GAMING MASCULINITY: Constructing Masculinity with Video Games
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).

INTRODUCTION

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 male, White or Asian, socially awkward, young and 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 focused on 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, meaning they are not present to demonstrating masculine practices, so these young men are often constructing their concepts of masculinity together.

Social Construction of Gender

This chapter is build upon the position that gender is socially constructed (Lorber, 1994)(Kessler, 1978). This analysis is based upon Judith Butler's theory of constructed gender, which recognizes gender as a dynamic identity, not dependent upon biology, with a changing set of requirements 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 world around them in both acting 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 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)

In these analysis digital boyhood can be a place for regression where males can escape feminism, class issues, and responsibilities and 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 place the idea of the hardcore gamer in contrast to the casual gamers. The causal gamer plays games that do not require intense concentration or devotion of long spans of time. In contrast, hardcore gamer consistently dedicates long periods of time to playing complex games which gives winning, or leveling up, greater gratification (Bosser & Nakatsu, 2006). Juul identifies s a stereotype of hardcore players that goes 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)

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 gamers there is also a 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 is a different ideal of masculinity in different cultures and in different context for each individual. Recognizing these as simplifications of complex and every changing traits, we can look at previous literature that speaks to the idealized or media portrayal of masculinity in western culture, geek culture and African American culture to see some of the contrast 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, (Taylor, 2011) (Margolis & Fisher, 2002) risk taking, a-social behaviors, and rejecting the physical body, such as sex, appearance, and athletics (Levy, 2001a) (Sharry Turkle, 1984)(Sherry 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)(Griffin, 2001)(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 – focused on mastery of the machine, but in a different context identify with stereotypical African American masculinity and draw attention to his athleticism or sexuality. With in 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 – but 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 doing gender.

INTERVIEWS
A part of a larger study exploring interview methods, 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 who would be interested in participating 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 they felt they were "not really gamers." We also excluded males who played predominantly sports or casual games – although only 5 participants were excluded, the finding indicate there maybe a correlation with those who play sport games, casual games, identified as African American or gay (this information was volunteered and not part of our interview protocol) and those who did not identify as "gamers."

Of the 20 participants identified as male gamers 16 self-identified as White with 2 of those who self-identified as Latino or Hispanic. We did not ask for sexual orientation, however several of them volunteered information that suggests heterosexual orientation by talking about their girlfriend or wives. The mean age of the 16 white male gamer participants was 26. Participants were predominantly residents in city (or suburban areas. Nine participants were college students and of those where were not studnets four participants worked in computing or information technology fields.

The semi-structured interview questions asked about several different topics including; their favorite genre and game and the reasons for those choices, 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 and if they had cheated, and the time they spent each week gaming. The interviews were conducted using three different media in accordance with the protocol for the larger interview methods study (Dimond, Fiesler, DiSalvo, Pelc, & Bruckman, 2012). Interview transcripts were then analysis using an inductive and deductive coding method in three phases.

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 a some time in 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 – Rafael

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 two
> 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. – Richard

And a few participants fully embraced cheating as a strategy or part of the game play experience:

Interviewer: Have you ever cheated?
JD: 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.

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 it may be "cheating" but it was acceptable when it was a way "gaming the game." This acceptance of cheating when, it is about mastery over the machine aligns with idealized geek masculinities (Levy, 2001b).

Competition, Trash Talk and Socialization

In general, participants did not talk about competition as a motivator for playing video game. In part this may be related in the type of games they played. While they all played first person shooter (FPS) most said roleplaying games (RPG) were there 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. -- Justin

Two of the participants who mentioned how competition motivated them, play 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. – Richard

There was little indication of playful trash talk, most of the trash talk was considered aggressive. The few participants who did mention it were hesitant to identify as someone who participated in trash talk. Bob, who was in his 40's, 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. – Bob

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… – Justin

> I guess just having that physical, like you can just… (hesitation) 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… (hesitation) I ended up being like… (hesitation) 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.' – Richard

This desire for social play defies stereotype of gamers being a-social, or interested in online relationships more than in world relationships. However, participants difficulty expressing these appreciation for social interaction aligns with descriptions of geek masculinities (S. Turkle, 1984) where real world social interactions are not considered valuable experiences

Gearheads

Many of the interviews were dominated by specialized and encyclopedic talk about game titles, genres, and histories of game series, 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 their playing and then you can just, like, click on their name… --Richard

However, a greater focus of their specialized talk seemed to be the opportunity to displayed an encyclopedic knowledge of games, similar to the way men frequently display and generate knowledge in a traditionally masculine sports domains (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. – MichaelJ

In consumer culture we have seen men practice masculinity through deep investment in tools and specialize knowledge related to their interest. The practices of these rational gearheads has 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, at first, said they didn't play any causal 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 casual games. Some admitted to liking them, but still presented 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 Attach. – Daniel

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. – MichaelF

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. – Joseph

This is similar to the derogatory talk that some car hobbyist have about Asian cars, or as they call them Ricers (Best, 2006). It is also reminiscent of how 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. – Eric

> 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. – Sergio

The complexity of the games, the rich narrative, imagery and sound helps participants become immersed in these world – not simply escaping the their other lives, but constructing as set of values and practices with their friends, the game designers, and the medium itself.

The word epic was mentioned several times during the interviews when participants described their favorite games. The context of epic poetry is an appropriate narrative form to compare to. Particularly the roleplaying games that the participants preferred have strong similarities to epic poetry, with male hero driven narratives, richly described worlds, magic, and mythology.

Epic poems, orally passed along, were a times dynamic constructions of the male hero narrative. In epic poems of western culture from the Greek Iliad and Odyssey (Graziosi & Haubold, 2003), Roman Aeneid (Martindale, 1997), Icelandic Njal's Saga (Jakobsson, 2007) to the British Beowulf (Dockray-Miller, 1998) explore a masculinity through their male heroes. As oral poems and text they have been public performances for socially construct our 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. Michael S. Kimmel (2005)

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. This is typical that white males do not see gender or race because they placed in a position of being the norm and their behavior is considered normal. Participants reveled 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.

I began this chapter seeking a place to deconstruct the identity of what we often assume as the norm in gaming. Not to critique these gamers, their values or their practices, but to create a space were we recognize that white male gaming practices are unique, and that video game, like most play and narratives pursuits, are used in constructing gender. If we don't seek to understand masculinity as a specific and unique trait of these gamers, we will continue to place the broad spectrum of gender that falls outside of their practices as the other.

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