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Gender and Race in the Gaming World

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Age is not alone in shaping real and imagined differences in Internet use. Racial and gender-based stereotypes abound and need to be empirically challenged. This chapter explores the relationships between race, gender, sexuality, and digital cultures in one increasingly significant digital domain—gaming. With a review of previous scholarship on race, gender, and gaming, the author shows that we see few signs of a “post-racial” society being brought into being. In fact, gaming is a digital activity where racism and sexism are commonplace. The chapter thus leaves us with questions about why, when the Internet is a potentially powerful leveling tool in the quest for democracy and fairness, does it continue to be defined by egregious sexism and racism?

Race, gender, and sexuality have a paradoxical relationship with video game culture. Like the Internet itself, gaming culture is both mainstream, with a majority of young people and adults under fifty playing video games,¹ yet it is also subcultural. Despite larger numbers of women playing games, including “hard core” online and multiplayer competitive games, this medium is still perceived as a “boys’ club,” and the cultural domain of young white men.² As video-game scholars such as Anna Everett, Craig Watkins, and David Leonard have noted, games contain some of the most egregiously narrow, racist, and

¹ Anna Brown, “Younger men play video games, but so do a diverse group of other Americans,” Pew Research Center: FactTank Facts in the Numbers, 2017, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/11/younger-men-play-video-games-but-so-do-a-diverse-group-of-other-americans/

² Cote (2015).

sexist storylines and depictions imaginable.³ Yet in recent years some of its most highly regarded, best-selling, and award-winning games from both indie and mainstream studios, such as Naughty Dog's 2013 *The Last of Us*, That Game Company's 2012 *Journey*, Telltale Studio's 2012 *The Walking Dead*, and Blizzard's 2016 *Overwatch* multiplayer game have centered female, nonwhite, and queer protagonists.

In short, digital gaming is a controversial and fast-changing medium that is in the midst of an equally controversial and far-reaching cultural transition toward both diversity and inclusion. Many within the gaming community have reacted negatively toward these changes, part of a racist and misogynistic backlash connected with the new conservative right wing in the US.⁴ As game developer and activist Zoe Quinn writes, the mistreatment of women, people of color, and queer players in gaming spaces is symptomatic of the Internet's larger issues around harassment, trolling, and online hatred. And Gamergate, the 2014 campaign that resulted in death threats against her and two other feminist game activists and developers, Anita Sarkeesian and Brianna Wu, demonstrated this culture's extreme hostility to critique about race and gender. As Quinn writes in her 2017 memoir, "Gamergate was a full-blown culture war over the heart and soul of the Internet itself."⁵

In a way, this is nothing new; digital games have always been controversial, both mainstream and synonymous with culture wars around specific types of social harm. Games are still typecast as addictive media that encourage school shootings and other forms of violence. Scholarly research about games' negative depictions of race, gender, and difference first emerged from critical and quantitative media scholars working in the 2000s. This groundbreaking wave of research on race, gender, and video games by Anna Everett, David Leonard, Craig Watkins, Hilde Cornelissen, Tanner Higgin, David Golumbia, and Alexander Galloway focused on anti-black and other types of US racism in video-game imagery, aesthetics, narratives, and game mechanics.

Representations of black people as evil zombies, drug dealers, and criminals perpetuate some of the worst images found in other media, while the exclusion of images of blackness and black avatar characters from fantasy games such as *World of Warcraft* creates an artificially "blackless fantasy," as Higgin puts it.⁶ Racist representation within games can be found in every genre: simulation games like the immensely popular *Civilization* series depict non-Western culture as shot through with superstition, cruelty, and irrationality.⁷ *World of Warcraft's* Tauren, Troll, and Blood and Night Elf Player reprise classic

³ Leonard (2006); Everett and Watkins (2008a).

⁶ Higgin (2009).

⁷ Galloway (2006).

⁴ Nagle (2017).

⁵ Quinn (2017).

racist imagery of Native Americans, Caribbeans, and Orientals from previous media.⁸ Black women in particular were very rarely represented in video games, and as Everett found, when they were, they were much more often depicted as the victims of violence than characters of any other identity.

Games from this period represented black and brown avatars predominantly as criminals, gangsters, and athletes.⁹ Women and people of color were usually depicted using broad stereotypes, resulting in one-dimensional depictions embedded within simplistic and exploitative “negative fictions,” environments, and storylines. Everett and Watkins argue that black and brown bodies are represented and treated as expendable targets and violent actors, particularly within “urban/street” games. In “The Power of Play: The Portrayal and Performance of Race in Video Games,” their close readings of games such as *Grand Theft Auto* demonstrate how digital visual environments produce “racialized pedagogical zones” that teach young players the proper place for raced and criminalized bodies.¹⁰

They also found that many gamers were resistant to critiquing racism, sexism, and homophobia within their favorite games, displaying a range of responses “from blatant racism to racial tolerance or inclusion.”¹¹ Though many of the players studied were resistant to the idea that video games are morally consequential media, they are indeed powerful vehicles for specific racial discourses, ideologies, and structures of feeling.

Sociologist Ashley Doane defines “racial discourse” as the “collective text and talk of society with respect to issues of race.”¹² And “racial ideology” as a “generalized belief system[s] that explains social relationships and social practices in racialized language.”¹³ Video games, particularly networked games, create social practices and belief systems that license and permit uses of racialized and racist speech that may be intended to stay within the “magic circle” of the game, but do carry over into the “real world,” particularly for the players who are negatively represented within them.

Networked gaming presents a different and equally harmful form of racism and sexism: live interactions between players often result in the harassment and victimization of women and people of color. Douglas Thomas and Constance Steinkuhler’s groundbreaking essays on anti-Korean and anti-Chinese racism in multiplayer games *Diablo 2* and *Lineage 2* demonstrate the remarkable prevalence of discriminatory behavior in process-based video games, and the insights and methods employed in their work enrich studies of television-based console gamers.¹⁴ Nick Yee’s *The Proteus Paradox* contains a remarkable

⁸ Jessica Langer (2008). “The Familiar and the Foreign: Playing (Post) Colonialism in World of Warcraft,” in *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, edited by Hilde Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg. New York: Routledge.

⁹ Everett and Watkins (2008).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Doane, “What Is Racism”.

¹³ Ibid., p. 256.

¹⁴ Thomas (2008); Steinkuehler (2006).

analysis of anti-Chinese player behavior in *World of Warcraft*, comparing US players' harassment of Chinese in-game currency sellers to earlier popular movements against Chinese workers in the laundry industry during the Gold Rush.¹⁵ Indeed, as Zoe Quinn asserts, games are not only "the heart and soul of the Internet," they are sites where cultural struggles around racism, sexism, and xenophobia occur in real time in every national context. As Holin Lin has shown in her 2011 study of Asian *World of Warcraft* players, clashes between Taiwanese and Chinese players sharing Taiwanese servers has often resulted in "open nationalist confrontations," with "indigenous" Taiwanese players stigmatizing Chinese "immigrants" to the gamespace by calling them "locusts."¹⁶

Game research has radically challenged earlier scholarship, claiming that online anonymity would result in democracy and equality. Scholars of race and ethnicity note that racial stereotyping does not go away in games simply because players cannot see one another. As Kishonna Grey observed during extensive ethnographic work with female Xbox players of color, collaborative competitive games often require players to use microphones, and the sound of a female voice often led to expressions of the most horrible racism and misogyny.¹⁷

Williams et al.'s 2009 quantitative "census" of protagonists, racial content, and themes within selected popular games found that people of color and women are both under-represented and depicted negatively.¹⁸ Other data gathered by Williams and Watkins brought to light another paradox that characterized video games, race, and gender: they found that Latino, African-American, and Asian and Asian-American male players are better-represented in the gaming world than white males, despite their being represented so negatively in game texts. Rideout, Lauricella, and Wartella's study of media use among youth in the United States found that nonwhite youth spend significantly more time playing video games at home. This is especially concerning: because youth of color spend more time playing games than white youth do, they may be more vulnerable to the racial discourses within games and game-enabled communications.¹⁹

Ivory et al. (2009) cautioned that networked play added a new and as yet understudied dimension to the study of profanity, and merited additional studies. The study analyzed several popular video games representing a variety of age ratings and found that one out of five games contained one of the "seven dirty words" which are regulated in network television, as

¹⁵ Yee (2014); Burnett (2004).

¹⁶ Lin and Sun (2011).

¹⁷ Grey (2014).

¹⁸ Williams, Martins, Consalvo, and Ivory (2009).

¹⁹ Rideout, Lauricella, and Wartella (2011).

well as “words that evoke strong emotion and offense (e.g., bitch).”²⁰ No mention is made of racist language, but the study cautioned that player-produced profanity may be a greater cause for concern in the age of networked gaming than pre-scripted profanity programmed into games: “The increasing popularity of multiplayer games and optional multiplayer game modes featuring voice interaction between players suggests that future studies should also examine the prevalence of profanity in online voice chat sessions.”²¹

While the rest of the Internet became more gender-balanced years ago,²² the world of video games self-identifies, and is seen by many of its players of both genders, as fundamentally masculine, despite evidence to the contrary. Despite the enduring popularity of games such as *The Sims* among female players,²³ as Adrienne Shaw’s groundbreaking work on gender and gaming found, “there is a definite correlation between gender and gamer identity. Male interviewees were much more likely to identify as gamers than female, transgender, or genderqueer interviewees were.”²⁴ As Shaw notes, her findings are far from unusual: many other game scholars have “found that women tend to underestimate the amount of time they play and do not generally identify as gamers.”²⁵ Interestingly, nonwhite males reported feeling less disidentified with gaming, despite their poor treatment both as players and as represented in game narratives, and while women were far less likely to claim membership or standing within gamer culture or to claim the identity of “gamer,” this was not true for nonwhite players.²⁶ Men who play less often than women may identify with gaming and as gamers more strongly than women do in order to solidify claims to masculinity. The identification between gaming and masculinity has become so strong that a new type of male identity, that of “geek masculinity,” has acquired popular currency. John Scalzi’s essay on white privilege, “Straight White Male: The Lowest Difficulty Setting?” attests to the ways that the vocabulary of gaming addresses men, particularly white men, in ways that other discourses cannot. As Scalzi writes, “[m]en think in the language of gaming . . . or at least wish to appear to do so in front of other men and women.”²⁷

Feminist scholars such as Christopher Paul, Carly Kocurek, and Megan Condis have shifted the research focus from female and nonwhite misrepresentation to a welcome interrogation of masculinity and its identification with gaming. Paul’s 2018 book *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture Is the Worst* and Megan Condis’s 2018 *Gaming Masculinity:*

²⁰ Ivory, Williams, Martins, and Consalvo (2009).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Wakeford (2000).

²³ Gee and Hayes (2010).

²⁴ Shaw (2011, 2015).

²⁵ See Cote (2015); Condis (2018).

²⁶ Shaw (2011), 28–44. See also Shaw (2015).

²⁷ Scalzi (2012). Retrieved from <http://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/05/15/straight-white-male-the-lowest-difficulty-setting-there-is/>. (Accessed August 6, 2018).

Trolls, Fake Geeks, and the Gendered Battle for Online Culture employ careful readings of game, producing nuanced and thoughtful accounts of the rise of the racist and misogynist right-wing movements centering around Donald Trump's election, and their roots in gaming culture.²⁸ Kocurek's work on early arcade gaming culture sheds light on how gaming came to be identified with maleness.²⁹ This work embodies one of the great strengths of gaming scholarship: it provides a perspective on race, gender, and gaming's struggles over digital media and communication, while grounding analysis in specific texts, practices, and embodied behaviors and discourse.

Women and minorities are underrepresented in the games industry, and this plays a role in perpetuating racist and sexist game content. Feminist game scholar Nina Huntemann's work documents how the practice of requiring workers to perform compulsory unpaid overtime at game studios, or "crunch time," produces female- and family-unfriendly workplaces. These institutional environments ensure that game-production culture remains male.³⁰

As Mia Consalvo, a leading scholar in the field of gender and video games, wrote in her 2012 essay, "Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture: A Challenge for Feminist Game Studies Scholars": "Of course harassment of female players has been occurring for quite some time—perhaps the entire history of gaming—but it seems to have become more virulent and concentrated in the past couple of years."³¹ Consalvo discovered that gaming culture was far less toxic, paradoxically, when there were *fewer* women playing:

Slowly but surely and building upon one another in frequency and intensity, all of these events have been responding to the growing presence of women and girls in gaming, not as a novelty but as a regular and increasingly important demographic... The "encroachment" of women and girls into what was previously a male-gendered space has not happened without incident, and will probably only become worse before it (hopefully) improves.

Consalvo's 2012 thinking about gaming's backlash against women players was prescient. This essay overlapped with the rise of mobile and so-called casual video games (defined by Jesper Juul as games which are "easy to learn, hard to excel at"),³² which brought women to gaming in much larger numbers. The 2009 Game of the Year, *Plants Versus Zombies*, *The Sims*, the classic *Tetris*, *Angry Birds*, *Bejeweled*, and *Candy Crush* lack overt racial and gender stereotyping. They also appeal to women and others with less time and money to devote to other types of games. Two years later, GamerGate proved Consalvo's prediction that things would get worse for women in gaming before they got better completely correct.

²⁸ Paul (2018); Condis (2018).

²⁹ Kocurek (2015).

³⁰ Huntemann (2010).

³¹ Consalvo (2012).

³² Juul (2009).

Gamergate embodies many of gaming's paradoxes and moments of struggle over race, gender, and identity. In 2014, game developer Zoe Quinn, a game maker who is still viciously harassed to this day on Twitter under the #gamergate hashtag, found herself under continual attack after an angry ex-boyfriend claimed that she had had sex with a game journalist in exchange for a positive review. The campaign of sexist hate against her and her boyfriend at the time made them unable to find jobs and in fear of their lives. Quinn's memoir *Crash Override* describes Gamergate in great detail from her own point of view.

Gamergate made public what many gamers already knew: that gaming can be a uniquely uncivil medium for women, queer people, and people of color. Gamergate was a punishing and traumatic experience for those targeted, but because it brought the culture's egregious mediated racism and sexism to light, it may have resulted in the corrective moves that characterize gaming in the post-2014 era. Gamergate was a watershed moment that exposed the pervasive sexism and racism in gaming culture and motivated many developers for major studios, such as Bioware's Manveer Heir, to address it directly.³³

So where do we stand today? Games have become more diverse, and so has research on games. As mentioned earlier, some of the most highly regarded games produced since 2012 engage directly with race, gender, sexuality, and emotion. Published and forthcoming books and articles by Bonnie Ruberg, Audrey Anable, Edmond Chang, Alenda Chang, Soraya Murray, and others focus on race, sexuality, and gender in gaming as topics for analytical study and as unique opportunities to understand speculative digital media.³⁴ These scholars employ scholarly approaches and methodologies that center affect, identity, and queer narratives and playing styles. Their work demonstrates both the potential and the harm of video games: at their best, games can bring new and impossible worlds and stories into being that create unique conditions of possibility for players to experience new identities, ideas, and environments.

Gaming is growing up, but it has much further to go. Gaming hardware has turned toward immersive technologies such as virtual and augmented reality platforms. The PS4 VR, the Oculus Rift, HTC Vive, and the Samsung Gear are expensive and powerful devices that raise the ante for digital embodiment and representation. These immersive game experiences offer new pleasures and risks along with new forms of digital harassment in game spaces. They present an even greater risk of harassment and mistreatment precisely because they are so intense: female players who use their real voices during multiuser play

³³ Grayson (2018). Available at www.rockpapershotgun.com/2014/03/27/manveer-heir-interview/. (Accessed July 6, 2018).

³⁴ Ruberg and Shaw (2017); Anable (2018); Malkowski and Russworm (2017).

have found their virtual breasts grabbed, and stalking and harassment have already become a major issue for developers.³⁵

Gaming is in the midst of a cultural turn; it is still, in Mia Consalvo's words, often extremely toxic to women and minorities. Pervasive sexism and racism characterize the industry, a characteristic it has in common with Silicon Valley's "bro" culture generally. The remainder of this essay will discuss why racism is such a stubborn aspect of gaming culture and will conclude on a hopeful note by analyzing how contributions by users and industry work to combat and correct these problems. Activist programmers such as Sassafra Collective and the Hollaback team have produced social movements and software to alter this climate of harassment and, in reaction to Gamergate, companies such as Intel have committed significant amounts of money to programs that support women professional gamers.

"Shall We Play a Game?" How Calling Someone a Racist Is like Starting a Thermonuclear War

There is no doubt that the "n-word" is "a racial insult with a special status and unique strength. In Randall Kennedy's definitive book on this topic, entitled *N****: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*, he asserts "it has long been the most socially consequential racial insult."³⁶ He cites writer Farai Chideya, who concurs, calling it "the All-American trump card, the nuclear bomb of racial epithets." Though it is cause for banning on every game platform that has a Terms of Service agreement, the word is frequently found in gaming culture.

What can be worse than sending someone an in-game message calling them a "nigger bitch," or calling someone a "nigger" over a voice-enabled headset? Calling someone a racist has almost an equivalent charge. (Sadly, calling someone a sexist lacks this ability to shock or anger.) Doane writes: "Today, charges of 'racism'—or the use of the label 'racist'—carry an extremely negative connotation and serve as perhaps the ultimate rhetorical weapon in public discourse on racial issues." The discursive act of calling someone a racist is viewed as almost equally transgressive to the act of actually using racist language: it is deemed so devastating that presumably no thing or body can survive it.

Race is a famously contentious topic, particularly in the United States. Because overt acts of racism have become less common in recent years, there is always a troubling tendency to view racism as disappearing, if not in fact completely eradicated. This view of racism as an unfortunate artifact of the

³⁵ Belamire (2016).

³⁶ Kennedy (2002).

past, always as something that is dying out, characterizes the “post-racial ideology.” Subscribers to this ideology believe that racism manifests itself most commonly as isolated incidents of hateful speech directed from one person to another, that racism is the result of “ignorance” rather than harmful intent, and that it is ultimately personal rather than culturally systemic.

However, those who doubt that racism (and its frequent companion, sexism) is still a serious problem or who believe that it is “personal” rather than pervasive throughout societal institutions need only look to the Internet for proof that this is *not* so. Racism and sexism have continued to flourish on the Internet, and indeed to some extent have even come to *define* it, despite Obama-era hopes for a “post-racial” society. The title of legal scholar Danielle Citron’s book, *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace*, attests to the often outrageous amounts of outright misogyny, racism, and other discriminatory types of communication to be found in the digitally mediated world.³⁷ This book is a welcome corrective to earlier work that glosses over the unpleasant realities of unbridled digital communication and its victims, who are predominantly women and minorities.

Doane identifies two dominant ways of understanding and talking about race in the United States. The first defines racism as the product of individual attitudes or behaviors motivated by personal hatred, stereotyping, and prejudice against people of color. The second defines racism as a set of *systemic* and institutional practices such as de facto segregation, persistent inequality, and unequal access to resources such as education and safe housing. Doane claims that the first definition is by far the most common. Individual examples of player-to-player prejudice and harassment are ubiquitous within networked video games, but it must also be remembered that systemic practices such as the exclusion of non-stereotyped characters of color and women from the game texts and storylines themselves are part of a harmful racial discourse as well.

As Gray and Cote have documented, “hard-core” competitive shooter FPS games like *Halo* and *Call of Duty* are rough places for women. Profane and abusive language is often described as “trash talk” rather than harassment by many players, a rhetorical ploy which minimizes the harm to recipient. There is, however, a bright line that separates inconsequential speech from abuse. Gamers themselves make a distinction between “trash talk” and discourse that crosses the line, such as use of the word “nigger.”

In 2011 A professional black female gamer known as “BurnYourBra,” a nationally ranked *Mortal Kombat* player, explained in an interview on Eventhubs.com, a popular gaming website, that

³⁷ Citron (2014).

At tournaments players talk [crap] to each other. That's just the way tournaments are. People get hyped. Players get salty when they lose, which is fine. But there is a difference between trash talking and calling other players disrespectful names. For me, I've been called a dyke, a butch, a slut, a bitch . . . I was even called a black bitch to my face along with being called a lesbian, a gorilla, and a monkey.³⁸

BurnYourBra's interview produced a lengthy comment stream on the site; many of the contributors debated where the "line" between trash talking and racism lay. Some agreed that "trash talk" was inevitable, indeed an intrinsic part of the competitive culture of video game tournaments, but that it was "not the same" as racism. Others maintained that racism is best ignored and is of little consequence in a "post-racial" world, leaving it to the receiver to "shake it off." A key paradox of race, gender, and game studies rose to the top: while profanity and abuse are "trash talk," a form of discursive waste, lacking meaningful content that contributes to the game, many defended it as a distinctive and inevitable aspect of video game multiplayer culture. If it is indeed trash, the consensus opinion among gamers on this discussion board is that it is the responsibility of the receiver, not the culprit, to "take it out."

As digital media theorists Galloway and Thacker write, "trash, in the most general sense, implies remnants of something used but later discarded . . . trash is the set of all things that has been cast out of previous sets."³⁹ Once trash talk has been used to intimidate or bully another player, it is supposed to disappear, absolving its user of responsibility or even memory of the event.

If "trash" doesn't deserve notice or interpretation, as some players maintain, it is because it lacks meaning. Yet like the omnipresent trash icon on the computer desktop, a fixture of personal computer use, trash talk is part of the media ecology of digital culture. Just like videogame cheating, in-game economies, and online gender identities, all of which have been the subject of important book-length monographs in game studies,⁴⁰ the discursive environment of sexism, racism, and homophobia deserves critical attention because it is central to games culture.

BurnYourBra is not a particularly famous figure in video game culture, nor would she most likely define herself as a video-game activist or a feminist. However, by sharing her experience of racism and sexism within the culture of gaming she is contributing to a small but growing media campaign against video-game racism and sexism, a form of speech that is often *defended* as just "trash talking." Likewise, user-generated blogs that are devoted to the task of

³⁸ www.eventhubs.com, April 15, 2011. Available at www.eventhubs.com/news/2011/apr/15/dmgburnyourbra-discusses-difficulties-being-female-gamer/ (Accessed August 6, 2018).

³⁹ Galloway and Thacker (2007).

⁴⁰ Castronova (2005); Consalvo (2007); Nardi (2010). "My Life as a Night Elf Priest," University of Michigan Press.

confronting racism, sexism, and homophobia work to prevent us from forgetting or ignoring online “trash talk” by preserving and archiving it, using old and new media.

“Fat, Ugly, or Slutty?” Game Activists and Crowd-Sourced Campaigns against Racism and Sexism in the Networked Gaming Era

As Dyer-Witthford and DePeuter write, “Games not only cultivate the imagination of alternative social possibilities; they also present practical tools that may be useful for its actualization.”⁴¹ Gamers who love the culture but hate its racism and sexism create websites that aim to expose some of its worst excesses. Well before Gamergate brought gaming’s problems to light for the general public to see, sites such as *Fat, Ugly or Slutty Racialicious*, *The Border House: Breaking Down Borders in Gaming, Not in the Kitchen Anymore*, and *The Hathor Legacy* critiqued and publicized game culture’s problems with race, gender, and sexuality while asserting the pleasure, aesthetic value, and social importance of games. These sites, all produced by passionate volunteers, provided “safe spaces” where these often-unpopular minority critiques can be expressed.

For example, *The Border House: Breaking Down Borders in Gaming* describes itself as “a blog for gamers. It’s a blog for those who are feminist, queer, disabled, people of color, transgender, poor, gay, lesbian, and others who belong to marginalized groups, as well as allies.” In its policies about posting, it asks users to include “trigger warnings” about content that “involves sexual assault or violence towards women and other marginalized groups, which may distress or cause readers to be triggered.”

Though anti-sexist and anti-racist gaming blogs often encourage users to report abuse to game moderators before posting, the sites work to address what the game industry can’t or won’t by publicizing sexist interactions on popular game platforms and exposing abusive gamers to public ridicule. Most screenshots of abusive discourse in-game include the gamer-tag or in-game identity of the abuser, thus linking the behavior to a semi- (but not fully) anonymous individual. In this, their strategy resembles *Hollaback!*, a “movement dedicated to ending street harassment using mobile technology.” *Hollaback!* encourages women to take pictures of sexual harassers and catcallers on the street or in public places with their cellphones and to share them on their website, thus creating an archive for other users to access, as

⁴¹ Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter (2009).

well as a form of accountability: “By collecting women and LGBTQ folks’ stories and pictures in a safe and share-able way with our very own mobile phone applications, *Hollaback!* is creating a crowd-sourced initiative to end street harassment.”

Hollaback! broke the silence that has perpetuated sexual violence internationally, asserting that “any and all gender-based violence is unacceptable, and creates a world where we have an option—and, more importantly—a response.” Similarly, the “Fatuglyorslutty site” relies exclusively on crowd-sourcing to produce a rich sampling of sexist and racist “trash talk” sent from one gamer to another in the course of gameplay on game consoles, mobile devices, within PC games like *World of Warcraft*, and on every imaginable gaming device that permits strangers to contact other strangers.

The site’s successful use of humor has helped it to garner positive attention in the gaming community, quite a feat given how unpopular and divisive the topic of sexism has been in recent years. *Kotaku*, a popular and widely read gaming blog, wrote the following in 2011:

The casual racism, snarling sexism, and random belligerence one encounters in online play, particularly in a first-person shooter over Xbox Live, are not at all a new phenomenon. It’s sadly accepted as par for the course, in fact. But the three curators of *Fat, Ugly or Slutty*, have chosen to archive it, not so much for a high-minded ideal, but to hold a mirror up to idiots worthy of ridicule.

Indeed, *Fat, Ugly or Slutty* embodies Henry Jenkins’ “critically optimistic” theories about the power of participatory media to increase tolerance and respect for diversity.⁴²

As the *Kotaku* post noted, racism, sexism, and homophobia are commonplace in networked console video gameplay. Though the Xbox One, Playstation, and multiplayer games such as *League of Legends* and *Overwatch* all require users to sign off on Terms of Service agreements regarding the use of profanity and hate speech in live gameplay, these regulations are enforced through a system of victim-reported “tickets” or, at one time, player tribunals that are acted upon well after the fact, if at all.⁴³ Users who engage in hate speech can be banned from the service, but are able to log back on after the ban period has passed. The ineffectiveness of industry regulation of hate speech has created a need for victims of gamer abuse to create their own participatory outlets to engage a wider public and increase awareness of this serious issue.

⁴² Jenkins (2006).

⁴³ Computer-based online games have come up with some novel solutions to the problem of moderation. For example, *League of Legends*, a popular PC-based real-time strategy game, has a system that invites users to act as moderators of player disputes around inappropriate speech and behavior.

In 2012 the front page of *Fat, Ugly or Slutty* featured a banner headline decorated with an image of a white woman wearing a dress, pearls, a conservative hairstyle, and a wink (see Figure 7.1). The header reads “So you play video games? Are you . . . Fat, Ugly, or Slutty?” There are radio buttons that invite users to submit their own material, read archives, learn about the site’s staff, and read “press” or media coverage that further explains the site’s mission to expose in-game harassment. The side bar on the right categorizes posts under labels that express the most common expletives that users have reported hearing or seeing, including of course the old standbys, “Fat,” “Ugly,” or “Slutty,” as well as additional ones such as “Crudely Creative,” “Lewd Proposals,” “Unprovoked Rage,” “Sandwich Making 101,” and “Pen15 club.” Perhaps the most disturbing category, “Death Threats,” is well populated by posts threatening female players with specific forms of violence.

Though online gamers almost never use their real names when creating avatars or identities for themselves, many of them have invested significant amounts of time, energy, and real capital in these gaming identities. “Fat, Ugly, or Slutty” publishes gamers’ online identities along with the racist and sexist messages that they have sent to its readers, thereby helping these readers to avoid grouping or playing with these abusive players while simultaneously exposing them to semi-public ridicule and shame. Though the site



Figure 7.1. “Fat, Ugly or Slutty” front page

collects samples of abuse that users found noteworthy enough to send in and is thus not a representative sample of what users commonly hear while playing, the examples users share are shocking.

For example, “xXSTONERXx1690,” the author of a message posted to the site that reads “u will always b a spastic cunt cause ur black ya dirty slave” is unlikely to find that readers of *Fat, Ugly or Slutty* will accept his requests to play with him, and he or she may suffer other repercussions. *Fat, Ugly or Slutty*'s front page features radio buttons that allow readers to re-post its content to Facebook and Twitter, and an RSS link for those who wish to add it to their newsfeeds.

The naked racism and sexist aggression displayed by xXSTONERXx1690 is far from rare on the site or in gaming culture, but neither is it the norm. While it has been argued that fighting games like *Mortal Kombat* and *Street Fighter* and FPS games like the immensely popular *Modern Warfare: Call of Duty* and *Halo* series promote violent and abusive behavior or even real-world violence, the range of game platforms that *Fat, Ugly or Slutty* displays shows the reader that racism and sexism are global behaviors that can be found on *all* platforms within *all* genres of networked play. For example, after winning a game of *Words With Friends* on the iPhone app, “Dabby Dot” sent a *Fat, Ugly or Slutty* contributor a message that reads “hi wanna suck my dick?” followed four minutes later by another reading “come ooon” (see Figure 7.2). *Words With Friends* is a casual game based on Scrabble with no gamic texts, images, or negative fictions that might refer to gender, race, or violence in any way.

Another post, filed under “Unprovoked Rage,” simply lists a spate of racist and sexist words, demanding that the reader “go back 2 halo” (see Figure 7.3). Similarly, other posted messages threaten to rape, kill, or otherwise violate or harm their recipients. A particularly disturbing example sent by “MrWinnipeg” to another player in *Draw Something*, a very popular casual game based on *Pictionary*, depicts a female figure labeled “slut” performing fellatio on a smiling male figure labeled “me.”

Doane also writes that there is “significant disagreement about what racism is.” This is no less true within the gaming community. Gamers greatly resent charges of racism despite its prevalence within the community. Many gamers often define racism and sexism very differently from how non-gamers do, distinguishing between “trash talk” and “real racism.” Many gamers who use sexist or racist language do not see themselves or their peers as racist or “bad” people. *Fat, Ugly or Slutty*'s goal is to collect overwhelming evidence that this speech is pervasive, harmful, and indeed both sexist and racist.

On February 28, 2012, *Kotaku* reported that a “firestorm of drama” had been set off in the already drama-laden world of video-game reality television. Another popular gaming blog, *Penny Arcade*, followed suit, reporting in a

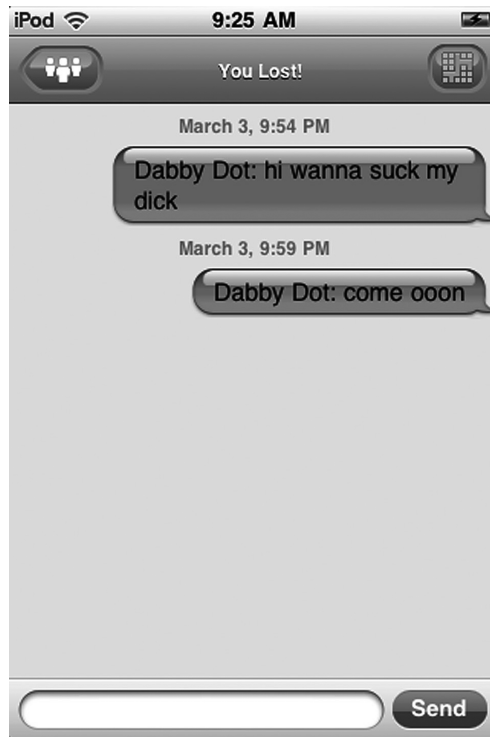


Figure 7.2. Sexism in casual games: user-contributed capture from FatUglyorSlutty documenting harassment in Words With Friends

story entitled “Sexual Harassment as ethical imperative: How Capcom’s Fighting Game reality show turned ugly” (PennyArcade.com, February 28, 2012) that during a recent Capcom sponsored event “contestants took part in sexual harassment and in fact argued that sexual harassment is an important part of the fighting game community that needs to continue.” In a video podcast entitled Capcom’s *Cross Assault*, aired on Twitch.tv, professional Tekken player Aris Bakhtanians repeatedly asked female player Miranda Pakodzi about her bra size, talked about her breasts, and otherwise made inappropriate and abusive remarks while watching her play. When she protested that he was making her uncomfortable and acting “creepy,” he responded that she needed to “toughen up.” Pakodzi withdrew from the tournament, Bakhtanians apologized on Twitter, but the story continued to draw attention.

This incident went viral, and Bakhtanians was later interviewed about it by Twitch.tv community manager, Jared Rae. When Rae asked him, “Can I get my *Street Fighter* without sexual harassment?” Bakhtanians replied bluntly, “You can’t. You can’t because they’re one and the same thing. This is a



Figure 7.3. “Go back 2 halo pussy, u r a loser pussy faggot nigger spic jew”

community that’s, you know, 15 or 20 years old, and the sexual harassment is part of a culture, and if you remove that from the fighting game community, it’s not the fighting game community.”

In this interview Bakhtanians retreats from his earlier position that women need to “toughen up,” thus minimizing the effects of sexism, a common postfeminist claim that represents the orthodox opinion on harassment in the gaming world. Rather, this time, Bakhtanians took an entirely different tack, asserting that video-game sexism may be harmful, but that it is an intrinsic part of a long-standing culture and needs to be preserved and protected as such. His argument is that the “fighting game community” has the right to engage in sexual harassment because it is “part of the culture,” regardless of the harm suffered by women. There are some obvious weaknesses in this argument—and in the wake of the controversy, hundreds of gamers stepped forward to disavow their membership in this “culture,” or claimed that Bakhtanians was misrepresenting it. However, few challenged the notion that gaming constitutes its own sphere of convention and condoned behaviors: that it was, in short, a “culture” with different norms, forms of speech, and customs from those of culture at large.

Conclusion

Despite Bakhtianians' claims that the culture of gaming must retain its customary sexist and racist discourse to remain authentic, traditions change. Post-Gamergate critiques of these practices, industry attempts to address the issue, and the producers of new games that center diverse protagonists are working to produce new gaming traditions and cultures. Today, avatars are much more customizable than they were, and it is far more likely that women and people of color can "see themselves" in the games that they play.

Gaming is still a media form where egregious sexism and racism are commonplace. Indeed, digital networked games are where both the worst *and* the best behavior on the Internet are to be found. How can we avoid demonizing straight white male gamers and honor players' legitimate claims to belonging to a playful, generative, and distinctive "gamer" culture while working to address its historic hostility to women and minorities? As gamer culture continues to struggle with racial and sexual difference, those of us who love to play but who do not fit the traditional gamer identity envision an expanded community based on skill, pleasure, engagement, and collaboration.

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