate, the hostility is expected. In Jean’s perspective, racist slurs and misogyny are “normalized,” which further entrenches a hostile community from ever recuperating. Others point out transphobic and anti-Semitic attitudes are pervasive and infuriating. Even more so, the overall trolling seems inescapable, leading players to expect such behavior and develop methods to work around it and create a pleasurable gaming experience. Examples of trolling, harassment, and methods of navigating gaming spaces are incorporated throughout the chapters four and five.

Still, the masculinity of gaming spaces offers additional challenges. As stated in the literature review, the male gamer stereotype and masculine nature of the gaming community emphasize the ubiquity of male as the norm, as in unless proven otherwise players are assumed to be male. The perception of a homogeneous audience in gaming culture is strong, resulting in some women criticizing others’ lack of awareness toward the diversity of video game players. The perceived homogeneity of an audience influences one’s gender performance and leads them to construct gender performances according to norms, expectations, and one’s own intentions (Foss, Domenico, & Foss, 2013).

Consequently, the assumption that players are male not only makes women in these spaces largely invisible, it also makes them targets to gender-specific harassment. Jean points out that it is normal for many female players to go “under the radar;” intentionally or not, under the assumption of being a male player. As such, operating under an assumed male identity, and thus being invisible, becomes normalized. Although not all women intentionally guise their gender,

Zoey mentions that women learn to expect to be treated differently when they are open about their gender. Similarly, trolls are unavoidable, Sis explains, but hiding one's gender may make her less of a target. Likewise, Cass mentions that unless someone stands out as hyperfeminine, such as through voice or a feminine username, they're seen as "normal," meaning male.

In contrast, being openly female is novel. Where masculinity and being male is seen as the norm in competitive online multiplayer gaming spaces, femininity and being female stands in stark contrast. In fact, participants express their feelings towards being alienated from the norm. Being a girl on the internet, Emily explains "Eh everyone hates you. Like you're not allowed to do anything and you're either, you know, what is it, fat, ugly, or slutty, so. Like as long as you're, but like if you're anonymous you're read as male and then it's okay, and then you're just everyone else" (Emily, interview). Echoing Emily's sentiment, Allison says disclosing her gender in a game is something for male gamers to react to, rather than expect or take for granted. Standing apart from the norm is not always easy. Even when another player admits to being female, Cass says she is skeptical of such admissions: "But it doesn't sound serious, it just sounds like they're making fun of the fact that like a woman's on the internet. That's how it feels to me. Like they're trying to just, I don't know, make fun of it like that or get some kind of fake attention or joke out of it" (Cass, interview). Participants' understanding and experience with gaming communities and others' expectations for a player's identity helps inform their agency in their gender performances. Players learn how to navigate gaming spaces based on prior social interactions, and so they construct appropriate performances based on how they desire to interact within the context at that moment. Gender fluctuates both from the performer's and audiences' perspective, through which female players have adapted to enact varying gender performances.

Navigating Within the Power Dynamics

Women in this study are acutely aware of their position within the gaming community and the ways in which they navigate gaming spaces illustrates common points of tension. Within gaming community contexts, Foss, Domenico, and Foss's (2013) concept of power dynamics is extremely relevant and evident throughout participants' experiences. The authors explain, "Power is demonstrated through performances of behavior, and those who have power in an interaction often convey their position through their actions" (Foss, Domenico, & Foss, 2013, p. 174). In gaming communities, this means enacting certain gender performances, such as being openly female, can incite undesired responses. As such, women's decisions and actions within gaming spaces take into account the ramifications of being female in that space. While being female does not guarantee being targeted for abuse, fear of such interactions translates into calculated maneuvers to avoid drawing attention to any deviance from the male gamer stereotype, which will be addressed in chapter five.

Regardless whether one's gender is either disclosed or withheld, the power dynamics are first evident through the language used by players. Exclamations like, "Well done, boys," (Jean, journal); "You mad, bro?" (Charlotte, journal); or "Okay guys, and girl, let's go this way," (Allison, journal) are a small sample of how male generic terms reinforce the male assumption. While a comment like "Well done, boys," is not necessarily meant to be insulting, it does reflect an ignorance towards the diversity of the community, especially when a woman in that situation feels she cannot be acknowledged as an individual human being. Jean writes, "(At times like those there is a small little part of me that wants to shout I'M NOT A BOY but thankfully it is tied up and held down by my common sense)" (Jean, journal). Male generic terms fail to include or even acknowledge a female presence, erasing them in favor of a male default (Wood, 2011).

In Allison's quote, although she is being acknowledged, the tone of the statement matters greatly. Such a statement could either truly include her as part of the team, or it could alienate her by emphasizing her difference and reinforcing her exclusion.

Similarly, the use of pronouns can elicit very different emotions from participants. Amy, Annie, and Cass specifically ask others not to reveal her gender in games. Even pronouns create an opening to be exploited. In frustration Cass says, "Just like, even if my boyfriend were to out, like oh... she. Or she, if he uses 'she' or 'her' or any kind of those uh pronouns and people catch onto that, they'll start making like sexual jokes or whatnot about me. And they don't even know me" (Cass, interview). Essentially, these women are asking others to participate in their gender performance by helping them perform a more masculine identity. In contrast, being acknowledged as female with no negative attention can have much more positive outcomes. When another player referred to Allison as "she" and complimented her gameplay, she writes, "I liked that. It was probably meant as nothing, but to me I heard "she", acknowledging I was indeed female, and a positive note towards me with constructive criticism for the rest of the team. It really felt inclusive" (Allison, journal). Certainly, supporting one's gender performance makes a space feel more inclusive. Yet, since the comment was also in relation to her skill, there are conditional clauses for this scenario, which will be discussed later.

What it means to disclose gender. Disclosing gender through a performance can also be met with gender-based language indicative of the power dynamic. In these cases, language is used to provoke offense and demean the subject (Foss, Domenico, & Foss, 2013). A crucial point of tension is the decision whether or not to reveal one's gender to strangers in a gaming space. Participants recounted numerous experiences relating to disclosing their gender in online games.

In essence, revealing one's gender frequently, though not always, forms the crux in which players' experiences are situated. During her first interview, Zoey captures it best,

“Um, if it so happens that um, I revealed my gender for this reason or another, um, there's bound to be some comment. Like, er, people will just never let it go. And I'm not saying I'm going to be insulted 100% of the time, cause that wouldn't be true. Um, but there's always people who always notice and they will always, I don't know, make it out to be more important than it actually is. Like there will be people who, who will start insulting instantly if, especially if I'm doing well” (Zoey, interview).

These women relayed a range of experiences and different interpretations about the events.

However, reactions to initially disclosing gender are focused in several key veins. When others learn of her gender, Annie explains, “It runs a gamut. Uh some people are just totally cool with it. They'll just be like ‘Oh, I didn't realize you're a girl,’ or whatever and they move on.” She continues that others are suspicious, “I know it sounds kind of weird but it's still like ‘Oh it's a girl?’ Like incredulous, I want to say. And then you know other people react like they've won you know the flippin' lottery. I, I say ‘people,’ it it's guys (laughs)” (Annie, interview). Another participant summarizes,

There's always gotta be somebody who says, you know, sandwich or kitchen, even if they're trying to be ironic, you know, you still, still gonna hear it from somebody. There's ‘Tits or get the fuck out,’ ‘Are you 14?’ you know, ‘How did you get into this? Is your boyfriend, get you into this?’ or ‘I bet you're just a guy trying to get attention and stuff’ (laughs). It's pretty standard (Jean, interview).

Such reactions point to the novelty of women in these gaming environments. Other players are delegitimizing their identity by inferring a woman's voice sounds like a child, by disbelieving their true identity as a woman, and by placing her value against that of a "boyfriend." Vulgar reactions seemed to be the most memorable, although the incantations do certainly vary. "So a guy would be like, 'Clutch this and I'll give you my dick.' And I just um like if I messed up or something he'll be like, 'Ah whatever. You, I bet you're fat and ugly anyway'" (Allison, interview). Similarly, erasing even the possible presence of women, men are insulted using female characteristics, like, "You all must have a bunch of vaginas" (Cass, journal).

Lastly, another source of special treatment and frustration for women is a phenomenon called "white knighting," "where they think that they can impress you by just keeping you alive or making sure you have more of a fun time without being too challenged" (Jo, interview). Explained later, white knighting is an underhanded means of rejecting a woman's gender performance.

Reactions to gender performances. *Tolerance.* Gender performances that do not echo the mainstream, as in those that fall outside of the audiences' expectations, can be seen as inappropriate or unwelcome. Another means of exerting power is by responding with either tolerance or rejection of these performances (Foss, Domenico, & Foss, 2013). Rain writes that after declaring her gender through text chat in several game matches, she got little reaction from other players. Responses she did incur tended towards saying nothing more than "who cares?" Rain, as well as Laquita, Sis, and others, take these reactions to mean her gender carries no weight in these circumstances; that gender "doesn't matter." In fact, she is pleased her gender did not elicit negative or derogatory responses.

Although the reaction may seem supportive initially, a deeper inspection suggests others are at best being tolerant of her gender performance. The phrase “who cares” is dismissive and attempts to reject having to acknowledge her gender. When others choose not to acknowledge a gender performance, Foss, Domenico, and Foss (2013) explain they are showing their rejection or denial of the performance. In a battle game scenario, as stated before, withholding one’s gender means allowing others to assume that player is male. Furthermore, by exhibiting a dismissive attitude towards an unexpected gender performance, others construct their preference and expectation for a male identity.

Rejection through denial. Outright rejection is an unfortunately common response that takes many forms. When Laquita tells how exceptional success in a match led to others denying her true gender, she reveals they are telling her that her gender performance is not acceptable within the confines of the gaming communities’ expectations. Indeed, to be performing as female and exhibiting exceptional gameplay skill is essentially violating audiences’ expectations of who is a (skilled) player. After doing exceptionally well in a League of Legends match, Laquita desired to see others’ reactions when she revealed her gender. So, she announced her gender through the text chat, prompting reactions such as, “No you’re not. There’s no way.” In response, her male friend confirmed her gender identity. She mentions, “And yeah, I think most guys just don’t, you know, believe that girls can be as just as good (laughs), or better than them, so. I was kind of, it was just kind of funny to see the reaction, like complete denial” (Laquita, follow-up). In this case, instead of cheating accusations, Laquita meets utter disbelief. “There’s no way” a girl could perform that well in a competitive video game. Additionally, her comments suggest she was expecting such a reaction; she presents an awareness of the girl gamer stereotype and an understanding of how doubly novel her existence as a skilled female player is. Congruent with

previous research on how male counterparts mediate females' access to games and technology (Schott & Horrel, 2000; Yee, 2008; Taylor, 2008), Laquita's male friend felt compelled to confirm her gender to those remained skeptical about her identity and skill.

Even when scores may not be exceptional, defying the "girl gamer" stereotype through skill still brings denial of gender performances. Lack of skill is deeply affixed to the girl gamer stereotype and a few ways it manifests is through blatant comments, disbelief of skill, and not being taken seriously. With a more feminine leaning username, Jo mentions her username will trigger other players to draw on the girl gamer stereotype. She says, "They'll assume that I haven't spent much time in the game, that I don't have the skills, that I don't practice, and I never really played games throughout my entire life or something." Jo continues saying that the assumption she lacks skill means, "I should be an easy kill, I should be someone who can just be ignored, or that I'm just not worth their time to play against in the game." Meanwhile, those on her team views her as a liability (Jo, interview). Later on during her follow-up interview, she expresses her disdain for an experience that occurred while journaling. In this instance, she experienced invalidation of her suggestions and a torrent of abuse after revealing her gender. Jo emphasizes,

I shouldn't have to prove myself and it frustrates me that I feel that way simply because they don't value my opinions or value my strategies when I'm clearly showing that I'm capable. And more often than not, more capable than the people who are belittling me. It, to try and have to prove myself to those people, those types of people who are belittling me. I don't know why I always feel that way, but it always makes me feel frustrated, upset, and a bit less likely to want to play the game (Jo, follow-up).

Other players reject Jo's gender performance by demeaning and delegitimizing her as a player. In these situations, however, she has the opportunity to enact her agency and choose how to construct her gender performance according to both group expectations and her personal desires. Especially when playing on familiar servers, Jo generally seems confident in her performance and unwilling to compromise it for the sake of group expectations, even though repeated experiences lessen her resolve.

In a similar vein, Gwen, who frequently uses voice communication, feels the majority of her interactions are quite negative. She explains,

And I've never, it's very rare that I've ever heard a guy say "oh good game" to me because I'm a female. I'm just 'a hacking bitch.' I'm just some stupid bitch making my boyfriend play with me while I talk and I should be in the kitchen making him a fucking sandwich. It's, everything is negative, everything derogatory. And it's difficult to play like that, to game like that (Gwen, interview).

The stress and frustrations of enduring harassment takes a toll. Both Jo and Gwen describe how gendered attacks based on their supposed lack of skill eat away at their resolve. Jo connects how her presumed lack of skill makes her an unworthy opponent, which thereby lessens her value to her team because she presumably won't contribute to achieving the goal. Likewise, Gwen is accused of "hacking" (using an outside modification to cheat and do well at the game) and having her boyfriend play for her. These accusations blatantly deny her skill based on her gender. To accuse her of hacking and playing through her boyfriend infers she cannot possibly have the skill to do as well as she's doing, and must resort to cheating or using a "real" gamer to play. Understandably these repeated experiences can deteriorate one's desire to play a video

game. Here, female gender performances are rejected first, for their presence in the gaming space, then, through outright denial of any association between skill and a feminine gender performance, indicating such performances are not part of the expectations of that setting (Foss, Domenico, & Foss, 2013).

Underhanded rejection. As mentioned earlier, white knighting is a means of indirectly rejecting a female's gender performance. Nora elaborates that players will treat women better than they would if they considered her a normal player, again glamorizing a woman's presence (Taylor, 2008) while emphasizing her exclusion (Taylor, 2012). The frustration with white knighting stems from the underlying assumptions that women are unskilled at games, are in need of help or protection, or require special treatment. Instead of direct insults or crude jokes, on the rare occasion, these women run into certain players who put forth a somewhat friendlier guise. The guys "who always stick up for you for no reason other than because you're a girl. They're like 'Oh you should not be making fun of this girl even though she's terrible at this game because she's a female,' and you know," (Sis, follow-up). Although the seemingly well-intentioned player offers help or protection to female players, underlying the motives is the assumption that female players are *in need* of help or protection. "Um I've been quote unquote white knighted a little bit. Where people would unduly jump to my defense because I'm female, er. [I'll] just be like 'Stop, please. I can handle myself,'" asserts Jess (Jess, interview). Again, the power dynamics of the gaming community are evident through such responses. These actions not only further reinforce the notion that women are inherently unskilled at video games, but also insinuate that women deserve special attention.

Rejection through harassment. Every participant mentions encounters with harassment, most also recalling either explicitly or implicitly incidents of sexual harassment. "Whether it is

targeted at an individual or disseminated more widely through the culture, harassment is a rejection of a gender performance through ridicule or criticism by someone in power who seeks to enhance a self-perception of power” (Foss, Domenico, & Foss, 2013, p. 217). Gender-based harassment, in particular sexual harassment, stigmatizes and demeans the subject, further reinforcing the perception that women are anomalies in gaming culture (Taylor, 2012). Even when “kitchen” comments are meant to be satirical or ironic, they still call attention to the idea that women are out of place in gaming spaces.

Throughout the interviews and journal entries, women convey instances of harassment ranging from irritating jabs at “flirting” to full on assaults indicative of hypermasculine pockets. For instance, Jess mentions cat calls; Annie, “Are you a redhead?;” Emily is frustrated with “Oh it’s a girl, get rid of her” reactions; Jo recalls transphobic hate speech; other players would solicit Sis for pictures; whereas Charlotte was sent pictures by male Xbox 360 players. Several times, a participant explained how she never seemed to encounter negative reactions, only to relay a recent story a few minutes later. In fact, Cat, who doesn’t immediately construe unsolicited “flirting” as a negative experience, explained that during the course of her journaling she felt it was necessary to change her reaction to when she died in game. Habitually saying “fuck me” indeed elicited too many negative reactions, “Well um because when I would say it, guys would be like ‘Oh name the time and the place,’ or ‘anytime, anywhere’ type of responses. And you know it’s not what, it’s not the attention I want” (Cat, follow-up). There are numerous mundane and unique ways harassment manifests in battle games. Further examples of harassment are woven throughout the results chapters, exemplifying the many ways women are demeaned, stigmatized, discredited, made inferior, excluded, and rendered invisible in the gaming community.

Rejection through discrimination. Lastly and as indicated previously, women are treated differently from “regular” gamers. Relating back to the assumptions that women lack the skill to play video games and are out of place in the gaming community, these women also express agitation with the lack of equal treatment. With a nod to the “glass ceiling” (Klenke, 2011), Sis draws from her experience in professional gaming and expresses a challenge she faced while competing. Sis recalls the difficulty of trying to advance in competitive gaming, “Even if [a female player is] just as good as everyone else. It doesn’t matter. Like the guys still think that they’re way better than her. Um just just because she’s a girl. And then a lot of guys also have no intent on helping her become better cause they’re much more interested in like hitting on her” (Sis, follow-up). Even among her friends, Sis feels they will “let me off easy if I make a mistake,” explaining that her male friends fail to criticize her gameplay, yet openly criticize each other. She writes, “This week I played with a friend who is also female. She will criticize me if I make a mistake, and she might be one of the only friends who has done so ever” (Sis, journal).

Although Rain cites competitiveness between males as the cause, she infers that she is also not taken seriously, “And probably because, you know, I am a girl and they think that I’m not the best, but they don’t say it. Um they’d rather trash talk the other guys, cause they kind of maybe already feel that I’m going to do bad so they just kind of leave me alone” (Rain, follow-up).

Similarly, Amy recalls, after losing a fighting game match she waited patiently to play, she walks away and hears a comment like, “At least she wasn’t free.” Being “free” insinuates that the player is an easy, unchallenging, or unskilled opponent. The comment, along with being ignored while waiting for her turn, first shows the assumption that a female opponent would be

unskilled and therefore be a “free” win, and second, how women are not taken seriously as opponents.

In these examples, Sis, Rain and Amy express irritation with how other players choose to discriminate against them. They are denied constructive criticism to improve gameplay, preventing them from advancing as professional competitive players. Even in everyday games, they feel they are not taken seriously as teammates or opponents. At first she is denied access to the game, Amy is then delegitimized and dismissed as an opponent because of her gender, which discourages her from playing at all.

Navigating with Usernames and Communication

Even when women say they don’t intentionally conceal their gender, there are only a few ways to signify gender and thwart the gamer stereotype. In particular, usernames and in-game communication through text and voice are easy means of discerning gender, and thus are common points of tension. Regardless of intention, player gender is conveyed in several main ways, first through usernames and to a lesser extent avatars and profiles. Usernames, gamertags, screen names, and such each serve as an initial anchor point to player identity, allowing others to potentially discern snippets of personality or gender cues.

Usernames. Previous research has shown that many women navigate gaming spaces with a “closeted” gamer identity which can manifest as gender-neutral usernames and withdrawing from voice communication (Taylor, 2012). As Taylor (2012) explains, women in hypermasculine gaming spaces use gender-neutral usernames to hide their gender, and this can be seen with nearly every participant in this study. Being identified as female, even just the suggestion, can incite hostile reactions. At one time sporting a “girly” username, Jean recalls,

Jean: We were losing this one game, and this guy was like just jumped on that. He was like, 'You're Momo. You must be a girl! Is that guy, is that guy your boyfriend? He must be so embarrassed to be playing with you.' And shit like that. And it was terrible. It was a terrible game and then I changed my name (laughs).

Interviewer: So you changed your name because of that?

Jean: Yeah, er I, okay. So I mean, it's not like, it's not like I didn't know that that sort of thing happens. And I haven't had a feminine sounding name in many years because of that. But recently I was like, you know, why not? It's nice, I like the name. And then I uh, bore the consequences of that. And now I've changed it back and now nobody does that anymore (laughs) (Jean, interview).

Aware of the consequences, Emily addresses her desire for a personalized username and the gendered conundrum all at once, "Um but like I [created my username] partially because it's my favorite word, but like I knew for a fact that like I couldn't, or shouldn't, um you know, put anything that's like super girly because then people would automatically know and like make assumptions and be weird." When asked for her reasons she responds,

I don't know. I didn't want to like automatically be kicked out of matches or something for them being like, 'Oh it's a girl, get rid of her.' Um you know, and I just, and then you automatically read it as like, oh this person's probably weaker, and like you know, I don't want to play with her, or like we'll have to take care of her so she'll be like a detriment to the team. Like I do wish I could change my name but I still wouldn't pick something girly (Emily, interview).

Those who felt they have a more feminine leaning username, such as Jo, Charlotte, and Cat, also mentioned their usernames were not always interpreted correctly. Cat mentions that other players cannot discern her gender from her username, “They think it’s Tom Cat, which I like cause they think I’m a guy (laughs), don’t think anything of it. But um, yeah I don’t think they can. Which I, I like that. I don’t want like a girly username. I um like it just being that” (Cat, interview). Instead, others’ misinterpreting Cat’s username enforces an assumed male identity upon her. Even when feminine stereotypes indicate a player’s gender, it is still met with skepticism and invalidation in favor of male identities. Only Jo recalls being distinctly assumed female through her username, which can result in very mixed player reactions, including harassment, discrimination, and white knighting.

However, reactions can largely depend on the actual game. While Emily and Jean play games that have a heavy voice communication component, games like League of Legends only offer in-game text chat. “Um, I mean when they see my name I don’t think they really think anything other than it’s another person. I, I know typically uh people assume that you’re a guy unless you have a very like female name, or you announce it” (Charlotte, interview). As Charlotte mentions, even a username based off her feminine real life name is construed as at least gender neutral, resulting in fewer gender targeted reactions unless her gender is explicitly stated.

Gender performances and usernames. Navigating gender in gaming spaces can be a difficult and very deliberate act, especially in regard to avoiding possible hostility. Usernames can be the first indicator of gender, and several participants reported crafting names to avoid gender disclosure. While these women describe how usernames can, at times, be the only means

of determining another player's gender, usernames only indicate gender when they are unmistakably feminine. Zoey clarifies,

I like I use unisex nicknames and uh avatars. I don't do this on purpose but it happens. I mean it it's like that. So I can see the the result is that people assume that I'm male and they don't give me problems because of my gender. So that's like a safe thing to do (Zoey, interview).

In many ways, to stand out as female means presenting oneself as stereotypically feminine, a task many participants actively avoid. Since gaming culture is male dominant, it becomes assumed that other players are male. In order to stand apart from the male assumption, players must draw on traditional or stereotyped feminine aspects. For instance, unless a username contains feminine idioms such as XO's, "gurl" or other feminine gender signifiers, it is read as gender-neutral at best, which still infers a male identity because of gaming culture's masculine nature.

Underlying many of these conversations is the assumption of how women present themselves in game. While playing Counter-Strike competitively, Laquita says, "I, I did go under a male name. I don't know why. It's not like, I don't know if I felt like I was hiding, the, but you would definitely get harassed more if you had a female name in that game" (Laquita, interview). In her words, withholding one's gender means "you just play the game and that's it," ultimately blending in as a "normal" part of the audience rather than an exception to it. Despite not doing so herself, Laquita argues the only way to tell if another is player is female is to have a stereotypically feminine name. She says gender can be determined when "Um they have obviously a female name, um or you ask them. And then they're like "yeah I'm a girl." So you know, I guess you have to take it on face that they are. I don't know. But um yeah, or that. Yeah

just, just their names pretty much give it away usually” (Laquita, interview). Although citing personal preference, Allison relays the feminine idioms commonly associated with feminine names. “I’m not very big into like the XO’s sorta thing, or like the, you know, AIM screen names. Um, I would never put like ‘gurl’ like G-U-R-L in my name or something. I don’t, it’s just personal preference” (Allison, interview). In line with Cass’s previous statement at the beginning of this chapter, Laquita expresses a sense of skepticism towards the validity of another female player. Her feelings in conjunction with Allison’s statement on feminine names, points not only to the tropes used to identify women, but women’s overall invisibility in gaming spaces.

In-game communication. Emily and Nora articulate the importance of in-game communication. Battle games often require strategy and coordination in order to fluidly work as a team, which typically can be done through text or voice chat. However, as several participants point out, typing is not an efficient means of communication in the middle of a fight. Players instead turn to voice chat, which can offer a range of different experiences. Not uncommon is a complete denial of one’s female identity.

In line with Foss, Domenico, and Foss (2013) and the previous section on rejection through denial, the male gamer assumption is so prevalent that even when met with a feminine voice, players still deny women’s gender identity. A surprising number of participants reported at least some experience encountering others who jumped to the conclusion that the higher pitched voice belongs to young boy. “So um, obviously on Xbox, you know, it was inevitable sometimes. You know, you talk and they’ll be like, ‘Oh are you a little boy?’ I’m like, ‘No, I’m a chick. Please,’” explains Rain (Rain, interview). Likewise, in text chat it is even more difficult to discern gender. Laquita explains that when she uses words like “cute” others will first assume she is a gay male. “So when I make certain remarks they’ll, they’ll obviously be very

homophobic and be like ‘That’s gay.’ And I’m like, ‘Well I’m not a dude in real life, so. I don’t know what you want to say to that’” (Laquita, interview). In the same strain, certain verbal or written cues elicit assumptions that the player is a gay male before even considering a female identity. This is indicative of both the homophobia of gaming spaces and the unexpectedness of a female presence, which results in women either abstaining from voice communication altogether, or turning to third-party VOIP services to communicate exclusively with friends.

Gender performances and voice communication. Voice chat can change gaming experiences which causes many women to employ precautions, often meaning withholding from public voice chat altogether. Tired with undesired reactions, such as gendered insults or sexual advances, Sis explains, “I uh I just don’t use in-game [voice] chat. If I want to like talk to my teammates or communicate to someone who I don’t know in a pub game, then I’ll type to them and they’ll never know that I’m a girl” (Sis, interview). Despite claiming how necessary voice chat is, when asked why she doesn’t use voice communication Nora replies, “Cause I’m scared (laughs). Or it’s not, I’m not scared. I’m uncomfortable. I just feel uncomfortable um revealing myself.” Flirtatious reactions, sexual harassment, and white knights permeate the conversation, leaving Nora to conclude, “So if I’m just kind of quiet then maybe that won’t, maybe I can just play for once instead of answering messages” (Nora, follow-up). Refraining from voice communication offers women slightly more control over their in-game experiences.

An example of how gender can fluctuate from game to game and moment to moment, Emily struggles with succumbing to voice chat for the sake of playing the game, “I didn’t want to talk when I would play with people I didn’t know. But I would want to hear what they would say, cause like when people talk, or they see you don’t have a mic, they’ll like kick you [from the

match or lobby]” (Emily, interview). To avoid being removed from a match, Emily would occasionally risk participating in voice chat and only conveying tactical communication.

In Summary

This chapter addresses the first research question and elaborates on how women’s real world gender impacts their gaming experiences in competitive online multiplayer video games. In addition, navigating gaming spaces through the use of usernames and voice communication addresses research question two. Drawing from Foss, Domenico, and Foss’s book, *Gender Stories* (2013), this chapter illustrates the complex dynamics at work in constructing and defining women’s gaming experiences. Power dynamics within gaming spaces are endlessly reiterated through the actions, behaviors of all video game players. While language, discrimination, and harassment, position (heterosexual) male players as superior and denigrates female players, withholding one’s gender, using a gender-neutral username, and abstaining from voice communication constructs a gender performance that renders women invisible and reinforces masculine nature of gaming culture. Nevertheless, women greatly enjoy playing these games and exhibit agency through the ways they negotiate such gaming experiences. The following findings chapter articulates the ways in which women negotiate their gaming experiences through reframing situations and enacting gender performances.

Chapter 5: Findings - Agency in Gaming

The previous chapter delved into the ways these female video game players navigate competitive online multiplayer gaming spaces and how their gender plays a part in their experiences. Deeply rooted in a pervasive masculine assumption, online gaming communities can be very difficult for women to navigate. Normalized hostile behaviors result in women expecting to encounter not just trolling, but gender-based harassment when they choose to disclose their gender. Disclosing oneself as female often elicits reactions, albeit not always directly negative or hostile but generally unsolicited. To extrapolate on how women negotiate these experiences, their thoughts, reasoning, and reactions, this chapter will address the third research question; how do women video game players negotiate their gameplay experience in a typically hostile gaming environment?

Gender performances involve aspects at the individual, social, and cultural level, meaning a gender performance reflects how one sees him or herself, how others see that person, and how they fit into the broader culture (Foss, Domenico, & Foss, 2013). In exploring women's experiences in competitive, online, multiplayer video games (herein called battle games), the social aspect of gender performance resonates throughout participants' stories, as do the individual and cultural levels to a lesser degree. In line with Foss, Domenico, and Foss (2013), these women incorporate repeated gender performances that can change and alter accordingly, adapting to various gaming interactions. In particular, this study examines how women reframe situations, or bracket their experiences, to give themselves a sense of agency. Also, a few participants with bolder personalities incorporate enactment into their gaming experiences, where they are not swayed by the power dynamics.

Gaming Space Expectations

In gaming space, women learn to expect to be treated differently because of their gender, but at the same time, reactions can vary greatly. Choosing generally not to disclose her gender, Charlotte reasons, “You never know what to expect. Which is the, the thing that like it’s, I, I guess would be the most stressful. Cause you never know if you’re going to meet one of those people that use the stereotypes, or one of those people that’s going to be like super creepy” (Charlotte, interview). Charlotte expresses an implicit sense of fear toward navigating potentially hostile spaces. There is no guarantee that another player will act negatively towards her, yet, in line with Foss, Domenico, and Foss (2013), it’s become the expectation in that setting.

Zoey’s experience is much more explicit. While attempting an optional journal prompt to use voice communication in a public game, she is struck first by fear then by a realization of her fear. Reflecting on her experience she writes, “It was just stressful. I dreaded talking on the mic, even though I had no guarantee whatsoever that it would end badly. After all, not every game is filled with unpleasant people just waiting to jump you and insult you” (Zoey, journal). During the follow-up interview she explains, “I’ve heard everything, I’ve seen everything. There’s nothing that can upset me anymore. And yet. Um I don’t know.” To her surprise, she could not bring herself to use voice chat. “I just didn’t want this attention and I knew that it would be there because of, because I couldn’t play, because I would make it obvious that I’m a woman and it was kind of bad. It was horrible” (Zoey, follow-up).

Nora shares very similar experience to Zoey’s. To communicate and strategize with her team means disclosing her gender through voice chat, something she is unwilling to do for fear of attracting attention. Thus she willingly excludes herself from voice communication but at the cost of full participation, leaving her frustrated and angry that she cannot participate (Nora,

interview). Evident in these cases is that the expectation for hostility means being denied full participation in game, which subsequently hinges on one's gender performance. Here, women weigh group and cultural norms in anticipation of a gender performance (Foss, Domenico, & Foss, 2013). In many ways, this fear and expectation deny women agency in their own gender performance; women cannot perform the gender identity they want to express for fear of becoming a target for harassment.

At the same time, some women expect and desire to be invisible while gaming, reflecting their understanding of the gaming community. This sense of fear and dread towards "normalized" hostile behaviors indicates how some women reframe negative gaming experiences. If negative interactions are to be expected, women can have agency in how they navigate around potential interactions. Annie shares Sis's sentiment that gender is personal information, a facet of one's identity that needs protecting in gaming environments. Annie explains, "So you know it kinda feels like I'm being outed almost (laughs). I know that sounds kinda weird and I don't know if it's entirely appropriate but you know, it's just how it feels. It feels like you know it was, it was my secret to share" (Annie, interview). Annie enacts agency through her desire to blend into gaming culture as a "normal" player. By concealing their gender women are able to navigate the space in a way that allows them more autonomy.

Choosing to disclose gender. Even in online gaming spaces, the general community has clear expectations as to how an individual should perform gender, which are based on gaming's dominant masculine nature. Prior exposure to gaming spaces encourages players to develop preconceived notions about gender performances, which then instructs players to construct an appropriate performance for that setting. Agency is evident through the choices women make but they must also work against forces simultaneously trying to deny them agency. Prior experience

with negative reactions sets the basis for how women enter into and navigate gaming spaces each time they play. Between personal experiences and other's stories, women learn how to navigate the space in a way that best suits how they want to play. As mentioned above, unfortunately learning to navigate does not mean they feel they're able to fully participate in the way they would like. Some are more comfortable blending in and not disclosing gender, while others do not hesitate to play openly. Yet even those who claim to never bother hiding, still get worn down.

When she says, "I don't feel like I could be open, but I am. Because I, well, it's not like I stopped caring. But I, I've gotten used to it on the terms as uh, I am aware of what's going to happen if I'm open about it. And, I'm just, I'm not fine with it, but I'm dealing with it," Zoey contemplates her frustrations with harassment and her desire to play games. Whether or not she discloses gender depends on the game's communication features, although the attention seems inevitable. "But yeah, I would get like stupid sorts of attention because of it. Even though I never asked for it. Right? So yeah. I don't feel like I can be open but I am anyway" (Zoey, interview). In the same manner and after years of playing, Allison mentions she's learned to expect reactions which has made her more open about her gender. "And then nowadays I just never feel the need to hide it. I sometimes joke though. Like if someone asks if I'm 12, I'll just be like 'No, I'm 7.' So that's fine. But I don't feel like the need to hide myself" (Allison, interview). In some ways, women build a resistance towards unfavorable interactions, and like female cadets in the military (McCone & Scott, 2009), women reframe such situations as obstacles rather than discrimination.

Akin to women in other male-dominated arenas (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1998; Titunik, 2000), these women show how they have internalized gaming culture norms and construct their performances according to how they feel they are *able* fit into that space; distinct from how they

would *want* to fit in that space. Some find it necessary to hide their gender in order to avoid inciting a response. In an exchange with Cass, she reveals that the threat of abuse is just not worth the risk.

Interviewer: So do you feel you can be open about your gender when you're playing games?

Cass: No. I try not to be and I don't want to be.

Interviewer: Why's that?

Cass: Cause I don't want the harassment that comes with it. It's inevitable. It's sad, but it's true.

Interviewer: How does that make you feel?

Cass: It makes me feel like, that I can't really be open about anything. It makes me feel like I have to not talk to anyone. I don't, see sometimes there's some people that makes you feel comfortable around them to where you'll talk to them and what not. But for the most part you just don't want to risk it to get that one person that'll just start flaming you or start being immature (Cass, interview).

Another point of view frames gender as personal information. Sis explains she perpetually hides her gender from others online because,

Um I don't like to label myself as a girl. Not because I'm ashamed of being a girl, I just don't want everyone to know. That, I think that being a girl in a game is pretty personal information and I mean I don't want to um I guess, disclose like personal information to strangers um on the internet (Sis, interview).

Underlying her reasoning is a distinct understanding of women's position in the gaming community. When she says, "being a girl in a game," she's acknowledging the risk posed by exposing her gender to others exclusively in the gaming community. Similar to last names or social security numbers, to her gender is an aspect of identity that needs protection from those who might exploit it. Where Zoey and Allison confront that exploitation, Cass and Sis make conscious efforts to avoid it altogether. In many ways, hiding one's gender, refraining from voice communication or gendered cues, is preferable when the onslaught becomes too much.

Friends' support. Similarly, friends play a significant part in women's gaming experiences. Not surprisingly, they feel much more comfortable and open around those who've already passed muster. Having teammates' support and knowing others on the team lessens the fear of hostility. "So you don't really have to uh be careful or anything. You know out of your five people on your team, you know three of them that are gonna be just fine. So it's a bit less stressful" (Cass, follow-up). Even Gwen, usually brazenly outspoken, turns to chatting with just her friends. "Yeah if I want a bit of peace and I don't want to just sit here and scream at my TV all day, I'll just go into a party chat with girls and just game, you know, in peace. And have our conversations" (Gwen, interview). So unless the social circumstances provide a safe harbor against potential hostility, many women are willing to stay under the radar, such as Annie. She explains, "Like if you know friends are introducing me to, or quote unquote friends are introducing me to somebody new, I don't hide my gender necessarily. It's just I prefer not to disclose it unless I absolutely have to" (Annie, interview). Even playing with as few as one friend at a time, participants expressed a sense of security and safety while in their friends' presence.

A sense of security helps mitigate some reservations toward encountering hostility in battle game environments. For instance, often using voice chat in Call of Duty, Cat makes little effort to hide her gender. She remarks, “Um I don’t, I I guess I, I’m proud to be a female gamer,” she says. “Um but I don’t at the same time feel like I need to go out and say I’m a female gamer. Um I just, I definitely don’t make any efforts to hide it, you know um” (Cat, interview). While gaming Cat communicates with friends through voice chat and Facebook, often talking about and resolving recent tribulations that took place. In Cat’s case, being part of a Call of Duty clan offers support, security and friendship, which makes it easier to navigate potentially hostile spaces. Since friends can offer some safety, often using voice chat hinges on friends’ presence. Recalling her early experiences using in-game voice chat, Sis mentions, “And um I found that mostly guys would react like one of two ways. They would either like troll you, and like, you know, call you mean names, call you a bitch, call you bad cause you’re a girl. Or they would like hit on you,” which drove her to stop using a microphone altogether (Sis, interview). Instead, she now turns to VOIP applications to “talk to friends that already knew that I was a girl and didn’t really care. And people that I knew wouldn’t disrespect me while I’m playing video games cause it’s just not something I want to bother with” (Sis, interview). In a similar fashion, Jean exclaims she’s very comfortable using voice chat with friends, but not willing to compromise her experience for a stranger. She says, “Oh playing with friends is no problem. I just, I chat like normal. Um, and then if it’s a [player in a public game] and he’s going to die, then I let him die (laughs). I, I would rather let him die than use voice chat” (Jean, interview).

Playing with friends allows some women to specifically avoid public voice communication in favor of third-party VOIP services, such as Skype, Mumble, or TeamSpeak. This provides women the opportunity to fully participate in a game without drawing attention

from the broader gaming population. Participating fully in video games can require a certain level of self-disclosure, one which many women are not comfortable with. The presence of friends allows these women to play more openly, enacting a gender performance with more autonomy, agency, and much closer to who they truly are. However, remaining on the fringes of voice communication also contributes to the invisibility of female gamers. As they're playing with friends, there's no need to expose themselves in a public setting since that friendly community supports their needs. Players are able to do this on a larger scale through familiar game servers as well.

Negotiating Harassment and Gender

Hostility and harassment are expected norms within battle game spaces. As such, these women negotiate those experiences in a number of ways. Other than trying to avoid potential harassment, many of these women also keep a mindset that minimizes the significance of the hostility. Repeatedly, women comment that it doesn't matter, everyone gets harassed. Although this mindset inevitably reinforces the idea that harassment is normal and to be expected, it is also helpful in reframing the situation. While discussing gendered insults she often encounters, Gwen exclaims, "And the other one we always get is, and this one I don't understand is, 'you sound fat.' Like, how do you sound fat? I, I've never understood that" (Gwen, interview). In response, she doesn't hesitate to match their attack, "I, I usually tell them I'm going to park my 600 pound ass on their chest and suffocate 'em. Um that usually helps. I think" (Gwen, interview).

Likewise, Rain claims, "I'm pretty good about taking it and you know, dishing it back out. I don't, I try not to let it affect me um especially in game." She continues, "Um if they're talking about me being a girl. "Oh go to the kitchen" blah blah blah, you know. I've heard it my whole life, so, and still. Um, you, I just, you know, as I've gotten older just try to let it, you know, roll

off me” (Rain, interview). Rather than hostility being aimed at them as a person, they’re able to distance themselves from the abuse by framing the experience as not unique or even asinine.

Allison takes this a step further with regard to attacks on her gender. She removes herself as the subject of the abuse, claiming that the attackers are looking for reason to troll. In her journal she describes many instances where her gender, revealed through voice communication, played a part in inciting reactions. One in particular involved lewd and derogatory comments. She describes them as saying, ““Tit pics? Please? I said please, goddamn, that means you have to show me!”” and ““You're offline?! Start streaming! What else am I gonna fap to?”” among other remarks (Allison, journal). Streaming is a live (sometimes with a delay) online broadcast where a player records a game as they are playing and makes it available for others to watch, usually through a service like Twitch (Twitch.tv). This may also involve the player speaking over microphone or using a webcam to capture video of her or himself while playing.

Another event seemed to occur spontaneously and she did not notice the signs of trolling until it was too late. Her teammates, a group of friends, turned on her in game with insults and friendly fire. Admitting these events made her upset, Allison negotiates such situations by rationalizing that it could happen to any player. She relays, “So I’m assuming that like people when they’re, when they are like that they just want to ruin someone’s day. Or like they want to you know just make people feel bad for no reason” (Allison, follow-up). She conflictingly places the blame both on the attackers and herself, saying,

Like if um like, I I guess it’s just like females in general were easier to like to see like, um or to spot like cause my voice is very obviously different. And it’s just easy to say stereotypical things like ‘girls are terrible’ or stuff like that. It’s like just an easy way to troll, I guess (Allison, follow-up).

Here she reframes such circumstances as inevitable yet positions her gender as the catalyst for the reactions. Inadvertently she acknowledges that she cannot control all aspects of her gender performance if she wants to use voice chat, nor can she control the audiences' reactions.

Although being somewhat denied agency, she reframes the situation as unavoidable, therefore also as an expected obstacle to overcome.

Another frame of mind positions harassment as ending once the game is turned off. Cat credits her years of experience and her age as helping to mitigate many in-game interactions. She explains, "I think it was over the years learning that you know, they're not talking necessarily to me personally. They're talking to me as a as a gamer. I gotta separate you know gaming from that, and um realize that it's just, it's just in the gaming world, you know." A 40-year-old woman and mother, she's experienced more than many of her 20-something counterparts. She is able to dismiss in-game interactions as generally petty and insignificant. Moreover, she separates her gaming from her real life saying, "... all those people that talk to me like like they do on there, the bad stuff, never happens when I turn the console off. I never hear those words you know, and no one ever says those things to me [in real life]" (Cat, follow-up).

However, several younger participants relay gaming related experiences that occur beyond the games themselves. Rain says, "Personally when I tell people I'm a gamer, I get more reaction than while I'm playing a game. Um. It's definitely more negative, you know, face to face than it ever is in game." She goes on to say, "I guess I'm expected to do other things than to play games" (Rain, interview). Rain alludes to the expectations of women in the real world when she says she's "expected to do other things." Rain, and several other participants as well, inhabit a conflicted existence between two distinct settings. Not only does she not fit the expectations of gaming culture, by playing video games she also not does fit expectations in real life.

Amy poses a similar struggle. During her journaling period, her game-related artwork began gaining attention through Twitter. Her excitement became muted when, over and over, those interested in her work continued to refer to Amy as male. She became disheartened and believed disclosing her gender would be a significant detriment to pursuing this work for profit in the gaming community. Contemplating an offer she says, “Is me being, gonna be a female, gonna be a problem for him? Especially since I haven’t actually established myself. Um. He he’s gonna probably judge me” (Amy, follow-up). As in online gaming, Twitter provides Amy with an unintentional male guise, allowing others to fit her into the expectations of gaming culture. At the time she was still in the process of arranging the offer and she remarks in regard to her gender, “Um I I’m wondering if that’s gonna affect it, I really do” (Amy, follow-up). She is overwhelmingly concerned her gender will cause her to not be taken seriously and severely limit her credibility, which again, is not unusual for women in gaming environments.

Finally, Nora’s gaming experiences also bleed into social media. After posting gameplay videos on Facebook she is mocked and insulted by a male player from a mutual Facebook gaming group. She writes, “He was saying that I ‘play on easy because I’m a girl...and that I am just asking for attention when I post videos of my gameplay’” (Nora, journal). Then, after posting a promotion for in-game items on Facebook, she writes, “I was called ‘not a real gamer’ and bashed left and right” by the same individual and others in the same gaming group. In line with gaming culture ideology, she felt excluded and ended up leaving the gaming group to avoid further harassment. She mentions later, “Well it’s disheartening that we (female gamers) can’t even do that. We can’t share tips with each other. We can’t post things without always being ridiculed, not just by gameplay but by what we’re talking about” (Nora, follow-up). Gaming experiences can extend beyond just in-game interactions. Rain, Amy, and Nora recall events

where gaming culture's male norm permeates people's expectations outside of individual games. As mass media have continuously replicated the stereotypes and masculine dominance (Cunningham, 2000), so do the players and the broader culture.

Overcoming Obstacles and the “Girl Gamer” Stereotype

This thesis has already established the gaming community's masculine nature and the prevalent assumption that video game players are automatically thought to be male. In contrast with the male gamer stereotype is that of the “girl gamer,” a chronic point of tension that impacts how women see both themselves and other women as video game players. Gathered through participant's explanations, several key “girl gamer” assumptions weigh heavily on women's experiences. First, the most prominent assumption associated with the “girl gamer” stereotype is a lack of skill, which echoed throughout participants' contributions.

Assumption of skill. Mentioned in the previous chapter, evidence of skill can draw accusations of cheating and disbelief of a female identity. Participants described lack of skill as a significant and particularly frustrating assumption which they actively try to work against. Acknowledging that all gamers feel pressure to play well in-game, Jess argues that females have additional obstacles to overcome. “It's just that extra variable. I have to prove myself more to prove that I'm a skilled female gamer, as opposed to a skilled male gamer. Or just a skilled gamer. Cause you think a gamer, you think a guy. It's just how it is” (Jess, interview). Similarly, in playing Call of Duty, Cat believes, “I think it's the, the um the community there is just, since they're so, so, most of them are more you know anti-fem. So you know, you go in there, and it's like ‘oh you're a girl. You're not. You're gonna suck.’ So then I feel like I need to prove myself” (Cat, interview). These women, intent on overcoming the lack of skill assumption, express the need to prove one's ability, to very deliberately defy the stereotype. Consequently, being skilled

and doing well in a game can shield one from possible harassment but also constructs her as an exception to women in gaming. In the previous chapter, Allison mentions being complimented on her skill and being acknowledged as female. Although this is a very positive experience, and she admits a rare one indeed, the circumstances could have taken a much more negative turn had she not done well. For instance, in other situations,

Sometimes I feel like I have something to prove, kind of. Like if I'm streaming and I'm doing bad, I just turn my stream off because I don't want people to be like 'Oh my god look. Another girl who's doing 1 and 20, and getting carried by her boyfriend.' Like that's just such a stereotype that I'm kind of fitting at this point. But I don't want to, so (Allison, follow-up).

Women take actions to deliberately navigate around the stereotype and prevent themselves from inadvertently reinforcing any assumptions. Emily even attempts to dismantle the stereotype through her profile. Although she conceals her gender in games she does use a female avatar for her Xbox profile, "Cause like I kinda wanted them to like find out after the fact, you know, where like, so be like, 'Oh that was a really good player,' and then check out my profile and be like, 'Oh like that was a girl?' you know" (Emily, interview). In some ways hiding one's gender also aids in thwarting this assumption, allowing women to perform an identity more in line with the setting's expectations, even if that means being assumed male.

Attention seeking. Another prominent assumption impacting participants is the notion that the "girl gamer" is attention seeking; that she is not a "real" gamer but someone who exists in gaming spaces only to draw male attention to herself. This assumption is often construed as intending to receive positive or flirtatious attention from men, when, in reality women can and do receive very negative and unwanted attention after revealing their gender. When asked to

describe the stereotypes around female gamers, Jean immediately responds, “Besides being bad? (Laughs) uh, that they’re doing it for some nefarious purpose other than gleaning enjoyment from the process. Like getting attention, or getting free stuff, or like whatever” (Jean, interview). This concept is centered around a female performance in a male-centric space and reflects how women are expected to respond to the power dynamics. A clear example of heteronormative gaming culture, the idea of the attention-seeking female gamer is tightly woven into her presumed desire for male attention. Such a “nefarious purpose” alludes to, and indicates Jean’s awareness of, women’s unwelcome presence in gaming spaces.

In essence, this assumption is meant to render women invisible. To be openly female in a gaming space means she is intentionally drawing attention to herself. In Sis’s words, it is being “marked as female” which incites negative and unwanted reactions. In some cases, simply being female and choosing to participate in a game through the voice communication feature constitutes attention-seeking behavior. After attempting to use voice chat and hearing the already hostile interactions between players, Zoey ties together the concepts of attention seeking and victim blaming, at first criticizing how it is generally applied to females but at the same time applying it to herself.

Interviewer: That’s really interesting what you just brought up. By being a female gamer and choosing to talk in a situation like this, you’re ‘asking for it,’ you’re asking for that negative attention. Can you explain that a bit more?

Zoey: Well uh I chose the wrong words. I mean I chose them on purpose because many people say that yeah you are ‘asking for it,’ right. Like uh they would say a woman who has, or a girl who has her picture, or a feminine nickname, or uses the microphone and she’s asking for negative attention. She’s asking

for the sexist comments, right. Obviously she is not, that is victim blaming (Zoey, follow-up).

She continues arguing that if she had not been a part of this research study and not trying to fulfill an optional journal prompt, she could be accused of “asking for it” if she chose to speak up in an already hostile environment. She responds, “Wasn’t I?” Aware of the situation, “And I give them another reason, right. Like what do I expect? I mean” (Zoey, follow-up). Instead, she opted to play in silence rather than knowingly expose her identity to others.

If being openly female is attention seeking, then to go under an assumed male identity is to be denied agency in one’s own gender performance. Although many women choose to use gender-neutral usernames and intentionally avoid signifying a female gender, the expectations of gaming spaces still imposes a male identity on players regardless of their intention. Thus, gender performances are interpreted through a male lens unless something distinctly indicates otherwise. When Jean wants to exclaim “I’M NOT A BOY” in chapter four, the situation illustrates how she, as an individual and a woman, is rendered non-existent. Expanding on it later she says, “Um. It’s the whole you know like you’re not supposed to say it otherwise you’re drawing attention it because gender totally doesn’t matter on the internet -thing. That’s that kind of common sense. Common sense in air quotes” (Jean, follow-up). Here Jean identifies an internal struggle she’s reigned in and “tied up.” At times the male assumption becomes too great and pushes too much against her gender identity. Yet as “common sense” dictates, she knows the repercussions of pushing back and chooses not to challenge the norms of gaming culture.

Assuming a male identity. In fact, many participants attempt to thwart negative attention by masquerading as a male player. Cass explains, “Um, I don’t let it on that I’m a girl because I don’t want the uh negative attention from it. I’d rather just be one of the other people. I don’t

want to get any attention from it. I don't want any special things from it" (Cass, interview). Cass withholds her gender because she desires to be "one of the other people," which others have articulated as "normal," "regular," or just "everybody else." As mentioned before, gender is not supposed to matter on the internet, but Cass points out being female, in the right situations, earns women "special" treatment. Despite occasionally enjoying the positive attention for being female, such as free games and special treatment, Allison explains, "I would trade all that in an instant just to um be like a normal person. Just to be on par with the regular people, regular dudes who just play. And like they receive no special treatment but they also receive no special hatred" (Allison, interview). The desire to be treated as an equal, to forgo special treatment, discrimination, and gender-based harassment, is a powerful motivator and a deep point of tension among these women.

Women in masculine environments may conform to the expected norms by avoiding drawing attention to themselves (McCone & Scott, 2009). In gaming spaces, assuming a male identity, or rather, not enacting a distinctly feminine gender performance, is one of the measures women take to prevent drawing attention to themselves. Intentionally and unintentionally, women can take on a male identity in order to avert others' reactions. As illustrated previously, unless a female identity is explicit, such as through using feminine signifiers like "gurl," a player's identity derived from their username is assumed to default to and be read as male.

Likewise, Cass reveals, "Uh typically having yourself outed as a women on the internet doesn't usually end well. So I'm not going to talk to other people in risk that it just puts me off." She goes on to reason,

Well I feel like (sighs) yeah, it's a really hard topic too. But I feel like the amount of teenage boys on the internet, between those and between the uh sexist

people on the internet, there's always jokes of all different kinds. Not only do you get that but you get your typical jokes that any men would get. And that's always the argument with it. Like, 'Oh, we get harassed just as much.' Well it's not the same because we get those jokes too, but on top of that we get jokes about your gender. And it doesn't make you feel that great to get those jokes. So I use a gender-neutral name in all games. And I don't use any (voice) chat in most of the games (Cass, interview).

Here Cass buttresses her reasoning for a gender-neutral username against a common remark used to devalue women's experiences: men get harassed *too*. Not only does she put care into choosing her username, she also avoids drawing attention by withholding her gender through voice chat, another point of tension for many participants. Mentioned in chapter four, Sis and Nora refrain from using voice communication because they want to avoid uncomfortable situations, but doing so creates a male gender performance. They each reframe the situation so that being silent grants them a more enjoyable gameplay experience, free of distractions or unsolicited interactions.

Assuming a male identity can help to mitigate potential hostility and gender-based reactions. Here as well, Jo's gender performance fluctuates as does the audiences' interpretation. In Jo's experiences, being identified as female isn't always explicitly negative, at first. After either exposing her gender through text chat or a more feminine username, white knights occasionally rise up to protect her and keep any challenge at bay. However, when "I start showing skill, they assume that I can't have skill. 'Oh, you can't be playing this game, you're hacking,' 'girls obviously can't play games,' stuff like that." Unfortunately things quickly turn vile when she reveals she is transgender, "But, again that's when I don't use voice chat, and as

soon as I do: hate speech. That's all they switch to. And the people who were the white knight aspect, they immediately switch over to hate speech too" (Jo, interview). Sis copes with hostility towards women by saying trolling is an inescapable part of gaming culture and being female makes you a target. Specifically she says, "I guess for them it's just an easy way to make fun of someone for being different" (Sis, interview). This is not limited to being female, but extends to any pronounced facet that sets one apart from the settings' norms and expectations. If others can identify a player as being "different" from the stereotype, those situations pose to be increasingly challenging. Subsequently, Jo mediates those situations through a no-tolerance attitude and a strong group of friends.

Distancing from the stereotype. Sis, Laquita and Rain provide interesting cases for examining the girl gamer stereotype and the invisibility of women in gaming environments. At times concerning, Sis illustrates how firmly her mindset is rooted in the expectations of gaming culture. "And um yeah like just because you're tagged as a girl and you get harassed as a girl, I think is, is pretty much to be expected, and I don't know what else they would be expecting in that situation" (Sis, interview). For her, to be openly female is to take responsibility for one's own harassment, akin to victim blaming. In addition, she generalizes about all "girl gamers" while also positioning herself above them as one of the few skilled (read: real) "girl gamers." Sis believes it is rare to encounter a female player who is good at the game, partly because she presumes skilled women (like herself) to be anomalies in the gaming world and their experiences in gaming environments have taught them to avoid disclosing gender. To be lacking in skill, vying for attention, and a visible female player, Sis says of these women, "they're kind of just making a bad name for all of us girl gamers" (Sis, interview).

She demonstrates a clear frustration with the stereotype and any who might chance to reinforce it. She says, "... it's kind of sad that girls are in a position where, you know, pretty much every girl who ever speaks on microphone is representing like all female gamers just in general cause the number of us who choose to speak is so little, so few" (Sis, interview). Very aware of women's' invisibility in gaming, the few who are visible unfairly end up representing the entire gender, so if they even minimally reflect the stereotype, it just reinforces it in its entirety. This relates back to how many women feel they have to prove themselves as gamer in order to distance themselves from the stereotype, and Sis does. Her sense of self and confidence in her ability allows her to distance herself from the girl gamer stereotype, saying she does not mind if others assume female gamers are inherently bad; she knows she is an exception.

Laquita's point of view exacerbates both the elitism and invisibility of female players. She mentions that women in gaming are rare and hard to identify, resolving that only usernames really give away gender, despite not using a gendered name herself. She sets herself apart as a rare, highly skilled player, a female to be coveted in gaming spaces. When asked if her gender impacts how others perceive her presence in gaming spaces, Laquita responds, sometimes. "Yeah cause um a lot of the time they're, they're slightly, you know, amazed at the rarity of um a girl that can play video games well... they, they want to be the friend of the girl that's really good. I guess" (Laquita, interview). Asked to elaborate, she says,

Um I think it's because it is a rarity. Um you know. There, there isn't a lot of girls that play video games. And if there is, there's not a lot that play it very well. So the fact that I am a, a small percentile of uh females out there that play video games really well. I think that's one of them. That, that attracts people to wanting to be your friend (Laquita, interview).

She holds herself in very high esteem, describing herself as a small percentage of women who play video games at all, then as part of an even smaller portion who are actually skilled. Her point of view is clearly evident of the dominant expectations of gaming culture: that female players are inherently unskilled, that those who are skilled are also exceptional, and that women are nearly absent in battle games, altogether.

To emphasize her perception of the female gaming population, Laquita describes the difficulty in creating a competitive all-female League of Legends teams. She says, “So like if you really do the math, it it’s true. It’d literally be like zero or one, that would actually be able to compete at that level, so” (Laquita, interview). To put this in perspective, a 2012 report puts female players as making up just under 10% of the League of Legends audience (Lyons, 2012). Since then, the number of monthly active players has doubled to 67 million (Riot Games, 2014). Even if she is exaggerating in her statement, Laquita makes it clear how invisible women are in gaming spaces when she says there is maybe one woman capable of competing at a professional level. In their gender performances Sis and Laquita replicate the expectations of gaming culture. Their skill lets them define themselves as exceptions. In Taylor’s words, these women and other (male) players are glamorizing their presence in this setting. (Taylor, 2008)

The negativity that occurs between female gamers and wanting to distance oneself from the stereotype presents a conundrum for some women, like Rain. The elitism Sis and Laquita express shows up throughout women’s interactions with other women players. The desire to distance oneself from the negative attributes of the girl gamer stereotype can result in hostile situations between women. Although several women insinuate they tend to be on the receiving end of such hostility, that’s likely not always so. Rain explains, “Um girls in game are not nice (laughs) and that is um, that is actually probably part of the reason why I don’t say that I’m a girl

is because I don't like other girls in the game" (Rain, interview). Despite previously arguing the drastic absence of women in gaming spaces, she says she receives more negative attention from other women in game than from men. With a few exceptions, these interactions tend towards elitism and further exclusion of women. Relaying her impression of those interactions, Rain says, "But then the other girls are you know, just like (sighs) you know, "why are you playing this game?" Like you know, "Go do something else" or you know, "I'm gonna be the best at this and you know, you're gonna suck" sort of thing" (Rain, interview). Here, women's gender performances take on a more masculine aspect wherein they embody dominant ideology. In such gender performances women position themselves as the exception to female gamers, actively enforcing the setting's expectations, delegitimizing other women's presence, and further excluding women from the space.

At the same time, Rain displays similar attitudes towards certain women who stream games. What Rain and other participants find frustrating are the expectations for women's appearances while streaming. She complains that "women basically sitting there with their chest hanging out" contributes to the negative image of female players and both creates and reinforces the heteronormative expectation for females in gaming spaces to be titillating or striving for male attention. And when female players combine this approach with intentionally poor gameplay, Rain says, "It gives us a bad name for those of us who want to be good at the game, and you know, maybe not have that stereotypical 'girls shouldn't play games.' They basically give other girls a bad name" (Rain, interview). In Allison's previous comment about streaming she explains how she attempts to thwart the stereotype by only streaming when she is playing well. Similarly, although she does not stream often, Rain refuses to accommodate the expectations for her appearance, going so far as to put a disclaimer saying so on her Twitch channel. Instead she

chooses to play in comfortable clothes and with messy hair. Essentially, Rain and Allison push against the girl gamer stereotype by enacting gender performances counter to the expectations of gaming culture, but Rain specifically struggles with those who seem to not enact such agency.

In Summary

This chapter further addresses how a woman's gender plays a part in her gaming experiences both in and out of battle game spaces. This chapter also elaborates on research question three and explicates how women negotiate experiences within potentially hostile spaces. Whether it's glamorizing their presence through "white knighting" (Taylor, 2008) or targeted harassment, participants convey that these are aspects of online multiplayer gaming one must "get used to" in order to play at all. Gaming space expectations lead women to enact gender performances in many different ways, often while also negotiating the ways in which they desire to participate in a given context. Women overcome the barriers of harassment by reframing situations to their advantage or by adapting to and enacting preferred gender performances, such as when playing with friends. Finally, women constantly challenge and reinforce the "girl gamer" stereotype by actively trying to distance themselves from the assumptions while also relegating other (presumably unskilled) female players into the stereotype.

Eventually these gaming space expectations and actions lead to habits. Individuals draw on past knowledge to instruct how one should perform gender within a given context. Repetition of both experiences and actions within particular settings leads individuals to develop habits for operating in that space, as in Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (Foss, Domenico, & Foss, 2013). *Habitus* refers to socially learned behaviors that are repeatedly and unconsciously acted out. Such behaviors are essentially taken for granted, helping to provide "structure and familiarity in everyday routines" (Foss, Domenico, & Foss, 2013, p. 177). Thus, the ways in which women

perform gender in battle games is learned through socialization and repeated within everyday gameplay experiences. Throughout their contributions participants reiterate the idea of “normal;” expecting hostile behavior is normal; concealing gender is normal; using a gender-neutral username is normal; for some, foregoing participation is normal, while for others so is brazenly talking back. As Allison says and many women echo, “I guess you get used to it. You, you know what to expect nowadays” (Allison, interview). As the rhetoric, interactions, and experiences within gaming spaces become normalized, so do the ways players perform gender in battle games.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This research study explores women's experiences in the potentially hostile environments present in competitive online multiplayer video games. Woven throughout the findings are women's experiences and their interpretations of events. As asserted in the literature review, battle game environments demand a different gender performance than RPGs. Limitations on avatar creation or character options can also limit the player's ability to identify with a chosen character but also serve to reduce the visibility of women. In support of previous research, women navigate battle games largely in anonymity (Taylor, 2012). This is because disclosing one's gender can result in becoming a target for harassment, abuse, and discrimination. Participants, such as Allison, Cat, Sis, and others, recount through their interviews and journals, lewd comments, sexual proposals, requests for pictures, and explicit rejections of female gender performances, which point to pockets of hypermasculinity where male players actively demean, belittle, and ostracize female players. Women learn from personal experiences and observation the implications of openly playing battle games while being female. Many women, intentionally and unintentionally, keep themselves invisible within gaming so as not to attract unsolicited attention. They generally adhere to gender-neutral usernames and some only participate in voice chat if friends are present.

The broader gaming community also keeps women invisible. The expectations for who players are and the threat of harassment for being different is enough to silence women and render them invisible. The power dynamics manifest in more ways than can be reasonably recounted in a single study. Specifically, gender performances, unless explicitly exhibiting a female identity, are read as male. This creates the assumption that all players are male unless proven otherwise and can be seen even amongst female players. Staying "under the radar," in

other words, not performing a distinctly female gender, makes women culpable in their own symbolic annihilation. Although concealing one's female gender is often done for safety, doing so creates an illusion of a male gender performance and perpetuates the invisibility of women.

Nevertheless, there are always exceptions. In line with Royse et al (2007), Taylor (2003), and Dovey & Kennedy (2006), some women deliberately challenge gender norms, and gaming culture expectations. Even when women play anonymously, they have many ways of employing agency and enacting the gender performances they desire. In particular, friends play a significant role in terms of creating safe environments and providing support. Some women do not take kindly to being in the shadows. They are bold, they feel empowered to assert themselves, and openly and fully participate in gaming spaces, which is something many of the women do not want to deal with. Though, previous research claims social interaction and communication are a key motivation for women to participate in gaming (Schott & Horrel, 2000; Royse, et al., 2007; Juul, 2010; Terlecki et al., 2011; Lewis & Griffiths, 2011). Yet, in battle games unwillingness to use voice chat and the fear of exposing one's gender directly contrasts with those claims. Essentially, the expectations of battle games' norms and the ways in which women are rendered invisible suggests evidence of the Spiral of Silence Theory. Developed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, put simply, Spiral of Silence Theory posits that as the majority opinion continues to foster support, those who hold a minority opinion, and subsequently do not have support of the majority, may remain silent or adopt the majority opinion for fear of becoming isolated from others (Noelle-Neumann, 1977).

Relating to the Spiral of Silence, there is an unfortunate consequence to learning how to navigate the spaces, especially when women keep themselves invisible by enacting male gender performances. Deflecting attention through anonymity not only renders a woman invisible, it

also isolates her from connecting with other women in gaming. Within battle game contexts, women are already isolated from one another and, as a result, some adopt the majority opinion as a means of navigating the space, such as Sis and Laquita. On the other hand, friends play a notable role in women's gaming experiences and could function as a support mechanism in overcoming isolation and the Spiral of Silence. Future research would benefit from further exploring gaming culture and the Spiral of Silence Theory.

Several times, women mentioned knowing very few women who game, or none at all. They talk about being surprised to discover a female friend enjoys gaming, or that others are surprised when they reveal their gaming hobby. And subsequently, many feel they must go out of their way to find other women to play with. In essence, women are conflicted between knowing other female players exist and the inability to actually see their presence. This creates an illusion that women are rare in gaming. Uncommon, perhaps in some games, but they are not unicorns. They are not creatures of myth and legend who exist as fantasies, yet women in gaming are glamorized, derided and dismissed into the confines of a stereotype.

Implications

Feminist standpoint epistemology provides a foundation for examining and understanding women's lived experiences in competitive multiplayer video game environments. Through in-depth qualitative interviews and textual analysis of participants' journals, this research study investigates how women navigate and negotiate their real world gender within potentially hostile gaming contexts. Here, I do not identify how women's experiences differ from men's, but rather outline the many ways gender impacts women's gaming experiences. This leads them to deliberately navigate gaming spaces in a context where they are largely seen as an unwelcome anomaly in that setting.

Feminist standpoint epistemology, this research study, along with previous and future research, can help the gaming industry to better identify with and include women as an expected audience for their games, rather than an added bonus. I suggest individual game developers and creators seek out women's experiences and listen. Be open and truly listen in order to understand what the audience means, not just what they say; adapt the findings to suit each unique game. For example, women's experiences using voice communication is incredibly pertinent to games like Counter-Strike and Call of Duty that have voice chat features, and not immediately relevant to games like League of Legends which lack voice chat features. However, the former games can draw from women's experiences to continue improving player's overall gameplay experiences. Likewise, games currently lacking voice communication features can look to existing implementations and women's experiences, should they desire to implement voice chat in the future.

Women play these games because they love them. They love action, the challenge, the competition, and improving their skills, *despite* how difficult those multiplayer environments can be. Although negative gaming environments are a deterrent for many, not just women, these women prove their dedication to the game by negotiating around the hostility. Still, participants overwhelmingly offered suggestions for improving games and the overall community: more women. Nearly every conversation brought up the drastic lack of professional female gamers and the disparity of the few who do exist. Many women express a desire to identify with a female gaming figure, a role model, and are left wanting. This extends to individual games as well. Poor representation in games, or the lack of women altogether, is disheartening, and participants desire to see an increased female presence in games. Nora puts it bluntly saying that increasing

women's presence through more female avatar options would make it much less unexpected for an actual woman to playing in that space.

Furthermore, this research provides insight into the invisibility of women in gaming spaces. On an individual level, players can personally begin breaking down barriers and actively try to overcome the assumption that other players are automatically male. Several participants explain how many of their male friends were just unaware of what it means to reveal a female gender, until they explicitly saw or heard the results. Similarly, players may take some of these findings as suggestions and employ them to more safely navigate gaming spaces and where to look for asylum. All but two participants mention playing multiple games, some of which fell outside the scope of this study, like World of Warcraft and Minecraft. Yet they still recount very similar, unpleasant, gender-based experiences, suggesting the exclusion of and hostility toward women is not limited to competitive, team-based games.

Limitations and Future Research

Even within gaming culture, the definition of a hardcore or competitive game is subjective and these terms can be misapplied to players as well. The term 'battle games' is also a loose definition used to combine a large number of games from multiple genres into one category. As such, this research addresses experiences across a number of games, each of which have their own mechanics, features, and individual game culture. In combination with a sample size of sixteen participants, the ability to generalize the findings is reduced, as women's experiences certainly vary across many different factors.

In addition, recruitment of participants was limited due to lack of access to certain gaming forums. Without the participation of companies such as Activision or permission to post

on game-specific forums, I could not directly address a game's audience. Instead, I went through third-party forums, such as reddit.com and Facebook.com, to access more general audiences.

Future studies involving battle games would benefit from taking a more intersectional approach to examine how gaming experiences vary across race, non-binary gender identities, age, and culture. In particular, this study did not address the intersection of race, ethnicity, or sexuality, yet in passing, participants did express experiences along these lines. Other studies could delve more deeply into women's experiences in specific video games in order to identify, understand, and compare the difference and similarities between distinct gaming environments. A cognitive science or psychological approach would also be beneficial in exploring women's behavior within in-game communication and the repercussions of persisting through a hostile environment.

Appendix A: Recruitment Blog

Page 1: Welcome!

- Welcome and thank you for your interest in my study. This study will look at women's experiences in competitive online multiplayer video games.
- This site contains the important information about my research study on video game experiences. Here you will find an overview of the study, information and requirements for participation, and a detailed consent form.
- Please direct all questions to SUGamingStudy@gmail.com.
- If you would like to participate, [click here](#) to begin.

Page 2: Overview

- The Study:
 - Research and culture tell us that women seem to dislike and shy away from certain types of games because of the difficult and competitive form of play such games require. Yet, many women still participate in competitive video games despite these assumptions. In particular, academic research has left the area of violent, competitive, multiplayer gaming largely untouched in regards to the female player experience. For this study, I am interested in learning more about women's competitive video game experiences in online multiplayer environments.
- The Method:
 - Since interviews are a key way of understanding individual experiences, in-depth interviews will be conducted with women gamers. In addition, participants will be asked to keep a gaming journal to log their gaming experiences. The focus is on player experiences in games like, but not exclusive to, League of Legends, DOTA, Halo, Call of Duty, and similar games.
- The Researcher:
 - Catherine Lukianov, graduate student at Syracuse University
 - Email: SUGamingStudy@gmail.com

Page 3: Participant Information

- Desired participants:
 - I am looking for women who are fairly frequent players of competitive multiplayer video games. I am interested in your experiences as a player of these games. Competitive multiplayer video games is a broad category and many games fall under this umbrella. Some games include:
 - League of Legends
 - DOTA2
 - Call of Duty series
 - Halo series
 - Team Fortress 2, among many others
 - The only kind of games that are excluded are roleplaying games (RPGs) such as World of Warcraft because there is already a significant amount of research in this area.
- Participation in this study is voluntary.
- Requirements:
 - Must be female

- Must be over the age of 18
- Must love competitive video games and be a regular player.
- Must frequently participate in online multiplayer games (roughly at least twice a week)
- Must be able to conduct an interview in person if located in the North East US, or through a voice chat service such as Skype.
- Must be able to participate in the journaling and complete typed journal entries.
- Time commitment:
 - There are four parts to this study. First, a short survey that will be used to screen potential participants, will take approximately 10 minutes of your time. If you are selected to participate further, an initial in-depth interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes. Next, journaling will take place over the course to two weeks. Time spent journaling will depend on how frequently you game and the length of your journal entries. All journal entries should be typed and emailed to me as they are written. Finally, a follow-up interview will be conducted that will take approximately 30 minutes. All information will be kept confidential and your name will not be reported or associated with the answers you provide.
- All individuals who participate in the interview portion of the study will receive a gift card.

Page 4: Electronic Informed Consent Form

Page 5: Journal Prompts

- Please answer the prompts you feel are relevant to your gaming experience.
- Briefly describe your most recent competitive multiplayer gaming experience (game mode, number of players, mission, etc.).
 - Describe how you participated in your most recent multiplayer gaming experience.
 - How did you interact with other players? How did they interact with you?
 - What were the positive experiences during the gameplay?
 - What were the negative experiences during the gameplay?
 - What are your thoughts about the player interactions?
 - How does your gender factor into how you played?
 - What type of interactions are you noticing now that you may not have noticed prior to the interview?
 - How has your perspective changed about this game/mode/platform?
- OPTIONAL journal prompts and challenges:
- **DISCLAIMER:** By putting yourself in any or all of these potential situations, you risk facing harassment, verbal abuse, and/or discrimination from other players that is not uncommon in some gaming environments. Some games and game modes do not let you quit a match without in-game penalty, and if you experience harassment, verbal abuse, and/or discrimination, you may be penalized in-game for choosing to leave the match. If you choose to stay in a game match, you may face this risk during and after gameplay. Please remain aware of the risks and that these prompts are entirely voluntary and optional.
- You may combine these options in any way you wish but please note which options you chose.
 - Play a multiplayer game with random strangers.

- Try a character you have never played before in a regular game.
- Play a character/class/mission you know you are bad at.
- Change the devices you use to communicate with others. Communicate using a microphone or headset if you typically do not.
- Were there any differences in how other players interacted with you?
- Did you change the way you presented yourself knowing the communication channels were different?

Appendix B: Interview Materials

Initial Interview

General Information:

1. Tell me a bit about yourself.
2. What is your all-time favorite video game?
3. What are your preferred platforms to play video games on? List platforms (ex. computer, Xbox 360, etc.)
4. What game modes do you enjoy playing or play most often?
5. Tell me about your username.

Battle Game Experience:

6. What is your favorite battle game? Can you estimate how much time you have put into this game?
7. What do you love about this game?
8. What do you hate about this game?
9. What draws you to battle games?
10. Who do you typically play with when you game? Who do you typically play against?
11. What devices do you use to play games? Microphone, headset, etc.
12. How does using these devices change your gaming experience?
13. In what ways do other players respond to you when they hear your voice?

Gender and Battle Games:

14. Do you feel you can be open about your gender while playing games?
15. Have you ever felt it necessary to hide your gender during a game? If yes, how do you do so? If no, why not?
16. How do you present yourself in online multiplayer games? What is your persona?
17. How do other players receive your presence? How do they react?
18. Do you change your gameplay depending on who you are playing with? How so?
19. Do you feel your gender has any impact on other gamers' perception of you?
20. Have you tried to prevent a situation where your gender might be disclosed?
21. In what situations might it be necessary or unavoidable to disclose gender?
22. What's been your experience when your gender is disclosed?
23. So what exactly stops you from wanting to disclose that you're female?

Game Culture Experience:

24. How would you describe your experience with game culture in the games you play?
25. Where do you think you fit into gamer culture? Where would you like to be?
26. Was the hostility ever directed towards or based on your gender? If you feel comfortable, please describe the experience.
27. Are you able to participate fully in a game? What about without friends?
28. What is it like to be a girl gamer?
29. What are the girl gamer stereotypes? How do they make you feel?

Follow-Up Interview

Follow-up interviews were based on a participant's journal entries, so specific questions varied accordingly. These questions are a general guide for beginning the follow-up interview.

General Questions

1. Since we talked last, how have your gaming experiences changed?
2. How were your interactions with other players different?
3. Did you feel your gender was a factor during your gaming?
4. How did others respond to your voice or presence?
5. How did you change your gameplay?
6. What are some of the positive impacts of the journaling experience?
7. What are some of the negative impacts of the journaling experience?

Journaling and Gender

1. Can you explain [a specific journal entry]? How does that make you feel?
2. How often did you change up your usual gameplay?
3. Why did you not want to change your gameplay?
4. How much do you feel you are able to participate in gaming? What about when you're not playing with friends?
5. What significance did your gender have in these games?
6. Overall, what was your experience like?

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