

A Gendered Identity Debate in Digital Game Culture

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Abstract

Although women make up half of the gamer population, only a small portion of them considers themselves as a gamer. This is seen as a logical consequence of a culture and industry that fiercely concentrate on legitimizing a masculine gamer identity. The upcoming presence of women in the digital game landscape, however, is threatening the notion of the masculine gamer. The aim of the current article is to analyze this threat, and how new forms of backlash emerge in response to it. Drawing from social identity and feminist theory, we argue that these new forms of backlash can be understood as 'identity management strategies', aimed at protecting a masculine gamer identity. We analyze three such strategies: (1) the use of novel gendered binaries to frame the masculine against a feminine gamer identity, (2) the use of hostile sexist assaults to silence feminist gamers and advocates, and (3) the use of dualistic postfeminist discourses to mitigate and undermine criticisms.

Keywords

digital games; female players; gamergate; gamer identity; social identity theory

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Introduction

"Playing games does not equal being a gamer" (De Grove, Courtois, & Van Looy, 2015, p. 3).

Contemporary game culture is permeated with gender issues. Concerns have been voiced, for example, with respect to the stereotypical representation of women in games (Downs & Smith, 2010) and the disproportionate number of men employed in the game industry (Prescott & Bogg, 2014). An explanatory factor for these and other gender issues in game culture is the strong entanglement between gamer identity and masculinity (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Fox & Thang, 2014). Many consider video game playing as a typically male activity – an activity wherein men are both more interested and successful than women (Consalvo, 2012). Research shows that, as a consequence of this entanglement, women valuing digital games are found to conceal their identity as a gamer (Taylor, 2008), restrain their identification (De Grove et al., 2015) or reject this label altogether (Shaw, 2012).

However, there is evidence that the traditional understanding of gamer identity as a masculine one is becoming more difficult to sustain in today's media environment. As digital games are increasingly expanding, with divergent genres attracting a whole range of non-traditional players such as women and people of all ages (Scharnow, Festl, Vogelgesang, & Quandt, 2015), the gaming community is progressively becoming more diverse. A US industry report, for example, indicated that the traditional gap between the sexes has largely closed with 56% male and 44% female players (ESA, 2015). As a result, traditional conceptions of gamer identity are being challenged. Although this shift toward greater diversity could be considered positive, the backside appears to be that misogyny has never been so present and organized in game culture as it is today (Consalvo, 2012). The recent *gamergate* controversy, for example, in which a group of male gamers started an online harassment campaign to silence (mostly female) opinion leaders critical of gender issues, illustrates how misogyny has become a key weapon in the "war over gamer identity". Although adherents initially framed the movement as a reaction against alleged unethical practices in games journalism, it quickly became clear that its main goal was to install "a false binary" of gamer identity, that is; true gamers (male and heterosexual) versus feminists trying to be gamers (Evans & Janish, 2015, pp. 126-127).

The aim of the current manuscript is to further understanding of *gamergate* and other kinds of toxic behaviors. To that end, we will first explore the epistemological foundations of gamer identity and its alignment with gender identity from a social constructionist perspective (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Next, we will analyze how underlying group processes of category membership explain toxic behavior online

by drawing from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Focusing on three main social identity strategies, current cases of backlash are discussed, including their postfeminist features in a digital game culture. This analysis allows us to draw bridges between theoretical notions about and contemporary experiences of a female player group whose gamer identity has been systematically denied through history.

Gendered Gamer Identities

Identities are “multiple rather than single, [...] dynamic rather than static [...] and volatile rather than consistent” (Van Zoonen, 2013, p. 44). This implies that each of us holds multiple identities that are defined and articulated within interpersonal relations and cultural contexts (Moghaddas, Persson, Hvidt, Christensen, & Hansen, 2012).

All identities, and therefore also gamer identity, are social constructions that are actively performed with and for others (Shaw, 2013). This definition implies that, similar to how a person’s gender identity results from a sociocultural process in which gender differences are perceived as objective facts that justify prevailing gender norms (West & Fenstermaker, 1995), gamer identity can be regarded as the result of a process in which people perceive “gamers” and “non-gamers” as different. These perceived differences lie at the heart of normative conceptions of appropriate activities for both “gamers” and “non-gamers.” To act appropriately as a gamer then, means that one’s actions are characterized and evaluated in accordance with these normative conceptions. Therefore, being a gamer is not something we *are* but something we *do* (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Interestingly, one of the perceived “objective” facts that demarcate gamer identity is its focus on masculinity. When looking at the history of digital gaming, it becomes clear that games have inherited their association with masculinity from the very beginning (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006). The gaming industry played a crucial role in this process by creating, marketing and thus reproducing its products in light of a predominantly male audience (Shaw, 2013). To this day, games remain fertile symbolic resources for men to construct and negotiate gendered identities such as multiple masculine ideals of respectable, rough and playful manliness (Schut, 2006). Games are places wherein men can perform masculinity. This is not to say that women do not play games, but it does indicate that the dominant discourse surrounding digital game culture is stereotypically masculine. Fron, Fullerton, Morie, and Pearce (2007) refer to the “Hegemony of Play” as the dominant discourse behind the construction of digital game culture, denoting a power elite that “works in concert with game developers and self-selected hardcore ‘gamers’, who have systematically developed a rhetoric of play that is exclusionary... to ‘minority’ players” (p. 1). This hegemony eventually creates a schism between those considered

"legitimate" of claiming gamer identity (i.e., men) and those denied of doing so (i.e., women) (van Zoonen, 2000).

A consequence of the schism is that, although women are increasingly playing games, male players are much more likely to identify themselves as gamers than female players (Shaw, 2012). This is problematic in that it denies women's rightful access to gaming capital, that is; being knowledgeable about digital games and their para-textual system (Consalvo, 2007). Secondly, because of this lack of gaming capital, women tend to hide their game play leading to social isolation within the gamer community (Taylor, 2008). Having a network with many self-identified gamers, however, is an important prerequisite for assuming gamer membership and receiving the rewards associated with it (De Grove et al., 2015). On a broader level, women's exclusion, both self and externally designated, promotes and recreates a stereotypical belief system that deploys a "strategy of splitting" between men as "typical" gamers and women as "deviants" (Hall, 2003).

This is not to say that disenfranchised players have no agentic power. As explained previously, gamer identity is a social construction and thus an unstable and contested ideological model of hegemony. Agency gives individuals the ability to define their own actions and resist the ideological ground of the hegemony of play (Hall, 1980). In this rationale, several authors (e.g., Fox & Tang, 2014) have recently drawn attention to a progressive shift in game culture that undermines the principles on which gamer identity is currently built. This shift is not only initiated by game industry's increasing interest to attract a broader audience (Vanderhoef, 2013), but also by social initiatives such the #INeedDiverseGames hashtag advocating inclusivity and diversity in gaming (Evans & Janish, 2015). We argue that this progress has led to a "gamer status threat", causing traditional players to defend old standards via relatively new types of backlash such as the use of ironic humor in which misogynic standards are reproduced (cf. infra).

Threatened Identity Boundaries

To better understand the underlying process of gamer status threat, the social identity of being or, better: *doing* "gamer" is discussed from a social identity approach (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This allows us to explain which mechanisms are accountable for the violent behaviors people experiencing status threats enact.

Gamer identity is a social identity because it denotes membership in a particular social category (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). People identify with that social category via cognitive processes of self-categorization: they describe themselves in terms of the category's defining characteristics. These characteristics comprise a group's prototypicality or normativity (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). In case of digital games, we have argued that masculinity is strongly tied to gaming technology (Carr, 2005),

making the masculine gender a prototypical attribute for assuming gamer identity. Moreover, while prototypical attributes help people typically self-categorize as gamer, value connotations are formed by comparing the in-group with out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The distancing of out-groups (i.e., non-prototypical individuals) will yield feelings of attachment and positive affect within a group of gamers. This positive group distinctiveness will in turn motivate individuals' adherence to in-group norms, assuring that one will be recognized as a legitimate and "prototypical" in-group member (Brewer, 1999). Given the focus on masculinity as a prototypical attribute, comparison with and distancing from femininity is central to a traditional gamer community.

Group membership can be relatively stable based on the extent to which one includes the in-group into the self. Social categories such as gamer identity are thus depended both on immediate social situations for the activation of prototypical behavior and on the availability of predefined culturally available categorizations (De Grove, Courtois, & Van Looy, 2015). The latter is similar with the idea that gamer identity is a social construction based on historical practices and economic decisions leading to an anchoring of gaming technology with masculinity (Carr, 2005). However, as explained before, social constructions are fluid and consequently subject to change and reformation. The growing numbers of female players together with non-traditional genres are challenging culturally embedded constructions of gamer identity. As a consequence, the status of "prototypical" male players becomes unsure through this progressive movement leading to an insecure social identity of the dominant or high-status group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). We refer to this mechanism as gamer status threat, indicating the threat of status loss that male players perceive resulting from an intergroup conflict in game culture.

According to the social identity approach, dominant groups try to maintain status quo and protect identity boundaries in preventing lower status groups (e.g., female players) from challenging their favorable position (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005). However, in-group favoritism does not necessarily lead to out-group negativity as there should be a motivational basis for discrimination against out-groups (Brewer, 1999). In case of digital games, women are not only perceived as threatening to in-group prototypicality (e.g., maleness) but their presence may also affect positive in-group comparisons on dimensions that are typically valued by traditional gamers. For example, it is argued that hardcore gamers feel reluctance towards games' increasing popularity and diversity, contributing to fears that the quality of their favorite games could be compromised or negated entirely. These threats to the in-group and more specifically their valued principles will make gamers who are highly committed to their identity respond to the gamer status threat. Specifically, the influx of female players is met with hostility from those invested in a hypermasculine gamer identity (Salter & Blodgett, 2012).

What we see now in game culture is an attempt to maintain (or restore) identity boundaries in terms of out-group derogation. Several strategies can be deployed for dealing with threatened social identities. In the case of gamer status threat, the combination of a strong gamer identification with group-level threat typically leads to, but is not limited to, conflict and antagonism (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Accordingly, the threat against gamer identity has led to new, more collectively organized, forms of backlash against female players in today's gaming environment. This backlash manifests itself in different identity management strategies that reassert a dominant masculine gamer identity. In what follows, three identity strategies are discussed: redefining a gender binary in terms of a perceived core-casual genre dichotomy, increased hostile sexism in- and outside game culture, and the use of postfeminist features in discourses on the role of gender in game culture.

A Redefined Gender Binary

With the emergence of mobile, and social games which are particularly popular among a female audience (Sung, Bjornrud, Lee, & Wohn, 2010)ⁱ, today's mainstream game culture is more diverse than ever. The influx of these casual genres, and their predominantly female player base, represents a threat to the social construction of gamer identity as hitherto owned by young, Caucasian, and heterosexual men. From a social identity perspective, this threat undermines their positive group distinctiveness (cf. Tajfel & Turner, 1986), as almost anyone can now be considered a gamer.

The "othering" of casual genres vis-à-vis (real) core genresⁱⁱ provides a strategy to redefine the elements of the comparative situation. This is also referred to as a *social creativity strategy* (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social creativity aims at retaining status quo by comparing the in-group to the out-group on a newly formulated dimension. By redefining the gender binary in gaming as one between casual (i.e., feminine) and hardcore (i.e., masculine) players, "gamers" attempt to strategically reassert a dominant masculine gamer identity.

According to Vanderhoef (2013), this "cultural feminization of casual video games" (p. 2) is accomplished in a rather subtle fashion. Initially, especially the game industry played a crucial role in the process of feminizing casual gaming by disseminating the terms "casual" and "core" genres for marketing and targeting purposes. This division, however, persuades a form of indirect devaluation in which casual genres are seen as games lacking the "qualities of core gaming titles" and thus aimed at people outside gaming capital (Shaw, 2013; Vanderhoef, 2013, p. 4). Not surprisingly, women are the most avid players of non-traditional casual and social games (Sung et al., 2010), affirming an association between femininity and a denigrated gamer label. Similar divisions between casual/devalued/feminine gamers and

core/valued/masculine gamers are further invigorated in reviews and online forums on numerous gaming websites (Fisher, 2015). This is not only carried out by formal parties such as game journalists but also by core players from the game community itself, who express their dissatisfaction with the changing nature of the game market and its demographics. Ranging from subtle sarcasm to rigorous aversion, these individual voices give rise to a collective sentiment of casual gamers invading a male-privileged core gaming space (Fisher, 2014; 2015).

In digital game culture, genre preferences thus shape a new dimension of comparison to maintain the evaluative structure of distinctiveness between masculine and feminine players. In doing so, the merging of femininity and casual genre preferences becomes eventually "naturalized" and "normalized", hereby (re)producing a presumptively biological disinterest of women in "real" digital gaming. The core-casual distinction, then, serves as a way to deal with the expansion in diversity (and rising womanhood) in gamers, reinstalling a symbolic boundary between those legitimate of claiming "real" gamer identity and those who lack this legitimacy. Neys, Jansz, and Tan's (2014) study provides empirical evidence for this assumption, showing that core players are much more likely to identify themselves as gamers than casual players. This is rather remarkable as Juul (2012) indicated that casual players do not necessarily play "casual", but can spend more time on gaming than core players do.

Hostile Sexism

A second identity management strategy for defending in-group positive distinctiveness is *social competition*. This strategy is typically applied when high-status groups perceive their status as unstable and fear position loss (Niens & Cairns, 2003). Especially high in-group identifiers are likely to deploy social competition. For these individuals, group distinctiveness threats combined with strong in-group identification often evoke overt displays of hostility and discrimination towards the out-group. This in turn serves purposes of collective self-esteem restoration (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Ellemers et al., 2002).

In today's digital gaming culture, male gamers who are strongly self-identified appear to systematically employ out-group derogation in terms of female marginalization and misogyny (Jenson & de Castell, 2013). While sexism and harassment of female players is nothing new in the game community, it is clear that this has become more concentrated and toxic in the past couple of years (Consalvo, 2012). For instance, in studying game magazines, Summers and Millers (2014) revealed a growing trend in the portrayal of female game characters toward an increase of hostile sexism and a decrease of benevolent sexism. Whereas digital game magazines used to portray women as "damsels in distress" (i.e., benevolent sexism), the focus is now much more on

female game characters as sexual objects (i.e., hostile sexism). While both constructs are built on the concept of male power (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Summers & Miller, 2014), the latter is considered to be a more harmful form of sexism.

Furthermore, sexism is highly prevalent in the game community itself. Although this has been the case for several decades, in recent years it has escalated, particularly due to upcoming possibilities to remain anonymous during game play. As the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE) posits, the increased anonymity of online environments makes people's social identities more salient and active while making their personal identities less salient (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). This process of depersonalization stimulates greater conformity to norms of the in-group of which the social identity has been activated (cf. self-categorization theory [Turner, 1985]). For online players, this implies that their gamer identity is activated more strongly during anonymous online game play, leading them to feel less inhibited to act in accordance with the masculine "gamer prototype". Anonymity can thus facilitate harassment and other forms of hostilities towards outsiders such as women (Fox & Tang, 2014).

The use of negative language, including flaming, in particular operates as a tactic of terrorization to silence female voices (Ross, 2010). Women using real-time voice chat, for example, are likely to receive three times as many negative comments compared to male voices or no voice at all (Kuznekoff & Rose, 2012). It is barely a surprise then that women are concealing their gender identity online. If they do reveal their femaleness, it is likely that these women have to pay a "misogyny tax"; known as the price they pay for being a women in the public sphere (McEwan, 2014). It is the cost to one's emotional resources in enduring the abuse and harassment for overtly practicing their hobby or profession (Ryan, 2014).

Online misogyny does not limit itself to harassment and flaming during game play. Also in the broader digital sphere, women directly and indirectly experience hostility. The recent *gamergate* controversy is an example of how deeply the misogyny tax (cf. supra) is anchored in digital game culture. This harassment campaign was set up by a movement of players with conservative ideas about gamer identity (Fisher, 2015). The increasing presence of feminist critics, woman players, and female developers was in particular met with resistance, pushing femininity outside game culture in order to reestablish the role of masculinity with gamer identity. Anita Sarkeesian, Brianna Wu and Zoë Quinn are just a few exemplars of female critics who dealt with online abuse, bomb, rape, and murder threats initiated and/or intensified by the *gamergate* movement. This vile behavior even forced these women to leave their private homes and seek protection after being doxxed (i.e. the act of making personal information public online;

Golding, 2014; O'Rourke, 2014). Also academia became a target itself as *gamergaters* accused feminist game scholars to be involved in a feminist gaming conspiracy. Professor of Media Studies and Production Adrienne Shaw, for example, was personally attacked for her work; *gamergaters* further claimed that she was a former tutor of Sarkeesian and Quinn (Chess & Shaw, 2015). Hence, the abuse that these victims have been receiving, in- and outside academia, is not limited to online spheres but taps into every aspect of their lives both online and offline.

Postfeminist Discourse in Gaming

A third strategy to protect the masculine gamer identity is the use of a postfeminist discourse in communication about that identity. Postfeminism is used to refer to current-day feminism, which is a "double movement" in which feminist ideas are simultaneously accepted and disavowed, leading to the subtle renewal of gender inequalities (McRobbie, 2007). Simply put, postfeminism argues that because feminism is considered an accomplished fact, feminist critique is paradoxically no longer needed. In postfeminism, contradictions between feminist and anti-feminist themes are oftentimes articulated through humor, irony, and exaggerating (Gill, 2007b, 2008).

Although postfeminism is no identity management strategy, it is a communication strategy that provides tools to obtain and maintain the gendered binary in game genres and hostile sexism. Making sexist statements in the form of jokes is one example of how postfeminism may support misogyny in game culture. Game texts and websites are littered with postfeminist irony and humor wherein sexist jokes are not supposed to be taken seriously or considered offensive (Vanderhoef, 2013). Nostalgia is often used as a justification for reproducing traditional sexism, translated into humor which is the case in typical retro-inspired gaming scenes. As such, *Fat Princess* (2009) is a typical example of a game in which a princess should be rescued with a humorous wink to the old-school "damsel in distress stereotype" (Sarkeesian, 2013). The use of a specific historic period in postfeminist discourse allows the hegemony of play to subsist "under the cover of a nostalgic preoccupation with the past" (Gill, 2007a, p. 110). Hence, while overt sexism may give cause for resistance, the use of subtle sexist humor is a powerful way for silencing voices that disapprove with a patriarchal game culture.

Besides humor, the ambivalence of postfeminism is also notable in discourses emphasizing female choice in the game industry. Prominent women in this industry are seemingly free to construct and control their own career paths, without having to suffer from imposed power structures (Harvey & Fisher, 2014). The reason why few women work in the gaming industry, then, is considered their own individual decision rather than the result of structural constraints. A recent study, however, showed that women in the game industry face several challenges that

limit their participation, such as a persistent gender pay gap and thresholds to work in executive or managing positions (Ganguin & Hoblitz, 2014).

Even overt feminist actions in gaming can be read as a postfeminist rhetoric. For example, as a reaction against the range of threats coming from the *gamergate* community, game developer Zoë Quinn co-founded the website Crash Override to help other victims of online hate speechⁱⁱⁱ. The website offers a valuable support network and concentrates on preventative tactics (female) victims can enact through outlining privacy protection recommendations to eliminate personal information online. Although these guidelines provide useful information, the organization risks victim blaming (i.e., when victims are held responsible for the harm committed against them [Ryan, 1971]) as they do not only advise minority players to remain anonymous, but also emphasize female players' responsibility for self-monitoring their online behavior. This focus on self-surveillance, however, comes at the expense of organized feminist politics. The latter is crucial for addressing global sexist practices because they can provide legal ground in counteracting online harassment. This policymaking is nowadays absent, forcing female players to be silent in favor of self-empowerment pursuing the underlying power hierarchy in game culture (Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2009).

Conclusion

Although game culture suffers from hegemonic players' (re)enactment of unequal gender standards, playing games is not fundamentally masculine. While many women have refused the adoption of gamer identity throughout gaming history, they have always been playing and creating digital games and will continue to do so (Golding, 2014). Games themselves are not inherently considered problematic, but the social structure on which these games are built deserves critical attention. Hence, it is only through questioning and preempting the ground of gamer identity that social change will and can be accomplished.

To that end, the current article has outlined how the social construction of gamer identity as a gendered identity defines in-group/out-group categorization processes in a changing digital gaming environment. Our main assertion was that the ongoing feminization of players and products has led to a perceived gamer status threat among traditional male players, which is counteracted by means of novel forms of backlash or identity management strategies.

This article not only aimed to give insight into current evolutions in digital gaming. It also tried to raise understanding of where these evolutions originate from, by theoretically grounding them in social identity and feminist theory. We believe that being aware of theoretical

foundations of backlash against women is crucial for achieving informed decision-making processes of game designers, game journalists and policymakers.

For example, during the writing of this article, the *United Nations Broadband Commission* released a report on cyberviolence against women and girls, stating the need for a “world-wide wake-up call”.^{iv} Soon after, however, the report was formally retracted due to criticism on the U.N.’s deterministic vision of the relation between games and violence, the sloppy writing style, poor research and failure to consult people from tech (Jeong, 2015). Whereas such initiatives are crucial for building a successful policy against harassment of female players, this attempt clearly lacked credibility, in part because of the missed opportunity to provide a nuanced understanding of the complicated problems that women are facing online, as well as how to address them.

The present article could, in this vein, serve as a starting point in formulating how backlash against female players manifests itself today: not (only) as simple and outright harassment, but often in subtle and ambiguous ways. The latter makes it difficult to recognize backlash and therefore challenges the design of concrete action plans against backlash in gaming. There is a need for sophisticated and well-considered policy programs with an eye for different forms of online sexism. These forms go beyond the harassment of female players, but apply to everyone who is negatively “classed”, “raced” and/or “gendered” in digital game culture. Future research could focus, for example, on how subordinated forms of masculinity such as homosexual men or avid male casual genre players are negotiated in a hegemonic game culture. It would be interesting to see how backlash against these alternative identities manifests itself (or not) and how they interact with femininity in gaming. Additionally, further research may adopt a longitudinal lens following how game culture progresses towards inclusivity and how counteractions respond to these evolutions.

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ⁱ In this article, casual, mobile and social games are considered to be different kind of games, however, they do represent a single underlying genre. Here we refer to "casual genres" as denominator for games that

are polar opposites of core genres, characterized by their ease of play, positive fiction and short play time (De Schutter, 2011).

ⁱⁱ Core genres are here considered as games that contain stereotypical masculine themes, have high complexity and require much effort and time (Juul, 2012).

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.crashoverridenetwork.com>

^{iv}

http://www.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2015/cyber_violence_gender%20report.pdf