

CHAPTER 7.

GAMING MASCULINITY

Constructing Masculinity with Video Games

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One reason that it is important to think about masculinity in these terms, is the normalization of a certain development in men's experience: it becomes a norm against which others are to be judged and found wanting. (Seidler, 2003, p. 3)

When talking about who plays video games, there is often a type of gamer that is held up as the traditional video gamer. These are generally people that openly identify as “gamers” or “hardcore gamers”. The stereotype of these gamers is that they are young, male, White or Asian, socially awkward, and willing to devote large amounts of time to playing complex first person shooter, roleplaying or strategy video games. Yet, the majority of work on gender in game studies are focused on women and girls (Carr, 2014; Jenkins, 1998). While much of this work is committed toward creating greater social equality, unfortunately this focus positions women and girls as the “other” in gaming. By directing critical attention to masculinity, and the male who identifies as a gamer, we place them outside of the “normal” gamer identity and see them in a pantheon identities among those who play video games – allowing for others who game to be seen as a part of gaming culture rather than aberrant identities in the world of video games.

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which masculinity is performed among a group of people whom self-identify as white male gamers. These men participated in interviews about their play practices, how they socialized around games, and how they interpreted cheating in games. In many ways these typically young males are practicing masculinity in a traditional way since gaming, for them, is often socially removed from feminine influences. However, older men are not part of this socialization; they are not present among these young gamer communities as

potential role modes for masculine practices. As a result, these young male gamers are often merely conjecturing and constructing their conceptions of masculinity alone together.

BACKGROUND

Social Construction of Gender

This chapter is built upon the position that gender is socially constructed (Kessler, 1978; Lorber, 1994). This analysis is based upon Judith Butler's (1988) theory of constructed gender, which recognizes gender as a dynamic identity, not dependent upon biology but rather a changing set of criteria based upon multiple influences. Through a stylized repetition of acts we perform our gender and observe others performances of gender – with each of us contributing to the construct of gender identities (Butler, 1988). This perhaps better understood as “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 2009). For West and Zimmerman, doing gender is the complex socially guided interaction of individuals and the surrounding world, both in terms of acting out and defining what is masculine and feminine. In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity, and there is no “normal” masculinity.

Masculinity and Gaming

Because gender is constructed over time and performed in social environments, previous work has identified video games, a traditionally masculine pursuit, as rich grounds for understanding masculinities. Christensen's (2006) work on online gaming sites identified how gender may not only be performed, but some ideal genders may be exaggerated in play practices. In fact, Christensen suggest the reproduction of masculinity online as aggressive, violent, misogynist and homophobic may be more stereotypical and rigid than that masculinity performed in “real life” (Christensen, 2006). In *From Barbie to Mortal Combat*, Jenkins identified how play and gaming is traditionally been a place for children to experience boyhood, to develop and define their gender. He identifies how contemporary video game culture is situated in similar ways to the way boy culture was characterized in the nineteenth century (Jenkins, 1998). Burrill further identified digital gaming as a place where men, not just as children, can indulge in boyhood (Burrill, 2008).

It is a space and experience where the digital boy can “die tryin’, ”tryin’ to win, tryin’ to beat the game, and tryin’ to prove his manhood. (Burrill, 2008, p. 2)

In these analysis digital boyhood can be a place for regression where males can escape the countenance of feminism, class issues, and responsibilities, in general. In

digital boyhood, they can fantasize about other spaces. It also can be a place to continually refine what it mean to be a man, through male socialization and the complex narratives based around typically male context, such as war, fighting, sports, and hero stories.

Traditional and Hardcore Gamers

Much of the gender and gaming work has made some assumptions about whom traditional, or hardcore, gamers are. Some have made a strong distinction between the hardcore gamer in contrast to the casual gamer. Under this pretense, the casual gamer plays games that do not require intense concentration or devotion of long spans of time. In contrast, the hardcore gamer consistently dedicates long periods of time to playing complex games which gives winning, or “leveling up”, greater emphasis (Bossler & Nakatsu, 2006). Juul identifies this stereotype of what makes for a hardcore player as one that extends beyond play practices:

There is an identifiable stereotype of a hardcore player who has a preference for science fiction, zombies, and fantasy fictions, has played a large number of video games, will invest large amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoys difficult games.” (Juul, 2012, p. 8)

Beyond the time and interest, another factor that distinguishes hardcore gamers from casual gamers is the type of game they play and how they identify themselves in relationship to gaming. Among those who identify themselves as hardcore gamers, there is also a widespread notion that “casual gamers” are not true gamers because they are not dedicated enough, and don’t play “real” games. (Kuittinen, Kultima, Niemelä, & Paavilainen, 2007)

Multiple Masculinities: White, Geek, and African American

Performance of masculinity or “doing masculinity” in its ideal form has been described in many ways. Indeed it is described in many ways because there are different ideals of masculinity in different cultures and in different context for each individual. Recognizing these as simplifications of complex and ever-changing traits, we can look at previous literature that speaks to the idealized or media portrayal of masculinity in western culture, among geek culture, as well as within African American culture in order to better appreciate the contrasts in what makes someone a “man”.

Western scholars describe the idealized masculinity as rational, in control of their emotions, (Seidler, 2003) athletic, technologically competent, heterosexual and white

(Connell & Connell, 2005; Pascoe, 2007). The masculinity most often associated with gamers is the geek identity. Geek identities have been studied in context of college students seeking computing degrees, hackers, and gamers. Scholars identify different traits for ideal masculinity in geek culture, but they generally include demonstrations of competitiveness, mastery of the machine, (Margolis & Fisher, 2002; Taylor, 2011) risk taking, asocial behavior, and the rejection of the physical body in terms of sex, appearance, and athleticism (Levy, 2001; Turkle, 1984). The idealized performance of masculinity depicted in the media of African American culture has been identified as anti-intellectual, focused on the physical in terms of athletics, hypersexual, heterosexual and at times physically dangerous and imposing acts (Ferguson, 2000; Hoberman, 1997; hooks, 2003; Page, 1997; Richardson, 2007).

These are but three examples of how masculinity is uniquely set within culture. And even among these three American idealized masculinities, there is not one stable position within a culture, or an individual. For example, an individual may at times identify with geek masculinity, committed toward mastery of the machine but in a different context identify with stereotypical African American masculinity and draw attention to his athleticism or sexuality. Within this study of white male gamers, we seek to identify how their play practices within the context of gaming are tied to the process of constructing identity as gamers; however, it is critical to note that for these young men part of the norm for a gamer identity is being male. In this way, the gaming identity is inherently tied to masculinity and part of the process of this practice of “doing gender”.

INTERVIEWS

As part of a larger study exploring interview methods (Dimond, Fiesler, DiSalvo, Pelc, & Bruckman, 2012), participants were recruited through game email lists and through social networks requesting interviews with gamers. We then used snowball sampling, where we asked participants if they knew of anyone else who would be interested in participating, thus producing a convenience sample. Four researchers conducted 50 interviews including 25 with individuals who identified as male.

Of the 25 interviews with males, 20 identified with the label “gamer”. The self-identification of “gamer” has been defined as more important than how much one games, in terms of identifying who is a gamer and who is not (Shaw, 2012). Indeed, most of the 50 participants interviewed were uncomfortable being identified as “gamers,” even when they spent many hours each week playing digital games. The idea that this gamer identity is predominantly a male identity was supported by our difficulty recruiting women for interviews, because several women we interviewed

told us they were “not really gamers”. We also excluded males who played predominantly sports or casual games. Although only five of the male participants were excluded, the overall finding indicates there may be a correlation with those who play sport games, casual games, identify as African American or gay and those who did not identify as “gamers.”

Of the 20 participants identified as male gamers, 16 self-identified as White and among those White male gamers two self-identified as Latino or Hispanic. We did not ask for sexual orientation; however several participants volunteered information that suggests heterosexual orientation by talking about their girlfriend or wives or indicated they identified as gay. The mean age of the 16 White male gamer participants was 26. Participants were predominantly residents in urban or suburban areas. Nine participants were college students and, of those who were not students, 4 worked in computing or information technology fields.

The semi-structured interview questions asked about several different topics including their favorite game genre and the reasons for those choices; questions also inquired about what platform they preferred to play on and why, if and how they like to play games with other people, what they considered cheating in games to be and whether they had cheated (or continue to cheat) in game play; finally, we questioned the time they spent each week gaming. The interviews were conducted using three different media, phone, instant messenger and email, in accordance with the protocol for the larger interview methods study (Dimond et al., 2012). Interview transcripts were then analysis using an inductive and deductive coding method in three phases.

FINDINGS

Cheating and Modding

While many of the participants expressed distain for cheating, all of them told us they used cheat codes, guides or modifications when playing some games, or at some time during their life. They generally considered these practices “cheating”, and that doing such things “ruined” the game, but they also had a number of justifications for cheating. The most common was the belief that cheating in a single player game is just an option to make the game more fun.

Of course I would not cheat in a versus game (unless we both were), but cheating in a single player game is just another option – Gabe, 24, employed in technology field

They also justified cheating as a response to design flaws:

So one thing that they allowed was teleporting in town because in Diablo, like walking in town, like, actually took a long time. You know, going from one bank to the other you had to like, walk a minute or 2 minutes. So they were like, "Ok screw this, we're just gonna' teleport around town with trainers" so that they could save time and stuff. So is that hacking? Yea, I think it's still hacking, but I think it's more like, they're kind of compensating for the game's design faults. – Robert, 21, student in technology field

And a few participants fully embraced cheating as a strategy or part of the game play experience, when asked, "Have you ever cheated?" Gary responded:

Many times, starting with the Game Genie and Game Shark. I've always had a fascination with hacker and felt like I was doing some of it. – Gary 25, Student in technology field

Cheating can be defined in many ways (Consalvo, 2007), and when we asked how they defined cheating, the participants did not have a rigid definition but instead defined it as open to interpretation. In most cases they felt an action might be cheating but still acceptable when that action was a way to outsmart the game as it was designed. This acceptance of cheating, when it was about mastery over the machine, aligns with idealized geek masculinities (Levy, 2001).

Competition, Trash Talk and Socialization

In general, participants did not talk about competition as a motivator for playing video games. In part this may be related in the type of games they played. While they all played first person shooter (FPS) games, most said role-playing games (RPG) were their favorite genre. Some expressed discomfort with competition with their friends and preferred competition online with people they do not know.

When people are, you know, being bastard. If I don't know them I don't care, but if it's people that I know who are being dicks, then I don't like that basically. – Dean, 27, employed in technology field

Two of the participants who mentioned that competition, in fact, motivated them, actually play video games in competitive gaming leagues. But with these two, and some others, the emphasis in competing was being part of team or group that competes against another group.

When it comes to gameplay I like playing games like Battlefield. I play that game competitively with clans. But yea, it's like, you play as an engineer or you play as a medic so it's kind of like cooperative play. – Robert, 21, student in technology field

In contrast to studies of young African American male game play practices (DiSalvo & Bruckman, 2010), There was little indication of playful trash talk, as most respondents considered trash talk aggressive. The few participants who did mention it were hesitant to identify as someone who participated in trash talk. Dave, who was in his 40s, told us that bragging like that would not be socially acceptable for someone his age.

Yea, but at my age, if I went into the office and told everyone how I rule with the AK47, I'd get fired.
– Dave, 47, employed in technology field

Most participants said they preferred playing with other people. Not only did they prefer social play, they also preferred to play in the same room with people rather than online. However, they had a difficult time articulating why.

It doesn't change it a lot to be in physical proximity, but it just kind of, it's still more enjoyable for a reason that can't really be quantified. It's just yea... – Dean, 27, employed in technology field

I guess just having that physical, like you can just... (pause) I don't know. It feels cool when you're, like playing a game. Like when I was at that LAN party, I think that's when Doom 3 came out, and so they had like, a competition for it. It was everybody's first time playing it and I was... (pause) I ended up being like... (pause) it was me and like the other guy. It was just us two battling it out for first place and everybody is like behind me watching. It just kind of felt like 'Wow this is cool. I'm like the important guy here.' – Robert, 21, student in technology field

This desire for social play defies stereotype of gamers being a-social, or interested in online relationships more than in world relationships. However, the fact that participants had difficulty expressing such appreciation for social interaction aligns with the common description of geek masculinities (S. Turkle, 1984) where real world social interactions are not considered (or at least not expressed) as valuable experiences.

Gearheads

Many of the interviews were dominated by specialized and encyclopedic talk about game titles, game genres, and the histories of game series, as well as specific game developers and trends in game development. In all, participants mentioned over 200 unique games series and indicated that they knew many more. Participants also talked in depth about their gaming technology or what technology they hoped to acquire.

Usually, like we had our own server. So we would just jump in the server also we had voice chat, which we would use, mainly it was Ventrilo. But, you know, I think we've used TeamSpeak in the past also. Also, there was a program called x-fire, which is kind of like AOL instant messenger. You can like, see which of your friends are, like, what games they're playing and then you can just, like, click on their name... – Robert, 21, student in technology field

However, a greater focus of their specialized talk seemed to be the opportunity to display an encyclopedic knowledge of games mechanics or tactics, similar to the way men frequently display and generate knowledge in a traditionally masculine sports domains around rule and strategies (Davis & Duncan, 2006):

The use of an AddOn to help with repetitive tasks that make the game less fun is acceptable as long as it's a SANCTIONED mod. The community polices this sort of thing, usually. So using a Quest Helper to help level up your second character quickly by giving you the GPS 'coords of the next quest point is not cheating in my book, it just makes the boring second-time through less tedious. Using an auto-targeting system or a "social engineering" attack like "throwing matches" for a ranked arena duel however, would be totally unacceptable. – Steven, 39, employed in technology field

In consumer culture we have seen men practice masculinity through deep investment in particular tools and resources and specialized knowledge related to their interest. The practices of these rational "gearheads" have been explored in the context of hunting (Littlefield, 2006) and cars and bikes (Best, 2006; Tragos, 2009). The vast display of knowledge about gaming is part of their gamer identity and aligns with other masculinities where the display of expert knowledge marks one as authentic to the identity of being a part of that culture.

Dissing Other Games

Another way we saw participants creating distinctions about what is authentic gaming was through derogatory and dismissive talk about games that have a focus on casual or social play, or sports games that would be less tied to geek masculinity. Most participants initially said they didn't play any casual games. However, several participants, after a moment of hesitation or further questions, admitted to playing casual games with a number of qualifiers on why they played such casual games. Some outright admitted to liking them, but then were still careful to note them as frivolous in contrast to the other games they play.

Well, lately my computer has been having issues with graphics-intensive games, so it's been mostly small, silly games on the Internet, like Robot Unicorn Attack. – Mark, 22, student in non-technology field

Some told us they had played, but found them unsatisfying:

You know, I dabbled in Facebook games a while, but I realized that never really satisfied me when I was playing. – Charles, 21, student in non-technology field

In a similar way, a few dismissed games that did not align with a geek masculinity by rejecting games that were tied to athleticism, such as sports games or performing arts, such a rhythm games.

In enjoy most genres of games, except for simulations sport games where they are going for complete accuracy. – Anthony, 23, unemployed

This is similar to the derogatory talk that some car hobbyists have about Asian cars, or as they call them “Ricers” (Best, 2006). It is also reminiscent of how some young men assert their masculinity by derogatory talk about homosexuality (Pascoe, 2007).

“Epic” Narratives and Aesthetics

In contrast to the difficulty in articulating why the social side of gaming was important to them, the participants were almost poetic in describing the narrative and aesthetic aspects of gaming. Nearly all of the participants mentioned narrative and aesthetics as a motivation for like certain games.

I enjoy Metroid Prime because of its deep attention to small details that lent the gamespace an almost surreal level of personality. The flora and creatures all seemed so natural, as did the crumbling Chozo architecture. It isn't easy to make a puzzle game, let alone one where the puzzles don't feel like puzzles at all, but products of the environment. The brilliant soundtrack and set pieces just drove these points home. – Bruce, 19, student in technology field

I like them (games in the action/adventure and survival/horror genre) because of the story line, the action, the ability to use think and solve puzzles, and the epic feel of the game. – Luis, 24, employed in technology field

The complexity of the games, the rich narrative, imagery and sound helps participants become immersed in these worlds. This suggest it is not simply players escaping their other lives, but also an act of constructing values and practices with their friends, the game designers and the medium itself. Exploring these acts through a lens of understanding gender, we can see these games as construction of masculinity similar to the dynamic construction and performance of epic poems of our past.

I like it (WOW) because, it is remarkably immersive, the story is epic and compelling, and the interaction will fellow players is fantastic. – Sean, 23, student in technology field

The word “epic” was mentioned many times during the interviews when participants described their favorite games. The context of epic poetry is an appropriate narrative for comparison. The roleplaying games that participants preferred particularly have strong similarities to epic poetry, both with male hero driven narratives, in richly portrayed worlds full of magic and mythology.

Epic poems of western culture, from the Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Graziosi & Haubold, 2003), Roman *Aeneid* (Martindale, 1997), Icelandic *Njáls Saga* (Jakobsson, 2007) to the British *Beowulf* (Dockray-Miller, 1998), explore masculinity through their male heroes. As oral poems they were public performances, dynamic in their construction and reconstruction, and underpinning a society’s ever changing masculine identities.

Constructing Masculinities

First, though we now know that gender is a central axis around which social life revolves, most men do not know they are gendered beings. When we say “gender,” we hear women. (Kimmel, 2005, p. 363)

For these participants, there was very little awareness of their gender, unlike in our interviews with women who frequently mentioned their gender in opposition to what they saw as normal gamers. It is typical that White males do not see gender or race because they are situated in a position of being the social norm and, consequently, their behavior is considered and extant of the normal. Participants revealed how they were invested or immersed in stories that focus on masculine pursuits and through their play construction masculinity. It is telling that different cultural background and context of play, such as African American students playing sports games with their families (DiSalvo, Crowley, & Norwood, 2008) or White gamers playing epic narratives with male friends, lead young men to immerse themselves in different types of games and with different play practices. These choices are self-regulating acts, reinforcing and reconstructing the masculine identities of their own culture.

This chapter began by seeking a place to deconstruct the identity of what we often assume as the norm in gaming. The goal here is not to critique these gamers in terms of their values and/ or their practices, but to create a space where we recognize that White male gaming practices are unique and that video games, like most play and

narratives pursuits, are used (intentionally or not) to construct gender. If we don't seek to understand masculinity as a specific and unique trait of these gamers, we will continue to perceive the broad spectrum of gender that falls outside of these practices as the "other".

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