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Friends With Benefits: Plausible Optimism and the Practice of Teabagging in Video Games

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Abstract

Recent scholarship in gaming studies has challenged the field to investigate and critique the *hard core* gaming audience (stereotypically seen as straight, white, cis-gendered male gamers) in a way that does not reinforce either the perceived marginalization of gamers or broader social hierarchies of gender, sexuality, and class. This article demonstrates a way to acknowledge the complexity of this audience without dismissing its most virulent tendencies via practice theory (Ortner, 2005) and weak theory (Sedgwick, 2003). Using data drawn from a qualitative survey of 393 self-identified first-person shooter video game players, this article looks at the specific practice of "teabagging" in online competitive gaming contexts. Ultimately, this article argues that drawing attention to the gaps and fissures that local gaming practices can produce in broader structures of gaming, sexuality, and class can help critical gaming scholars encourage and cultivate such practices as well as construct new, reparative alliances between different fields and communities.

Keywords

Introduction

Gaming has a problem with hard core gamers. By "hard core gamers," I do not mean an actual, objective audience. Rather I use the phrase to refer to the imagined typical audience of video games – straight, cis-gendered, white, adolescent men. While there is an abundance of evidence that this audience is not the largest demographic of the video game audience (Crawford, 2012; Lifehouse Associates, 2014), this hard core gamer audience is still frequently put forth as the imagined center of the gaming community by both the mainstream press and hard core gamers themselves. Meanwhile, efforts to provide counter-narratives to this imagined audience have focused on other minority groups who consume video games, such as women and LGBT subjects, to the exclusion of other groups (Graner Ray, 2004; Leonard, 2006; Leupold, 2006; Miller, 2006). As Shaw (2011) has noted, however, such an approach tends to reproduce a marketing logic that reduces identities to separate, discrete categories. This practice reinforces the idea that these categories are stable and monolithic, contradicting scholarship that uses post-structuralist theories of identity to explain contemporary identity construction and performance. This scholarship (exemplified in Hall, 1996; Couldry, 2000; Gilroy, 2004; Appiah, 2005) asserts that identities are contingent, multiple, and performative. In addition, feminist theories of

intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and post-colonial theories of hybridity (Bhabha, 2003) have further undermined conceptions of identity as stable and singular.

These discussions, however, are not limited to academic research on gaming identity and practices. Recent events like the notorious "GamerGate" demonstrate that the effects of how we as researchers, particularly critical feminist researchers, conceptualize and categorize gamers extend throughout the gaming community. As Chess and Shaw (2015) have observed, we are in a moment where masculine gaming culture is not only aware of, but actively responding to, feminist gaming scholars. While deeply critical of the hegemonic masculinity that provoked much of this response, Chess and Shaw also note that the reliance of "GamerGaters" on the discourse of conspiracy theories reflects their intense feelings of disenfranchisement and disempowerment. Representing hard core gamers as monolithic and discrete potentially reinforces these feelings of disenfranchisement. Furthermore, this strategy erases the multiple points of intersection between the imagined audience of hard core gamers and the members of minority communities who play video games. This not only misrepresents hard core gamers but also frustrates efforts to form alliances and coalitions across these various differences in order to effect change in both the gaming industry and in the broader culture.

This essay, then, builds on previous scholarship in gaming studies that has used critical theories of identity by articulating it with a specific body of literature that has a longstanding intellectual history in Anthropology and other social sciences – practice theory. Practice theory, with its emphasis on the relationship between individual practices and the broader social structures in which they are embedded, can enable researchers to better examine particular gaming communities as complex sites of competing and

contradictory impulses. This strategy would allow critical scholars a way to acknowledge intersections between the practices of various communities while advocating for better treatment of minorities within gaming communities. To demonstrate this, this essay will focus on a specific practice prevalent in first-person shooter gaming communities – teabagging.

Teabagging

Teabagging is traditionally understood in the offline, non-digital realm as a sex act involving the dragging of testicles across someone's forehead. Having its origins in go-go dancing and gay male subcultures, teabagging was introduced into the mainstream via John Waters' 1998 film *Pecker*. In the video game community, however, teabagging can take on additional significance. First popularized within *Halo 2* multi-player competitive matches, teabagging is a controversial practice where the player's avatar repeatedly crouches over a defeated player's "body" in order to simulate rubbing his or her genitals over the avatar's body. At first glance, it is easy to dismiss teabagging as yet another example of what C.J. Pascoe (2005) has named *fag discourse*, which regulates and disciplines boys' gender and sexuality practices through joking relationships. While fag discourse is a component of the practice of teabagging, this article contends that it is not the only lens through which to view teabagging. Due to its situation within the context of *Halo* competitive games, teabagging can also signify closeness, even *intimacy*, among heterosexual male friends. By highlighting this less widespread understanding of teabagging, this article sheds light on how hierarchies of value are shaped and reproduced through gaming practices. Crucially, though, this article also uses teabagging as a starting point for investigations into the fissures in that reproduction. This article argues that the variety of meanings attached to

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the practice of teabagging demonstrates that video game players do not comfortably inhabit either the structures created by the rules and programming of a game or the larger social structures that seek to distinguish proper expressions of sexuality and male bonding from other, more playful expressions.

Ultimately, though, this article suggests that these practices are not unusual within gaming communities. This article's position is that gaming scholars must acknowledge that hard core gamers already engage in playful, potentially transgressive practices that unpredictably disrupt power relations embedded in certain social structures. This stance would not only better represent the diverse and contradictory elements of gaming practices. It would also encourage a more inclusive attitude towards gamers that anticipates and potentially staves off a common reaction amongst hard core gamers to critiques of gamer identity, one born of feelings of isolation and shame that cultivates harassment of women and minorities in the gaming community. It is tempting to see hard core gamers as a monolithic structure to be fought and dismantled, but that is a misrepresentation. What is harder to reckon with are the fissures and cracks that already exist in this structure. Practice theory allows researchers to better investigate these fissures and cracks. Such an approach could be fertile grounds for alliances between queer gamers and scholars and other segments of the gaming population, particularly hard core gamers, as well as alliances between the field of gaming studies and other fields of communication inquiry.

A Practice Theory of Teabagging

Within the field of video games, the *Halo* series looms large. Debuting in 2001 and spanning 13 games to date, *Halo* is a first-person shooter franchise developed by Bungie

and, later, 343 Industries. Published by Microsoft across every iteration of the Xbox

gaming console and PCs, the franchise had sold 34 million copies worldwide by 2010 and

spawned numerous spin-offs and tie-ins across a variety of media, including novelizations,

direct-to-video films, and anime, grossing almost $3.4 billion (Orry, 2012). The critical

response to *Halo* within the video game press has equaled its commercial success, with

many video game journalists and commentators arguing that *Halo* revolutionized the first-

person shooter genre, with several gameplay and fictional elements being copied across

numerous other games and franchises.

For those unfamiliar with the *Halo* video game series, a brief description of the

structure of the game as well as the goals and strategies that it encourages is in order. *Halo*

is classified as a first-person shooter (or FPS) type game. Gameplay involves progressing

through 3-D environments from a first-person perspective and defeating opponents with a

variety of weapons. Controls allow players to jump, swap and reload weapons, zoom the

camera, and (most importantly for this article) crouch. All *Halo* games (with the exception

of the first in the series) feature both single-player and multiplayer modes. In the single-

player mode, players take on the role of "Master Chief," a Space Marine tasked with fighting

off invading alien armies. The focus of this article, however, is on the multiplayer modes, in

which players interact with other players either co-operatively or competitively, locally or

online. These modes range from relatively simple objectives (such as amassing the most

number of kills in a given time limit) to complex games involving teams of two or three

players competing against one another to guard or destroy particular resources.

Teabagging was not originally a part of the design of *Halo*, but arose from the

creative and unpredictable use of pre-designed gameplay mechanics by players in

multiplayer matches. By taking advantage of the "crouch" button as well as the camera system of the game, which lingers on the avatar's corpse after death, players were able to simulate the act of teabagging. Despite not being a part of the designers' original intentions, teabagging has become so much a part of *Halo's* multiplayer culture that aspects of later games have been changed to allow for it (Brudvig, 2010).

The practice of teabagging, then, has a unique relationship to the rules and structure of the *Halo* video game series. Due to its status as an emergent gameplay mechanic produced through creative uses of other, more "authorized" mechanics, teabagging can be read as a liminal practice within first-person shooter games. As such it can provide us with a unique entry point into discussions of how players interact with and through the rules and structures of video games in unpredictable and irregular ways. Such a discussion necessitates a conceptual framework that accounts for this relationship between game structures and player agency. Practice theory can fulfill this need, particularly Sherry Ortner's (2005) elaboration of practice theory.

Practice theory is concerned with overcoming the structure/agency opposition of earlier social theory by arguing for the dialectical, rather than oppositional, relationship between large scale structures on the one hand and the smaller scale practices of social actors on the other. Prior social theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1990) were instrumental in establishing the structure/agency opposition as a problem in social theory and providing us with theoretical tools to overcome this opposition. However, as Ortner (2005) maintains, Bourdieu and other European practice theorists' early emphasis on social reproduction rather than social transformation as well as their reliance upon structuralist lexicons often threatened to reintroduce a kind of functionalism into practice

theory through the back door. In order to guard against such a return, Ortner argues that the early practice theory framework of the 1970s must be supplemented with the work from other major areas of social theory, namely work on power, history, and culture.

While Ortner (2005) notes that ideas of power have always been a part of practice theory, early practice theory rarely made it central to the theoretical framework in the ways that critical work on dominance and inequality had (p. 4). To more accurately grasp the ways in which inequality and domination affect the actions of individuals, Ortner argues that practice theory should incorporate and adapt the fuller accounts of power found in "power theorists" such as Michel Foucault, James Scott, and Raymond Williams. Ortner is particularly sympathetic to Williams' approach to power, which is in turn derived from Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemonic domination. For Williams, hegemonic formations are never absolute and total in the historic sense, but are instead palimpsests that contain residues of prior hegemonic formations and the foundations for emergent hegemonies. Hegemonic foundations are also never total in the psychological sense, as social actors always have at least a partial awareness of their domination (Ortner, 2005, p.6).

Ortner prefers this characterization of power as compelling but never totalizing hegemonies because it allows social theorists to move beyond a simplistic opposition between structure and agency and towards an understanding of their interrelationship and co-presence. For Ortner, questions of direct resistance are less compelling than the ways in which domination itself is always shot through with cracks, contradictions, and ambiguities. Consequently total social reproduction of structures in the practices of social

actors is never guaranteed. In other words, practices always have the potential to revise,

modify, and otherwise transform social structures.

Moreover, Ortner argues that social actors need not always intend for their practices

to be transformative, or even be aware that they are transformative, in order for those

practices to be transformative. Ortner, referencing the work of Marshall Sahlins (1981),

argues that differences may exist between how practices are understood by social actors

and the meanings later assigned to that practice by the larger cultural formation or

symbolic order. Simply put, a particular practice may have consequences not foreseen nor

intended by its practitioners. As a result, as practices unfold over time they risk

transforming the cultural conceptions that produced them in the first instance. While social

actors always act in reference to particular cultural conceptions, in practice those same

conceptions can be shifted or transformed. Every practice, then, has the potential to put

cultural categories and conceptions "at risk," even seemingly conservative practices

(Ortner, 2005, p.10).

Engaging with Ortner's practice theory would help a significant problem in gaming

scholarship – its over-emphasis on and over-exaggeration of video game audiences. Garry

Crawford (2012) has argued that video game researchers have tended to over-emphasize

the agency of video game players while de-emphasizing the ideological effects of video

games in their efforts to highlight the interactive qualities of video games. However, this

tends to collapse the relationship between structure and agency to a reductive binary,

which threatens to ignore how games shape, or at least exert significant pressure on, how

gamers interact with them. Practice theory would enable gaming researchers to grapple

with these ideological effects while still acknowledging the agency of gamers and the

transformative potential of video game practices.

Such a movement is in line with the work of other gaming researchers, such as

Adrienne Shaw (2010, 2011, 2014) and T.L. Taylor (2006, 2012), who have drawn upon the

theories and methods of cultural studies, feminist audience research, and qualitative

ethnographic work in order complicate our understanding of the relationship between

video games and everyday lives. Despite never concretely engaging with practice theory,

both Shaw's (2014) work on the relationship between representation and identification

processes in video games and Taylor's (2012) work on eSports and the professionalization

of gaming culture touch on many of the themes highlighted by practice theory. Broadly,

Shaw and Taylor are concerned with the ways in which social actors inhabit, reproduce,

modify, and transform particular social structures, be they gender and sexuality (in Shaw's

case) or gaming culture (in Taylor's case). This article uses practice theory, then, as a way

to foreground these tendencies already present in current gaming research and as a way to

explain the diverse and contradictory responses received when gamers were asked what

"teabagging" meant to them. It is to these responses that we now turn.

A Brief Note on Methods

These responses were gathered using a qualitative survey methodology. The author

deemed this necessary since this study aimed to investigate a specific communication

practice that would be difficult to examine using more traditional ethnographic methods

(such as participant observation) due to the unpredictability of its occurrence. Moreover,

as Livingstone (2004) has noted, much audience research provides unique challenges to

traditional field methods such as participant observation since it attempts to capture

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private, interior phenomenon that are notoriously difficult to observe and record. This is further complicated by communication practices within online multiplayer gaming environments. Many participants in online games do not communicate with one another verbally, rendering it difficult to observe the interpretive practices of players. Thus while we cannot assume that a players' verbal reports of their experiences correspond to their actual practices, their verbal reports do provide us with some insight into the range of interpretations assigned to online practices such as teabagging. Moreover, since the survey was constructed using SurveyMonkey, was distributed through popular Internet forums and social media, and was anonymous, the form of the survey itself corresponded well with other forms of computer mediated communication that participants (hard core gamers) were likely to be familiar with and comfortable expressing opinions through. While this is not a guarantee of validity, it does make the survey as likely as other methods to capture the range of interpretations and understandings of practices attached to teabagging.

The survey, consisting of 15 close-ended questions and 9 open-ended questions, attempted to assess how players of first-person shooter games felt about the practice of teabagging. The questions targeted players' feelings about being teabagged, teabagging others, and other players' use of teabagging, in addition to information about their gaming practices (particularly with whom they played video games) and basic demographic information (particularly age, gender, and sexual orientation, due to the sexualized nature of teabagging). In order to target this study's demographic of hard core FPS gamers, a link to this survey was made available in November and December 2010 on the official forums of a variety of popular first person video games with heavy online components (e.g. *Call of Duty*, *Halo*, *Counter-Strike*, and *Team Fortress*) in addition to the Facebook and Twitter

accounts of an acquaintance with ties to various video game communities. While the individuals who visited these forums are more likely to be heavy users of first-person shooters, and thus not representative of the entire FPS gaming community, Baym (2009) has noted that the goal of qualitative research is not generalizability, but comparability. By comparing the answers of different users, we can gain a sense of the diversity of meanings about teabagging that can emerge even within a relatively uniform community. From there, further studies can be conducted to compare these results with other participants in other video games or even video game genres.

All told, 393 participants completed the survey, of which the vast majority were males (95.5%) between the ages of 18 and 30. These responses were in turn analyzed and coded according to emergent themes and interpreted with a particular focus on the cultural assumptions that could be inferred from them. Janice Radway (1991) has argued for the utility of this interpretive strategy, since we cannot necessarily assume that audiences are always aware of the various factors that shape their particular understandings of texts or cultural practices. As such, a certain degree of interpretation on the part of the researcher is necessary if we are to attempt to locate the significance of audience responses within broader cultural patterns.

Teabagging and the Charmed Circle of Gaming

While only half of participants reported that they ever teabagged or were teabagged by other players, this did not prevent the majority of respondents from having complex opinions about teabagging's use within online matches. As one respondent wrote in response to a question about how others react to being teabagged, "In some cases you hear anger, and sometimes you [hear] laughter." This answer suggests a wide range of affective

stances towards the practice of teabagging, a range that was born out in the diversity of responses collected. More than 14 separate types of reactions to being teabagged alone were identified. These reactions included amusement, anger, annoyance, disappointment, disgust, embarrassment, offense, pity, confusion, and indifference. As a result, it would be impossible to write an exhaustive account of the multitude of positions that respondents adopted in relationship to the practice of teabagging. Instead, the remainder of this article will focus on a comparison between two particular stances towards teabagging articulated by the respondents. These two stances were chosen not only for their thematic richness, but also for how they illustrate the explicit and implicit cultural assumptions of the respondents as well as how teabagging could potentially work to modify and transform these structures.

A recurrent theme among participants was that teabagging was most frequently used to humiliate or dominate a defeated opponent. This can be seen in the number of times that respondents referenced dominating an opponent (48), angering or taunting an opponent (32), or otherwise celebrating a victory (18) in response to questions about why players teabag other players. Examples of these responses include one respondent noting "a feeling of dominance after I teabag someone who has teabagged me" or when another respondent attributed teabagging to an "I'm better than you attitude." There is also evidence for this in the large number (50+) of references to the concept of being "owned" during the process of teabagging, a common term used among gamers to describe moments of victory or dominance over opponents. In total approximately 148 of the 393 people who participated in this survey, or roughly one-third, made some reference to a connection between teabagging and domination/humiliation.

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This finding is unsurprising, though, since the game itself encourages such attitudes towards other players through its rules and goals. *Halo* multiplayer matches, as discussed previously, are typically organized around objectives that require players to compete against other players. Thus teabagging, despite the fact that it was unanticipated by game designers, can still be seen as an extension of the social atmosphere that the game's rules and objectives promote rather than a contradiction.

However, many participants took pains to distance themselves from both the practice of teabagging and those players who engaged in teabagging, arguing that it is inappropriate in the context of a competitive multiplayer match. For example, one respondent reported that witnessing an instance of teabagging "immediately leads me to believe the player performing the 'teabagging' is immature, probably a kid still in school who thinks just because he got one kill and got owned by the same player 10 times in a row he has the right to 'teabag' without understanding the underlying notion of this action." Similarly, other respondents reported that teabagging "makes me seriously doubt the player's maturity" or that "people who Teabag are seen as immature/idiotic." All expressions of dominance, it seems, are not considered equal within the first-person shooter community.

To understand why all expressions of dominance are not considered equal within the first-person shooter community, it is necessary to account for how the field of gaming is structured and the field of gaming's relationship to more mainstream fields of cultural production. Turning first to the question of how the field of gaming is structured, Mia Consalvo's (2007) work on the practice of cheating in gaming communities is particularly relevant. Building upon Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital, Consalvo

proposes the concept of "gaming capital" to describe the dynamism of play practices among game players and their relationship to both the gaming industry and its evolving paratextual industries.

Crucial to Consalvo's argument is that gaming capital tends to accrue according to particular logics, logics that are shaped by larger social hierarchies privileging narrow expressions of gender, sexuality, and class. This is particularly germane in this discussion of teabagging. Within gaming communities organized around first-person shooters, there exists a segment of the gaming population that expresses a deep commitment to the development of one's skills as a gamer. Teabagging, from this perspective, is viewed as a "cheap" or unearned method of expressing dominance over another player. Such a practice betrays a limited understanding of not only gameplay mechanics, but also the values and dispositions that are deemed appropriate to the context of competitive first-person shooters. Players who teabag are seen as less concerned with rigorously honing their skills as players and more concerned with humiliating other players. This violates the "collective social commitments" to training and the development of one's competence at playing the game (Ito and BIttanti, 2010, p. 220).

This process of acculturation is not unique to *Halo*. T.L. Taylor, in both *Play Between Worlds* (2006) and *Raising the Stakes* (2012), offers an overview of player induction and social progression in MMORPGs and eSports, respectively. What she describes is a process where players are "not only taught how to play, but how to *be*" (2006, "Becoming a Player," para. 7, emphasis original). As we can see in these references to a players' maturity, we can extend this analysis to *Halo* communities. In *Raising the Stakes*, Taylor (2012) describes the methods used to legitimize eSports (i.e. professional gaming competitions) as a serious

endeavor worthy of attention, respect, and money. What is at stake for these players is not only their enjoyment of the game, then, but the status of gaming and gamer identity in mainstream culture. These are players who, by and large, take gaming seriously in a cultural context that sees gaming as frivolous and unproductive. Although the stakes for non-professional *Halo* players are smaller than an eSports competitor that relies on playing video games to support their livelihood, the same discourse supports many of the rigorous defenses of gaming practices seen in the data collected for this study. Teabagging, from this perspective, threatens the "seriousness" of gaming for these players.

Interestingly, then, one of the significant threats to "taking games seriously" is, in itself, a significant component of masculine game culture. In her analysis of eSports, Taylor (2012) draws on the work of C.J. Pascoe (2005) to describe the homophobic language in masculine eSports cultures and communities. Pascoe refers to this homophobic language as *fag discourse*, which she argues functions as a regulatory mechanism of gender and sexuality for adolescent American boys (p. 330). By jokingly referring to each other as "fag" (or other homophobic variations), adolescent boys invoke and repudiate the specter of a failed, penetrated masculinity. In its representation of virtual penetration, teabagging can be read as a part of fag discourse – a way for (male) players to perform dominance and jokingly call into question the masculinity of other (mostly male) players.

However, the responses of the players surveyed were largely critical and dismissive of this fag discourse as immature. In essence, the repudiation of failed masculinity that Pascoe argues is central to fag discourse is in turn repudiated by the male gamers surveyed in their dismissal of teabagging as immature. This practice resembles what Michael Billig (2005) has termed *unlaughter*. *Unlaughter* is more than just the absence of laughter, but is

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instead the conscious withholding of laughter in response to an invitation or demand to laugh. Sociologists and communication scholars have argued that the practice of unlaughter is widespread and can have significant social consequences (Saltzman & Smith, 1995; Lewis, 2006). As Smith (2009) explains, joke audience members can use unlaughter "to highlight the supposed differences between them [and the joke producer] and so heighten exclusionary social boundaries" (p. 151).

However, before I begin to misrepresent my respondents' unlaughter at fag discourse and teabagging as a dismissal of homophobic and misogynistic practices, I must admit that nowhere in the respondents' surveys were there any references to such a rejection. Instead, what was emphasized the most was the perceived immaturity of the practice of teabagging and its status as a poor strategy. As one participant explicitly writes, "I think teabagging represents a lower level of FPS play. Time spent teabagging a player could otherwise be used to reach the next objective, defend the area, or go on the offense once more. Many times a second or two counts, so the player engaged in teabagging isn't thinking of the big picture."

The unlaughter at teabagging, then, is not an attempt by some gamers to distance themselves from a perceived homophobic practice. Instead, this unlaughter is rooted in unspoken assumptions about the depreciated value of the practice of gaming in mainstream culture and its subordinate position in relation to other forms of cultural production, a perspective that is widespread in gaming communities (Shaw, 2012; Taylor, 2012). It is only logical, then, for enthusiasts of gaming to want to defend their practices. However, in their rush to defend gaming, the strategies of legitimation most often deployed seek to police gaming practices and, in the process, intersect with hegemonic ideas of

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proper audience dispositions, as evidenced by the attitudes towards teabagging discussed previously. This stigmatization of teabagging is part of an effort align a "gamer" identity with particular discourses regulating media consumption that arose during the nineteenth century and continue to have a persuasive force on contemporary ideas of proper consumption practices. As Richard Butsch (2008) describes, the emerging middle-class of nineteenth-century America, in a bid to legitimize their class status and consolidate their power, began to construct a particular ideal of respectability, which was often equated with a control of the body. Thus moral refinement and superiority were often measured by the middle-class ideals of restraint. Teabagging, though, with its references to perverse, undisciplined bodies and a lack of restraint, threatens the respectability that certain gamers attempt to cultivate.

However, in their effort to legitimate gaming practices as respectable, the segment of the respondents under discussion reproduces particular social structures of value that privilege some while disenfranchising others. In addition to the class hierarchies that Butsch discusses, we cannot overlook the hierarchies of sexuality invoked by the practice of teabagging due to its status as a form of fag discourse. As Gayle Rubin (1984) has argued in her foundational analysis "Thinking Sex," sexuality and sexual practice are structured according to a sexual value system that privileges a select few expressions of sexuality (heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial) as good, normal, and natural, while stigmatizing other forms of sexuality as bad, abnormal, or unnatural. These privileged sexual practices are then frequently accorded benefits, such as the assumption of psychological complexity and maturity. This sexual value system, then, draws an imaginary line between good and bad sex. Those select forms of sexual practice

that are privileged form a "charmed circle of sex," as named by Rubin (1984). Similarly, we

can see in participants' responses an attempt to construct a "charmed circle of gaming,"

wherein certain gaming practices are accorded complexity (e.g. learning maps,

coordination, and the cultivation of particular skills) while others are stigmatized as

immature. As this study's data demonstrates, a particular segment of the gaming audience

works to remove teabagging, an act that closely resembles other stigmatized sexual

practices, from this charmed circle of gaming through the practice of unlaughter.

Friends With Benefits

To summarize, in the unlaughter at teabagging this article contends that we can see

the contours of a discursive strategy that allows gamers to argue for the value of their video

game practices within a cultural context that denigrates them. Rather than resisting

ideologies of masculinity that place value on the achievement of dominance through

superior skill or intellect, certain segments of the *Halo* multiplayer community argue that

playing *Halo* can cultivate these skills and attitudes, and as such can be seen as a culturally

valuable practice. In the process, these gamers are able to carve out a place for themselves

within ideological structures that value other strongly gendered, competitive practices.

Teabagging, though, reaffirms the dominant perspective that playing video games is an

immature and lowbrow practice that cultivates unruly bodies. As such, the practice of

unlaughter at teabagging is a way to construct social boundaries between gamers.

Engaging in teabagging means that the player in question is not properly acculturated into

the gaming community, while refraining from and dismissing the practice demonstrates

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one has the proper disposition. Some participants even went so far as to dismiss any first-person shooter *game* (particularly *Halo*) that allows its players to teabag others.

However, where there is unlaughter there is also laughter. Of the 393 total respondents, 15 respondents reported teabagging other players for "fun," while 53 reported finding it funny. Similarly, 68 participants reported finding it "funny" when other players were teabagged. Now obviously this can be interpreted as an extension of the fag discourse Pascoe (2005) has observed in other young male communities. That is, if fag discourse involves jokingly invoking the specter of homosexuality and a penetrated, failed masculinity, and teabagging is at times a form of fag discourse, then it follows that some would find the practice funny. This was particularly the case among those players who reported playing with friends. As one participant noted, "Usually it's just friends doing it to friends." Later on, this participant noted that oftentimes you will see the statement "lol" used in reference to teabagging, indicating its status as a joke. Similarly, another respondent noted that "[I] usually only do it to friends I know well in private matches – both time consuming and possibly rage inducing on public matches."

The previous observation – that teabagging is "both time consuming and possibly rage inducing on public matches" – brings us to the final aspect of teabagging that I wish to highlight. I want to preface my interpretation, though, with a disclaimer of sorts. I do not want to claim that the following meanings attached to the practice of teabagging are widespread. As noted, the most common attitude towards teabagging by the gamers surveyed was dismissive. Even those who were not dismissive tended to use teabagging in a way similar to the fag discourse observed by C.J. Pascoe – as a way to invoke and reject the specter of failed masculinity.

Despite this, though, there was a particular reaction described by a few participants that I want to highlight not for its general applicability but for the potential cultural world that it suggests. As stated previously, practice theory is particularly attuned to the contingent relationship between individual social agents and the structures that they inhabit. In the process of inhabiting these structures, social agents may reproduce these structures, but they may also modify or even transform these structures through their practices. The final section of this article, then, adopts a more reparative, optimistic stance towards teabagging by practicing a form of "weak theory."

In her book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick contrasts "weak theory" with "strong theory," and suggests that weak theory is particularly suited to helping us see the openings and transformative possibilities that strong theory frequently forecloses or ignores. For Sedgwick, the qualifiers "weak" and "strong" do not refer to the relative strength or weakness of the theory, but rather to the "size and topology of the domain that it organizes" (p. 134). Strong theory seeks a wide spectrum of applicability, while weak theory remains comparatively local and descriptive. The problem with strong theory, for Sedgwick, is that it oftentimes only confirms what is already known, and is not particularly adept at addressing possibilities, surprise, hope, and contingency. Gibson-Graham (2006) argue that this has led critical theory to repeatedly "discover" that "the world is full of cruelty, misery, and loss, a place of domination and systematic oppression" (p. 7). Gibson-Graham, drawing on Sedgwick (2003), present weak theory as an alternative, reparative project to the reductive and paranoid excesses of strong theory. It is a theory that works at a local level, with a particular sensitivity to

context and contingency. With its focus on contingency, context, and local action, such an approach is well suited to the framework of practice theory.

Crucially, this stance does not preclude the possibility that practices such as teabagging can reinforce or reproduce hegemonic relationships of domination. As the previous section of this article argued, teabagging is frequently framed as a form of fag discourse that regulates practices of gender and sexuality among young men. Even the dismissal of the practice of teabagging risks reinforcing social hierarchies that privilege controlled bodies and heterosexual practices. However, these are not the *only* possible ways in which teabagging can be used. This is because, in addition to heightening social distinctions (Gruner, 1997; Billig, 2005; Smith, 2009), humor can also produce openings and new discoveries. In fact, Davis (2008), in his survey of scholarship on humor and communication, argues that humor's ability to produce affects of joy and elation in response to new discoveries should be central to its conceptualization. A weak practice theory can help draw attention to these new discoveries that potentially introduce cracks and fissures in the smooth reproduction of social structures, in the process entertaining the hope that oppressive structures can change and, indeed, already are.

To that end, we will focus on a particular idea expressed by a few participants that suggests that teabagging can be used to signify intimacy and strengthen relationships. Teabagging can accomplish this because of its situation within the context of a competitive game. As noted above, many participants were dismissive of teabagging because it is a practice that leaves a player vulnerable to counterattack. This was summarized succinctly by one participant: "Usually it's just friends doing it to friend. If I'm playing at a

competition level where someone would be doing it out of spite the person doing the

teabagging will probably get fragged [i.e. attacked] for staying in the same place too long."

What would be a poor strategy during competitive matches, though, can become a

signifier of closeness between friends as it demonstrates that the player trusts the other

players enough to not take advantage of them while in a vulnerable state. Perhaps this is

why many participants (approximately 50) stated that they are "amused" when they are

teabagged by other players. This might simply be a statement meant to save face, a way to

recuperate a gamer's masculinity by refusing to take the threatening practice seriously.

However, a small number of respondents (5) went further by specifying that they are only

amused when the teabagging occurs *among friends*. The above participant who noted that

teabagging leaves one vulnerable to counterattack made this connection, inferring that that

this is why teabagging is "just friends doing it to friends." Another participant said, "I just

do it when around friends when playing with them and we all have a good laugh."

This implies that, depending on the context of the event and the relationship

between players, teabagging can be interpreted as a signifier of closeness and intimacy

between players. This is because of teabagging's peculiar relationship to the rules and

structure of competitive play. In an environment where the rules and conditions of play

work to shape players to always be vigilant for attacks and counterattacks, taking the time

to crouch repeatedly over a fallen avatar is a terrible strategy. To do it among strangers

would be an invitation for defeat. But among friends, such a practice involves an implicit

acknowledgement of trust. This, in turn, suggests an additional layer of the fag discourse

described by Pascoe. While it still may function as a regulatory mechanism of gender and

sexuality among young men, the context of gaming potentially adds a new dimension to fag

discourse that exists alongside its other functions – an implicit acknowledgement of trust and intimacy.

This is not an assertion that participants are consciously aware of this aspect of teabagging. Yet, as Ortner (2005) contends, agents need not be conscious of all of the meanings of their practices for their practices to be transformative. Practices unfold unpredictably over time. This unfolding can lead to cracks and fissures in the smooth reproduction of regulatory mechanisms like fag discourse. The responses collected for this study suggest that teabagging can, and does, produce such a fissure. And like all fissures, it produces openings and new opportunities that can be exploited. In the case of teabagging, it allows critical new media and gaming scholars to articulate "hard core gaming practices" and "hard core gamers" with queer practices. This, in turn, suggests that "queerness" is not something that exists outside of hard core gaming practices and communities. Queerness is always already there. In addition to contemplating how to queer gaming practices, then, researchers can also focus on identifying and nurturing those practices that are already queer in order to transform oppressive social structures. This opens up new lines of questioning – what other practices could be considered queer? What are the conditions for their queerness? How can we make these practices more visible and viable? Examining practices like teabagging help us see that such questions are worth pursuing.

Such a disposition resembles what queer and class scholar Lisa Henderson (2013) has referred to as "plausible optimism." Plausible optimism, in distinction to what Lauren Berlant (2011) has termed "cruel optimism," describes an attachment that leads not to the attrition of the self but to its renewal. For Henderson, plausible optimism is rooted in specificities and the formation of solidarities and friendships (p. 150). Plausible optimism

is valuable precisely because it short-circuits the cycle of paranoia and disappointment that characterizes so much of critical practice (Sedgwick, 2012), helping us to see openings and new possibilities for connections and alliances alongside the familiar closures wrought by conditions of domination. Instead of attaching teabagging to a narrative of disappointment, this article argues that we can also attach it to a narrative of optimism. This optimism allows for the possibility that hard core gamers are not hopelessly misogynistic and homophobic, or that mainstream games will not always reproduce hegemonic structures of gender and sexuality. It insists that teabagging, under certain conditions, can exemplify some of the transgressive potential of play and its ability to circumvent, recontextualize, and otherwise upend both the rules of the game and the rules of gaming communities. This does not require us to deny teabagging's location within misogynist and homophobic discourses of fag discourse. It does, however, empower us to acknowledge that teabagging may also provide players with a kind of perverse pleasure, one that can even be used to signify their intimacy with friends.

For when players persist in engaging in a practice that is contrary to both the rules and goals of a game and the hegemonic norms of appropriate and proper play dispositions constructed by the player's community…well, something significant is happening. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that the fag discourse is simply so pervasive and powerful that it overrides other regulatory mechanisms. However, I do not want to resist this interpretation or reject it so much as say that another possibility exists alongside it, a possibility that is more open and queer. Sedgwick (1993) has written that queer refers to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's

sexuality, aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signifiy monolithically" (p. 8). I argue that we should approach teabagging, indeed any practice, with an eye towards this "open mesh of possibilities."

This does not simply have a descriptive purpose, although it will enable us to produce more detailed and precise descriptions. It also has a more utopian purpose – it helps us identify and, by doing so, cultivate nascent transformative practices. It helps us see that change is not something that has to be imposed upon a community of practice. Instead, practices are always situated in a complex relationship to broader regulatory structures and as such are varied and contradictory. Approaching a practice like teabagging from the perspective of practice theory helps us see these contradictory impulses and, in doing so, perhaps encourages queer, critical gaming scholars to sympathize with those practices. Alongside the derisive sneer or the silence of unlaughter, then, I optimistically assert that perhaps another kind of laughter exists, one that is gentler and more receptive. If nothing else, the example of teabagging demonstrates that those moments of laughter are not beyond the realm of possibility and that allowing for those moments can offer critical inquiry resources for new alliances and reparative practices.

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