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A Radical Feminist Critique of the Video Games Industry

Bryce Alexander Dumas
Worcester Polytechnic Institute

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A Radical Feminist Critique of the Video Game Industry

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by **Bryce Dumas**

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John Sanbonmatsu
Worcester Polytechnic Institute

Abstract

This IQP proposes a radical feminist critique of the video game industry. It explores the conflicts arising at the intersection of video games, gender, violence, masculinity, and militarism, and argues that the industry as a whole reinforces an unjust set of gendered political power relations. This paper strives to understand the problems and conflicts existing at the core of video game design, and charts new paths toward challenging games, gamers, and the industry from a feminist perspective.

Table of Contents

Introduction

This paper offers a radical feminist critique of the video games industry. We will explore the conflicts that arise at the intersection of gender and video games. This paper is motivated by an imperative to understand how the social media phenomenon of #Gamergate was spawned and incubated, but also to suggest pathways for feminist challenges to gamers and the game industry alike.

One can no longer spend too much time on the internet in video game related spaces and not hear about Gamergate (particularly if one is a woman). The name is in reference to the infamous Watergate scandal; -gate has effectively become a suffix meaning "scandal", seen in the sports world with the Patriots' deflated ball scandal being called Deflate-gate. The scandal around which Gamergate revolves is the alleged exchange of positive reviews for sexual service. The developer in question, Zoe Quinn, developed the game Depression Quest, a work of interactive fiction that navigates the conflicts of living with depression. The games journalist who Quinn allegedly had sex with for more positive reviews of the game actually only briefly mentioned Depression Quest in a list of other independent games. What exactly is the scandal here?

It's not a matter of Quinn's supposed breach of journalistic ethics - itself a dubious affair - or surely we would have heard about a social movement addressing the unethical relationships between games journalists and AAA developers (those with the largest studios and budgets). It is not, as Gamergaters argue, a movement critiquing "ethics in games journalism" else we would be focusing on the larger problem of bribery between powerful developers who need good reviews from journalists who are desperate enough to accept anything that will draw ad revenue to their websites. Instead, Gamergate is a movement bent on destroying the careers, integrity, and lives of women and LGBT people in the video game industry – this originary instance was intended not to raise serious questions about ethics, but to ruin Quinn. Gamergate was spawned as an act of revenge porn – the public sharing of personal and private images or information about a former partner as revenge for being slighted. It

evolved to be a terrorist movement, threatening any woman who dared speak out against them with violence, most commonly of a sexual nature. It is important though that we recognize that the underlying problems of Gamergate are not a recent, sudden, or isolated occurrence, it is but the latest instance of a long-standing pattern of women's forcible exclusion from the game industry.

If we were to trace Gamergate's origins back a single step, we'd find ourselves in Anita Sarkeesian's video series *Tropes vs. Women in Games*. This video series tackles the representation of women in games from a feminist perspective, focusing on a few particular clichés and plot devices that involve female characters. The series covers a stunning volume of hundreds of game titles, and attempts to show how, taking the game industry as a whole, women are often represented in ways that could be considered lazy game design or storytelling, or are sometimes outright violent towards women. Sarkeesian consistently reminds viewers that she seeks only to offer a feminist view that gamers might consider when they play the games she reviews. At the beginning of every video, Sarkeesian says some variation on the statement: "It's both possible, and even necessary, to simultaneously enjoy media while also being critical of it's more problematic and pernicious aspects" (Sarkeesian, "Damsels" Part 1). This is so democratic, so balanced, and so calm an idea that surely even men eager to hate women in games can find her videos to be a fair review, right?

Sadly no – Sarkeesian was the victim of serious and at times criminal cyberbullying in response only to the launch of her Kickstarter campaign to fund the videos. Before any of the videos had even been completed, some trolls had developed a game in which the player could brutally assault Sarkeesian with just a click of the mouse – for each click, a photo of Sarkeesian would become more and more gruesomely photoshopped to look like she had been punched by the player. As she phrased it in a Ted talk she gave, misogynists on the internet had made a game out of harassing and abusing her. The bitter irony of Sarkeesian's videos is that she is reviewing misogynist representation of women in games while herself starring (against her will) in a brutally misogynist video game.

Typical feminist responses to Gamergate focus on diversity, inclusion, and equality, insisting that since women play games, they deserve to be recognized and represented in non-sexist ways. Feminists strive for diversity among game developers, by fostering communities for networking and support between female developers. They seek inclusion in game content, instead of being told in ways both subtle and overt that this medium was intended for a different audience. Implicit in these responses is the notion that gender is all that must change about the industry – the fundamentals of how games are developed may be largely left intact, so long as the games themselves are expanded to include women.

This paper explores why it is crucial that games be changed at their root, at their core, that the values with which we design games be put to question. Gamergate is not an isolated or unpredictable event, and managing it in ways that ignore how deep its roots penetrate only postpones the next upheaval, the next Gamergate, the next female developer cyberbullied out of the industry. Instead we might view this heinous campaign of misogyny as the predictable product of an industry that ultimately reinforces violence against women.

Feminism

In this section I will outline the difference between liberal and radical feminism, and attempt to show how liberal feminist approaches fall short of addressing the core problems in the game industry. I will define and outline the institution of patriarchy as an arrangement of power differential social politics in which men are made to dominate women. First, what is radical feminism? Feminism is both a social movement and an academic subject: feminist theory reinforces the actions of activists and organizers, and feminist activism opens institutions to feminist criticism. Feminism has a particular image in mainstream entertainment media, which is seldom a positive image, and typically a white one. Feminism's goal, or at least what is commonly put forward as its goal (even by figures like Emma Watson, the UN ambassador for women) is to make women the social, political, and economic equals of men (Lindeman 6). Many feminists insist that feminism is not man-hating, and is instead purely a

movement for equality. Some go as far as suggesting feminism does not seek to challenge men's social position, only to provide women equal rights to men. Two problems arise from defining feminism around equality.

The first is that women are themselves not treated equally to one another, nor are men. Bell hooks, in her book *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* asks us which women are being made equal to which men. Hooks critiques Betty Friedan's 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, an influential bestseller that brought white women's subjugation to men into public discourse, where it had earlier been seldom mentioned. But what Friedan called a "problem that has no name" referred less to the struggle of the "silent majority" of American women, but to a "select group of college-educated middle and upper class married white women – housewives bored with leisure … who wanted more out of life" (hooks 1). Hooks is curious as to who would take up the still-necessary task of domestic labor and child raising in the absence of white housewives in their quest for equal employment in male-dominated professions. The women who felt liberated by Friedan's book seemed not particularly interested in the lot of women of color, who suffered even greater injustice. While it is true that all women are socially unequal to men, it is inappropriate to act as though they experience oppression in quite the same way (hooks 5). The political needs of one woman are not the needs of all women. Further, a woman may exist as both oppressor and oppressed – where men oppress her on the basis of gender, a white woman holds power over a woman of color on the basis of race. What hooks demonstrates is that "there are no men and women in the abstract" (Lindemann 6). We all live lives not simply as men or women, but as people of all sexualities, races, classes, and more. This sense of complex lived experience is lost on the feminist mainstream.

Another problem arises when we consider the particular phrasing of making women socially equal *to* men. Why should women measure themselves based on what men already are? Men's lives are left unquestioned, default and central, "theirs are the lives that women would naturally want"

(Lindemann 7). If feminism is for gender equality, in what ways are we attempting to make the genders equal? Catharine MacKinnon points out the tendency in equality-centered feminism toward a "sameness/difference" approach. Women may either choose the route of formal equality, or sameness to men, or the route of difference, in which legal protection is put in place when women are made structurally different from men. Disguised in both is the way men are the invisible standard around which women revolve (MacKinnon 219).

Following the difference approach, we take into account that regardless of any innate sameness, social reality certainly creates differences between the sexes. Under equality law, differences between sexes are seldom viewed for the systemic forces that generate them (and which they in turn reinforce). Relative difference warrants different treatment, with no sense that such treatment is "categorical, disadvantageous, or cumulative" (MacKinnon 217). Focusing on difference in this way obscures what in particular is different about men and women, and whether those differences are cause or effect of inequality. In sex equality law, natural differences are considered a cause of women's different treatment, but they are its effect. Women's social position suggests a concrete and material disparity, to treat this as difference is to suggest a symmetry which does not exist (MacKinnon 219).

We can see the failure of the difference approach most notably in the typical conversation surrounding stereotypes. The liberal feminist approach is to view stereotypes and the way they inform or obstruct our perception of gender as the cause of sexism, but MacKinnon urges us to consider that they are only part of the mechanism with which we understand gender as difference in the first place. Stereotypes perpetuate the inequality that generates them. When a stereotype is or becomes real, it is not considered discriminatory, as it has become merely a difference (MacKinnon 230).

With stereotypes viewed as the primary problem, the liberal solution then becomes defiance of stereotypes, where reinforcing the stereotype is backwards, defying it progressive. Princess Peach is a

stereotypically feminine video game character - even in her appearances in the Super Smash Bros. series of fighting games, she fights with her parasol, slaps or hip-thrusts opponents, or summons her father to shield her, and in the 2006 DS game Super Princess Peach, the only one of 13 Super Mario games in which Peach is the main character (Sarkeesian, Damsels Part 3), part of the game relies on using her PMS-induced mood swings to fight bosses. On the other hand, a character who in many ways defies gender stereotypes is Lara Croft - she's dressed more ready for combat than Peach in all her frills, and can shoot, punch, kick, and spelunk her way through tombs without being overcome by her "girly" emotions. In section 3 I provide a more in-depth analysis of Lara Croft, but of note here is that defiance of stereotypes means acting tough and ostensibly manly, where by the sameness/difference approach a stereotypically feminine woman is considered to be a poor role model for people of either gender.

This view of stereotypes presents an interesting paradox for the representation of gay men, who are stereotypically effeminate. A gay man who is masculine is defying the stereotype that gay men are "femme" fairies; a straight man who is feminine is similarly defying images that feminine men are necessarily gay. Ironically, to defy stereotypes of masculinity, one must be either heterosexual or masculine. Being neither makes one a stereotype; being both makes up the central identity of masculine straight men, which is often left invisible. Section 2 covers the conflicts raised around sexuality and masculinity.

If stereotypes are merely differences, they also aren't a problem. Stereotypes about white people and men exist, just as stereotypes about French or Italian people exist. But it is the context of these images that determines their material significance. Stereotypes about hegemonically masculine, straight men do not exist in a way that oppresses them, certainly not in a way that suggests women's domination of men. Straight men are stereotyped as lazy and bad at cleaning, but this isn't an overwhelmingly derogatory image. The result of this image is instead that the labor of domestic service becomes the duty of wives, picking up after their inept husbands without thanks. When men do cook or

clean, even just once, it's praised in a way women never are. This image is necessary for the exploitation of women's labor, even though it is a stereotype about men.

What MacKinnon calls the sameness approach denies the material difference that patriarchy enforces on women, insisting that culture ought to reflect our inherent sameness. Assuming a situation of sameness as the means by which you create sex equality is "the sentimentality of liberalism," applied to gender. Attempting to make gender the same by disregarding it leaves us unable to address the very material ways in which we are made unequal by patriarchy: "The sought after blindness to sex differences also achieves blindness to sex inequality" (MacKinnon 231). What we are left with is an attempt at "political correctness", an obsessive focus on formal usage of language in public rather than a deeper critique of oppressive systems, as if oppression had no other form than publicly expressed thoughts of hate. This also treats the problem as if it were abstract enough to work in reverse, as if one could substitute men and women and have an equally problematic result. Liberal feminism rejects anything that might be "misandrist" or man-hating; liberal feminists constantly reassure men that their efforts are not attempting to challenge what men are, or to diminish men's rights. Never mind that radical "misandrists" have committed no acts of terror or mass violence while dozens of young men have left men's rights activist manifestoes before perpetrating horrible acts of terror. Political correctness cares more for the purity of equal treatment than a critical examination of power and violence, so naturally this fact goes ignored. Hillary Clinton has been the target of misogyny in media since before the current youngest voting generation was even born, yet the sameness approach would have us ignore this fact and treat her the same as every male candidate, as if a lifetime of having a misogynist view of a person can be easily willed away.

The sameness approach makes explicitly clear which group is the one in need of changing, and which is the model to be left the same. Men remain the central identity, and women the Other. To become equal, women then must reject their gender, becoming neutrally "human" – in other words,

male. Masculinity is the definition of every category, men's interests percolate through every institution, yet these standards are presented as gender neutral (MacKinnon 224). Men remain the basis of what a person is, the sameness approach applies "equally" to women that which is already implicitly provided to men. The sameness approach allegedly renders us abstract and pre-gendered, without regard for the neutrality and abstract status it grants men: "To be a person, an abstract individual with abstract rights, may be a bourgeois concept, but its content is male" (MacKinnon 229). Missing from the equal rights liberal feminists fight for are those rights specific to women's structurally situated existence. Abstract rights reflect men's interests, rights that are specific to the "other" gender are concrete, dubbed "special interests" that are not relevant to abstract people. The sameness approach thus leaves us with an impossible target – women's equality to a standard defined inherently around their exclusion. Denying gender as a situated experience, and a situating force, leaves us in an abstract reality named objective though it is anything but. Masculinity is as subjective and situated a position as femininity, yet power elevates it to objectivity through abstraction. Thus women seek equality while they are by patriarchal definition subordinate: "Abstract equality necessarily reinforces the inequalities of the status quo to the extent that it evenly reflects an unequal social arrangement" (MacKinnon 227).

This sameness/difference trap actually defines much of feminists' actions in the game industry thus far. The two books *Barbie and Mortal Kombat*, and *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat,* are collections of essays on gender in games from a diversity of perspectives, and they outline the major conflicts as well as strategies for change. These strategies can be summarized into a few key groups: "Pink Games", or those that are stereotypically feminine; "Purple Games", which attempt to design games around more gender neutral terms; and "Gamer Girrls", female gamers beating the boys at their own "boy games". "Pink Games" take the difference route by suggesting that gender equal gameplay can be achieved by girls playing girl games as much as boys play boy games. This is a well-intended approach, focusing on the way in which young boys more active and encouraged game playing sets

them up for early success in STEM education - what amounts to a headstart program (Cassell and Jenkins, 12-14). The phenomenon of "Gamer Girrls" – female players striving for victory against men in competitive games – takes the sameness route: gender equality in games looks like women working for recognition that men are granted by default, and doesn't question the violent content and themes of boys' games, or of masculinity more generally. Purple Games cannot be easily coded as following the sameness or difference approach, the Purple Moon team (where the term Purple Games comes from) sought to offer games that appealed to children of both genders, particularly by analyzing themes and content based on gendered interests. The research is not gathered in a way that reinforces gender stereotypes, but with the goal of examining the ways in which boys and girls play games and the themes in which they have expressed an interest.

Patriarchy
By either the sameness or difference approach to gender equality, men are still the unexamined measure of the public sphere, and the private sphere is simply not measured. Women must either meet the standard of what men are despite misogyny keeping them from independently attaining that status, or be legally relegated to the position that they already occupied, leaving women as same or different as the law found them in the first place. What either approach suggests is that gender inequality can be challenged only if the primary mechanism by which it is generated - the values and ideology of patriarchy which relegate women to be dominated in the first place – is left untouched (MacKinnon 233) and thus approaching gender from this direction helps protect that mechanism. Gender equality obscures the reality that men are its point of reference.

Understanding sexism not as a mere inequality, but as a system of dominance makes clear feminism's goal. It's not directly about equality, it's about power and injustice (Lindemann 9). More specifically it is about dismantling the system of social relations that result in the oppression of women (hooks 24). Patriarchy is the name and nature of that system. Patriarchy is a set of power differential

social relations that establish men as a dominant class and women as their subordinate. Patriarchy is the force that generates gender as a category for the means of oppressing women; gender has little meaning outside of its relevance to power.

In order to understand institutional power on these terms, we will first turn to a chapter on Hegemony written by James Lull. For a deeper outline specifically of *patriarchal* hegemony, we turn to Kate Millett's Sexual Politics. Millett outlines eight bases of patriarchy: Ideology, Force, Biology, Sociology, Class, Economy and Education, Anthropology, and Psychology. We will briefly cover each category as a basis of men's social domination of women.

Ideology

Millett understands that patriarchy is enabled both by violence and by consent. Consent is achieved through dispersed ideology. James Lull outlines this process more explicitly in a chapter on Hegemony. Hegemony refers to the power of a ruling class over other subaltern classes. Consent to power is fabricated by ruling class interests and disseminated through media channels that it controls. Messages that reinforce the status quo emanate from every institution, sharing and perpetuating the same ideology. Hegemony also garners consent by infiltrating cultural practice, generating social roles and identities within the family and other relationships – scripts from which we are discouraged from wavering and which render the dominant ideology invisible (Lull 62). Gender generates these roles as readily as capitalism does.[1]

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[1] Further, hegemony often even directly implies that popular consent is a meaningful choice, as in electoral democracies like the United States, where candidates selected by the ruling class inform us that our vote matters, when voting is made irrelevant technically by gerrymandering and the electoral college, or by the knowledge that only candidates who would reinforce ruling class interests have any chance at winning major elections (Lull 63). By presenting an oppressed population with a choice limited to only what the ruling class desires, hegemony fabricates our consent, as in the popular slogan, "if you don't vote, you can't complain". Capitalist-apologists also push "voting with your dollar": only buying products or consuming media whose message you find agreeable. One must continue to hope that the ruling class will be willing to put messages directly countering their hegemony up to a popular vote; this is unlikely.

The ideology of patriarchy fabricates consent to its hegemony through socialization into its politics in regards to temperament, role, and status (Millett 26). Even fetuses aren't immune to the gender assignment process, and some straight people even hold parties with their friends where they excitedly decide where in the social order of patriarchy their baby will fall, prior to even giving birth. Millett identifies "temperament" as the assignment of personality along gender-divided lines, where socially valuable traits like aggression, intelligence, competitiveness, and efficacy are assigned to masculinity; those traits which are convenient to domination of the subordinate class, such as docility, passivity, ignorance, or dependence, are assigned to femininity (Millett 26). "Role" refers to the social codes of behavior, dress, and manner that one must follow. This is where hegemony infiltrates gender at the point of cultural practice, disappearing patriarchy under the culturally-made-natural (not natural per se, but elevated to the status of nature by cultural practice) roles of the nuclear family. Domestic service is not simply made stereotypically feminine - women are relegated to it by their gender role. Thus women perform service labor as a duty; men do so as a noble sacrifice. "Status" naturally follows from the other two, one group that embodies the values of dominant culture rises to the heights of human achievement while the other tends to baser, animal needs. Status then further reinforces patriarchal ideology, as men control the institutions disseminating ideological messages. Separated, temperament is the psychological component, role the sociological, and status the political, though they are mutually reinforcing.

Lastly, the transmedia interconnections between different institutions serves to further perpetuate the same ideology. Successful movies go on an endless procession of spin-off toys, games, sequels, the logos involved are shipped on clothing and other goods, countless click-bait articles reviewing the product online garner ad revenue when they go viral on social media, where users can interact with one another under constant advertisement. Federal regulations are imposed, but the regulators are often selected from the industry itself, and return to it as well. It is rare that new or independent ideas break through and become popular. Typically, only those independent artists who reproduce the dominant class' ideology are made popular, or else their views are either co-opted by hegemonic interests, or run out of business (Lull 64).[1]

Biology

   Millett stresses how the ideology of patriarchy finds justification for itself in an invented conception of nature, forming the supposed biological base of patriarchy. This fabricates consent by portraying patriarchy as an inevitability – it would be unnatural and harmful to defy patriarchal rule. One of the leading biological arguments is that men's greater musculature hints at their domination. Today, muscles are largely irrelevant - machines have taken over the most strenuous labor, and the most important modern work happens entirely on computers, sometimes entirely virtually. Were we to put MMA fighter Rhonda Rousey in a ring with whoever the best male competitor is, what would the outcome even mean to the average man or woman who would likely be handily defeated by either? When muscles are as dependent on cultural practices like diet, breeding, and exercise as they are, dimorphic musculature seems less a biological root on which to base a caste system in a civilized society, and more a direct effect of that system.

   Reproductive biology is often twisted to serve patriarchy as well. Millett asserts that the discovery of paternity could be an origin of patriarchy, moving us from a speculative pre-patriarchal mode that highlights fertility, to a patriarchal one in which men claim ownership of women and children, land, produce, capital. Consider even our subjective cultural myths about reproduction – do sperm cells race each other towards an egg passively waiting to be fertilized, penetrating it and becoming a human life, or does the egg sit regally on its perch waiting for a new crop of sperm cells to arrive, consuming one to slake its thirst for genetic data? Note in each of these potential models of what occurs during reproduction, one gamete is given active status and a subject position, the other remains a passive object, a mere vehicle to reproduction.

   Video games consistently reinforce this patriarchal view of biology, often in spite of its own technological capabilities. Games that allow you to choose between a male or female character also

provide gender differential stat bonuses or maluses – men have higher strength and physical stats, where women have higher charisma or magical abilities. But if a real-life woman can train to be physically stronger than a man, certainly a world in which she can cast fireballs would enable a similar mechanic. Within the magic circle (and coincidentally the technical makeup) of a virtual game, the appearance of a character's (virtual) physical body is independent of their ability. What that might mean for character designers is total freedom to create wildly diverse characters, all still balanced by the in-game numerical representation of strength, speed, or other statistics. Some players find it ridiculous that fat gamers would want to play as characters who look like they do. They have no problem suspending their disbelief about seeing a thin character walk and jump up an almost vertical incline in a game like Skyrim, or jumping off 100+ft towers into piles of hay and walking off without injury in a game like Assassin's Creed, or being shot and killed and then returning to life at the previous checkpoint in countless other games. But a fat person doing parkour (which fat people can do in the real world) a fat person skateboarding (also possible in the real world) or a fat person doing any number of other activities seen in games is not realistic. For a female character to hit just as hard as the male characters (based on the numbers assigned to her strikes in the code) defies the supposed natural order on which patriarchy rests. Patriarchal ideology is so important that incongruity between gendered notions of strength are a more serious defiance of what is allegedly natural than throwing magic fireballs from one's hands. Fat-hating and misogynist gamers crave escapist fantasy, but they're willing to argue in favor of realism so long as it protects *their* narrow conception of fantasy.

Anthropology

These primal foundations of patriarchy are fundamental to the construction of institutions that exist today. The biological basis lends itself to what MacKinnon calls the Anthropological base – our biological anxieties are resolved in our more complex institutions. The myths we use to understand reproduction, paternity, and ownership infiltrate religion, government, commerce, education, marriage,

the family, labor – in short, every human institution. The bodily conflicts above set patriarchy at the core

of the institutions from which ideology emanates. The anthropological base as Millett describes it ties

our modern experience of patriarchy to its complicated origin in neither the body nor culture alone, but

both simultaneously (a concept we will expand on in a later discussion of masculinity).

Sociology

The sociological base is where patriarchy infiltrates cultural practice. From before they are born,

children are trained into the order of patriarchy. Parents provide the base values, which are later

reinforced in school, media, religion, and other institutions, setting these values concretely as cultural

reality.

Even now when some parents have attempted to raise their children on more gender-neutral

terms, they are exposed to patriarchy by the time they reach school, and as we've previously discussed,

gender neutrality adopts the male standard. Patriarchy's hold on the family is so strong, these new

endeavors at healthy parenting are met with dismissal and outcry. This explains the dissent against

same-sex marriage – gay families defy the patriarchal order, in theory. Many straight people were

motivated to fight for marriage equality by the idea that we too could conform to their practices. The

potential to criticize the patriarchal family, namely the way that a quarter of all LGBT teens are

abandoned by their straight parents and left homeless, was papered over by the sentiment of equality.

Even for heterosexual couples, raising children on values that are opposed to patriarchy is seen as a

moral failure, one children learn to reject when they are exposed to patriarchy through means other

than their parents.

Education/Economy

Women have been denied entry to institutions of education and business, forming another base

in the patriarchal system. The situation here has improved greatly in response to feminist demands, but

work remains to be done. Historically, women were simply barred access to universities, and it was rare

for a woman to take positions in university faculty after graduate education, and rarer still that she'd be

retained. Again, this has been a site of great feminist change, and women enjoy much greater respect in

the university. Still she must strive to prove herself as an academic with merit, rather than a mere

"diversity hire" (it's worth noting that a pay gap persists here too, so a diversity hire is conveniently

cheaper). Millett identifies the problems of anti-discrimination law that MacKinnon more thoroughly

explores – the law was never intended to be enforced, in fact enforcing legal gender equality is

considered a special treatment, and here we fall into the sameness/difference trap again. Affirmative

Action, claimed to be "reverse sexist/racist" stains the reputations of women and people of color

regardless of their credentials, and fluffs the reputation of white men who didn't have that official

advantage, but had the unofficial advantage that accompanies a lifetime of whiteness and maleness.

The problem here extends beyond merely whether women are participating in the STEM fields.

"Natural science itself has a gendered character. Western science and technology are culturally

masculinized" (Connell 6). It's not just that there are more men in STEM, or in teaching and research

positions in those fields, it's that masculinity and patriarchal ideology are embedded in the impersonal

discourse, the structures of power in scientific communications, and the internal culture of STEM. This

works circularly with the biological base that claims patriarchal origins in nature itself - science

dominates discussions of gender, and masculinity dominates the fields of science. From Donovan's

critique of liberal feminism we remember that men are also symbolically associated with rationality and

objectivity, they are unbiased by emotion and are more apt scientists. One of patriarchy's many

contradictions is that men are more rational than women when it comes to scientific research, but are

irrational and beastly when harassing women from their vehicles.

Video games are very much an extension of the STEM fields. Women's exclusion from the

university, and in particular from the militarized and male-centric discourse in the fields from which

video games spawned, started her off with less of an opportunity to take part in the making of games.

Still today, her presence in the game industry seems more of a token, Affirmative Action representation rather than a significant and refreshing voice in game development. This attitude has recently been changing in the game industry, and it is important that we continue to foster such change in communities of gamers and developers. Groups like Women in Games, Girls Make Games, Black Girls Code and many others help women and people of color network in what remains a white-, male-dominated field.

Class

Millett presents the superficial confusion that obtains between women and men of different classes, races, sexualities, levels of ability, age, etc. (Millett). Others have named this term kyriarchy or intersectionality – the complex interconnections between different social classes. What Millet refers to as the Class basis of patriarchy establishes gender as a meaningful class difference, one that intersects uniquely with the ways other classes are made dominant/subordinate. Just as women have different experiences and perspectives from men, so too do lesbian women, women of color, poor women, women who are all of those things and more, have different experiences and perspectives from one another. Women might define womanhood itself in vastly different ways from one another, while still comprising a social class made subordinate by patriarchy.

Psychology

It is important to reiterate that these eight bases occur simultaneously and reinforce one another. This is especially relevant for the Psychological base – the existence of patriarchy has a direct psychological effect on all of us. Where we encounter patriarchy at any of the aforementioned points, we interiorize its principles. For women, the process of objectification takes a serious toll in the form of habitual body monitoring – that is, constantly tending to her appearance. For a woman to forego this care, she must pay the price in social scorn. Take the now-infamous example of "manspreaders" – men who spread their legs so wide on public transit that they take up two seats, pushing anyone next to

them away. When feminists have done the same in protest, onlookers are visibly upset – this isn't the behavior they expect in women, but it passes unnoticed in men. Consider habitual body monitoring a sort of cognitive tax for being a woman. Whether she exerts any effort into appearing ladylike or not, she is spending mental energy.

Consider also the female gamers driven off of voice chat or away from games entirely, because of misogynist harassment they received when it was made obvious that they were women. When female gamers are treated with greater scrutiny and have their failures blamed on their gender, and even worse when they face misogynist harassment or even rape threats, they internalize that this isn't a space for women, it's a man's space and a woman may only trespass at her own risk. If game companies, community moderators and male players who claim to be allies hold harassers accountable (and the more immediately the better) they instead help to make misogyny an outlier behavior, and assert women's right to play without having to face harassment or abuse.

Force

The other component in reinforcing hegemony, (and the eighth base named by Millet) Force, is not to be ignored. Force is powerful not just for making women the victims of violence, and violently initiating men into masculinity, but also for the threat of violence that is a constant force policing men and women. Whether every woman will be made the victim of the worst violence, her behavior is policed by the ever-present threat of such violence. This threat is interpreted by theorist Adrienne Rich as "compulsory heterosexuality" – a matrix of material forces that operate to control women and their sexuality in particular.

Compulsory Heterosexuality

Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" is a foundational text on the politics of sexuality. The essay attempts to grapple with not just the cultural assumptions of women being innately attracted to men or the negative views of lesbians, but also with "how and why" female

relationships "[have] been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise" (Rich 632) and the erasure of lesbians from all writing including much feminist work. She highlights how prescription against female sexuality, whether homosexual or not, is policed on material, not merely symbolic or abstract, grounds.

Rich criticizes the exclusion of lesbians from much feminist writing of her time. The problem extends beyond just the failure to account for a subset of the population of women; their account of sexuality ignores the reality that heterosexuality is itself a political institution, one that is vital to patriarchy. One such text Rich critiques is *For Her Own Good*, which examines the history of how men's medical advice to women was structured around capitalist labor needs. While it provides an excellent historical account of the intersection between patriarchy, capitalism, and medical practice, it neglects any mention of the medical torture of lesbians, and ignores the economic imperative behind heterosexuality (Rich 634). It is from this position that feminist projections of gender equality make the "old liberal leap across the tasks and struggles of the here and now," assuming heterosexuality to be inevitable without reference to how women actually experience sexuality, and the material forces coercing her to practice it. Indeed, heterosexuality is a powerful institution, even for those men who believe they are the pro-feminist precursors of new sexual relations (Rich 637). In tragic contrast to the purported progressiveness of some heterosexual relationships, there are many stories of liberal men using vaguely "feminist" language as a means of manipulating women into abusive sexual relationships, or using their image to shield themselves and blame their victims.

Compulsory heterosexuality is closely tied to another important term: sexual objectification. Compulsory heterosexuality denies women any choice but to be sexually objectified, as MacKinnon argues, "All women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water" (Nussbaum 250) implying both that it surrounds them, but also that they require it for nourishment. This is exactly the problem

Rich addresses: women's experience of heterosexuality is one of coercion by the matrix of social forces that make her materially dependent on men.

Constant sexual objectification has a detrimental psychological effect on women, addressed in the previous subsection on the psychological base of patriarchy – but it is also a component of the specifically sexual violence committed against women. When a person is viewed as an object, violence against them is not viewed as a moral transgression. But what constitutes sexual objectification?

Martha Nussbaum outlines seven components of objectification: Instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity. In this context, instrumentality refers to viewing the object as a tool for the objectifier's personal use, the object exists to be used; the denial of autonomy and subjectivity shows an inability to relate to the object as if it has free will; inertness refers to the objects static nature, it doesn't do anything, it is merely acted upon or controlled. Fungibility, or interchangeability, is the principle of viewing an object as if it were not individual and unique, but a similar component that can be easily swapped with any other, and ownership refers to the object belonging to a person, able to be bought, sold, or traded.

Violability is the component most important to violence – this principle casts objects as lacking in "boundary integrity" such that they can be broken, smashed, and violated within the sphere of morally permissible actions. The sexual objectification of women is most heinous for this reason – it treats women as though they were not deserving of personal boundaries, and as if they existed to be violated. When we view women this way, it is difficult to treat their stories of sexual violence seriously as moral transgressions – if an object is treated as violable, no moral crime was committed in its violation (Nussbaum 257). We will address sexual objectification in games more directly in section 3.

Compulsory heterosexuality exists as both force and consent in upholding male heterosexual domination. It is upheld by the violence itself, but also for the cultural practices which render such violence acceptable, encouraged, and inevitable.

Rape

One of the greatest forms of violence upholding compulsory heterosexuality and where violence intersects sexual politics most completely, is rape. It is a notoriously unreliable crime to measure, as very few victims ever come forward, for reasons we will soon see. The FBI predicts that 37% are never reported, and those that are reported are even more rarely charged and sentenced. One of the most intensive studies with a very large sample size has found that on college campuses, 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men will be sexually assaulted before they graduate. The prevalence of rape has much to do with subjective social forces that excuse, enable, and even encourage men to rape women. These cultural vectors form a web called Rape Culture. Rape Culture offers us defective theories about rape, dictating what rapists look like, and where, specifically, the moral transgression of rape lies. The first problem arises from our image of what a rapist is, the second from our idea of what rape, and sex, are (Lindemann 131).

Violence against women generally, and rape in particular, is treated with a curiously ambivalent emotional response from men, ranging from hyperbolic indignation with little critical thought about the crime, to titillation, seen most in violence against women used to sell products, to camaraderie at sharing experiences of violence or seeing their violent desires validated by another man (Millet 45).

Our cultural image of who a rapist is and what they look like is often inaccurate. This is the Monster Myth – the idea that if someone is a rapist we'll all be able to tell because he'll look like an incorrigible criminal. Often this mixes with the concomitant criminalization of Black and Latino men, such that they are more likely to be perceived as rapists. But this myth makes it incredibly difficult to prosecute those rapists who don't fit this image. Those like Curtis Lepore who have popular social media

accounts with large followings, those like Bill Cosby and David Bowie who've made great artistic contributions, and those like Daniel Holtzclaw, who are granted power (in this case the power of the police) over women and abuse that power for both access to women, and a defense of their actions if they are ever accused. This last example is most important: rape cases are often not taken seriously for the exact same reason they are so common and so politically charged in the first place – the powerless are commonly targeted *because* they will not be believed.

The Monster Myth is an inaccurate depiction of rapists, but culturally we also suffer from an inaccurate depiction of victims. This is commonly referred to as victim blaming, and it is one of the biggest reasons victims don't come forward about the crime. Sadly, the first to blame victims are the victims themselves. The feeling of shame, the betrayal and violation of trust and this tendency to blame themselves is a powerful means by which victims are silenced. But victim blaming is a cultural phenomenon as well, one that is damaging to victims and a threat to justice. We think first about what an individual could have done differently to avoid being targeted in the first place, rather than think about what could have compelled the rapist to act as they did. Victim blaming is at play in the "rape myth" – the idea that women who accuse men of rape secretly did consent.

Ann Cahill examines three of the major theories that describe where the moral transgression of rape lies: property, consent, and abusive group relations. The most regressive and misogynist of these theories is property theory, where rape is a crime not against the woman being raped, but against her male handler, either her husband or her father (Lindemann 131). As she falls under her father's jurisdiction, her "purity" is a possession of his, and he must guard it such that he can earn the full trade value when he sells her to a husband, a form of livestock exchange. While it seems antiquated when written this plainly, this theory still holds today. We can observe property theory in the common media trope of the father intimidating his daughter's first boyfriend or prom date while she's upstairs getting ready. She's not a part of the conversation, and she might even be expecting the two to have a normal

introduction, but alas, they're negotiating sexual access to her body. Rapists often see themselves

committing a crime against the father, choosing to rape someone vindictively against her father, proving

himself a greater man for taking the property that is his daughter's "virtue". If he can be made to feel

remorse for his actions, it is often because he sees the father's perspective. Even in seemingly anti-rape

endeavors, we see this theory taking shape: we're asked to sympathize with victims because "she's

someone's daughter, sister, mother, friend" without mentioning most importantly that, "she's

someone" in her own right. Many men only begin to care about rape culture after having daughters; it's

a great hypocrisy that they fear men doing to their daughters what they likely did to other women, that

only then do they realize the immorality of their sexuality.

The next theory is focused on consent – the moral wrongness of rape lies in the lack of consent

between all parties. This is a more common theory, and is far more progressive than the previous. A

problem arises with the burden of proof: one needs to not only prove that they were raped, but that the

act wasn't consensual, whereas in other crimes it is automatically assumed you did not consent. Liberal

ethics and law present this in the terms of what individual parties can and cannot do to one another,

and treat sex in terms of the impersonal interactions of the public sphere, rather than the complex and

personal relations of the private sphere (Lindemann 134). Liberal law covers only the public sphere, it

would be wrong to infiltrate the private one. Rape is also more often committed by close friends or

acquaintances, boyfriends, husbands, fathers and other family members, which further inhibits one's

willingness to fight back (Lindemann 133).

The third theory is abusive group relations, which highlights the political nature of rape. Physical

violence is an assault on the body, as well as the mind (for the fear, humiliation or trauma it also inflicts).

But sexual violence is an attack on a person's sexuality (Lindemann 135). It is damaging to their identity,

as Bonnie Mann discovers in her reviews of interviews with victims of Abu Ghraib style tortures –

violating someone's sexuality is a particular way to degrade them. Abusive group relations theory also

helps account for the way in which rapists target victims specifically *because* they hold social power over them. Carole Pateman and Catharine MacKinnon note that under circumstances in which one group is made to be 'naturally' superior and sexually aggressive, while the other is made passive and accommodating, consent is not possible, and thus all heterosexual intercourse is rape (Lindemann 133). Rape constructs heterosexual norms – thus separating rape and sex is flawed, because significantly, much of what constitutes male heterosexual norms *is* violent. Compulsory heterosexuality offers women what is called a protection racket – women seek a man to protect them from other men, in exchange for sexual and domestic service that women are not allowed to refuse.

The problem of victim blaming, the monster myth, and defective theories of the moral wrongness of rape, help to disappear rapists by focusing on the actions of victims, and implicitly assumes rapists will always exist. "Teaching men not to rape" is an honorable goal, but as abusive group relations occur under *political* situations, this goal will only ever be realized with the dismantling of patriarchy: that same institution that establishes heterosexuality in way that renders consent impossible.

Taking rape culture and compulsory heterosexuality into account, liberal feminist's goal of gender equality seems particularly ridiculous. A woman already needs to expend energy on performing heterosexuality for men or risk her material survival, must also do everything in her power to avoid rape and sexual assault or be held responsible for the crime, and now she needs also to "Lean In" or exert herself to prove she is the equal of men whose primacy goes unquestioned. When a woman performs as well as a man, she is not his equal but his better – his path was free of misogyny.

This is the essence of liberal feminism: women's success is defined by her equal opportunity to participate in capitalism and war. The injustice of women's daily life is ignored; the injustice of these institutions is ignored, and is even further obscured. When we cheer on the first female front-line

soldiers, we give our consent to the imperial slaughter in which they will participate. This will be central

to our critique of the video game industry: the problems of the industry that I hope to expose are

deeper than women's unequal participation in the system. Women's absence as game characters and

developers is a symptom of misogyny in the industry, not the root problem.

Masculinity

Some of #Gamergate's most allegedly moderate defenders try to play at being serious – despite

the fact that their movement is one of trolling at its most innocent and terrorism at its least – and have

created some interesting phrases that prove to be hollow bastardizations of feminist or other critical

theory. Most infamous among these is the argument that Gamergate is really an earnest critique of

"ethics in game journalism" which proves false the moment you look into its origin as revenge porn. But

among these expressions of bad faith, one in particular has deep significance for this section, as it signals

a fracture in masculinity that may be shallower than we often are led to believe: the concept of "geek

oppression". This and similar terms became more commonly used after Chris Klue, a professional

football player, insulted Gamergaters on Twitter, and highlighted their misogyny and inability to adapt

to women taking part in the hobby to which they felt entitled (though this does raise questions about

whether Klue would be willing to actively encourage women's football or rugby teams).

In any case, the Jock vs. Geek divide has been a narrative staple in Western media for much

longer than just Gamergate, longer even than the existence of video games. The stereotypical image

we're presented with shows jocks - athletic and physically strong teenage boys - as the pinnacle of

masculinity, homophobic womanizers who have it all in high school, with the assumption that they'll toil

in blue-collar, minimum wage labor after graduation as a karmic punishment, or get a job through family

connections if they're white and born to wealth. The geek, in contrast, is either fat or scrawny, is looked

over by the female classmates he pines for (and whom the audience feels he deserves or is entitled to),

but is gifted with knowledge in the STEM fields, which gives him the promise that after being at the

bottom of the hierarchy as a teen, he will later have the chance to flip the script and dominate his bullies by exerting his newfound capitalist power.

In reality, the lines between these two brands of masculinity have always been blurry, and have begun to deteriorate further. We will look in particular at the points of eSports (which seems to attract merely a different flavor of jock culture), consumer capitalism (where tech savvy can earn you money, and where money can buy the jock body if perhaps not the personality), and the military (where men can train their bodies for physical strength and the ability to kill, or train their minds and reflexes in drone operations, and are expected to do both).

By the end of this section, I'll argue that far from being oppressed, "geeks" are and have always been as misogynist as "jocks", that what defines them both is a militarized, masculine desire for mastery over nature and that what separates them is merely a cosmetic difference. First, we will analyze how masculinity is constructed as a process of interactions between social forces and men's bodies over time. We will then examine the phenomenon of school shooters, relevant both as a representation of the geek/jock dichotomy at a point of crisis, as well as the primary battleground of the debate on violence in games. Lastly, we will examine this dichotomy against a similar one, that between mind and body, which will tie us back to the first section. This will provide the platform for the final section, in which we draw together the threads of the game industry, masculinity, and feminism.

Construction of Masculinity

For a comprehensive analysis of masculinity, we turn to R.W. Connell's book, *Masculinities*. Connell first outlines, throughout history, the attempts at defining a science of masculinity, or a way to understand masculinity as a solid object of knowledge. Three major projects include Freudian psychology, sex role theory, and developments in related social sciences of anthropology, sociology, and history. Connell compares this with definitions of masculinity given by feminist and gay social movements (Connell 7). We will briefly cover what each of these perspectives offers.

The first attempt of a study of masculinity comes from the field of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis has a (deserved) reputation of being a means of "healing" social deviants into conformity, as a project of social control that is ongoing today with the pathologizing of mental illness. Connell recognizes this reputation but also the radical potential of Freud and later psychoanalysts. Freud made these contributions for better or worse – many of his answers to psychological problems are outright misogynist. But our grasp on the formation of masculinity has been forever shaped by his work (Connell 8).

Among Freud's contributions to knowledge about masculinity is in understanding the continuity in mental life, most importantly that adult gender and sexuality are constructed over time, with the construction led by the Oedipus complex. Important here is that masculinity does not exist as a biologically fixed reality, but that personalities are competing and conflicting, a point missed by the conservative psychoanalysts acting to make adherence to gender norms the definition of mental health, stigmatizing people outside of those norms as mentally ill and in need of correction. What Freud said was complicated and fragile, they made concrete and simple, and by doing so erased the potential for critique (11). Freud viewed the oedipal construction of personality as a complicated and fragile one, but conservative psychoanalysts made it concrete, simple, and natural, erasing the potential for change that Freud's model offers (Connell 11).

The next approach Connell outlines is sex role theory, what Millett called the sociological basis of patriarchy. Most major differences between the sexes can be easily argued as the result of social norms and prohibitions, as MacKinnon does in "difference vs. dominance" – sex equality law often treats differences between genders as causes of sex discrimination when they are an effect of it (MacKinnnon 219). Sex role theory takes up the task of defining these two scripts of gendered behavior, and the way we act them out. From this standpoint, feminists ought to work towards generating new

scripts, and questioning anti-social or violent behavior and the way it is normalized on the basis of sex role.

Sex role theory has particular relevance to our analysis of masculinity as a process of managing competing social expectations, rather than merely repressing subconscious desires as suggested by Freudian psychology (Connell 23). "Geek" and "Jock" are two among several different images of masculinity to which men might be drawn.

Sex role theory has also had its conservative leanings, being used to demonstrate the natural order or balance of heterosexuality. Feminists have suggested the order imposed by these sex roles as they are defined supports a misogynist subordination and exploitation of labor. Some have used an understanding of the male sex role to help explain how men learn misogynist behaviors and have worked on changing the role to change the man. However, others have used role theory to suggest men are just as oppressed by their sex role as women. This shows the greater flaw of role theory – it is too vague. Recalling MacKinnon's critique, role theory is operating within the difference approach, and fails in the predictable way: if each sex has its own different role, there is equality of a sort. Sex role portrays a vertical political hierarchy as a horizontal difference (Connell 26). New definitions of a male sex role are quickly shut down as soft, and are remasculinized – the "new man" is either too sensitive, or he's no more than cosmetically different from the old man. He certainly is no more critical of the relegation of unpaid reproductive labor to his wife.

Connell next examines the contributions of the social sciences of history, anthropology, and sociology towards a knowledge of masculinity. Historical analysis - like that provided in *Digital Play* – help us to track changes in specific institutions in relation to gender. Often definitions and norms about gender are morphed to suit the needs of capitalism and the military industrial complex, which is exactly the argument in *Digital Play*. This is also argued in *For Her Own Good*, which shows the reproductive

needs of capital reflected in medical advice to women, that taboos and restrictions change depending on what is needed of women. But Connell stresses that these social changes aren't the result of unidimensional machinations of the powerful: "the gender pattern was not a mechanical effect of these forces; it was nurtured as a strategic response to a given situation (Connell 30).

The field of anthropology, particularly ethnography, has a history fraught with imperialist objectification of "primitives" as wild, animal others. We might now open that history to criticism and see as much a reflection of western culture and definitions of masculinity as the culture studied (Connell 34). Among the ethnographic data is a common thread between several cultures of initiation into manhood being a homosexual act, namely, the ritual rape of a young boy. In this cultural situation, homosexuality was not only not sinful or aberrant, it was a rite of passage in which almost every man participated. The positivist response to this is to interpolate the existence of an abstract base of sexuality that isn't grounded in culture or social construction, rather than to see the specific ways in which social forces constructed this case (Connell 33).

Sociology studies masculinity in relation to power, both the way in which masculinity is arranged for hegemonic interests and the way it reflexively changes when limited or modified by race, sexuality, class, and ability. Sex role theory is part of sociology, but Connell here highlights sociological work that is grounded in social institutions more than psychological facts, that accounts for a diversity of outcomes rather than a binary linear path of socialization toward a male or female role (Connell 36). To reiterate, masculinity is not horizontally different from femininity, but hierarchically arranged in a dominant position, and there exists a parallel political hierarchy within masculinity itself (Connell 37). Men who are capable of dominance rise steadily to the top of the hierarchy; those left at the bottom are compelled either to negotiate a new place for themselves, or face ostracism from the more highly ranked. Sometimes those at the bottom of the hierarchy generate new forms of masculinity that are in direct opposition to power, seen in punk rock, hip hop, and many other countercultural movements.

Countercultural movements often spawn in opposition to white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal hegemony, so it is tragic that they often undergo a remasculinization when the societal outsider can be marketed to the societal insider. The highly criticized *Grand Theft Auto* series is a perfect example of the anti-establishment origins of hip hop being warped into a masculine power fantasy for suburban white boys.

The hierarchy within masculinity is largely dependent on context, and generates vital conflicts when the context changes. These conflicts are the perfect site to observe masculinity at work – these crises are when masculinity is (re)negotiated. This is key to our understanding of the Geek/Jock dichotomy: the dominant narrative here features a role reversal as a result of time, in which the context for being dominant changes from physical and athletic prowess to excellence of the mind. Men who were dominant at one point may soon find themselves the lesser of their former bullying victims, a bit too late to expect remorse.

The last source of knowledge about masculinity that Connell draws on is offered by politics – centered on a conflict between conservative Christian fundamentalists seeking to define a traditional masculinity which is in fact a modern invention, and the understanding of masculinity generated from feminist and gay liberation movements.

Gay men's mobilization in western politics has largely centered on homophobia that is inherent in the makeup of hegemonic masculinity, as well as the homoerotic undertones of all-male institutions and men's relationships with one another (Connell 39). Gay men also connected and organized with feminists at the time, highlighting that homophobia mattered for more than just the physical violence and abuse suffered by gay men, but also the demarcation of acceptable masculinity around the marginalization and exploitation of women in the hetero-patriarchal family (Connell 40). While this has

always been an imperfect relationship, gay men now seem content to leave feminists to their lot, and even seek membership in heterosexual male culture.

The ironic contradictions between simultaneously homophobic and homoerotic male institutions seems now to have reached critical mass: gay men remasculinize, painting a conservative picture of the future gay male family, while "straight" men navigate the complicated reality of their sexuality while still claiming heterosexuality publicly out of fear. One example can be found in craigslist ads for "soft bro fun" or the allegedly straight men using gay dating apps – men turning to the mostly anonymous world of the internet to solicit gay sex with a man with whom they could still watch football and drink beer like normal (that is, heterosexual) guys. Connell offers an example of male bodybuilders striving to achieve the ideal male form, while selling sex to wealthy gay men who also wanted the ideal male form (to have sex with). They rationalized their homosexual behavior as a necessary part of making a living. The old saying still stands: "Every straight man is a target of gay liberation".

If we analyze these different attempts to define a solid object of knowledge of masculinity, we see that essentialism, which defines masculinity by what-men-are, would make every man's action masculine, and wouldn't account for masculine women or feminine men. It also doesn't recognize the cultural vectors at work in defining and changing masculinity. This is what Millett calls the biological base – if the current expression of masculinity is something natural for men, it might be damaging or working against nature to try changing it (Connell 45). Rape culture makes exactly this claim, excusing men who rape as simply acting out their natural sexual desire. Rape apologists characterize feminists as restrictive of men's nature. The essentialist view of gender is based on faulty understandings of nature.

Positivist psychology can't investigate gender from a neutral standpoint when we already have an idea of what masculinity is before we evaluate it; "positivist procedure rests on the very typifications that are supposedly under investigation in gender research (Connell 69). Normative definitions of

masculinity as what-men-ought-to-be might be effective for political movements, helping us see that gender norms dictate much of what men value, and that they incubate men's insecurity. We will look more clearly at those anxieties soon, but as far as defining masculinity, normative definitions are ineffective, as most (if not all) men do not look, act, or live like the normative forms.

The semiotic approaches to gender do take into account that gender is inherently relational, that masculinity can only exist in contrast to femininity (Connell 68) but this approach freezes us at the point of discourse (Connell 71). Where essentialism tied gender to the body, semiotics divorced it from the body altogether. The competing currents in the arguments of what role the body plays in gender can be grouped into "body as machine" and "body as landscape". Connell outlines both before presenting a compromise – that gender is constituted through a body-reflexive practice.

Masculinity and Violence

Under stress, the conflicts arising from the construction of masculinity might be brought to the fore. If a man feels compromised in his masculinity, as is natural when it is so tenuously defined around unattainable ideals, he might lash out against one of the forces acting against him. The images of hegemonic masculinity in media are well established and render patriarchy invisible. Feminism is in direct contrast with this, it is considered a new fad and feminists are hyper-visible targets of misogynist ire and backlash. When this conflict comes to a head for an individual man, it is unlikely that he will choose to question hegemonic masculinity, and instead will identify more strongly within it. Thus he turns his rage towards feminism, as a force that is constricting his behavior. That rage might be (and often is) taken out in an act of suicide-by-mass murder. We see in documents left behind or statements made during various school shootings a pernicious anti-feminist backlash. The perpetrators of the Montreal Polytech massacre, the University of California Santa Barbara murders, the more recent event at Umpqua Community College, all featured anti-feminist and men's rights activist extremism.

As an example particularly relevant to our topic of video games, Anita Sarkeesian canceled a talk she had planned to give at the University of Southern Utah, because an anonymous man threatened to commit "the deadliest school shooting in American history" and that he would "write [his] manifesto in [Sarkeesian's] spilled blood" ("USU Terrorism Warning Letter"). In his article he dubs Marc Lepine, perpetrator of the Montreal Polytech massacre, a "hero to men everywhere for standing up to the toxic influence of feminism on Western masculinity". It is worth noting also that Sarkeesian cancelled her talk not because of the threats, but because the state's open carry policy wouldn't allow basic security measures, even in the presence of such violent and specific threats. This event in particular draws the connection to video games, but other threads exist, such as mental health and suicidal ideation, masculinity, misogyny and anti-feminism, and guns and gun control. We will explore each in more detail to uncover the shifting ways they interact with, perpetuate, and are used to excuse one another.

Rachel Kalish and Michael Kimmel use the term "aggrieved entitlement" to describe the phenomenon of mass violence, which I feel is at play not only in the school shootings they study, but in the formation of #Gamergate as well. Every school shooter has been male, though this fact is seldom mentioned in mainstream news coverage. Gender is a vector worth noting however. Another similarity between the men is a feeling of marginalization by school bullies. This humiliation is emasculating, and not avenging any perceived slight to ones masculinity is to cease to be a man, as we'll see more clearly in a later analysis. This is aggrieved entitlement, "a fusion of that humiliating loss of manhood and the moral obligation and entitlement to get it back. And its gender is masculine" (Kalish and Kimmel 454). It takes both marginalization and entitlement to make a school shooter like the ones studied, otherwise members of other marginalized groups would be committing these crimes as well. It is the contrast between entitlement in the dominant culture and marginalization within the school subculture that turns suicidal ideation into mass murder.

Suicidal ideation is a core component neither to be overlooked nor blamed as the sole influence. If this were the case, it would be a great indictment (where one is indeed sorely needed) of our mental healthcare system, but not in a way that suggests actual improvements (Kalish and Kimmel 454). Several Republican 2016 US presidential candidates called for improved mental healthcare in the wake of the UCC shooting, but none could offer any concrete solutions, or even name the problems with the existing system that cause suicidal ideation that could become premeditated suicide-by-mass-murder to fly under the radar of school counselors and healthcare providers. Nor did any of them relent in their promises to work against greater healthcare laws or sensible gun control.

Returning to Millett, we remember how gender makes normal some forms of violence, even when they appear to be treated with hyperbolic and hypocritical indignation (Millet 45). We react passionately to white male terrorists, but in a way that renders them outliers of both groups. Kalish and Kimmel argue that "It was not because they were deviants, but rather because they were over-conformists to a particular normative construction of masculinity, a construction that defines violence as a legitimate response to a perceived humiliation (Kalish and Kimmel 461). It is convenient to patriarchy that we view these men as isolated extremists who are not representatives of their gender or race, but they are prime examples of hegemonic masculinity.

Wrestling with Manhood is a documentary by Sut Jhally and Jackson Katz examining the world of pro-wrestling as a cultural product that generates images of masculinity that center around violence and misogyny. Their argument is two-fold: first, media, at least the media environment surrounding pro-wrestling, does impact its audience, and second, that these images simultaneously satisfy and retroactively generate the desire for such images. Pro-wrestling's apologists say they're merely providing a source of entertainment that is in demand, very similar to the video game industry spokespeople – violence is just fun and entertaining, not worth examination.

The documentary defines two terms that are important for an understanding of media violence. The first is happy violence: portrayals of violence that might show their victim being in pain, but ultimately having few long-term consequences. They use cartoons as an example: Tom and Jerry shows Tom undergoing sometimes tortuous circumstances, but within a few seconds, he's back to normal. Pro-wrestling shows happy violence almost constantly, and this is relevant to the way it constructs images of masculinity – the "manly" thing to do is to shrug off pain, no matter how severe. To show any indication that physical violence hurts is feminine; to acknowledge the emotional damage of insults is even worse. Retaliation is the most effective way to recoup one's masculine image when another man tears it down, which brings us to the next term: escalating violence. The craving for violent images that pro-wrestling satisfies also generates a craving for even greater violence. From Connell, we understand that masculinity is inherently relational, rather than a solid object to be understood, and so one might be either more masculine or less masculine (Connell 68). Thus, retaliation makes one more masculine, and this escalates back and forth until one contender admits defeat and emasculation. The craving for violent media operates on similar grounds, where the more violence in the media consumed makes more masculine the consumer. This is visible in pro-wrestling and video games, but also notably in porn, where men are led to more violent and misogynist pornography. Men need not just retaliate, but retaliate bigger, or "one-up" their peers.

Militarized Masculinity

Violence in video games has long sparked public outcry from a variety of parties. In 1982, the US Surgeon General declared video games dangerous, that they were generators of "aberrations in childhood behavior" (Digital Play 247). From this approach, we see media as a way to correct aberrant behavior. One might borrow this same format to argue against representations of "aberrant" sexualities. Further, as Kalish and Kimmel indicate, the men who enact suicide-by-mass-murder are not aberrations from masculine norms as they are often painted to be; they are in fact over-conformists to violent

hypermasculinity (Kalish and Kimmel). The critique of the game industry that I'm posing is not resolved

through government intervention into "aberrant" youth behavior. The government's involvement is

largely a part of the problem: the American military spawned the video game industry intentionally,

which we will review shortly.

Alain and Frederic Le Diberder argue that the focus on video games is no different from earlier

media mayhem in response to violent movies, TV, and music, which deflects from more plausible

culprits like the American gun lobby (Digital Play 247). More than their current popularity however,

games offer something that traditional media do not: interactivity. According to game industry

apologists, the ability to interact with games makes the medium so particularly revolutionary, but

seldom is it taken seriously as a potential ethical problem. It is convenient to the game industry, the gun

lobby, and patriarchy, that we constrict the definition of the problem to a simple connection between

the nodes of "violent media" and "real world violence". The multitudes of psychological research

typically attempt to connect exposure to the stimulus of violent games with a direct and measurable

increase in violent behavior in the real world. We do not enter game worlds in isolation as blank slates,

but as people situated within a complex web of cultural experiences. Games cannot be extracted from

that web for a study of simple cause and effect, thus we must study games exactly where they are.

Simon Penny looks more closely at what difference interactivity makes in his essay "The Ethics

of Simulation". Penny also notes the focus of ethical and aesthetic accounts of interactive media focus

on psychological and sociological research, and center on questions of community and virtual identity,

with little attention paid to the ethics of enactment (Penny 73). In his essay Penny seeks to juxtapose

interactive entertainment, professional simulator training, and not-tech-aided bodily discipline and

training. Repetitive bodily training is a part of education and socialization into norms, gender being

among the most obvious (this is part of the psychological base described by Millett). One needn't

consciously agree with the bodily habits they are putting into practice. In fact they are often anti-

intellectual, it becomes a mastered habit when you can do it without consciously thinking about it (Penny 74).

We hear from the game industry's apologists that video games are excellent teaching tools, and when we examine the effects of professional training simulators we see that the money corporations invest in them is well spent – they do produce the desired result of improved skills. Driver and pilot training programs use simulators to prepare trainees before heading out on the non-virtual road or airspace. Certainly a pilot trained using only simulators will likely be less effective than one who has experience with the real interface. But a flight simulation needn't be a perfect representation of the interface to still benefit one's ability to pilot a plane. In the case of first-person shooters, you lack the heft of the gun, the force of the weapon recoiling, you can move with a joystick or keyboard instead of your legs and thus won't get nearly as tired, but what the game does offer is a similar view of the weapon, the ability to aim it at targets, press a trigger or button and watch and hear the gun fire in real time, and see your enemy get hit and fall to the ground (Penny 79). First person shooters don't provide the full tactile experience, but might they provide enough to help your skills?

Digital Play also reviews the history of the game industry, particularly the ways in which it is deeply entwined with the American military. Having originally been spawned by military investments in computer technology and virtualization, the game industry continued to grow in part because of a symbiotic relationship developed with the military. The American military has a massive budget, but it is unlikely that they would spend as much money as they have on the game industry unless they were seeing a return on that investment. They are imperfect simulators of military skills, but they may also serve an ideological and recruitment purpose – witnessing violence akin to that taken out by the American Military may help us justify the actions of the military, or even want to volunteer to participate.

Further, with technological advancements like internet connectivity, drone weaponry and robotics engineering, we may be nearing a world like that in Orson Scott Card's *Enders Game*, in which teams of teens wipe out an alien race all while playing a virtual game. This dystopic setting is not technologically out of the range of what is possible. We could upload the coordinates of bombing targets to the TV screens of American homes, where families gather together to play a military game, in which the controller they use corresponds both to their on-screen character, as well as a drone in real life, dropping bombs on threats to American democracy – a sort of crowd-sourced militarism. It wouldn't really matter then if the in-game models were lifelike, futuristic, or fantastical; the image on screen could easily be of a player-controlled dragon shooting fireballs at innocent dwarven villages, so long as the coordinates and button input was accurately updated in real time.

Even if games were completely incapable of training soldiers, it is important that so many interactive games revolve around a narrow and gendered narrative of violence and conquest. Regardless of their observable psychological effect, such themes would not be popular had the cultural foundation for them not been already prepared (Penny 77). *Digital Play* focuses on this cultural groundwork more specifically.

Digital Play provides a historical analysis of the cultural, military, and capital circuits that have worked to construct the game industry over time. In one chapter they outline the way in which the game industry has come to orbit around what they call militarized masculinity – a narrow and regressive image of masculinity centering on violence, conquest and competition.

Video Games
Sexual Objectification in Games

Sexually objectified female characters are so commonplace in video games that their absence is noticeable. Even in allegedly progressive games, we still see female characters designed to show the largest surface area of blemish-free skin on the same pornified thin body. If the game developers don't

provide female characters with the exact dimensions and jiggle physics to match your tastes, you might be able to find an active modding community to provide exactly what you need. While some games might not feature women in sexually objectifying ways, when looking broadly at the game industry, it is ubiquitous enough that these alternate representations are merely exceptions to the rule.

We need first to define sexual objectification, as it is often conflated with sexualization, though the two are distinct. Anita Sarkeesian's infamously maligned video series, *Tropes vs. Women in Games*, provides a comprehensive look at sexual objectification of women in video games. We will review her arguments pertaining to each of the media cliches in the video series, and then hold each in relation to our theoretical basis outlined above.

The difference between sexualization and sexual objectification is a subtle but important one. Without understanding this difference, critics of Sarkeesian and other feminists are quick to point out instances of male characters who appear scantily-clad and sexualized. First, these examples are much rarer; if it is a problem for men to be represented in a sexualized way, it is not as widespread a problem as similar representation of women, which is nearly ubiquitous and a foundational element in the medium of video games. But more importantly, comparisons of this nature reminds of the sameness/difference trap – it is less important that men and women be evaluated on the basis of their equal representation, and more important what the status quo of their representation means. In other words, what is the material significance of their sexual representation?

Certainly male characters in games can be sexualized. Men in games can also be objectified – whether as targets to be gunned down, units to be commanded, or even "friends" in games like the Sims, existing only as tools to one's career advancement. Men almost never exist at the intersection of both – sexual objectification. When men and women wear revealing outfits, what is being revealed? For women, such clothing highlights her vulnerability, she is exposed and available for male consumption. For men, nakedness is used to highlight strength, the capacity to dish out and withstand physical

violence. He is making a masculine display, peacocking his physical appearance to intimidate others. She is showing skin, he is showing muscle. Again the difference is subtle, but it has everything to do with such images entering into a pre-existing image library, and their meaning being derived from their context within that space.

Tropes vs. Women in Games
The Damsel in Distress

The first trope covered in the series is the "Damsel in Distress" – a female character is held hostage by the villain and acts as the player's motivation for progressing through the game. Often she is distributed to the player as a trophy for beating the game. That her gratitude might be shown in a sexual manner is either hinted at, or outright expected of her.

While this trope can be seen in plenty of games throughout gaming history, we'll be looking at two, more recent, indie takes on the trope: Braid and Castle Crashers. Both are side-scrolling 2-D platform games. In Braid, the player uses time manipulation to navigate platforming puzzles. At the end of each level, the player sees a princess being taken away by an armored knight. At the end of the final level, it is made clear that the player character is not chasing after her to rescue her – instead she is fleeing from him. This positions the player as the would-be villain, failing in his attempt to claim the woman-as-trophy for his own. Braid's inversion of expectation and reality leads us to see her as a subject, an agent, someone who makes choices for their own life. But more important we learn to accept and respect her choice, and even see ourselves as stalkers (or worse). This inward reflection about our own sexuality is exactly what is missing from representation of rape and sexual violence in media like *Game of Thrones*, *the Witcher* series of games, and many others, which we will review in our analysis of Sarkeesian's video on violence against women as background decoration below.

Castle Crashers is a multiplayer hack-n-slash adventure game in which up to four players fight their way through levels filled with slapstick, bathroom humor, ultimately working to rescue four princesses who are bound to logs and carted away by the enemy. When they finally free the princesses,

the four players must then fight each other to the death to claim them for themselves. The winner then unties the fourth princess – whose face was covered by the cloth binding her to the log. When her face is revealed, she is hideous – specifically, she is masculine. This is played as a misogynist and homophobic gag, we are meant to laugh at the one who killed all his friends because he got stuck with a dud. The typical damsel narrative shows the hero scoring a hot babe, making the prize a less-valuable one does nothing to disrupt the misogyny of the trope.

The inverse of the Damsel in Distress, what Sarkeesian calls the Dude in Distress, is significantly different. The Damsel in Distress is taken as a reflection of her gender as a whole, not as a subject on her own. A woman as a subject has personal failings, an object however is interchangeable with other similar objects, and thus what is true of one member is a facet of the type. A damseled male character exists less as a reflection on his gender, if anything his capture is emasculating for him – a "real man" would have resisted capture and defeated the boss himself. That such games are also exceedingly rare, with the few that do exist not seeing nearly the same commercial success as more mainstream games, is indicative of how effective it is to sell this emasculating representation to a group of men who are used to being treated as the core audience.

The Ms. Male Character

Sarkeesian next addresses the Ms. Male Character: "A female version of an already established or default male character" (Sarkeesian). The Ms. Male Character is often a distaff counterpart – almost an exact copy of a male character, with feminine gender signifiers, like Ms. Pacman's pink bow. Common gender signifiers used in games are bows, pigtails, makeup, high heels, a pronounced bust, pink, purple, or pastel color palettes, and a heart motif in a character's design and abilities These signifiers are a quick and easy way for an artist to differentiate a character as female. Sarkeesian stresses that there is nothing inherently wrong with the character design choices, characters with these visual elements might still be good and feminist representations of women. The problem however arises from the male character becoming neutral and default – masculinity becomes defined as the absence of feminine

signifiers. Consider the Koopalings, Bowser's seven children in the *Super Mario* Series. The six male

Koopalings feature a diversity of character design components, showing off their different attitudes,

aesthetics, and hinting at their different moves. Wendy's design, in contrast, shows one unique feature:

"one look at her and you can tell she's female, but not much else" (Sarkeesian).

This is closely related to what Katha Pollitt calls the Smurfette principle – the existence of only a

single female character in an all-male cast. According to Pollitt, the message this principle sends is that

"boys are the norm, girls the variation; boys are central, girls peripheral; boys are individuals, girls types.

Boys define the group, its story, and its code of values. Girls exist only in relation to boys" (Pollitt). This is

#Gamergate's great motivating anxiety: games are boys' space, and boys have long defined its code of

values. For women, especially feminists, to impose new rules and expect fair participation in games is a

perceived violation of this code, one which Gamergate-apologist men are compelled to retaliate against.

The default status of men reinforced by the Ms. Male Character trope is an extension of men's

existential central identity where women are relegated to the status of "other". This seemingly innocent

character design is actually a core component of how patriarchy assigns women to their peripheral

status in the species known as mankind.

Women as Background Decoration

From even the first commercially sold Arcade Game, *Computer Space*, game advertisements

have featured sexually objectified women lounging around game consoles or machines, with the

implication that both she and the game are toys to be played with and objects to manipulate. This is also

visible in the French advertisement for Sony's Playstation Vita handheld, in which a female mannequin

has breasts on both the front and back of its body, with the tagline "Touch both sides. Twice the

sensations" (Martin) which is a reference to the Vita having touch pads on both front and back of the

console. In this way the metaphor is made explicit – men fondling the handheld device are likened to

fondling this sex object's two pairs of breasts. These advertisements not only objectify women, they

attempt to convey that games are part of a heterosexual male lifestyle. This is part of the phenomenon of militarized masculinity described in section 2, what began as a male dominated profession spawned games and advertisements that reflected the interests of those men. Repeated over decades, these interests infiltrate to the core of the institution of video games, what Lull and Millett describe in their outlines of hegemony and patriarchal ideology.

This trope is what Sarkeesian calls Women as Background Decoration: "The subset of largely insignificant non-playable female characters whose sexuality or victimhood is exploited in a way to infuse edgy, gritty, or racy flavoring into game worlds. These sexually objectified female bodies are designed to function as environmental texture while titillating presumed straight male players" (Sarkeesian). These non-playable characters (NPCs) are game objects populate most open-world style action, shooting, or role-playing games, and can be commonly found in brothels and strip clubs that have become almost obligatory in such games. These characters often loop sexualized animation, and their personality can be summarized as "available".

Games allow gamers to go beyond the limitations of other media in which sexually objectified women are presented to titillate them, and take an active role within the game world. They aren't simply being shown sexually objectifying images, they are invited to take part in the objectifying process by controlling the camera and character. This has dangerous consequences considering Penny's argument in the ethics of simulation – viewing women as sex objects to be manipulated and practicing such habits in interactive environments helps to train those habits once in the real world once the simulation has ended.

The Fighting Fucktoy

The industry's concessions in the representation of women look more like a compromise between hitting the bare minimum to slip under feminist's radar while still maintaining the masculine, dark'n'gritty, violent aesthetic that keeps their core market coming back for more. When the feminist

and LGBT markets approach improving the industry by buying into these superficial changes and calling them progress, we may only be helping the industry to cover itself from a much more sorely needed criticism of the underlying root values.

From this position of compromise on the scale of "feminist sensibility and intellectual authenticity" to "widely-selling, familiar masculine grit" the industry has spawned a peculiar beast – the fighting fucktoy. This cliché exists outside of games as well, but it finds in games a perfect medium to blend senseless violence and sexual objectification. The fighting fucktoy is a female badass, equipped with guns, martial arts skills and impractical outfits that offer little protection from bullets, blades, and other danger, but often provide many opportunities for cameras to voyeuristically leer at her exposed and "empowered" form. When she grunts and whines with the strain of her ass-kicking, it is allegedly a mark of her empowerment, regardless of how similar it sounds to porn.

Recall my earlier argument about feminism centered on equality, and how when left unquestioned the things we value remain in line with patriarchy; that making women equal participants in unjust institutions is no mark of progress or justice. If, as I argue in section 2, one of the most pressing problems regarding masculinity as it is currently constructed is the militarization and violence bound so closely to it, surely advocating women's equal participation in the military-industrial complex is not in the interests of feminism or of changing masculinity. The fighting fucktoy at best represents this liberal feminist petition for equality that doesn't question the values of an institution and whether its existence can ever said to be feminist.

But no fighting fucktoy in video games is as commonly mentioned or as hotly debated as *Lara Croft*. Throughout, she has been the poster image of a woman both sexually objectified, and militarized. She is every bit the same gun-toting badass we get to play as in games with male leads, now transformed into sexy eye candy to look at when we aren't renovating walls of an ancient tomb with a fresh coat of zombie blood and giblets.

The earlier iterations of Lara show ridiculous, even impossible body proportions. Looking back at her 3-D model made on antiquated hardware, it's quite a stretch to call that group of polygons sexy, yet copies of the game in which one could grope her bas relief breasts sold wildly, and she became a pop culture phenomenon. Surely though, with the newest incarnation of Lara in the 2013 release, simply named *Tomb Raider*, we've moved in a more mature, politically correct direction, right? Brianna Wu, one of Gamergate's most hated women, even dubbed *Tomb Raider 2013* among the most feminist games.

I would argue that while less obvious, Lara still holds the same position as fighting fucktoy. Her body is more realistic, and her practical outfit of cargo pants and tank top is certainly not what we'd expect of most women who fit this trope. Yet I would argue this Lara is the best incarnation of the initial design goal of Toby Gard, her *voyeur auteur*: "strong, independent women are the perfect fantasy girls - the untouchable is always the most desirable" (Digital Play, 263). De Beauvoir wrote of men's sexual conquests relating to his conquest over nature: a man who climbs a mountain has bested it, has made it his own, and the bigger the mountain, the stronger the man. For a man to claim a prostitute is not a sexual conquest, she's merely a molehill – an exploited molehill whose existence is as taboo as it is consistently expected. But should a man conquer a strong woman like Lara, it must mean either that he is exceptionally strong as to have tamed her, or that he has been emasculated, "whipped" into shape by an ambitious woman. Which of these two do we imagine straight men who play Tomb Raider want to be? Certainly they don't see themselves as Lara, in any case.

Even if we disregard my critique of the newest Tomb Raider, when we expand our view to the game industry as a whole, 2013 Lara is one exception to an overarching rule: female characters in games exist to titillate straight men. Even just within her own franchise, 2013 Lara is one exception amongst many hypersexualized female game characters. For every step feminists take in a new direction, the game industry at large continues its homogeneous march.

Imperialism

The debate on violence in video games tends to center around shooters, especially those with the most gratuitous graphical violence. When the blood and gore is that visible, it's hard to argue that the game isn't violent. Games that are often left out of the debate, or sometimes even considered non-violent examples, are strategy games. The games seldom feature blood and gore, and the player is removed from the first-person action, taking a top-down approach instead.

However, the themes of the game are still very much the same, the player is tasked with exploring alien lands, expanding their empire and army, exploiting the land and natural resources, and exterminating and dominating every other nation. In fact such games state these objectives directly, forming the "4X" genre: eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, eXterminate.

Exploration is the most seemingly innocent of the X's – yet was Columbus' title not "explorer"? The purpose of exploration in these strategy games is to have the player map out the natural world such that they might assess its strategic importance early and plan out how best to use it. Players who neglect to explore early on will find it impossible to do so later when enemy borders have closed and left their territory hidden behind the "fog of war". Josephine Donovan, de Beauvoir, and others describe man's mapping of order over nature as a concomitant act to his enacting rule over women. By exploring the land with a mind for its use and service to him, "man" reiterates his existential superiority over nature, and over women.

As the map is being sufficiently explored, the player-as-empire must *expand* their influence, claiming land as their own. Millet offers the possibility that patriarchy might find its earliest precursor in the discovery of paternity, when cultures moved from female goddesses of fertility, with women symbolically as creators of life, to monotheist and male-led religions in which it was man as the origin of life, whose "seed" was his property, even as it became a child, another human. From this spawns patrilinearity, male ownership over the family, slavery, and patriarchy. The player-empire's expansion is truly an act of spreading their seeds, marking new land tile by tile with their color. The implicit goal of

this gameplay mechanic is to cover every tile with your influence – to claim total ownership of the world.

Once they've marked out their share of the land, the player-empire must *exploit* its natural resources. Creating laborers who exist for no other reason than to serve the empire is the common way this exploitation is achieved. The elephants residing on some tiles in *Sid Meier's Civilization V* do not exist in their own right. In fact they aren't even animals as far as the game is concerned, they are merely ivory – a luxury resource that improves the empire's "happiness". Happiness is a subjective quality in the real world, but quantified in *Civ V*, it is merely another statistic, one that determines your citizens' ability to produce food and other goods. If you're planning a military excursion, it'd be best to keep your populace happy by supplying them with luxury goods like ivory. The nasty business of claiming another nation's city and forcibly converting its people to your culture can be a major drain on the empire's happiness, so if you plan to conquer any cities, pick the ones with new and unique goods – your people are quicker to forgive genocide if it at least helped secure access to diamonds, gold, cocoa, or other luxuries.

Unlike reality, these resources the player-empire exploits are ceaseless. One can drill and burn as much oil as they desire, it will never run out, and using it for power plants or bomber jets emits no harmful chemicals, no greenhouse gases. An environmental cataclysm might even have been a fun gameplay gimmick, but the reality of global warming is left out of *Civ V*, among many other popular strategy games.

The final X in the 4X series is its most obviously violent one, but it is an inevitable reality in these games, as it is in the very real imperial conquests outside of the game: *extermination*. Note this isn't negotiation, it isn't diplomacy. The player can't truly work with their opponents, at least not if they want to claim more land for themselves. Nor is it termed as merely a military skirmish to send a warning. Extermination bears the connotation of absoluteness – one doesn't half-ass extermination, the process

doesn't end until the exterminated party has fully ceased to exist. Ethnic cleansing is the primary goal of the player-empire in a 4X strategy game.

Case Study of Diverse Video Game Characters

Assassin's Creed: Unity, one of many almost identical games in the Ubisoft-developed franchise, received some well-deserved backlash from feminists when it was revealed that of the four playable characters, not one was female. Defending this decision, technical director James Therien said that adding female characters would "double the work" and that it wasn't "a question of philosophy or choice in this case … it was a question of focus and a question of production" (Burns). This is a conflicted narrative: Ubisoft is a massive company with "tonnes of resources", but making even one playable female character would be too much work for them. Therien assures women weren't left out as a conscious design decision, but this is a paltry defense since it seems to paint women as an afterthought that don't matter to the core game design. From *Digital Play* and *Barbie and Mortal Kombat*, we see that this is true of most game development, and has been for decades: women aren't a major audience that the developers are looking to sell to (Digital Play 256), they cost too much to research and develop the game differently (257), and they don't make up enough of a market to risk jeopardizing the more-aggressively-marketed-to male audience.

Assassin's Creed: Unity was neither the first nor the last to use the excuse that women were too hard to animate, but it was among the most infamous. It shouldn't make much of a difference, either in how difficult the animation is or in how much longer it should take to make. But these technical issues are ridiculous when we take into account the sheer size of a company like Ubisoft. If they truly wanted to include women, they would have easily been capable of doing so. Women's absence as playable characters was indeed a conscious design decision. To prove this, I offer my own MQP work as an example: with only a single character animator (myself) who had no experience animating in the game industry, no budget, and no franchise of successful prior games from which to draw, I still made four

playable characters, of which two were female and three were people of color. Making a diverse cast was a priority for our project team.

Here are the characters, along with the goals that motivated their design:

(Image 1) Artemis is goddess of the hunt and the moon, but also protector of women. A major symbol of Islam is the crescent moon, and so I thought to channel the aesthetic of punk hijabi women doing parkour or skateboarding in countries where they can't legally drive cars. She wears a leather trenchcoat and red hijab.

(Image 2) In video games, men of color are often invisible, or they comprise hordes to be gunned down. But in other media, where men of color are more visible, they are often hypersexualized or fetishized. I had hoped to avoid this in the game, yet Poseidon arguably fits the bill, he wears only a speedo and swim cap. The top-down view of the game camera doesn't provide much of an objectifying gaze, and as a god character he isn't an interchangeable game object, so hopefully my design avoids this racist objectification.

(Images 3 and 4) I wanted the definition of diversity to include age as well; game characters, especially if they are female, are overwhelmingly younger (and therefore more able-bodied, attractive, and relevant to the industry's target audience of young white men). I wanted Zeus and Hera to look older than the others. The leading design idea was "old-money interracial couple not-so-secretly filing for divorce after his many bestial affairs with humans were made public". Hera's outfit was inspired by one of Meryl Streep's Oscar looks, turned silver and green to fit the colors associated with the goddess. Zeus wears a purple suit and gold tie, the colors of royalty fitting the head of the pantheon.

Two characters that didn't make it past the concept stage were Hephaestus and Hades. Hades would have been reimagined as a female character, almost suggesting that Persephone ascended in Hades' place. Persephone's story of fertility, death, and seasonal renewal would have played heavily in

her abilities. She would have worn a black dress and a silver gorget with a ruby-inlaid crest made to look like the pomegranate from the myth. Hephaestus was cast off of Olympus and broke both of his legs, but forged two robots, one silver and one gold, to lift and carry him. In keeping with this image, my rendition of Hephaestus would be a robotics engineering Silicon-Valley-start-up kingpin, complete with silver and gold prosthetic legs.

Between my characters and those featured in the *Assassin's Creed* series, I hope to avoid comparisons of quality, obviously my schoolwork won't compare to that of teams of professionals, but I am drawing the comparison of design goals and intentions. It is clear that their primary objective in the design of the game was to earn a return on the publisher's investment, this is their bottom line and they aren't shy about it. As they have proven with their more current release, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, it is perfectly possible for them to include female characters and still meet their bottom line. The writers of Digital Play could have told them that: "add a few she-warrior characters, and the same games can be cranked out in all good conscience" (263). The themes, objectives, and marketing of the game are the same as they ever were, that women are there is only a superficial change.

Unfortunately, even the characters I created were still used in a game not dramatically removed from the militarized masculine narratives of conquest and domination. (Had our MQP actually worked) the player would play as one of these gods, controlling "minion" units who had one of two purposes: labor until death to produce goods for the empire's expansion, or participate in the military and slaughter the enemies. The gods themselves could be involved in combat as well, and had much stronger abilities to wipe out masses of enemy minions.

We had originally planned to make alternate victory conditions, but similar to *Civilization* and other strategy games, these victory conditions would still revolve around conquest, or would be made easier by simply dominating opponents anyway. These are considered alternate methods, implying that

violence is the normal path to victory. Non-violent victory conditions might even be seen as a cheap way

to nab a win from a militarily stronger opponent, not as a real measure of skill. Whether the game

allows you to win by non-violent means doesn't change the fact that at the core, these games are

geared toward conquest and domination.

Regardless of my characters' appearance, they exist in the game as powerful weapons to

destroy enemies and expand empires. While there is merit in a diverse cast that breaks out from the

homogeneity of game character design, it's still only surface deep. We were unable to penetrate the

more central problem of violence at the core of the game design.

(Images 5 and 6) Outside of this MQP, I also designed several creatures with the intent to make

that which would ordinarily be monstrous look more human and relatable. These creatures in most

mainstream games would simply be enemies to kill, with no possibility for non-violent interactions. I

hoped to communicate visually that these creatures were not necessarily dangerous or unreasonable,

such that they could feature in a non-violent game without seeming out of place.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have provided a radical feminist critique of the video games industry. Using

Gamergate as a key moment in recent gaming history, I argued that it was not a random or isolated

incident, but another instance in a pattern of excluding women from video games. I explored the

differences in theory and strategy employed by liberal and radical feminists, and made a case for a

radical feminist approach that challenges the video game industry and the gendered assumptions and

conflicts that arise within it at its very core. The fault of liberal feminism is a focus on equality that often

falls into a trap of whether we are seeking to make men and women the same or different, and also

does not question the values and principles of institutions. Women's unequal participation in games and

game development is not the root problem, it is a symptom of an institution whose values mirror that of

patriarchy. We explored the way in which patriarchy operates and manufactures our consent to its domination over us.

Where conversations about misogyny and violence in video games and other media tend to focus on direct, measurable effects between individuals responding to the stimulus of media content in a laboratory setting, I have instead approached video games where they are, exploring the complex web in which game playing is situated. Namely I connected the culture of video game playing, hegemonic masculinity, and the aggrieved entitlement of rampage school shooters. Masculinity is constructed through a process of the body's complex interactions with the social world over time. Within this body-reflexive process, some men are established as a dominant class over others. Patriarchy instills a compulsion to be dominant in this hierarchy of masculinity. When a man feels insecure in his masculinity, or if his position is threatened, he is compelled to escalate the situation, and violence is inevitably the way to do so. Men at a particular crisis point, suffering from the aggrieved entitlement of being stuck at the bottom of masculinity's hierarchy, turn to violence.

Video games factor in as a reinforcement of this construction of masculinity. I argue that taking the game industry as a whole, video games orbit around militarized masculinity – this narrow and regressive image of masculinity that stresses violence, conquest, and competition. As further evidence of the industry's militarized masculinity, we examine the misogynist ways in which women are often represented in games. Women's sexual objectification in games takes various forms that reassert to women that game spaces are not for them, and encourages men to see that women only exist to serve and titillate them. While these arguments are true of the game industry generally, there are certainly examples of games that have taken great steps forward. These are of the utmost importance, charting new paths in which game development might begin to tread.

This paper's most egregious fault is its lack of research. For the breadth of information I've covered, my research is still shallow. The problems I've outlined are serious enough to deserve a more thorough discussion than this paper may offer.

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Appendix A: Property Theory on College Campuses

I would argue that a form of property theory is still in place on most college campuses. Universities thrive on ratings and reputations, and being notorious for rape spells certain doom for a university's profits. There are two ways in which one can have a low number of reported sex crimes: either they don't happen in the first place, or they aren't reported out of fear of institutional mishandling. In order to guard their reputation, they employ a series of high-visibility solutions that ultimately have no impact on sexual violence. Take the boasted-about emergency blue lights on most campuses – perhaps originally an important resource, now outmoded by the popularization of cell phones that can easily dial 911. Even without cell phones, these lights exist only *on* campus. For greatest effect, we would need these lights at the fraternity and athletic housing, where a majority of college rapes likely take place. At WPI specifically, the blue light system is faulty at some locations and outright doesn't work at others. According to the tour guide script, at least one blue light can be seen anywhere on campus – its impact can be felt nowhere.

Other high-visibility low-impact solutions include self-defense training and rape whistles. The martial arts practiced in self-defense classes may indeed be excellent stress relief, and confidence-building, healthy physical exercise, but within a culture that condones sexual violence, it only complicates what remains a no-win scenario for women. If a woman is armed with these tools and decides to use them, she will have fended off an attack, but in a culture that already blames victims who don't fight back, she may have assault or attempted murder charges brought against her (as in the case of Michelle Alexander, who fired two warning shots at her abusive partner and is now in prison in the same state where George Zimmerman walked free on a self-defense plea after murdering unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin – clearly self-defense isn't a term about which the state of Florida has even the most rudimentary understanding).

If she does not use the training (or weapons) at her disposal, this will be used to blame her later. Consider Donald Trump's defense of his campaign manager Corey Lewandowski – according to him if the act was a violent one, she would have shouted or acted in a way that displayed that. If a woman is capable of fighting back but doesn't (whether she's intoxicated, drugged, coerced, emotionally manipulated or afraid of social backlash) it can be used as proof that she actually consented, and is inventing the whole story, perhaps just for the chance to experience the thrill of being publicly humiliated for coming out about her victimhood.

Universities suggesting little more than these measures amounts to a property theory where the property isn't a man's daughter, but a woman's body as a liability. By providing these measures, the university assures that the liability is in the hands of female students – it's not the university's fault if the student didn't avail themselves of the resources offered.

Appendix B: Images

Image 1, Artemis:

Image 2, Poseidon:

Image 3, Hera:

Image 4, Zeus:

Image 5, Elf:

Image 6, Sea Creature: