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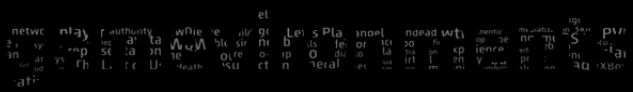

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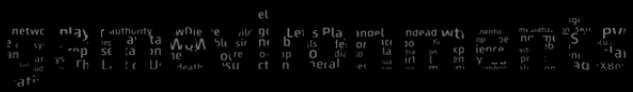

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reviews

Feminist Gamer Social Identities

Michael Winters and James L. Williams

Abstract
In 2020, the Electronic Software Association reported that women are just under half of all video game consumers. However, video games as an industry and communities of gamers are apparently resistant to the presence of women and especially feminists in these spaces. The events of #GamerGate serve as a stark reminder of the response to women and feminists in gaming spaces. We aim to contribute to a growing field of research by exploring why women who are feminists continue to identify as gamers in the face of such hostility. The first author interviewed 10 self-identified women who detailed their experiences as both gamers and feminists. We found that gamer and feminist identities impact each other in complex and surprising ways, leading to the creation of personal philosophies and social groups that support both social identities concurrently. We also discuss implications for future research.

Keywords: Feminist Gamers, Social Identity, Feminist, Feminist Identity, gamevironments

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In 2020, the Electronic Software Association (ESA), in their annual report on the video games industry, found that the average gamer is 35 years old (ESA 2020, 5). Additionally, they also reported that women age 18 and older represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population than boys under age 18 (ESA 2017), which runs contrary to what many people assumed to the be the average game consumer (Dietz 1998, Chess, Evans and Banes 2017). The most popular genres according to the ESA (2017) are shooters, casual games, or action games. In 2016, the American video game industry earned $30 billion dollars, making it one of the largest industries in the United States (ESA 2017).

Social science research on video games has focused on two broad categories: a person's interaction with the gaming software itself (Dietz 1998, Kuznekoff and Rose, 2012, Pérez Latorre 2015) and the social interactions between players (Cărătărescu-Petrică 2015, Greitemeyer and Mügge 2014, Ivory 2006, O'Connor, Longman, White and Obst 2015). In the early days of video games as medium, this would have sufficed, as gaming was not a broadly connected activity. Video game players were rarely given the opportunity to interact with people outside of their immediate social groups. Additionally, video games were at one point generally considered to be an activity exclusively for men (Brehm 2013, Chess and Shaw 2015, Cote 2017, Cote 2018, Fox and Tang 2014, Salter and Blodgett 2012, Williams, Consalvo, Caplan and Ye 2009). For these reasons, a considerable amount of academic energy has been put forward in trying to understand what links (if any) exist between video game consumption, masculinity, and aggression (Bertran and Chamarro 2016, Fox and Potocki 2016), antisocial behavior (Greitemeyer and Mügge 2014), and sexism (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 2009, Dill, Brown and Collins 2008, Salter and Blodgett 2012).

Issues of gender representation in the video game industry have always been present, but an intensified interest in this issue developed in the wake of #GamerGate. #GamerGate refers to the widespread harassment of prominent women in the video game industry due to their attempts to shift the production of game industry narratives in a more inclusive direction (Chess and Shaw 2015, Gray, Buyukozturk and Hill 2017, Kondrat 2015, Mortensen 2016). Much of this backlash was based on the rejection of feminism specifically, which has become a point of contention and derision in many gaming circles (Phillips 2020).

Regardless of their roles as either developers or consumers, women report extensive harassment and discrimination while in gaming spaces (Brehm 2013, Cote 2017, Cote

2020, Phidd 2018). It has also been observed that gender cues present in the representations (avatars) of women in video game spaces result in negative or aggressive responses from players (Kuznekoff and Rose 2012), even if the gender of the player controlling the avatar is unknown to others (Eden et al. 2010, Waddell and Ivory 2015). These findings are similar to the literature regarding the treatment of women and feminine behavior in offline spaces that are perceived to be traditionally masculine or male-dominated (Cuadrado, Garcia-Ael and Molero 2015, Eagly and Karau 2002, Heilman and Okimoto 2007, Koch, D'Mello and Sackett 2015, Thoroughgood, Sawyer and Hunter 2013).

However, it is important to note the limited availability of academic literature regarding harassment or discrimination against feminists at both the professional and social level in the gaming industry and in gaming communities. While existing data suggests that just under half of all gamers are female (ESA 2020, 5), it is unknown how many female gamers identify as feminists, contributing to their relative absence in the gaming literature. Additionally, there is a lack of previous studies reporting on the possible conflicts between maintaining identities as feminists, gamers, and women. However, conferences where women and feminist gamers have had to defend themselves and explain their purposes to gaming audiences have been held, indicating there may be identity conflicts present within feminist gamers (Sinclair 2018). Additionally, Amanda Phillips' (2020) Gamer Trouble posits the contention between general gaming culture and feminism across multiple gaming spheres.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of women who are feminist video game players. More specifically, we aim to map how identities both as gamers and feminists are developed and maintained, even when both identities are seemingly in conflict at a social level. To this end, we intended to see why people who identify both as women and feminists continue to be part of a community that is

apparently resistant to both identities as noted by Gray et al. (2017, 2-3) and Phillips (2020). The study is also interested in the ways women and feminists maintain social circles within the contexts of both gaming and feminism. Additionally, we aim to see how women and feminists view the gaming community overall, as well as what they would like to see from the video game industry regarding their inclusion.

Literature Review

Gaming and Social Interaction

In terms of games studied, most social scientists have analyzed the impacts of several genres of games. By far, the most common genre is the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), an online-based multiplayer game that requires cooperation between players to complete various objectives (Waddell and Ivory 2015). Other genres examined include shooter games, which can include single- or multiplayer campaigns (Kuznekoff and Rose 2012); and action-adventure games, which are typically single-player but can include multiplayer elements (Pérez Latorre 2015).

The real-world impact of digital interaction on behavior and identity has been tied to the study of gaming because of the vast array of game types available to consumers, the success of the video game industry as a whole, and controversies regarding problematic behavior in gaming spaces. Additionally, gaming literature has shown that experiences in an online setting have effects both online and offline. For example, Greitemeyer and Mügge (2014, 583-584), in an extensive meta-analysis of available literature spanning experimental, correlational, and longitudinal studies, found that violent video games increase aggression and decrease prosocial outcomes in an offline setting, while prosocial video game play had the opposite effect. Cole

and Griffiths (2007) found that most MMORPG players in their experiment found the virtual environments to be highly social experiences that detached them from real-world categories and obligations. Even so, many MMORPG players construct personal identities in these games (Gabbiadini et al. 2014) and form social relationships with other players, up to and including considering them to be true friends and expressing a willingness to meet these people in an offline setting (O'Connor et al. 2015).

Regarding gender in gaming, Waddell and Ivory (2015, 122-124) found that attractive female avatars received more help in online games than non-attractive avatars, but non-attractive female avatars found less help than all male ones. This suggests that offline cultural biases bleed into digital social lives. Additionally, Dietz (1998, 438) reported that a significant number of games feature contextually acceptable aggression toward female characters, such violence committed toward women as a narrative impetus for a male protagonist. What this suggests, then, is that the consumption of gaming has effects in both the digital and physical realms that the players inhabit.

Sexism and Gaming

Williams et al. (2009, 711) reported that women tend to make up the majority of *hardcore* MMORPG players, or those who devote the most time and energy toward their games. Despite this, Ivory (2006, 111-112) found most games lack a significant female character, while those with female characters emphasize the sexual aspects of these characters by having these characters wear revealing clothing and behaving submissively, among other noted trends. Even games that feature playable female protagonists will oftentimes portray the character in a highly sexualized manner (Salter and Blodgett 2012) or exclude them from advertising campaigns (Kondrat 2015).

Many video games, especially those that are founded on interaction between players, now rely on built-in voice or text chats where players can directly address each other. This has made the identification of some player characteristics immediately apparent to other players, which has been shown to lead to gendered interactions between players. For example, Kuznekoff and Rose (2012) conducted an experiment where a confederate played a game with alternating, pre-recorded male and female voices played over voice chat in *Halo 3* (2007), a shooter game. They found that other players responding to a female voice were more likely to give the confederate a negative review than when they were responding to a male voice. Adding to this, most female players report experiencing overt forms of hostile and benevolent sexism over both text chat and voice chat (Brehm 2013), leading to the adoption of defensive strategies that include concealing their gender or leaving gaming spaces entirely (Cote 2017). However, while the experiences of playing video games differ according to respondent sex or gender, there has been limited research regarding the role of feminist ideologies specifically in how players connect with each other or form gaming communities.

To provide context for the study of gamer and feminist identities, it is important to highlight two prominent events that informed the origins of this research. The first event is #GamerGate. In late 2014, the event that would come be called #GamerGate took shape as a response to the feminist critique of the video game industry for having embedded sexism in the development of games and gaming spaces (Mortensen 2016). This response included not just written responses against such criticisms, but discrimination, harassment, and threats of violence and sexual assault towards feminist game critic Anita Sarkeesian, game developer Zoe Quinn, game developer Brianna Wu, and others (Wingfield 2014, Gray et al. 2017).

Although many in the #GamerGate movement argued that the primary aim of the movement was to enforce accountability for honest journalism, many critics and academics noted that the targets of #GamerGate tended to be women and feminists in the games industry (Chess and Shaw 2015, Cote 2020). Researchers also noticed that, either directly or indirectly as a result of #GamerGate, women in gaming spaces (regardless of their personal identification as a feminist) became the target of threats of rape or doxxing (have their personal information released to the public) (Gray et al. 2017).

The harassment, discrimination, and violence faced by women during #GamerGate resembles the experiences of women in other fields where men and masculine identities are dominant (Eagly and Karau 2002, Heilman and Okimoto 2007, Ko, Kotrba and Roebuck 2015). It is important to note that #GamerGate is an exemplar events regarding the widespread harassment and discrimination within the gaming and entertainment industry and the responses to such events within these spheres. Harrassment and discrimination are experienced daily by women, people of color, and queer people within these spaces, and #GamerGate, while a helpful encapsulations of common experiences, should only be seen as one part of the whole issues of sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia within these particular industries.

Gamer and Feminist Self-identification

Since this study looks at the process of self-identification as both gamers and as feminists, it is important to understand how a person can construct *gamer* and *feminist* identities. An identity can be seen as an internalized response to social position (Stryker 1980 [2002]). Identities are developed and maintained through interaction with the social world, oftentimes by interaction with proximate social

structures such as the family or the church (Yarrison 2016). These identities are thought to result from aggregate individual and social circumstances (Burke and Stets 2009, Hogg 2006), such as group visibility or gender socialization (Carter 2014).

One of the personal and social circumstances that influence identity development as a gamer is the creation of game characters. Karen Isbister (2006) found that people become attached to the personalized characters (avatars) that can be created in video games. An avatar that more closely resembles a player is more likely to psychologically or emotionally attach the player to the game world and, theoretically, any communities that build up around the play of that game (Euteneuer 2016). This should, in turn, lead to the creation of a gamer identity in any person who plays these games. However, most games do not include the option for a player to design a character that resembles them. Primary protagonists in games have often been archetypically designed as cisgender, heterosexual, white, and male (Chess, Evans and Baines 2017, Dietz 1998, Euteneuer 2016, Ivory 2006, Kondrat 2015). This in turn has led to the creation of a gamer social identity as belonging to straight white cisgender males (Mortensen 2016, Cote 2018).

In this context it is important to remember that female gamers are more reluctant to identify themselves as gamers, especially as the prospect of actual or perceived discrimination by male gamers becomes more likely (Vermeulen, Bauwel and Looy 2017, McLean and Griffiths 2018). Shaw (2012) ultimately found that negative attributions to game playing were likely to reduce the likelihood of an individual adopting a gamer identity. Understanding this in terms of the rise of gatekeeping of who is and is not a *true gamer* that underlies the events of #GamerGate (Chess and Shaw 2015, Gray et al. 2017) indicates that anyone who does not fall into all of the four identifiers of the prototypical gamer identity (cisgender, heterosexual, white, and

male) would be cumulatively stigmatized in the gaming community and thus become increasingly unlikely to identify themselves as a gamer.

Of concurrent interest to this study is the development of feminist identities and subsequent self-identification as a feminist. Unlike the gamer identity, there exists a popular model that traces the development of one's eventual self-identification as a feminist. The feminist identity development model that was developed by Downing and Roush (1985) explained that women move through a series of stages from passively accepting traditional gender roles to self-identification as a feminist through internalization of feminist concern and social interactions with other feminists. Liss and Erchull (2010), in a study of female self-identified feminists and non-feminists, found that self-labeled feminists were more likely to acknowledge and publicly discuss sexism, unjust gender differentials, and the need for women to work together for change, especially as these self-labeled feminists came closer to identifying with prototypical feminists. This discussion of feminist prototypes is important because favorable attitudes toward these prototypes are not only associated with claiming a feminist label but also with a willingness to intervene when confronted with everyday sexist behavior, especially if that self-identified feminist felt more likely to be personally vulnerable to the effects of that everyday sexism (Weis et al. 2018). In another recent study of self-identified feminists, Kelly and Gauchat (2016) found that respondents with a feminist identity were likely to be associated with progressive attitudes on gender, sexuality, race, and intersectional social justice.

While there has been no strict formal examination as of yet, it seems somewhat clear that self-identified feminists would generally be opposed to the current sexist state of gaming. In contrast, it appears that self-identified gaming communities have made little space for the imminent concerns of feminists. Yet, there exist people who

straddle the line between the two communities, as evidenced by #GamerGate victims Anita Sarkeesian, Brianna Wu, and Zoe Quinn, all of whom are both prominent feminists and video game consumers (Chess and Shaw 2015, Gray et al. 2017). A burgeoning field of research has analyzed the way race, gender, and sexual identity have intersected with video game culture, namely in the ways that contribute to identity-based harassment, disparities in development and in-game representation, and the creation of alternative gaming spaces that are more inclusive (Cote 2018, Gray et al. 2017, Phillips 2020). This research aims to contribute to these findings.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory suggests that membership (or perceived membership) in a social group affects the sense of self in terms of social categorization (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Social groups are characterized as two or more individuals who share similar identities and evaluations of themselves, including definitions of who they are, what attributes they have, and how similar or different they are to people who are not a part of the group (Hogg 2006). Social categorizations produce prototypes, which are collections of perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and other attributes that are meaningfully related and understood as being similarly shared with members of certain groups (Hogg 2006). These prototypes provide instructions for behavior and cognition that is consistent with membership in a certain group. The creation of this prototype social identity is also what distinguishes other individuals as either in-group or out-group members (Tajfel and Turner 1986).

This theory is a popular choice for understanding ideological movements because the theory suggests that members of an in-group will maximize the differences between their groups and competing outgroups (Tajfel and Turner 1986). While this theory to our knowledge has not yet been applied to the apparently competing ideologies of

feminism and video game consumption, it has been successfully used to show how partisanship between competing political orientations can form (Greene 2004).

There is no specific model to gauge such behavior in people who hold gaming identities, and this study will make no attempt to construct one. However, when group membership is threatened, we know that stereotyping (Tajfel and Turner 1986) and gatekeeping (Hogg 2006) become go-to activities to maintain stable social identities. Such stereotyping and gatekeeping (among other hostile acts) were frequently used by the perpetrators of #GamerGate, who actively resisted feminist and intersectional efforts to make gaming for accessible and inclusive (Gray et al. 2017). The current study attempts to expand the explanations that social identity theory can provide for people who hold self-identified membership in two seemingly competing social groups (gamers and feminists) and how these individuals manage such stereotyping and gatekeeping in these communities to which they belong. This study will not limit itself to studying a particular genre of game, such as MMORPG or action-adventure, and instead will focus on the broad application of social identities to feminist gamers.

Research Questions

The following research questions were explored in this study:

Research Question 1: What contributes to the development and activation of gamer social identities in women?

Research Question 2: What contributes to the development and activation of feminist social identities in women?

Research Question 3: How do gamer and feminist social identities interact in women?

Data and Methods

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used because of the intricate and nuanced nature of the intermingling, specialized identities under study (Neuman 2011). Considering the unknown number of feminist gamers, it would be unlikely that a generalizable random sample could be drawn. Hence, participants were selected based on how well they fit into this study, and how well they fit relied solely on their self-identification as feminists and as gamers. Participants were drawn from recruitment scripts posted in the following social media pages geared toward feminist gamers: *Feminist Gamers*, *Feminist Warriors of Dungeons and Dragons* on Facebook and the *r/FeministGamers* subforum on Reddit. These groups were selected for recruitment due to their specific or general interests in both feminist and gaming topics. Recruitment scripts were not posted without approval from at least one group administrator. Recruitment also came from physical or electronic recruitment scripts submitted to potential participants by associates of the primary researcher.

Data Collection

An in-depth, semi-structured interview was held for ten participants (see Appendix A for questionnaire). Interviews were used due to the ability to capture the rich, nuanced data needed to establish a baseline for the study of this unique population (Leavy 2017). Each interview consisted of three sets of questions. The interviews ranged from 45-120 minutes in length with an average length of 56 minutes. During the interviews, the respondents were notified that they could leave the interview at any time, could skip any questions they did not want to answer, and that questions could be asked at their leisure. Interviews were conducted using a voice program of the respondents' choosing. Of the ten participants, nine consented to voice interviews using Skype, Google Hangouts, or Facebook Messenger voice services. These online

interviews were recorded using a handheld recording device. The remaining participant preferred a text interview using Facebook Messenger, citing concerns for privacy as the main reason for not using a voice chat. All interviews were conducted by the first author.

As mentioned above, each semi-structured interview consisted of three sections of pre-selected questions. Probing questions were used as needed to gather more specific information from the participants (Leavy 2017). Additionally, respondents were informed that although the questions seemed to be geared toward video gaming, they could also answer these questions in terms of their gaming experiences overall, regardless of gaming format or medium.

For the first section of the interview, ten pre-selected questions were asked regarding the participants' gaming experiences, habits, and preferences. Experiences were measured with questions such as, *How did you first get into playing games?* and *Can you tell me about your experiences as a woman who plays games?* Habits were measured with questions such as, *How frequently do you play games?* and *Do you maintain frequent contact with other game players?* Finally, preferences were measured with questions such as, *Do you have a preference for how you play your games?* and *What do you like most about gaming?*

For the second section of the interview, eight pre-selected questions were asked regarding the participants' feminist experiences, habits, and preferences, in a manner similar to the first set of questions. Experiences were measured with questions such as *What brought feminism to your attention?* and *How did you learn to identify yourself as a feminist?* Habits were measured with questions such as, *How frequently do you participate in feminist dialogue?* and *Do you maintain frequent contact with*

other feminists? Finally, preferences were measured with questions such as, *What does being a feminist mean to you?* and *Would you classify yourself as any particular kind of feminist?*

The final section of the interview consisted of 12 pre-selected questions aimed at uncovering the interaction between the respondent's gamer and feminist identities. First, six questions related to the events of #GamerGate were asked to gauge the possible impacts of respondent gaming habits and interaction with other players. The final six questions saw the participants responding to prompts about the current general state of gaming as well as their own place as both gamers and feminists within that state.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using in vivo coding techniques with the purpose of finding concurrent thematic elements relating to gamer and feminist identity and formation (Leavy 2017). During this process, pseudonyms were assigned to participants for the purpose of protecting identities. In keeping with social identity theory, transcripts were analyzed for social identity formation and activation in response to the influence of immediate or proximate social groups and how those contributed to or were detrimental to the ability to identify oneself as a feminist or as a gamer.

Researcher Reflexivity

This study was conducted as part of a long-term research agenda of studying gaming, technology, and marginalized populations. This study results from the first author's own interests in feminism and gaming. It is important to state these matters

because they played a role in my chosen method of data analysis and the selected theoretical frameworks applied to this study.

Social identity theory was chosen because of its ability to address the analysis of multiple identities. Since the gaming community seems to generally undervalue the participation of women and feminists, social identity theory is useful in addressing any personal or social conflict that may arise from holding membership in communities that are antagonistic towards each other on the surface.

It is also vital to note that in addition to being a feminist and a gamer, the first author is a white, cisgender male, which is typically considered the archetypal gamer (Shaw 2012, Chess et al. 2017). These identifiers could play a role in data analysis due to different perspectives or experiences of the subject matter discussed in this research. Additionally, it may have also influenced respondent participation in the sense that many women who are feminists or gamers may be reluctant to talk to a researcher who has many matching characteristics as the typical gamer (and, thus, the typical antagonizer of both women gamers and feminist gamers).

Results

Characteristics of Participants

From the recruitment process came ten participants, all of whom identify as women. Although demographic questions were not asked directly, the nature of some questions led participants to reveal some primary data about themselves. Nine of these respondents (90%) identified themselves as white; seven participants (70%) directly identified themselves as currently pursuing or in possession of degrees in higher education; four (40%) identified themselves as currently partnered; and one

respondent (10%) indicated that they were homosexual. Participants are referred to using the pseudonyms assigned to them during the transcription process.

Six (60%) respondents indicated that they started playing games between the ages of 5 to 10; two (20%) of respondents indicated that they started playing games between the ages of 11-13; and two (20%) of respondents did not indicate when they started playing games. Seven (70%) of respondents indicated that they played games every day; two (20%) indicated that they played games several times a week; and one (10%) indicated that they played once per week. Role-playing games (RPG) were the most popularly discussed genre, with eight (80%) respondents mentioning that they play these games. Seven (70%) respondents indicated that they played action/adventure games; six (60%) indicated that they played tabletop games; five (50%) indicated that they played shooters; five (50%) indicated that they played puzzle games; and two (20%) indicated that they played simulation games.

Sexism, Women, and Gaming Identities

For the gamers interviewed here, many did identify themselves as a gamer in a community of other gamers. This was reflected not only in the choice of games they played, but in the other gamers they surrounded themselves with. Such categorization stemming from membership in a group could be seen in how important each respondent saw gaming to their lives, how frequently they game, and what gaming entails for them. From these excerpts, it is clear that all respondents have made membership in a gaming community to be a primary part of who they are as an individual and a key component in many social relationships, including marriages and positions of authority in gaming spheres:

> "[Gaming is] very important. I met my husband through [it] . . . [it's] my primary hobby. [Games have] been a source of income for me. I have many friends that I've made through gaming. It is critically important to my life. . . I am a moderator on an all women's group about role playing games on Facebook and we have 30-40,000 members and it's a pretty active community. . . I'm also a moderator on the Dungeons and Dragons fifth edition page and we have about a hundred and twenty thousand people." (Miranda, Personal Interview, 25 January 2018)

Respondents also discussed their membership in gaming communities with reference to a prototypical gamer. Each respondent indicated that for others, the prototypical gamer was male, thus making them ineligible for gaming community membership at some point in their lives. Many indicated that where gender was not an explicit reason for differential behavior, exclusion or hostility came in the form of negative or gender-specific evaluations of gaming choices that they played – namely, that such choices were made specifically for or by women and thus may not lay claim to being indicative of a real gamer. This confirms a wide swathe of previous research on the difficulty that female gamers have faced in being a part of the gaming community (Brehm 2013, Cote 2017, Cote 2020, Dietz 1998, Gray et al. 2017). The following excerpt illuminate this trend:

> "I've always had one of three experiences. One, people got super super sexist immediately because they hear a female voice over the com and I would log off immediately. The second thing that would happen would be that they felt the need to play differently with me and they would super protect me or they would over help me out . . . the third thing that would happen would be that they would assume I don't know how to play the game, so anything that I said was just completely ignored or just second-guessed and it was just a constant fight to even be of any meaning to the team because they would just go out of their way to play as if I wasn't there." (Tabitha, Personal Interview, 30 January 2018)

Despite the apparent ubiquity of such gender-based exclusion, discrimination, or hostility, most respondents indicated that they think it does not happen to them as much as it does to other women, or that it may not happen with such severity compared to other women. This may point toward the somewhat paradoxical conclusion that although they are indeed gamers, they are neither the prototypical gamer nor the prototypical female gamer:

> "I don't think it happens to me as much as it does other girls though. . . I see a lot of stories about girls getting death threats and rape threats and stuff, but I just don't think I've gotten anything more than like, 'Hey, how big are your boobs?'" (Bonnie, Personal Interview, 10 February 2018)

> "Um, mostly it's just a lot of people are like, 'Wow, a woman who plays games?' kinda thing. I know that there was a whole thing where women would talk about people being slime to them on the internet. . . I think other women have it worse." (Gillian, Personal Interview, 27 February 2018)

So what, then, might a prototypical female gamer look like? While respondents did not discuss what the seemingly shared characteristics of female gamers might be, a respondent called Emma discussed a time she donned a *fake gamer girl* costume for Halloween:

> Emma: "I even went as a fake gamer girl for Halloween one year."
> Interviewer: "Can you tell me what that costume looked like?"
> Emma: "So I use the short pleated mini skirt and I just rolled up a little short cut T-shirt, really nice heels. . . a very long full blonde hair wig. . . I had a controller for Xbox but the headset for PlayStation and then I had these really hideous thick black rims frames - just the frames, no lenses - and I wore really bright red lipstick and I took pictures with the controller like I'm almost about to lick it. The idea seemed ridiculous and funny to me."
> (Personal Interview, 13 March 2018)

While Emma was the only respondent to discuss what a *fake gamer girl* looks like, it appears to be based on a previously established prototypical standard on what does not make someone a gamer and how women in the gaming community are portrayed. In this sense, it is based on the stereotype in social identity theory as described by Tajfel and Turner (1986). Emma's decidedly humorous costume, based on an amalgam of many other women, confirms previous findings on the gaming community's widespread perception of the inability of women to be able to play games (Kuznekoff and Rose 2012) or to at least be knowledgeable about them (Brehm 2013). Additionally, the *fake gamer girl* was highly sexualized in accordance with the representation of women in video games (Dietz 1998, Cote 2017).

In many ways, this costume served to illustrate the maximized difference of outgroup members of the gaming community. This should not be read as Emma's indictment of the *fake girl gamer*, but rather it should be seen as how stereotypes of gamers are used to maximize the distance needed to be crossed for out-group members to become part of the in-group (Tajfel and Turner 1986). In the case of gamers, many respondents discuss how stereotypes of women in gaming spaces were used to question the validity of their membership in the gaming community. The events of #GamerGate were indicators of women being outgroup members in gaming spaces:

> "[#GamerGate] didn't impact my role playing games, it doesn't impact my tabletop stuff. . . it does affect me indirectly because it affects two people. Number one, the population of women gamers who become very recalcitrant to reach out to other gamers. Two, it affects the population of poo-flinging gibbons who take #GamerGate as a sort of carte blanche to treat women terribly." (Miranda, Personal Interview, 25 January 2018)

As indicated by many responses thus far, a common adaptation was to leave a gaming space or to mask gender. This echoes the findings of other research that

looks at women in gaming spaces (Brehm 2013, Cote 2017, Gray et al. 2017). This study also found respondents were more likely to withdraw from the larger gaming community to join or form alternative gaming communities where their identities as women were not grounds for outgroup membership. In some cases, this happens concurrently with a switch in gaming type – for example, from online video games to in-person tabletop gaming, or from multiplayer video games to single-player games:

> "I started playing with a close-knit group that I had. . . that's just not allowing [sexist behavior]. We didn't surround ourselves with people who do that or who think that way. Then again, I don't play games online with other people. I haven't gotten the, 'Oh, you're a girl' while I was playing Dungeons and Dragons but I think that comes from me purposely not setting myself up for it." (Emma, Personal Interview, 13 March 2018)

Learning and activating feminist identities

Frederick and Stewart (2018) examined the development of feminist social identity using qualitative interviews with women from five countries including the U.S., finding four common pathways in the formation of feminist identities- education, personal relationships and gender based injustice, violence, and activism and emotion.

As with gaming social identities, respondents indicated that they developed their identities as feminists in relation to other people and to prototypical feminist leanings. This is consistent with the work of Myaskovsky and Wittig (1997), who showed that experiences including exposure to feminism, recognition of discrimination against women, and belief in collective action contributed significantly to the prediction of feminist social identity. Zucker (2004) found an important role for self-labeling as part of the formation of feminist social identity. Burn, Aboud, and Moyles (2000) also found that the strength of gender social identity was related to support for feminist ideals and for collective action to advance gender equality.

Respondents were more likely to indicate their feminist identities by relating to personal experience and through interaction with feminists on social media rather than through specific, academic feminism:

> "When social media first started becoming popular is when I first started hearing about feminism. Obviously the movement has been around much longer and I had learned some history of the movement in school but nothing to a strong degree. Civil rights of all kinds seem to be getting much more recognized and heard as social media and the internet in general have been connecting like minded people across the planet, and we're finding out it's bad all over." (Gretchen, Personal Interview, 19 March 2018)

According to many respondents, active feminist social identities required constant self-education on issues in the world. The most common forms of self-education came through reading feminist-leaning social media, fiction and nonfiction, and television shows. Many of these feminists indicated that they were interested in more than gender issues between men and women specifically. To the respondents, race, socioeconomic status, age, disability, sexuality, and gender identity are core elements of their feminism. For this reason, most respondents indicated directly or indirectly that they were intersectional feminists, which lends support to Kelly and Gauchat's (2016) findings that feminists in the general public lean toward intersectionality. This excerpt details the terms and parameters of their intersectional feminist identities:

> "I've been reading a lot about race on the internet, and I've been making the effort to read the experiences of black women. . . I have a couple of websites I follow, but I also look at feminist social media, like on Tumblr and Reddit. So much of the experiences [on those sites] are so valuable but they never get out there because they don't have a publishing deal or anything like that." (Morgan, Personal Interview, 30 March 2018)

> "[I am an] intersectional feminist; as I believe all aspects of discrimination are relevant. This side of feminism seeks to explore and acknowledge how intersecting civil rights violations in society disproportionately affect people of color, LGBTQ+, transgender people, the homeless and poor. . . We need to bring these issues to the forefront and not hide the terrible acts of the past. . .I read feminist articles and blogs almost every day as I follow a lot of feminist pages and groups on social media." (Gretchen, Personal Interview, 19 March 2018)

This excerpt, in line with many other statements from respondents, indicated that an intersectional feminist belongs to an ingroup whose prototypical behavior is one of self-education and inclusion of issues that extend beyond the differences between men and women. Many respondents also discussed a prototypical outgroup feminist, which may be used by outgroup members to actually describe all feminists. This prototype is aggressive, exclusionary, and may not reflect true feminist principles. A respondent illustrates this prototypical feminist:

> "They think that feminists ruin everything, and they don't want to play games when I'm there because they think I'm going to go all feminist Hulk on them." (Claire, Personal Interview, 16 February 2018)

Much like gaming communities, many respondents solidified their feminist social identity by actively surrounding themselves with other feminists. Many of these feminist groups are, interestingly enough, also gaming groups to which the respondents belong. Respondents even indicated a desire to have more feminist acquaintances. The following excerpts discuss these findings in more detail:

> "I run a feminist gamer group online where we discuss all kinds of intersecting feminist topics. . . As we find each other we reach out and get together for events and make even bigger communities. . . And in my offline life I have now made many friends through activism and social media platforms who I would probably would have not met and got to know otherwise." (Gretchen, Personal Interview, 19 March 2018)

> "Most of my friends think the same way that I do. I've met some people on Facebook and Steam through what I share, and we like each other's stuff but I wouldn't say we talk to each other a lot. I wish we would though." (Morgan, Personal Interview, 30 March 2018)

Through a combination of the apparent prototype of a feminist as a self-educated, intersectional-leaning individual and the tendency to surround oneself with ingroup members, it appears that these feminists were likely to put their energy toward activism based on their feminist philosophies. Many of these people mentioned that they were willing to openly discuss their feminist viewpoints and advocate on behalf of others. For instance, many respondents indicated that they were active for #MeToo, a movement where women in the entertainment industry and beyond began sharing their stories of sexism and sexual assault, largely through social media posts (metoo n.d.):

> "I went to a presentation [about #MeToo] at my school about it. I shared my own story." (Claire, Personal Interview, 16 February 2018)

> "I may have perhaps shocked a few men when even people as mouthy and wordy as myself, I had said 'yes, this is happened to me and people that I know'.' I don't think many of my guy friends had thought about that or thought about me like that." (Miranda, Personal Interview, 25 January 2018)

Tabletop Gaming

Although this study began as an exclusive study on the development of gamer identities as a product of video game consumption, 6 respondents (60%) also discussed their experiences in terms of tabletop gaming. Tabletop gaming for the purposes of this study include the following types of games: board games (mentioned games: *Monopoly* [1935], *Clue* [1949], *Caverna: The Cave Farmers* [2013], *Castles of Burgundy* [2011], *Zombicide* [2012]); card games (mentioned games: *poker*, *Magic the Gathering* [1993]); wargaming or strategy-based battle scenario games

using miniature figurines (mentioned games: *Risk* [1957], *Warhammer 40,000* [1987]); and pen-and-paper roleplaying games (mentioned games: *Dungeons and Dragons* [1974], *Pathfinder* [2009], *Call of Cthulhu* [1981]). Because tabletop gaming was discussed frequently in these interviews, it is necessary to include them in this analysis.

There are many differences that distinguish video games and tabletop games. First, the mediums themselves are different: video games are necessarily digital products, while tabletop games could be digital in format but are more commonly thought of as physical face-to-face games. Second, tabletop games as they were discussed in these interviews are social games, whereas video games could have been either individually or socially played. It is important to discuss this here because the social dynamic was an important common experience among respondents who discussed tabletop gaming.

Three respondents discussed some of the necessary components of tabletop gaming relevant to this study:

> "Tabletop gaming has allowed me a sense of social interaction that I didn't have before and I also think that it's a very accessible way for me to stress relief. I think if it wasn't there it would have to be replaced by something else just as significant which would be very hard to find. . . I have a whole group that I meet with multiple times a week depending on the game. I have one that I meet with for wargaming, and then one that I meet with for board gaming, and then I have one that I meet with for Dungeons and Dragons." (Tabitha, Personal Interview, 30 January 2018)

> "I tend to play a lot of tabletop games. There's ones you can play solo, but that's not very fun to me. So board games are fundamentally a multiplayer interactive thing. . . I'm kind of introverted, so I'm not a super social person, but part of me likes playing board games because I get to spend time with my friends and stuff. . . I don't like playing stuff online with random people I've

never met because you don't know what they want from the game." (Chelsea, Personal Interview, 11 April 2018)

"Tabletop gaming, because it's a face to face activity - while I have certainly had problems in the past with people who have some kind of damage because I am a woman, those experiences are very few and far between. . . it's different from games because none of that stuff survives face-to-face personal contact." (Miranda, Personal Interview, 25 January 2018)

While communities formed around tabletop games in a manner similar to video games, the dynamics of group interaction were different in many notable ways. Most respondents indicated that they were less likely to be recipients of gender-based discrimination or harassment, although it did still happen on occasion. Additionally, most respondents indicated that they would engage in tabletop games with close friends or family members more frequently than strangers. The unique statements about this style of gaming are presented in this research, but it is important to note that respondents were willing to identify themselves as gamers in reference to these styles of games and thus they will be included for analysis of gamer identities.

Creating Alternative Gaming Spaces

As mentioned previously, many respondents indicated that they were willing to join or create alternative communities, and in these communities, the respondents became the de facto in-group members as women, as gamers, and as feminists. The creation of safe spaces appeared to be one of the mechanisms through which feminist gamers came to learn how to manage their identities as feminists and gamers. A respondent named Miranda shared a story about her role as a moderator for a feminist gaming group on Facebook:

Miranda: I am a moderator on a. . . pretty active community for women, non-binary people and trans women [Dungeons and Dragons]

players. There's a lot of discussion there, usually just games but we also discuss. . . problems that uniquely affect women or trans men. . We have a strict policy that if you make a rape joke, we're going to ban you, there's no ifs, ands, or buts. Our moderators are in accord on this, but every now and then some chowderhead will inevitably start joking about it and . . . there are fifteen moderators but I'm one of only two female moderators on the group.

Interviewer: It's really interesting to me that fifteen people came to a consensus on this. Was that pretty difficult to get across the board?

Miranda: Nope. Absolutely not. . . It was never even a question. (Personal Interview, 25 January 2018)

One respondent even highlighted their need for alternative gaming spaces in tabletop gaming due to sexism within the *Magic the Gathering* community:

Chelsea: "Ever since I stopped playing Magic and started just playing other tabletop games besides Magic, I have never felt anything but welcome. For instance, we went to Gen Con . . . it's probably the biggest gaming convention in the US . . .the thing that's great is that everybody assumed I was there to play Warmachine. No one was like, 'Oh, are you getting something for your husband? Are you getting something for your boyfriend?' . . . Magic everyone was like, 'Oh you must be the girlfriend or the trophy girlfriend.' I haven't had that experience since I quit playing Magic."

Interviewer: "Why did you stop playing Magic?"

Chelsea: "I just kind of started becoming disillusioned with the way that some of the men in the community treated other people. . . it has gotten worse as the community has gotten larger . . . and that kind of made me feel like I did the right thing by leaving the Magic community." (Personal Interview, 11 April 2018)

Even in the absence of an online feminist gaming community, many participants indicated that they felt the need to create a gaming space that is friendly to feminists during the course of gameplay:

> "There's very little that will stop me [from engaging in feminist dialogue]. There's very little that can. When I'm . . . running the game . . . I am in positions of authority and power. I usually find a way to make my point that last one that gets made, if not the loudest one." (Morgan, Personal Interview, 30 March 2018)

> "Yeah, yeah, [discussing feminism] kind of goes back with gaming. There have been times where I felt, like, the need to stick up for myself and say something, you know, like, 'Guys, chill, it's a girl gamer, let's just focus on the game'." (Felisha, Personal Interview, 17 March 2018)

Additionally, despite the high-profile nature of #GamerGate and how invasive and terrifying sexism and anti-feminism in gaming spaces seemed to be to respondents, only about half indicated that they thought that the gaming community was generally anti-feminist. As mentioned previously, respondents did not perceive themselves to be the recipient of frequent or severe harassment or discrimination when compared to other women. Additionally, all respondents indicated that they had joined social groups where they became in-group members as women, feminists, and gamers. This may provide some explanation for the differing perspective on the apparent anti-feminism of the game-playing community at large.

> "I don't think I know enough to say, but I think there's definitely a lot of resistance. I think I said earlier that my boyfriend's friends say a lot of stuff, and the people he plays games with say stuff about feminists. It's kind a joke to be a feminist to them . . . I think gamers are a lot more mature than they're presented generally, though." (Bonnie, Personal Interview, 10 February 2018)

> "Yes, I can still walk into a video game store with my male fiancé and not get talked to, and if I have a question about a game - instead of talking to me, the person who's asking about it, they will turn to him and answer my question. . . If I have a female character who is feminine or if I have a feminine gamertag, then I might get treated differently." (Tabitha, Personal Interview, 30 January 2018)

Respondents were more optimistic about the direction of game development, however. While there was still some division, respondents were likely to identify game titles or developers by name that are making efforts to be inclusive towards women and toward feminist ideologies in games. In any case, all respondents indicated that there was more work to do:

> "They are starting to listen to the community and #MeToo and #GamerGate have both gone far to address these concerns and make them public knowledge. . . developers are starting to change slowly, they start with diverse gender options and better customization." (Gretchen, Personal Interview, 19 March 2018)

> "I mentioned Fortnite earlier, and after it came out I started watching videos of it to see if I wanted to play it. I was really struck by how many women of color and how many larger women I was seeing. So I think that's a step in the right direction." (Claire, Personal Interview, 16 February 2018)

A recurrent theme among all responses was a desire for better community management on the part of game developers. Many respondents indicated that a developer with an active role in making more inclusive gaming spaces was something that they wanted in the future of gaming. This indicates that although they did turn to form alternatives communities of feminist gamers, they did so out of necessity due to the blind eye that developers turn to the problematic members of their audience rather than a strict desire to separate themselves entirely from the general gaming community. Respondents indicated that intolerant gamers did not represent who

they were as gamers and they would like for these issues to be addressed from the development side of gaming. The following excerpt is a typical concern echoed by participants, which also confirms Cote's (2017) report indicating that greater structural support for advocacy as a possible mechanism for changing gaming culture.

> "Whether it be better reporting systems or harsher punishment for anyone who does stuff like that, you have to take responsibility. Especially if you run a game where there's stuff online, where there's a lot of interaction. You need to make sure people in your community are being treated the right way." (Chelsea, Personal Interview, 11 April 2018)

> "Take a very public stance that everyone is welcome in your game, regardless of age, gender, race, sexuality or lack thereof, nationality, or belief system. Say it upfront, put it on your forms and boot out the assholes. . . have a code of conduct and stick to it." (Miranda, Personal Interview, 25 January 2018)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the activation of gamer and feminist identities in women and to explore how these identities interact. Traditionally, video gaming has been seen as a male-dominated, masculine pastime (Dietz 1998) that is actively hostile to women and feminists (Mortensen 2016, Sinclair 2018). Through gender stereotyping in the creation of game narratives (Ivory 2006, Salter and Blodgett 2012) or by excluding women and feminists from video game spaces (Gray et al. 2017, Kondrat 2015, Phillips 2020), women gamers have struggled to enjoy games without constant harassment or discrimination (Brehm 2013, Cote 2017) or, in the cases of professionals in the gaming industry, threats of violence and assault (Chess and Shaw 2015).

Despite this, women constitute just under half of all video game consumers (ESA 2020, 5). For this reason, the first research question aimed to uncover what contributes to the development and activation of gamer identities in women. The study found that the participants were introduced to gaming at young ages by family members, similar to the way young men and boys are introduced to gaming (Dietz 1998). For these women, games became a focal point of social relationships and even professional development.

Commonly reported instances of gender-based differential treatment include: verbal harassment using gendered slurs and stereotypes; exclusion from gaming spaces; criticism of or doubt toward the respondents' knowledge of gaming; labeling of gaming choices as not indicative of being a *real gamer*; altered behavior by other players, such as being overly helpful to respondents after learning that they are a woman; and threats of assault including rape. Although all respondents did report that they experienced discrimination, harassment, and even threats of violence, they reported that, instead of actively leaving game spaces, they instead found or formed communities that were supportive of women gamers. Respondents became active members of these communities and desire such inclusivity to the general gaming population and from game developers. Interestingly, most respondents indicated that they do not believe that they receive such gender-based differential treatment at the same frequency or intensity as other women.

In many cases, respondents also played games other than video games, and reported that they were less likely to experience gender-based differential treatment in tabletop game spaces. These tabletop games tended to be social games that, by design, require in-person play with other people. While resistance to women was present in these spaces as well, it was reported to be more infrequent compared to

their experiences with social video games. Notably, most tabletop gamers were willing to play tabletop games with others, but also most respondents indicated that they preferred to play single-player video games. The trend appears to be that women gamers are more likely to adapt to gender-based differential treatment by altering their own participation in the community rather than to leave the gaming community entirely. Many respondents indicated that they were unwilling to openly identify themselves as gamers, which echoes previous research of the identity (Shaw 2012) and behavior of gamers who are women (Brehm 2013, Cote 2017, McLean and Griffiths 2019).

The second research question sought to understand how feminist social identities form and are activated in women. The development of feminist identities in these respondents followed a similar trajectory. Respondents indicate being introduced to feminism through proximate social structures such as family, friend groups, and educational institutions, albeit usually at much later ages than was reported for gaming. Many respondents reflected on their own differential treatment as women and in the differential treatment of other women when detailing their own feminist identity formation, which is consistent with previous research on feminist identity development (Downing and Rush 1985).

All respondents indicated that they were not academically-trained feminists, but rather they were self-educated feminists. Most respondents directly identified leanings towards the intersectional feminist perspective, where issues of race, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other elements of differential treatment should be addressed by feminism. Self-education occurred through the use of feminist fiction and nonfiction media, social media feeds and personalities, and through discussion with others, namely feminists in their immediate social circles.

Interestingly, almost all respondents indicated that their identities as gamers were influential in forming, maintaining, and activating feminist identities. A combination of high-profile news events like #GamerGate and #MeToo, personal experiences with the gaming community and consumption of gaming products, and connection with like-minded people in gaming spaces lead to an activated feminist identity. Respondents cited poor treatment of nonwhite, non-male, nonheterosexual, and non-cisgendered individuals by the greater gaming community and a lack of good representation of these individuals in video games as factors in becoming or acting as a feminist. It is important to note that this criticism was directed almost exclusively toward video games because respondents indicated that the social nature of tabletop games, combined with the agency that comes in playing these games, might make them more conducive to inclusive, intersectionally feminist gaming. While it is evident that feminism does contribute to the solidarity of gamers who are women in terms of forming communities that are more gender-balanced and inclusive, it nevertheless remains the case that these communities were created as a response to actual or perceived threats to these gamers.

The third research question asked how the identities of gamer and feminist in women may interact, considering the gaming community's apparent hostility toward women generally and feminists specifically. Overall, this study found that while the activity of gaming may have informed how the respondents came to call themselves a feminist, it is their feminist identities that become the most prominent and the most salient when discussing the issues of gaming, women, and feminism. It is important to note that these feminist identities did not appear in opposition to gaming communities nor gaming in a general sense. Perhaps influenced by their experiences as gamers, respondents instead were likely to use their feminist perspectives to illustrate what a better, more inclusive gaming community might look like. As mentioned above, most

participants identified themselves as intersectional feminists, and such intersectionality was apparent in the frequently expressed desire for increased representation of and consideration for racial/ethnic groups, sexual minorities, transgender people, and people of all body types in gaming products and in game development. From a social identity theory perspective, it appears that these women were able to maintain multiple, intersecting social identities as women, feminists, and gamers.

One of the most frequent desired changes in gaming according to the respondents is for an increasingly active role on the part of game developers in the management of gaming communities. This may be related to the view of half of the respondents that the gaming community is not explicitly anti-feminist in a general sense, despite the common portrayal of gamers and the gaming community as such. Although this was a very divided topic among respondents as far as gamers themselves are concerned, more often than not respondents expressed the sentiment that game developers were becoming more compatible with feminism as time passed by, either through actual commitment to inclusive ideals or due to changing game markets. In any case, all respondents expressed a desire for game developers and community managers to take a stronger stance against sexism, homophobia, racism, and transphobia in the gaming community.

Limitations and Future Research

It needs to be noted that the first author identifies as a gamer and a feminist. In addition, both authors are cisgender white males. These need to be noted because this is a study of a group that has been marginalized. The first author shared some characteristics with both the marginalized group while also sharing characteristics

with the group that has marginalized respondents. Although the first author did seek permission and endorsement from all social media group moderators before recruiting participants, it is important to mention researcher characteristics because it may have played a role in willingness to participate in this research, how answers may have been formed, and how data may have been analyzed. A researcher who is female, nonwhite, and/or transgender may receive different rates of participation and different insights from this population.

Interviews were semi-structured, with probing questions used contextually according to the parameters of each unique interview. While all participants received the same question schedule, each participant also received individualized questions that may affect the reliability of the data. Additionally, the interview questions aimed to capture insights on the perceptions of the individuals. As a consequence of this methodological choice, the actual severity or frequency of instances targeting them as women or as feminists was not measured.

Each interview was conducted online using video and text messaging services such as Facebook Messenger and Skype. Some interviews suffered technical difficulties, such as dropped calls, stuttering, and lag. For these reasons, some participants provided multiple answers to the same question. This may have instilled fatigue in the respondent and thus affected the veracity of some answers.

This study limited its sample to respondents who identified themselves as women. This means that feminist gamers who are men were not sampled. Because of the potentially intermingling effects of gender on feminist identities and on gamer identities (and any relationship between the two), a study of self-identified male feminist gamers should be conducted. An additional limitation of this study is that it

strictly looked at the experiences of participants who identified themselves summarily as women, as feminists, and as gamers. Although most respondents did voluntarily reveal some information about their age, ability, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, or transgender identity, it was not asked from participants. While any of these characteristics could potentially impact the experiences of the individuals interviewed, any findings in this study related to these characteristics should only be considered incidental until further studies are conducted focusing on these aspects.

This study advances social identity theory in a number of ways. First, this study expands social identity theory to the discussion of feminist gamers and gaming communities. Specifically, we detail the creation of social groups that support social identities. Each respondent indicated finding or forming unique communities to which they can become in-group members. These feminist gamer communities were formed in response to apparent out-group membership to the general gamer community from which they were pushed away. In the case of women who are feminist gamers, in response to personal experiences and social categorization resulting from #GamerGate and personal experience with sexism, participants indicated that they actively sought out like-minded individuals who would concurrently support their gamer identities, their feminist identities, and their identities as women.

This study also contributes to social identity theory by exploring how people can self-identify as feminists without relying on an academic background. Each participant noted that – while they may have been exposed to so-called formal feminist texts or discourse, i.e. from a university – they learned what feminism is and what it means to them through their interactions on social media, in gaming spaces, and through personal interaction with others in their life. Respondents largely indicated that their

feminism is intersectional in nature, meaning that they are concerned with issues of race, ability, and sexual identity, among others, which reflects Kelly and Gauchat's (2016) assertion that feminists in the general public subscribe to intersectional feminist ideologies.

Additionally, this study found support for the hypothesis of prototypes used to indicate appropriate in-group and out-group behaviors. In this case, women who are gamers were consistently reminded that they were not a prototypical woman gamer and were treated as such, leading them to the formation of groups to which they could establish a new prototype – one of an inclusive gamer. In terms of feminism, many respondents indicated that the prototypical feminist should be intersectional, and that feminists who were not intersectional were, perhaps, not feminist enough (if at all).

In this sense, social groups of both gamers who are accepting of feminism and feminists who are intersectional intertwined to create immediate social structures that not only confirmed social identities and their in-group membership in these social groups, but also contributed to the activation of gamer and feminist identities. This study then suggests that identities may play a role in the creation of social contexts that promote salience and prominence of a seemingly desired social identity. For instance, all respondents indicated that they wanted more inclusive gaming communities as it appeared that #GamerGate – in spite of its dubious popularity in the discussion of a *typical* gamer – did not represent themselves as gamers nor the gaming communities to which they belong. This appears to be reflected in the fact that most respondents believed that other women experienced more or worse forms of sexism than they did. Most respondents found that while they did experience sexism frequently within some gaming spaces, it did not reflect the whole of their

interactions with gamers and gaming itself. In fact, most respondents indicate that their gaming experiences are largely positive due to the connections that they make with like-minded people and the work they can do to make gaming spaces more inclusive and accommodating. These findings highlight the need to move beyond discussion of #GamerGate toward a larger focus on the everyday experiences of sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia – and reactions to these issues – in video game spaces.

One recurring finding across interviews was the presence of alternative gaming spaces. Respondents mentioned creating or seeking out spaces where they could participate in gaming and interact with other gamers without their identities as women or feminists becoming contentious topics. Each participant noted that these spaces were made or sought out of necessity to continue enjoying their hobbies, rather than as a positional standpoint aimed at directly opposing larger video game trends or the general gaming community. Interestingly, such alternative gaming spaces appeared to be have a large role in the activation and maintenance of feminist social identities, which in turn strengthened each individuals' appreciation for gaming and gaming culture.

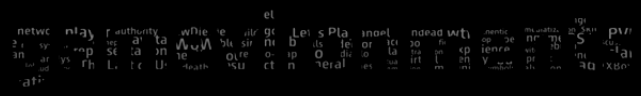
A final consideration is the different realms of gaming discussed in this study. Although this research set out to discuss the medium of video games exclusively, several topics were spontaneously identified by the respondents as they answered interviewer questions. Many respondents made necessary distinctions between the video game community and other related but distinctly separate communities, such as tabletop gaming, which for this study provided some interesting contrasts in terms of identity and social group membership compared to video gaming.

Additionally, a sizable minority of individuals discussed cosplay – the creation of costumes and sometimes roleplay of recognizable characters from media such as video games (Rahman, Wing-Sun, and Cheung 2012) – as related to gaming as a community, their identities as gamers, and as feminists as well. Although cosplay was not featured in our analysis, it was discussed by three of our respondents and thus warrants consideration in future studies on social identity:

> "Very recently. . . the best-known Magic cosplayer, she gets a lot of crap from people because I know a lot of people look down on cosplayers. But she basically had some guy harassing her to the point where that - combined with how other people treated her in the community - she quit. She left Magic basically, and that kind of made me feel like I did the right thing by leaving the Magic community." (Chelsea, Personal Interview, 11 April 2018)

> "I'm really big into cosplay, I do a lot of that with other people. I do conventions all the time . . . I'm very vocal when it comes to that aspect because, again, I haven't had a lot of it directed toward me. . . with the cosplay community, I have seen a lot more about sisterhood. More girls sticking up for each other and that sort of thing. . . we will even help them throw a little con [convention] on the airforce base by teaming up with one of the game stores in town." (Emma, Personal Interview, 13 March 2018)

Finally, four of our respondents discussed their experiences with gaming and their disabilities. While the specific disabilities were not specified by the respondents, and disability and gaming itself was not a focus of this research, quite a few discussed their experiences as gamers with disabilities who experience ableism in the gaming community. This may warrant further research regarding the creation of alternative gaming spaces or disabled identities within the gaming community.



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APPENDIX A: Interview Questions.

Part I: Gaming Experiences

The goal of the first set of questions is to gauge respondent experiences regarding their interactions with and preferences in the medium of video games.

1. How did you first get into playing video games?
2. Generally speaking, which types of video games do you prefer?

    2a. Genre: Define this however you like

    2b. Specific: A couple of different games

3. Do you have a preference on which systems you use to play your games? For example, phone, console, or PC gaming?

    3a. Why do you have this preference?

4. What do you like most about gaming?
5. How did you come to identify yourself as a gamer?
6. How important are video games in your life?
7. How frequently do you play video games?
8. Can you tell me about your experiences as a woman who plays video games?
9. Do you maintain frequent contact with other video game players, such as playing multiplayer games or using social media?

    9a. Yes: To what degree?

    9b. No: Continue

10. Have you been the target of gender discrimination or prejudice while playing a game?

    10a. Yes: How so?

    10b. No: Continue

Part II: Feminist Experiences

The goal of the second set of questions is to gauge respondent experiences regarding their identity as feminists.

1. What brought feminism to your attention?
2. How did you learn to identify yourself as a feminist?
3. Why did you decide to adopt this identity?
4. What does being a feminist mean to you?
5. Would you classify yourself as any particular kind of feminist?
6. How frequently do you read feminist literature?
7. How frequently do you participate in feminist dialogue?

    7a. What stops you from engaging in feminist dialogue?

8. Outside of [the community participant is recruited from], do you maintain regular contact with other feminists?

    8a. Yes: How do you come to meet them? Do you prefer one kind of social environment over another?

    8b. No: Continue to next question

Part III: Feminist/Gamer Experiences

The goal of this third set of questions is to gauge respondent experience regarding the intersections of their identities as gamers and as feminists.

1. Are you familiar with #GamerGate?

    1a. No: Briefly, #GamerGate was an incident in the summer of 2014 where prominent feminist video game critic Anita Sarkeesian was harassed by members of the gaming community on the grounds that she was unprofessional or uninformed. Similar incidences occurred that targeted female video game developers Brianna Wu and Zoe Quinn. All of these women were threatened with violence and had their personal information released to the public.

    1b. Yes: Continue to next questions

2. When events like #GamerGate occur, does this impact your video game playing?

    2a. Yes: How so?

    2b. No: Continue to next question

3. When events like #GamerGate occur, does this impact your interaction with other gamers?

    3a. Yes: How so?

    3b. No: Continue to next question

4. Are you familiar with #MeToo?

    4a. No: Briefly, #MeToo was a social media campaign in 2017 that brought focus to the stories of women who were victims of sexual harassment and assault. #MeToo was popularized around the time that Harvey Weinstein, a powerful Hollywood executive, was facing sexual harassment allegation from many women. This event is notable because many women (and some men) who were previously unwilling to discuss their experiences were able to discuss what happened to them.

    4b. Yes: Please continue to the next questions.

5. Do you feel this #MeToo may have resulted from the events of #GamerGate?

    5a. Yes: Why do you feel this way?

    5b. No: Why do you feel this way?

6. When events like #MeToo happen, does this impact your video game playing?

    6a. Yes: How so?

    6b. No: Continue to next question

7. When events like #MeToo happen, does this impact your interaction with other gamers?

    7a. Yes: How so?

    7b. No: Continue to next question

8. As a whole, do you feel like the video game community is generally antifeminist?

    8a. Yes: Why do you feel this way?

    8b. No: Why do you feel this way?

9. Do you feel like video game developers are making an effort to create video games or gaming spaces that align with feminist values?

    9a. Yes: Can you provide an example?

    9b. No: Can you provide an example?

10. Are there any video games, modern or classic, that you see as being feminist?

    10a. Yes: Please identify one and explain your reasoning.

11. Do you feel like you are well-represented in video games?

12. What are some things that you would like to see as a common feature of video games in the future?