“Making games is easy. Belonging is hard.”: An Analysis of Gender Representation in Video Game Production Culture

Jacobs-Johnson, Kalon

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“Making games is easy. Belonging is hard.”: An Analysis of Gender Representation in Video Game Production Culture

By

Kalon Jacobs-Johnson

The Department of Communication Arts
Allegheny College
Meadville, Pennsylvania
“Making games is easy. Belonging is hard.”: An Analysis of Gender Representation in Video Game Production Culture

By

Kalon Jacobs-Johnson

Submitted to the Department of Communication Arts in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities, as defined in the Honor Code, and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the College as a whole.

_______________________________________
(Student Signature)

Approved by:

_______________________________________
Jon Wiebel

_______________________________________
Julie Wilson

_______________________________________
Beth Watkins
Table of Contents

Introduction........................................................................................................Error! Bookmark not defined.

Chapter 1:.................................................................................................................. 5

Chapter 2:........................................................................................................Error! Bookmark not defined.

Chapter 3:........................................................................................................Error! Bookmark not defined.

Conclusion: ........................................................................................................Error! Bookmark not defined.

Works Cited: ........................................................................................................Error! Bookmark not defined.
Introduction

Videogames were, surprisingly enough, not a childhood hobby of mine. I grew up in rural New York in a house relied entirely on solar power until my early teens with parents who were distrustful of “too much screen time” - the screen in question being a cathode ray tube TV with faux 1970s wood paneling and a collection of VHS tapes from the local library. My only interactions with videogames at home was the occasional game of Pinball for Windows ME, and I distinctly remember not bothering to use my allotted timeslot for playing learning on the two computers in my first grade classroom as doing so required that I keep close track on the clock, which I was exceptionally bad at. On trips to visit extended family, I would often simply watch my cousins - who grew up in distinctly suburban areas, with gaming consoles and perhaps even reliable power, play their own games, as I was so unsure of my ability to interact with controllers. To a child whose main sources of entertainment involved playing in a very real world, with all the physical limitations that said world implies, or relying on the distinctly linear narrative of a movie or TV show, the ability to actively interact with onscreen narratives was equal parts exhilarating and overwhelming.

Once I’d mustered the courage to play them however, the visual and interactive nature of videogames won me over, causally spurring my interest in the computers and electronic devices that played them. By the time I moved on to high school I was an avid (albeit beginner) computer tinkerer, where I used my newfound technological knowledge to break into the world of PC gaming, which formed the basis of much of my social life from then onwards. To me, gaming brought people together - whether it was a reason to drag five PCs over to a friend’s house on the weekends for local co-op, or a shared hobby that helped me break the ice and chat with other kids I barely knew. The representation of gamers in the media and popular culture at
the time bothered me as the stereotypical images of the nerdy, unpopular kids clashed with my experiences with the gamers I met in high school, who comprised a large portion of my classmates and indeed more than a few of my teachers. The community aspects of gaming—on a personal level the social connections, and on a cultural level charitable gaming events such as Desert Bus were being uniting forces that exemplified some of my favorite life experiences at the time, such as the weekends spent with my friends and attending my first conventions.

In college, my forays into Communication Arts furthered my understanding of our personal and societal relationship with media consumption, all the while basing how I interpreted media through the lens of entertainment as a business. I jumped at the chance to take 490 Game Rhetoric my sophomore year, as it applied so much of what I was learning to my favorite hobby, and it made me more passionate about the hobby as a whole, despite the many apparent flaws. In 2014, the GamerGate “scandal” broke, and my idealized conception of gaming as a welcoming (albeit flawed) community was rapidly broken down as the community quickly and viciously divided itself. Issues, many of them gendered, that had seemed so abstract due to my own privilege suddenly had a more personal impact as industry employees and fans who I respected were the subject of vicious personal attacks and doxxing. Gaming fandom no longer seemed to be a safe or welcoming place, and I was forced to come to eventual realization that it had never matched up to my ideal. The blatant sexism and volatility not implicitly make me feel unwelcome, but I no longer felt comfortable participating in a community that felt so distinctly at odds with my prior positive memories. However, as I participated less, lurked more, and gradually drifted away from gaming community and culture, one detail caught my eye—industry discussions of GamerGate, Tropes vs Women in Videogames, and all the various subjects apparently worthy of extreme outrage in the wider fandom were all fairly subdued, and if not
positive then at least more civil. By that point was a welcome change, and as a result I began seeking out more news and entertainment authored within the industry, which seemed to be better weathering the divisive and often derogatory arguments that had left me feeling so disenfranchised. At this point, having turned in an honestly subpar and somewhat wandering comp proposal easily summarized as “something to do with gender and games”, I was on a track, though perhaps not the right one. After great deal of support, advice, and quite necessary hand-holding from both my academic and senior project advisors, the framework for this project was born.

With this project I hope to develop scholarship on how gender is represented in the contemporary gaming industry. The rapid growth and shift in consumer demographics, coupled with rising awareness of social and gender imbalances within technology fields have spurred intra-industrial discourse in both formal and informal cultural and industrial spaces. To more comprehensively understand the politics of gender representation in games we must also examine how gender is constructed and performed within industrial and production culture.

In the first chapter I review the prior literature that is pertinent to my work, including the theories that make up the theoretical framework from which my project is built. To this end I chose Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity in order to interpret the socially constituted and constructed nature of gender and how it is performed within the culture of the games industry. John Caldwell’s theory of the importance of the para-industry, in which Caldwell asserts that makers constantly negotiate with themselves through texts, provides the framework for the forms of industry interaction and negotiation in which Butler’s theory of the social construction of gender takes place. The second chapter outlines the context necessary to understand the state of the modern games industry, including the history of gender within the
industry, recent changes in consumer demographics, and contemporary social and cultural movements within the industry that affected the culture in which this project is based.

In the third chapter I work to critique how gender is represented within the industry through critical analysis of developer interviews, trade show reports, and blog entries in which members of the games industry discuss matters of gender and industry culture. Through examining the language used in these discussions, as well as industry practices at conventions, I hope to provide some level of scholarly insight into how gender is currently constructed and portrayed as well as the limitations of the self-reflexive critical discussions taking place within the industry.

The objects of analysis for this project were chosen because they related to the subject of gender in the gaming industry, either through active or unconscious discussion or reporting upon the subject. In order to maintain focus on industrial culture, rather than fan culture, relevant texts had to have come from within the industry, or at least be reporting on the industry itself. Therefore they were authored and published through industry-oriented publications such as Gama Sutra, Game Developer Magazine, and develop-online, covered or originated from industry-oriented events such as GDC, DICE, E, or were worker-generated texts such as blog posts, tweets, speeches and other texts written by industry employees. Throughout, I hope to explore the methods through which gender is performed within industry culture.
Chapter 1: Lit Review

Prior Work

Academic study of the representation of gender in the video game industry (and by extension, video game production culture) can only be considered successful if it is properly contextualized within the world of pre-existing academic texts and theory. The upper levels of the pyramid of cultural study must rest upon their broader subject materials, as well as prior academic literature. While scholars such as John Caldwell have written extensively on the subject of television, cinema, and music production culture, far less work has been published on the subject of video game production culture, more than likely due to the young age and rapid development of the genre. In the industry itself, trade magazines and industry veterans have published articles related to industry culture, but very little of it is academic in nature. It is clear that discourse is happening within the industry itself, but past and current academic work on the subject has largely focused on gendered issues and barriers to entry in gaming as a hobby and culture rather than as an industry or livelihood. There has also been a significant amount of research and discussion on the question of gender and accessibility, but it is largely based in STEM or technology culture, with some mention of gaming along the way.

Before mobile games quantifiably altered industry perceptions of the demographics of gaming, a great deal of academic analysis of gender in relation to games was often based upon the oft-stated belief that “girls don’t play games”, as the perceived lack of interest was a topic of research for both social scientists and critical media scholars. Consequently, research and analysis of gendered play goes back several decades. Gendered play in video games was formally discussed in the early 1990s in Sex Differences in Toy Play Use and Use of Video
Games (Goldstein 1994), but the idea that women were somehow just not wired for video games has been historically persistent. Yasmin Kafai’s 1998 article Game Design by Girls & Boys: Variability and Consistency of Gender Differences formed some of the earliest academic study that countered the idea of gaming as an intrinsically male hobby (90-114). As boys overwhelmingly took over the limited computer access time in the study location, Kafai gave full and equal access to computers and game-design software to separate groups of boys and girls, aged 9-10 in afterschool programs. The result was an equal level of interest in the game design projects by both groups, though the games the students produced were markedly different. A subsequent study, What Games Made by Girls Can Tell Us found that an all-girl afterschool program quickly embraced games and game design. The games that the girls produced were similarly cooperative and lacking in violent feedback in comparison to the games produced by the boys in Kafai’s study, but they displayed a similarly wide range of ideas and gameplay concepts. The conclusion found that, while girls did prefer different types of game mechanics and stories, their games “challenged several assumptions about what girls want” (2008, 129-144).

Topography of Gender and Play in Online Games by Nick Yee approached much the same issue- interest and access- in teenage and adult populations, albeit focused on game play rather than game design. Utilizing technological surveys, Yee found that, while women were in a significant minority in almost every (online) game, their surveyed motivations for playing were, with a few exceptions, overwhelmingly similar to male motivations. Accompanying these motivations were a great number of responses regarding physical and social barriers to entry to online games, ranging from the accessibility of hardware to often negative reactions by other players. Similar to Yasmin Kafai, Yee ultimately concluded that while game mechanics did have
an effect on player interest and retention, gendered physical and social barriers were often (mis)interpreted as a lack of desire (on the part of women) to play games, a theme which continues on to this day (83-96).

While Yee’s work paid some level of attention to the aforementioned physical barriers to access, Holin Lin examined physical barriers to gaming, in *Body Space, and Gendered Gaming Experiences: A Cultural Geography of Homes, Cybercafes, and Dormitories*. Lin’s research produced results markedly similar to both Yee and Kafai- cultural barriers abounded, ranging from limited computer access at home to the overwhelmingly male-dominated world of cybercafes, to the social anxiety and pressures of gaming in female dorms, which, unlike their male counterparts, lacked a pre-existing culture that positively embraced gaming (29-67).

Today, much of the academic research and discussion of accessibility has been rendered somewhat obsolete due to the massive change in gaming demographics following the mobile (r)evolution, as women now make up close to half of the gaming demographic. However, the industry is still in many ways playing catch-up, which *Getting Girls into the Game: Towards a “Virtual Cycle”* discusses as not only an issue of gender, but a financial limitation on the videogame industry. This work posits that, as game design studios with (somewhat) proportional representation of women have produced games with incredibly wide audience appeal (in particular, Maxis & the Sims franchise), there is a clear financial incentive to want more women in the videogame industry. The authors note like many of their predecessors that current cultures of game making and play have historically discouraged girls and women from participation, and suggest that one possible solution is to encourage the continued development and expansion of academic programs and workshops in partnership with the gaming industry, as they provide
supportive settings that can help transcend the gender dichotomies that pervade most development studios (161-176).

In Girls, Gaming, and Trajectories of IT Experience, Elizabeth Hayes focused on the accessibility of videogames and game culture as a means to an end- in this case in order to encourage women to acquire skills applicable to job opportunities in computing technologies, where similar cultural barriers exist. While videogames are a new twist to this research, the gendered nature of tech culture has been the subject of great discussion and critical analysis, such as Kiesler, Sproull, & Eccles in 1985, Grint and Gill in 1995, and Mia Consalvo in 2007.

**Theory**

The treatment of and definitions surrounding gender in the video game industry are not the product of any single person or group, nor can they be traced back to a single source. Additionally, as a socially constructed set of labels its meaning is entirely dependent on the mixing of cultural and personal definitions and conceptions. Thus the conception and representation of gender is best approached through the examination of relevant texts- in this case, industry dialogues- and the subsequent interpretation of said texts must be supported by the framework of previously established academic theory.

In *Para-industry, Shadow Academy* (2014), Caldwell critically examines the industry and industrial culture that surrounds and shapes the production of entertainment media and the products the industry ultimately creates. An important part of this, according to Caldwell, is what he terms the ‘para-industry’. While paratexts constitute individual objects surrounding mass media projects, the para-industry envelops the projects entirely, as it is made up of the
“ubiquitous industrial, cultural, and corporate fields that surround, buffer, and complicate our access” (Caldwell, 720-721).

Put another way, production industries have grown so large and so public that the consumption of entertainment media now involves the consumption and discussion of media surrounding the production of the original entertainment media, which is quite applicable to the gaming industry especially given the close ties between games journalism, industry, and the audience at large.

Additionally, Caldwell defines the term “media texts”- as in his words “dynamic sites of intrinsically collective, negotiated interactions by industry” a term which is quite applicable to the largely digital (and oft-discussed) texts around which this project is based, some of which fall under Caldwell’s category of “worker-generated snark” (721-732).

The framework of this project is primarily contextualized within the ecosystem of critical industry media While Caldwell, provide a broad framework through which to contextualize the relevant texts from a critical industrial standpoint, this project is based around gender in industrial texts, which requires an additional keystone of critical theory. Judith Butler’s *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* provides the context for the central focus. The texts at hand are representative of (and the product of) of videogame industrial culture, and thus they provide a window into how this specific culture constructs and represents gender. In Butler’s words “by endlessly citing the conventions and ideologies of the social world around us, we enact that reality” (519). This social construction of reality is not only an excellent lens through which to analyze the subject matter, but a compelling reason to do so in the first place. Given that the product(s) of the gaming industry can as disconnected as they please from both the physical world of biological sex, as well as the ideological world in which gender takes the forefront, Butler’s postulation that “possibilities exist for the cultural transformation of gender
through such acts” (521). Butler’s theory of performative acts and performativity showcase the importance of this analysis- if linguistic construction shapes reality, then the content at hand both creates and enforces social concepts of gender roles, as well as the overall hegemonic structure of the videogame industry as a whole. The performative act of writing (and discussing) these industrial texts and paratexts showcase not only the standards of constructed reality, but the ways in both the gaming industry and gaming culture are shifting in response to localized cultural and demographic changes, as well as larger social and cultural shifts in general.
Chapter 2: Context & Background

A brief history of videogames

In 1950, two computer games premiered at national exhibitions and trade shows. The games (Tic-Tac-Toe and Nim) pitted a human player versus the computer, to demonstrate the rapid developments of next-generation computing technology. This marked the debut of the first computer games available for public consumption, though, as previously stated, only through specific venues, and for a very short time at that. In fact, video games as a commercial product would not appear on the marketplace until 1971, with the first generation of publicly available arcade cabinets and home consoles (Baer, “Video game history). While this two-decade gap is not directly relevant to an industry that was, at the time, nonexistent, it formed the base from which the games industry and surrounding culture later emerged.

Until the release of the personal computer in the 1970s, computer access was almost entirely the domain of universities and government institutions—thus, the pool of early game developers and players was extremely small, and drew entirely from a group of pre-existing scientists, mathematicians, and engineers whose livelihoods were based in the nascent computing industry.

The first game(s) developed primarily for the purpose of entertainment only came about with the advent of the commercial computer, circa approximately 1958. At MIT, host to a prototype of this first commercial computer, the eventual relaxation of access restrictions resulted in the design and programming of of Spacewar!, in 1962, which is widely credited as the first video game produced explicitly for the purposes of entertainment. Other simple games followed as more universities gained access to commercial computers (Brandom, 'Spacewar!').

By 1970, technological breakthroughs reduced the price of commercial computing equipment down to the point that, for the first time, arcade and consumer-level gaming hardware was
fiscally viable, and thus the videogame industry was founded. The subsequent decade of development brought about a second generation of videogame consoles, as well as hundreds of new arcade games.

1978 brought about a new ‘first’ for the burgeoning industry- after close to three decades of video and computer game development, and six years of commercial game development, Carol Shaw became the first woman to find employment in the videogames industry, working for industry giant Atari. Shaw had a successful career in the industry, though she departed Atari and moved to Activision soon afterwards, a move that she thanked for “funding [my] early retirement” (Benj, Carol Shaw, Atarti’s First Female Game Developer).

The story of the second woman in the games industry is, unfortunately, markedly different- in 1980, Dona Bailey was hired by Atari’s coin-op (arcade) division, where she remained for just over two years before permanently retiring from the industry. In a 2007 interview, Bailey cited additional pressure from her (entirely male) co-workers, and disbelief in her abilities as a programmer as her primary reasons for leaving Atari, especially after her first game, Centipede, resulted in, as she described, a great deal of “surly attention” from her co-workers (Alexander, The Original Gaming Bug). Her complaints that in many ways mirrored Shaw’s reasons (the “general [workplace] climate”) for departing Atari in 1982. (Benj, Carol Shaw)

It should be noted that at the time of Dona’s departure, the entire game development division at Atari, at the time the largest game development company, was made up of approximately 120 employees- individual games were usually developed by teams of, at most, 3 Additionally, due to the relative simplicity of games at the time, as well as difficulties with developing game AI (an issue that was, interestingly enough, Bailey’s focus with the development of Centipede), games were, at the time, primarily ‘social’- in that they were based upon player v. player
mechanics, either in Pong-esque home consoles, or two-player arcade games. While the industry itself was almost entirely male, the games themselves were marketed as a new generation of interactive entertainment- consequently, the implicitly gendered marketing that would become prevalent in later years was largely absent, though industrial precedent had been set for some time.

The early 1980s were a time of rapid development for the games industry- many game historians have described it as a “golden age”. While the industry expanded, available jobs were primarily targeting experienced programmers, of whom very few were women. That being said, growth was still growth- for example, in 1981, Brenda Romero began work as a QC tester at Sir-Tech, Inc, on the Wizardry series (GDC 2013). Romero remarked in a GDC talk that her story was fairly common among the first generation of women who joined the industry in the 80s- the small-scale nature of development studios meant that responsibilities such as bug-fixing and writing dialogue and menus were often delegated to QC testers and other entry-level office employees, which offered some level of entry into the industry as a whole (GDC 2013).

1981 also saw the launch of the also- nascent field of games journalism- the first videogame-centric magazine, *Electronic Games* was launched by Bill Kunkel, as both the console/PC market and arcades grew to accommodate demand for electronic entertainment- *Donkey Kong* saw its first American release (to great success) in arcades. (Fulton, 2014). The following year saw an even larger catalogue of releases, including the now (in)famous collection of pornographic games from developer Mystique, which, while poorly designed, achieved a modicum of success thanks to word-of-mouth sales. Mystique’s handful titles were in many ways indicative of the industry at the time- the widespread commercial success of the industry as a whole lead to more produced games, more developer innovation, and more risks taken by
publishers. Unfortunately, by the end of 1983, the formerly booming industry experienced a sudden and severe decline as a result of a console market flooded by both consoles and unregulated third-party games, as well as the commercial failure of several first-party games, and the rapidly aging capabilities of the Atari 2600 and other consoles in comparison to newer generation home PCs. The consequences for the industry were severe—stock of most games and consoles were liquidated at low prices, which lead to the withdrawal of several console manufacturers, as well as the collapse of many first and third-party studios.

1985 brought about a resurgence in the games industry, though to a certain extent, the damage to the industry was already done—many studios had declared bankruptcy, and several game-related publications either went bankrupt or were scaled back. While the industry quickly found its feet again, the crash was still fresh on the industry’s mind. Consequently, fledgling games journalism either remained strictly under the umbrella of syndicated papers and magazines, or was funded directly by videogame companies, as was the case with Nintendo Power. Similarly, production companies remained largely focused on successful and reliable pre-existing IPs in order to avoid another catastrophe.

The huge success of Mattel’s 1996 PC game Barbie Fashion Designer was, to the videogame industry, an unforeseen and shocking turn of events. While prior titles had found unexpectedly wide appeal with a female audience, Barbie Fashion Designer was the first game targeted specifically at a specifically young female audience. A new and untapped market had been brought to light. The result was the girl games movement, parallel to which there appeared a new (or in some cases a revival) of academic focus on gender in videogames, and the production thereof. On the industrial side Brenda Laurel’s Purple Moon, established in 1995 to create games adapted specifically for the preteen female audience based on extensive market
research. Similarly, *Her Interactive*, a studio founded on the “Nancy Drew” game series, which largely sought to attract an audience of girl consumers via offering games with a strong and culturally recognizable female lead, and both studios struggled with the issue of stereotypical marketing used to draw in their target audiences.

Unfortunately, the girl games movement was a short-lived phenomenon in the industry. The first generation of post-Barbie ‘girl games’ either undersold and ended up mired in controversy (in the case of Purple Moon) or slowly adopted a more ‘feminine’ style in order to appeal to a more stable market, as was the case with Her Interactive and the Nancy Drew series. Additionally, as development costs and distribution requirements grew, the viability of independent studios shrank—especially once publishers started buying studios wholesale— a move that ensured financial stability but limited the ability of developers to pursue new audiences and ideas. While some developers were able to find niche roles, the industry as a whole was unable, and in many cases unwilling, to appeal to the hitherto unknown market that *Barbie* had revealed, instead opting to focus on high profile brand names and franchises. Ultimately the commercial success of the girl games movement was limited—while several independent studios were founded, few saw long-term success, and Barbie Fashion Designer remained one of the highest-selling “girl games” for several years. That said, a dialogue had been created. Gender as a factor in game production began to receive some attention, one result of which was the editing and production of *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, which was published in 2000.

The slow but steady expansion of development studios during this time period opened up new jobs and positions, though outside of the aforementioned ‘feminist entrepreneurs’, even the most positive reports at the time found men occupying an overwhelming majority of positions in almost every department. At the same time, game culture was growing in response to the greater
marketing push of the early 90s- videogames were now firmly established as an entertainment industry focused around a male audience, even in the casual and children’s game marketplace. As videogames struggled to find acceptance in mainstream culture due to concerns surrounding the supposedly influential nature of the “new” medium (and the violent and sexual content contained therein), the gaming community and surrounding culture became increasingly insular and tight-knit. While the girl games movement spurred academic and industrial discourse, concerned parents and lawyers unintentionally created cultural connotations of rebellion inherent to videogames, which further reinforced the notion of videogames as a boy’s space.

Fortunately, as the gaming industry expanded into the new millennium, cultures surrounding gaming began to change as well. Games journalism expanded into the television world with G4, a 24-hour station featuring both news and entertainment. While academics had already taken note of the gender gap and gendered nature of the computing industry since the 80s at the earliest (Kiesler, Sproull & Eccles 2002) the academic community took note of the new and growing culture of videogames, though a few authors also turned their sights on the industry itself.

2007 saw the launch of a product that would alter gaming in almost every respect- the iPhone. While Nokia had included basic versions of games such as Snake and Tetris on their mobile phones since 1997, the iPhone was in demand, widely available, multipurpose, and featured an easy and standardized method of app dissemination. Mobile games could be played anywhere, at any time, were designed with the casual player in mind, and were sold at an exceptionally low price point, further enhancing their mass appeal. Subsequent iterations of the iPhone and smartphones and tablets in general opened the doors for casual gaming in the general population, even for those who considered themselves to not be gamers. Similarly, social
networking sites such as Facebook also began to allow the publishing of games tied into their websites. As mobile gaming grew rapidly in sales, investors and publishers began to pay attention to the genre. One of the advantages of smartphone gaming on the business side was the great amount of widely available polling data on app purchasers, which resulted in the realization that, contrary to almost every belief in the games industry, video game purchases were divided almost evenly among men and women. Casual games, without advertising or an established community, were being played by a much wider audience than the industry had predicted. After nearly three decades of a male-run industry producing games for what it perceived to be a male audience this data came as quite the shock, and the industry is still coming to terms with this realization in contemporary times. The firm establishment of “casual” gamers as a major market force (and the resulting shift in gender demographics) were a paradoxical challenge to gaming culture- the demographic shift resulted in a widespread normalization of gaming as a medium and a hobby. As the gaming industry began to adapt, or at the very least become aware of the changing demographics it faced, gaming culture reacted in a quite different manner, in many ways exemplified in the Tara Tiger Brown’s 2012 Forbes post “Fake Geek Girls Go Away”. Soon afterwards, following a wave of sexist harassment, and subsequent financial backing from supporters, Anita Sarkeesian’s Tropes vs. Women in Video Games series was funded, which resulted in massive outrage in the gaming community and a strong degree of support from the industry itself. Meanwhile, on the journalistic side, “DoritoGate” brought public attention to the exceptionally close ties between the largely hobbyist-driven field of games journalism and the marketing divisions of publishing companies. Further controversy occurred in 2013 following the inclusion of topless dancers and strippers as entertainment at an International Game Developer’s Association event, which prompted veteran industry executives Brenda Romero and
Darius Kazemi to resign from the IGDA, citing the sexist nature of the events and their alienating effects on women in the industry. The subject of gender and representation within the industry was back in the spotlight, especially since the controversy began soon after Brenda Romero’s #1ReasonToBe panel on the topic of women and inclusivity in the gaming industry, which sparked a massive response from developers and gamers alike.

Subsequently in August of 2014, another controversy appeared- GamerGate, in which personal conversations between a journalist, Zoe Quinn, and her boyfriend, a game developer, alleged a journalistic conflict of interest. Hailed by its proponents as a push for ethics in videogame journalism, GamerGate quickly spawned a huge and divisive debate that quickly fell along highly gendered lines, with many proponents targeting Quinn, her supporters, and often women in general for speaking out against harassment. While GamerGate was a significant milestone in gaming fandom, complete with both online and real-world threats of violence and sexual assault, doxxing (the exposure of personal information) directed towards women in both the games industry and general geek culture, the industrial response to the event itself was minimal. The allegations of GamerGate supporters were neither nor correct in their assumptions, though women in the games industry were targeted for their professed views on the subject.

**Background**

The objects of analysis for this project are specific in nature while a great deal has been written and said about gender in videogames in general, as well as in gaming culture as a whole, this project is focused around gender as it is constituted and portrayed in the production culture that surrounds the videogame industry. Relevant texts are thus directed towards the industry at large and must involve industry employees in the form of interviews or quotes, or must be directly authored by the industry employees themselves. Consequently, most of the relevant texts
stem from either industry magazines such as Develop-Online and Gama Sutra, or industry conventions and events including Game Design Conference (GDC). Other relevant texts are the product of developer blogs and diaries, which are not explicitly industrial in nature but nevertheless remain a part of industrial and para-industrial discourse.

Alongside the utilized and relevant texts there exist a great number of texts that engage with similar topics but do are not produced by or for the games industry. Games journalism as a whole contains a great deal of discussion of gender and sex in both games and production culture, but the content is produced for and targeted to consumers, rather than the industry itself. Web video series such as Extra Credits utilize both academic theory and industrial knowledge to discuss topics, including gender, though they are produced for gamers rather than producers. Additionally, many podcasts from journalistic organizations such as IGN, Game Informer as well as entertainment groups such as Funhaus and Rooster Teeth have discussed similar topics in podcasts, videos, and other forms of content, but their intended audience is predominantly gamers and the general public. Similarly, Tropes vs Women in Games, an online web series, has critically approached videogames utilizing feminist theory and analysis, but does not actually stem from the industry itself. While the effects of TVWIG have been felt in the games industry, to the point that their work has been quoted in relevant texts used for analysis, the series occupies a buffer zone that is neither academic nor industrial in nature.
Chapter 3: Analysis

The performance of gender in the games industry is hegemonic and highly stratified. While the industry is not particularly diverse to begin with, the performed social reality of the industry has, through repetition, established masculinity as the default narrative within industry culture. While scholarly work has challenged many of the dominant conceptions of gender, it was not until fairly recently that the industry began to critically discuss and negotiate gender. This increased awareness and negotiation have had unforeseen consequences- activists have unintentionally commodified gender, presenting it as a product that adds capitalistic value to the industry, rather than an artificial social construct that has historically limited the natural progression of gaming industry and culture by supporting the dominant hegemonic narrative.

Many privileged industry employees are fundamentally unaware of and believe themselves to be unengaged with the subject of gender within the industry, often acting surprised at the mention of discourse or controversy surrounding the subject. However, the language used these employees when discussing the topic of gender frequently portrays a culture in which any gender combination outside of the presumed straight male goes unthought of, which, by the very definition of ‘different’ does not fit the definition of ‘normal’. This is not a slight or criticism of the actions of these privileged employees in question- rather, it is simply an example of the linguistic affirmation of maleness as “normal”. As an example, in a 2014 Glixel interview, lead director Neil Druckmann of Naughty Dog, recounted a story of a focus tester who became “irate” at the addition of female characters to Uncharted 4. (Suellentrop) The actions of the focus tester in question are fairly telling in and of themselves - his outburst stemmed entirely from the portrayal of a major character as not only female, but capable of physically outmatching the leading man of the series. Druckmann’s comments on the subject of character design, especially
the aforementioned new major character proved quite relevant; “When I'm introducing and describing a new character to our lead character concept artist, constantly she will ask, “What if it was a girl?” And I'm like, Oh, I didn't think about that. Cool, that's different.” (Suellentrop)

It is telling that the discussion of representation is simply “cool” and “different”, definitions that unconsciously define male as ‘routine’ and ‘normal’- implicitly coding any other gender as abnormal, or unthought of. Abnormal in this case is the default state of existence for women in the industry- to perform as anything but heterosexual male sets one apart from the masculine “norm” of both industry demographics and industry culture. Being unthought, on the other hand, is to not exist within the socially constructed industry reality. When there is no present sense of abnormality to define normal, we see a more stark version of the truth- one in which social access to the industry is differentially gendered- that is to say the conception of what constitutes a game developer- who can claim successfully lay claim the social identity that transforms the self from an outsider or an “other” to a member of the industry, a member of the culture. This identity implicitly relies so heavily on what Marshall and Witz describe as an “unthought sex-gender matrix”- within the reality of industry culture, to exhibit feminine traits, or simply be constructed as female is enough to be initially and instinctively sorted into the column of the “other” (23). While Druckmann later refers to specific characters within the narrative using the terms woman or women, ‘girl’ is the go-to terminology in the discussion of generic female characters, which implicitly (and unconsciously) codes those characters as either immature and lacking in agency as a result of age, or exceptionally feminine (and thus, passive actors). These examples all occur in discussions Druckmann explicitly outlined as occurring in conversation with Amy Hennig, co-writer and creative director for the project. Even when working for a woman on a game franchise frequently considered to have excellent female
characters, utilizing gender as an aspect of character creation is still considered ‘different’ and ‘cool’.

**Critical analysis, self-reflexive discourse**

In *Para-Industry, Shadow Academy*, John Caldwell argues that current models for textual analysis do not take into account what he refers to as industrial negotiation, as “texts cannot be understood without understanding the integral social and political-economic contexts that animated them, and second that political-economic and social contexts themselves cannot be fully described or measured without understanding how those ‘real’ background contexts have been textualized, scripted, and mediated in the first place” (721). If, as Caldwell asserts, makers “constantly negotiate with themselves through texts”, seeking to redefine and renegotiate industry practices, then industrial/production culture (and by extension the cultural and social construction of gender within this cultural) is simultaneously constructed and performed through these negotiations (720). Makers communicating through what Caldwell refers to as “sanctioned intra-industrial leakage”- discussion and negotiation that take place within stabilized and moderated areas of industry discourse- unconsciously frame their discourse on the advancement of gender equity that seeks to justify these changes through a capitalist logic of profit maximization (729).

Frequently, developers discuss the performance of gender within industrial products (games) and the effects thereof, with comparatively little attention paid to industry culture, still operating on this justification of capitalist logic. For example, in a 2013 interview conducted by Rock, Paper, Shotgun and reported on by Develop-Online, Bioware’s David Gaider discussed the broader industrial culture of game development, and its relationship with sex in games.
Gaider’s reason for the interview was a GDC panel titled “Sex in Video Games”, in which Gaider wished to discuss issues of sexism and sexuality, which in his own words “can only happen if we are willing to acknowledge that greater discussion of the topic within the industry is merited” (Grayson). Overall, Gaider’s comments pushed for increased awareness and discussion of sex and gender, claiming that critical discussion of inclusivity and critical discussion of subjects surrounding sex could greatly improve the industry by broadening their market appeal, therefore improving sales. Doing so could prove that “accepted industry wisdom”- an unquestionable piece of business dogma- in this case that the target marketplace for the gaming industry is only interested in stories about white men- might be limiting the industry’s wider audience appeal, as well as the creative impulses of designers and writers (Grayson). In actively discussing sex and gender and their role in the world of videogames, Gaider is taking part in a positive shift within the industry, but his discussion of gender takes place entirely within the products of the industry, not the industry itself. Framing the discussion as such discussion implicitly disregards the fact that reconsidering how gender is constructed in games does not impact how it is constructed in the industrial culture that produces them. It is asking the industry to consider modifying its approach to the content it produces, rather than to the hegemonic structure of the surrounding culture. In the words of Anthony Burch, Gearbox employee and lead writer for Borderlands 2, it is “artificial diversity”- a step forwards in representation within games, but one that does not implicitly welcome or advocate for equity (Inside the Box: Inclusivity).

**Gender as a Commodity**

Thus far we have seen the performance of gender undertaken in several ways- from the unconscious performative acts of privileged industry employees to the and the conscious efforts of other industry professionals to conduct discourse that, ultimately, focused industry products,
neglecting the industrial culture from which the products were developed. Still others, such as Manveer Heir and Quinn Dunki, speak from personal experience about issues of representation in industry culture. Through these speech acts in formal discussion developers create a cultural reality in which gender (and by extension gender inequality) is a cultural commodity, best utilized for the purposes of economic gain.

An excellent example of this phenomenon is Manveer Heir, an employee at Raven Studios (and later Bioware) who spoke with GameInformer in 2013 regarding issues of representation and bias within the interrelated fields of the games industry and surrounding culture. Like David Gaider, Heir was interviewed about a GDC panel he hosted on the topic of representation within games. Unlike Gaider, Heir approached the subject of virtual representation by focusing on the real-world institutions of the games industry. When asked about the relationship between game development and game culture as a whole, his first response was “These are all interrelated... We have a workforce that’s predominantly white males. I think you see some of the output of that workforce as a result” (Hegelson).

Recognizing the power of demographics and by extension culture culture is a significant step up from the wholly abstracted questions of virtual gender representation, but echoing the words of Gaider and Hocking, Heir’s argument for greater awareness and inclusivity stems from, in the words of the interviewer “not for reasons of social 'fairness' but for reasons of economic survival,” or in the words of Heir himself; "It's not about being fair. It's about bringing something new to the art” (Hegelson). Yet again, any mention of inclusivity is explicitly decried as a form of fairness or equality- the conversation is focused through the lens of gender an asset to the industry rather than an unthought subject that directly aids in the performance of the norms of the industry culture. Doing so does not allow or even encourage shift in the hegemony of the gaming
industry, as it assigns an artificial worth to gender representation—essentially welcoming inclusivity, so long as inclusion brings with it a tangible economic benefit.

Similarly, when discussing gender imbalances in the games industry, mobile developer Quinn Dunki described the industry’s approach to the subject as “gender indifference” stating that the industry lacked diversity as a result of “peer pressure” (Crossley). Immediately thereafter, the author of the article paraphrased a quote from Clint Hocking, who claimed that gender in the industry is a question of “industrial sustainability” (Crossley). Hocking also personally denied that morality was a factor in his argument, as “try selling that idea to the board”. Oddly enough, moments before, Hocking’s reason for speaking out is quoted as motivated by “craftsmanship, not commercial” interests (Crossley). The dichotomy between indifference vs pressure, craftsmanship vs a question of morality is at first confusing. It seems as if, speaking formally in a capacity as industry professionals, authors including Dunki and Hawking are comparatively soft-spoken in order to avoid personal and/or professional backlash for speaking out against wider industry culture. While there is clearly an awareness of the uneasy and unequal cultural construction of gender and how it affects intra-industrial demographics and representation, developers who enter formal discussions of these issues frequently bundle critical discussions of gender equality with an argument that will “sell to the board”, as the commodification process renders the subject less threatening to current seats of hegemonic power.

This discursive practice of conflating equity with capitalistic paradigms often serves as a springboard for critics who attempt to devalue critical industrial discourse and negotiation based on some aspect of the author’s identity that renders their criticism disconnected from the less
threatening economic justifications. Outspoken critics of industry culture, Manveer Heir, included are frequently castigated and labeled as biased against particular races or genders in comments surrounding industry articles. David Gaider’s addition and subsequent support of of gay romance options into Bioware’s Dragon Age series resulted in claims that the series was pigeonholing their player demographic by neglecting their male fans. The commodification of gender is further supported using the perceived personal failures of makers to justify their opinions and agendas without utilizing through this capitalistic matrix.

**The performativity of industry spaces**

Within the spaces of industry events we are able to view a combination of the the unconscious commodification of gender and the Butlerian performance thereof, as well as in the words of John Caldwell “makers constantly negotiating with themselves through texts…. distributing agency across a network of makers and tools” (732). On one hand, there is the formalized industrial discussion, from the aforementioned panels from Gaider (*Sex in Games*) and Heir (*Misogyny, Racism and Homophobia: Where Do Video Games Stand*) as well as the ongoing #1ReasonToBe series, in which much of the critical and reflexive analysis of the industry occurs. On the other, there is the portrayal of gender in the wider events and surrounding mixers and parties. Panels, such as the aforementioned #1ReasonToBe in which women developers, journalists, and game critics took to the stage to discuss and highlight the explicitly gendered experiences of women within the games industry. The panel was itself a response to the #1ReasonWhy Twitter hashtag, which served as a unifying banner for developers to tweet about subjects of sexism within the industry. One of the first stories shared at the inaugural #1ReasonToBe panel at GDC 2013 was Brenda Romero’s account of her inability to take her daughter to the GDC expos- despite her daughter’s ambition for making games- as in
her own words “I want her to feel safe there and not gazed upon” (Chapple). Romero felt the showfloor gave off “the wrong impression of women in the game industry”, as the women hired to promote and represent games and companies on the show floor were primarily scantily clad booth babes. (GDC Vault).

The day after the panel, Romero resigned from her position in the “advocacy-oriented” Independent Game Developers Association following an afterparty which, for the second year running, featured “scantily clad female dancers” as entertainment (McElroy). Similarly, in 2016, a Microsoft-hosted party at GDC 2016 featured “erotic schoolgirl” dancers and was described by attendees as a “boys only club” (Sottek). This event was particularly noteworthy as it occurred less than 24 hours after their annual ‘Women in Gaming’ luncheon (Procter). Through these events, we see that while gender is not an unfamiliar subject, inclusion within the industry often goes unthought, despite continued controversies and attempts to raise awareness. If industry events are planned under the conception that the industry is male-dominated and oriented, then clearly this discourse that is occurring is having a limited effect, especially if gender is still being constructed as a literal other- another gender, another class of person, separate from the developer community, existing wholly for the enjoyment of said community. In another more personal anecdote, published by Patrick Miller of Gama Sutra, a female associate of his was told by male attendees that, as a community and PR manager, she was not a “part of the industry”- while attending the 2013 E3 Women in Games International party. (Miller).

While these formal stories and anecdotes provide a great deal of insight into how gender is constructed and portrayed, it is important to note that we are only privy to what is reported on or discussed within industry events or recorded interviews, and as such our view of dominant industry practices- and indeed what topics are considered safe to discuss publically- may be
limited. Writing in a 2013 blog Kim Swift, of Airtight Games and lead developer for Portal candidly discussed experiences of sexism and gender within the industry- and the danger of speaking out. Her opening anecdote, accompanied with a cartoon of another employee asking to speak with the manager for a project, outlined an interaction Swift described as a common occurrence- one in which “Someone made an assumption, and although it wasn’t necessarily insulting, it certainly made me raise an eyebrow because I can make a pretty decent bet that it was based solely on my gender” (1Reason). Swift notes the she feels entirely unsurprised by these interactions, as her gender frequently defines her perceived role within the industry- likely a secretary or receptionist- an employee, but not a member of the industry. While Kim felt safe discussing comparatively insignificant, but still assumptive and harmful, moments of industry sexism, her passion for the industry left her worried to speak out. In Swift’s words “I am fearful of delving below the surface. Talking about this subject in public is terrifying because frankly you never know when retribution is going to rear its ugly head and what sort of consequences will come about because of your words. To tell all, in many ways, either means having nothing to lose, anonymity or extreme bravery, none of which I possess.” (1Reason). Even as gender and representation takes a place in formalized industry discourse, there are still significant barriers to entry. In the words of Deirdra Kiaia at the 2013 GDC #1ReasonToBe panel, “Making games is easy. Belonging is hard” (Wawro).
Conclusion

Throughout the previous three chapters, I have worked to outline how gender is constructed and represented within the production culture of the videogames industry, including the dominant industrial narratives, gender performativity within physical industry events, and recent intra-industrial discourse. As a whole, the performance of gender, sex, and sexuality in videogame industry/production culture is based within the traditional hegemonic and heteronormative standards of our wider culture, but within industry culture these power structures are even more stratified due to a historical gender imbalance within the industry and the performance of masculinity within industrial discussion and event spaces as the default industry gender. Femininity, and indeed all non-masculine genders are discussed as either new and different or unthought, in gender is known to exist but preconsciously discarded in the process of interpreting the makeup of the games industry.

The limitations of this project (author self-sabotage aside) primarily revolve around the relatively wide-ranging nature of industrial texts, as there is no single repository or group of sites in which industrial texts are produced or published. Selecting discourse on gender from within the broader scope of Industrial discourse provides a rather scattershot selection of texts. Different texts are produced with different industry cultures and values in mind. In addition there is no clear timeline for the texts in the this project, or the rapidly changing face of industrial discourse within the past three years, which could likely be the subject of several entirely different projects. In addition, my work on this project was fairly hands-off and abstract, and as such my assumptions and analysis were based solely off of available texts. Interviewing members of the industry would likely change the broader narrative of this project, but someone with a greater
and perhaps more personal connection to the industry would likely have a better sense of where to look for subjects of analysis to begin with. In addition, as it stands this project primarily discusses gender as a male/female binary, which overlooks the construction and representation of other genders, as well as the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community within the industry.

Moving forward I can see a great number of paths this project could take. I believe Caldwell’s writings, especially on the shadow academy, could be expanded upon in relation to the industry, as they deal with the usage of aspects of critical theory in industry discourse, which could be discussed in relation to both developer panels and the movements for social equality within the industry. As previously mentioned, a chronological analysis of industry discourse could shed more light on the process of change within the industry in the past several years, as well as the exact effects of particular movements and events such as the #1Reason hashtag series and the growing dichotomy between the industry and gaming fandom on subjects surrounding GamerGate, and an entirely new project could be spun off from the contrasting cultures of the AAA games industry and indie development, where social advocacy and LGBTQ+ awareness has resulted in a small but growing culture of games about gender and representation.

Even as the industry has become more diverse and self-reflexive discourse and negotiation have become increasingly common, much of this discussion spins gender awareness and inclusivity as a benefit to the industry, commodifying new representations of gender as a beneficial product, not a solution to historic issues of inequality and hegemony that are formed in large part through industrial conceptions of gender. This sort of analysis is important as industrial conceptions of gender inform the negotiation and production of games through their effects on the industry as a whole, which has lasting ramifications for critical media studies, especially game scholars looking to better analyze media texts. Any further partnerships between
academics and the gaming industry (a la the symposium on gender in gaming that eventually resulted in the writing of *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*) also need to consider the interconnectivity of culture, production, and negotiation.
Works Cited


