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## **Gaming For Life: Gaming Practices, Self-Care, and Thriving Under Neoliberalism**

Brian Myers

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Gaming For Life: Gaming Practices, Self-Care, and Thriving Under Neoliberalism

A Dissertation Presented

by

BRIAN H. MYERS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

September 2019

Department of Communication

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Gaming For Life: Gaming Practices, Self-Care, and Thriving Under Neoliberalism

A Dissertation Presented

By

BRIAN H. MYERS

Approved as to style and content by:

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Emily West, Chair

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Lisa Henderson, Member

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TreaAndrea Russworm, Member

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Sut Jhally, Department Chair  
Department of Communication

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If this project has taught me one thing, it is that the cultural image we have of the individual writer, sitting alone at a desk, spilling out words from his genius is a fiction. So much of the writing process is obscured in the final written account of research, especially the sheer number of people needed to bring any project of this length to completion. So many people supported this project. Without them, I would never have completed this dissertation. They were absolutely vital to this project and bringing this to my audience's attention in an acknowledgement page that, I am willing to wager, the vast majority of people will decline to read feels like a woefully inadequate reciprocation. Nonetheless, we operate within the structures we are given at times and I cannot think of a better way to express my gratitude or acknowledge their contributions outside of an "Acknowledgements" section. Apologies for my lack of imagination. I know you will not hold it against me.

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ABSTRACT

GAMING FOR LIFE: GAMING PRACTICES, SELF-CARE, AND THRIVING

UNDER NEOLIBERALISM

SEPTEMBER 2019

BRIAN H. MYERS, B.A., THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

M.A., THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS-AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Emily West

This dissertation frames gaming practices in relationship to thriving, an area of inquiry that has received little attention within the fields of video game studies and cultural studies. It argues that video games can be used by audiences as a tool for thriving, provided we define thriving outside of the framework of success and failure established by a neoliberal political rationality. Using survey data from 70 video game audience members, textual analysis, and ethnographic and auto-ethnographic methodologies, this dissertation first describes how video game audience members define thriving by distinguishing it from a related term, self-care. It then moves to a discussion of how the participants view the relationship between thriving, self-care, and gaming, arguing that their perspectives are informed by a neoliberal political rationality that cultivates a disposition structured by self-surveillance, self-government, and productivity. From there, it moves to a discussion of a representative example of a video game used for the purposes of self-care and thriving, *Final Fantasy XIV*, to examine the affordances and limitations to thriving a video game can provide.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

There is a section in *Alone Together* (2011), a book by the eminent digital media researcher Sherry Turkle, that I want to focus on at the start my dissertation. I do this for a myriad of reasons, the most obvious being that it exemplifies the “gap in the literature” that my research attempts to fill. However, I would argue that this is not the most compelling reason to begin with this passage. No, I am drawn to this passage for what it provokes in me. I want to begin with this passage because it helps me understand myself, my own personal and political commitments and attachments, my own perspective within the dynamic fields of cultural studies, video game studies, and media studies, and my purpose for putting together three terms that one does not find very often in the literature of these fields: “video gaming,” “self-care,” and “thriving.” For that is the purpose of this dissertation – to begin mapping the relationship between video gaming, self-care, and thriving and the contexts of their articulation in the practices of media audiences.

In *Alone Together* (2011), Turkle focuses on the relationship between technology and intimacy in the contemporary moment. Over the course of 16 chapters, Turkle uses various case studies to map how our cultural understandings of technology and its affordances have influenced our understandings of intimacy, sociality, and companionship. At a historical moment when the line between what is robotic and what is human is often very fine indeed, Turkle provocatively asks how we got to this moment and whether or not we, as a society, should be content with it. In particular, Turkle is worried about what she sees as the substitution of “real”

intimacy between people with a technologically-mediated intimacy that reaches its ultimate expression in the (for now) imagined romantic entanglement between humans and robots. Faced with the complexity and unpredictability of intimate relationships with other humans, Turkle argues that people are increasingly turning to technology as a preferable and permanent alternative to human companionship rather than a last-ditch effort to stave off loneliness. As Turkle succinctly puts it, sociable robots and technologically mediated intimacy have gone from being “better than nothing” to “better than something” (p. 7). While *Alone Together* is primarily concerned with the prospect of sociable robots and virtual pets, Turkle also deals with the idea of simulation more broadly and how we have configured ourselves to be more satisfied with simulations of relationships than the real thing. This extends, naturally, to the relationship between people and video games. In Chapter 11 (“Reduction and Betrayal”), Turkle devotes a lot of space to the story of “Adam,” a 43-year-old who prefers the “electronic glow” of games like *Quake* and *Civilization* to his “real life,” which Turkle asserts is falling apart (p. 224).

I want to linger a bit here, for in Turkle’s description of Adam, which moves across a variety of feelings such as empathy and compassion before ultimately resting on pity, I find problems with not only how peoples’ relationships with video games are framed in current cultural debates, but also how particular subjectivities and ways of being in the world are legitimized while others are accorded less complexity, and thus less status. Turkle begins by describing Adam’s affection for games such as *Quake* and *Civilization*. As Turkle writes, “Adam likes who he is in these games – a warrior and a world ruler – more than who he is outside of them.

His handicaps are in the real; in the games he is a star” (p. 219). Even within this first paragraph, binary distinctions and their implicit hierarchy are invoked – between the real and the virtual, between those who are handicapped (who are, presumably, not “stars”) and “stars” (who are, presumably, not handicapped), between self-esteem and depression. Moreover, the relationships between these pairs are already established. The real is preferred to the virtual. Being a star is better than being handicapped. Self-esteem trumps depression. Turkle develops this picture further by describing how Adam has failed in the real world - a failure that is partly attributed to his attachment to video games. Adam’s “real jobs” (he provides technical support to an insurance company on the weekdays and emotional and physical support to an elderly man on the weekends) are “slipping away” because of his video game habits, which can occupy fifteen-hour stretches at a time. His offline relationships with people have suffered. Whereas in the past, Adam used to play *Quake* with groups of people, now he is content to play with *bots*, or AI- controlled player simulacrums. Even his *online* relationships with people have suffered. Adam used to play an online version of *Scrabble* with a woman named Erin, but that contact was lost once Erin moved on to another game (p. 219). What Turkle describes is the slow attrition of one man’s life by his attachment to a digital medium (video games) that has promised its users much but has failed to satisfy those promises. Turkle spends much time describing the appeal of video games for Adam. She writes:

Adam says that he shows more skill at Capture the Flag than he does at his technical job, which he considers rote and beneath him. Beyond mastery, games offer the opportunity to perform roles he finds ennobling. Adam wants to be a generous person, but power is a prerequisite for benevolence. In life Adam feels he has none. In games he has a great deal (p. 221).

At another point, Turkle comments on the appeal of bots as companions to Adam: “He explains that the bots are competent conversationalists because conversations on *Quake* tend to follow predictable patterns” (p. 221). And again, at several points, Turkle discusses the appeal of mastery that video games offer: “Adam reminisces about moments of mastery on *Quake*; for him, mastery over the game world is a source of joy” (p. 221). In short, according to Turkle video games offer mastery, companionship, power, and feelings of benevolence to people who routinely feel that they have none of those things off-line.

For Turkle, though, the problem with these virtual promises is that they do not translate into similar attitudes and affects in the “real” world. As Turkle notes, virtual experiences are only therapeutically beneficial if they function to further “real” therapeutic relationships (p. 223). For Adam, however, “there is no evidence that online accomplishment is making him feel better about himself in the real” (p. 223). This is evidenced by the apparent slipping away of all that tethers Adam to the “real” world: his jobs, his relationships, even the promise of a reproductive future with Erin, the familiar “girl who got away.”

Now I do not want to challenge Turkle’s description of Adam or the failures that she argues are attached to his gaming practices. How could I? I have never met “Adam,” nor do I have access to any of the research material collected during Turkle’s interviews with Adam. On a more abstract level, I also do not want to claim

that failure, attrition, and negative affects can *never* be attached to gaming practices. Self-esteem can be better than depression, being handicapped can be worse than being a star, and the real can be preferred above the virtual. I want to insist, however, that they *do not have to be*. I want to insist that Adam's story is not the only story about the relationship between video gaming and thriving that can be told.

While Turkle's description of Adam and his gaming practice is relatively benign when examined in isolation, a more problematic picture emerges once we place that picture in the context of mainstream culture and its discourses of video gaming practices. When evaluating media representations of gaming communities, we find that there are few alternatives in the broader culture to the story that Turkle is telling. The story told by Turkle is deeply familiar to both gamers and media researchers. It is the story of how an attachment to the media becomes pathological once it crosses a certain line, resulting in the collapse of both the self and, in its more extreme versions, the body politic as a whole.

This pathologization of heavy media users is not new. Media historian Richard Butsch (2008), in his study of the emergence of the mass media audience, has argued that many of the cultural anxieties surrounding any media are embodied by the figure of the media addict. As Butsch explains, the media addict is a pathological mass media audience member, "an individual, usually male, isolating himself from relationships with family, friends, and community, not fulfilling his responsibilities to the family, the community, the polity, and failing to cultivate himself" (p. 129).

We can see the contours of this figure in Turkle's description of Adam. As Turkle



repeats throughout the passage, Adam's offline life is "falling apart" (p. 224) and "slipping away" (p.219). And what constitutes this offline life? Relationships with friends and family (particularly women) and his responsibilities to the larger community embodied by his labor. These are the stuff of the real world, Turkle contends. Video games, when abused, cause these productive (and reproductive) attachments to wither.

It is this pathologization of video gamers and heavy media users, the all-too familiar articulation of media usage with illness, isolation, and failure, that this dissertation will interrupt. Suspending this familiar trajectory towards pathologization can allow us to see alternatives, possibilities, and perspectives that could provide us with a larger vocabulary for discussing gamers, media users, and the relationship between culture and thriving.

To see how this might work in practice, we need only begin with Turkle's description of Adam. The first step is to question the terms by which Turkle evaluates Adam's relationship with video games. As noted previously, the first paragraph signals to its audience, through its careful invocation of familiar binaries and hierarchies, that this is going to be a narrative of failure. From the beginning, we know that Adam is a failure. All that is left is to fill in the details. And fill in the details Turkle does. We learn that Adam has failed to accumulate wealth. We learn that Adam has failed to marry and reproduce. We learn that Adam has failed to maintain connections with friends and family. In almost every conceivable way, Turkle writes, Adam has failed.

But why must this count as failure? Why is refusing to marry a failure? Why is letting go of labor a failure?

These are questions that Turkle, in so many ways, declines to account for. The biggest failing of Turkle's description of Adam's failures, in my reading, is her refusal to interrogate the basis of her evaluation of Adam's life and gaming habits. That is, she leaves unquestioned her assumptions about the prescribed roles of the liberal subject in contemporary America. As Halberstam (2011) argues in *The Queer Art of Failure*, the terms of success and failure used by researchers like Turkle often assume a heteronormative, capitalist society. Halberstam explicitly states that "success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation" (p. 2). Authorizing hegemonic understandings of success and failure in American society, then, is the assumption that heterosexuality and capitalism are natural and normal. We can see this in Turkle's concern over the loss of Adam's relationship with Erin, where I detect traces of the familiar anxiety that Adam "will never find a woman." We can see this in Turkle's worry that Adam's gaming practices interfere with both his real job and his aspirations of becoming a singer and songwriter (p. 218). Heterosexual reproduction and wealth accumulation are the measures of success for Turkle and by those standards Adam has failed.

But Halberstam reminds us that there are other ways of "being in the world" than these standards of success and failure prescribe (p. 2). Failure, as defined by a heteronormative, capitalist society, can in fact offer rewards to its subjects that success cannot. Not only does failure allow its subjects to escape the "punishing

norms that discipline behavior and manage human development” (p. 3), but it can also empower subjects to question and “poke holes” in contemporary hierarchies of power and address the structures of distribution and recognition that organize and maintain these hierarchies.

For an example of the opportunities a different approach to failure may provide us, I return to Turkle. As I have argued, Turkle pathologizes Adam’s media practices and positions Adam as a failure because of his inability (or refusal?) to attach himself to “productive” forms of labor. But one of the issues with this pathologizing moment is that it casts Adam’s “failures” as personal responsibility. As Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) has noted, capitalism often insists that success is born of hard work and dedication while failure is no one’s fault but your own. Turkle, in her focus upon Adam’s failures at the expense of the context surrounding these failures, implicitly endorses this perspective. Yet, if we take a soft Marxist stance and propose that much labor under capitalist systems is alienating to the laborer, is it really so surprising that Adam chooses to let that labor “slip away?” Is it really so pitiable that, given the choice between a world where Adam can be “a warrior and a world ruler” and a world where he is simply “making ends meet” by providing technical support to an insurance company and care to an elderly man, that he would choose to be a warrior and a world ruler? Rather than use the story of Adam as a way to comment upon and challenge a capitalist system that routinely provides limited choices like these to its subjects, Turkle instead uses this story as an example of how media addiction can ruin a person’s life.

It is this gap, this failure to consider alternatives, that this dissertation situates itself within. Partly this is due to my own personal recognition of myself in Adam. I look at Turkle's description of Adam and his video game usage and realize that Adam and I are not that different in our play habits. Like Adam, I routinely find myself choosing video games over work. Looking through the play logs of different video game consoles that I own, it is not unusual to see upwards of eight hours a day spent on one video game or spread out across multiple video games. And I have been doing this for decades, since the days of the 8-bit Nintendo NES system. I was an introverted child growing up in the 1980s and 1990s when home video game consoles first became a viable commodity for lower middle-class families. Faced with a surplus of leisure time in which I was only expected to play, I would choose video games over the overwhelming and quite frankly terrifying option of associating with other children my age. Even to this day, as I explain my gaming practices to colleagues or new acquaintances, I go out of my way to say that gaming has always been a way for me to escape from other people. I gamed because I did not like being around other people. To their credit I had a mother and father (both teachers) who were sensitive to my needs and let me be alone with my games. But I realize that that situation was (and continues to be) rare in a society that often privileges the social, extroverted child. Moving forward into adulthood and grad life, I routinely use video games as a way to desensitize myself to the world around me. Diagnosed with an anxiety condition in my mid 20's, I turned to video games to calm down and distract myself from the dizzying, spiraling thoughts that are part and parcel of my anxious mind. Later, in my early 30's, a debilitating spinal injury

left me unable to do much more beyond sit very, very still in a recliner lest I suffer intense pain down the left side of my body. In those times, video games were one of the few things I could use to distract from the pain. Video games, in many ways, have been and continue to be necessary for my survival.

Yet, while video games are a vital part of my everyday practices of physical and mental maintenance, I also recognize that these same practices may not help me move beyond survival to growth and prosperity. They may, in fact, impede growth and prosperity. After all, while spending 8 hours a day grinding away at a video game may help calm my anxious mind and distract me from my chronic pain, it does not help me do much beyond that. This contradiction between survival and thriving is the central idea that this dissertation grapples with and attempts to make sense of. I initially began conducting research for this project with an eye towards recuperating video gaming practices from hegemonic discourses that frame them as, at best, inoffensive or as, at worst, destructive to the individuals and society as a whole. My purpose was to construct a framework for digital media scholars to investigate a broader spectrum of media practices and to suggest that not all of these practices are inimical to the emancipatory goals of critical cultural studies, that in fact some of these practices are necessary for some people's survival. This purpose was drawn both from my own experiences with digital media, specifically video games, and the observations and findings of other researchers that I have encountered over the years. As Samantha Allen (2013) proposed in her address at the 2013 Queerness and Games Conference held at the University of California-Berkeley, many of the qualities of video games that gamers are frequently shamed

for - that they are repetitive, that they are isolating, that they are anonymous, that they are ephemeral - are precisely the qualities that make them appealing to queers trying to get by in a heteronormative, capitalist system that routinely denies them the tools for survival.

In gathering and analyzing data from other video gaming audience members about their experiences playing video games and their thoughts about the relationship between video games and thriving, however, an ambivalence emerged that was impossible to discount. While the majority of participants were willing to acknowledge that video games helped them reduce anxiety and manage their affective states and mood, a significant amount refused the idea that playing video games contributed to their ability to thrive. Many of them, in fact, echoed the same judgements and reservations that Turkle expressed in her analysis of Adam, suggesting that the ideologies embedded in Turkle's account have a certain degree of purchase in more mainstream interpretations of gaming practices. Yet while Turkle and my participants largely attributed their (and other's) behavior to the individual's psychological make-up, this dissertation instead draws on a critical cultural perspective to interrogate the cultural underpinnings of this stance and suggest alternative readings.

For while others may look at Adam's and my video game practices with concern or pity, I do not. I remember my childhood spent playing video games and think, "Those were fun times!" I look at the possibility of playing video games for 8 hours (or 15 hours, as Adam did) and think, "That would be a good day!" Yes, there is guilt attached to those days, but that guilt stems largely from my awareness that

others would look at that day and judge me harshly for it, not from an intrinsic characteristic of video game or video game practices.

In short, I look at Turkle's description of Adam and see a lot of myself there, a self that I could have become had my context been different. Rather than leading to my attrition, as it arguably has for Adam, video game playing has been crucial to my survival. And I know that I am not the only one who feels this way. This dissertation began, then, by entertaining the idea that gaming can, and often is, a necessary condition of thriving for people who play games. This position does not require me to deny that gaming and thriving can be opposed to one another, as it arguably is in the case of Turkle's Adam. But I do want to suspend that easy (because common) conclusion in service of finding and creating spaces for alternative stories and attachments. Such a project allows me to expose and interrogate the hierarchies of subjectivity that organize media consumption practices and, by extension, social life in contemporary American society. For example, why is productivity, defined by the accumulation of wealth, the privileged measure of success? Why is being with people so much better than being alone? Examining people's gaming practices, particularly people from non-dominant social groups, can help us describe different ways of "being in the world" and take seriously some peoples' desires to live in ways that differ from the ways prescribed by a heteronormative, capitalist, extroverted society. Such a project also deepens our understanding of the ways in which the media can be integrated into the fabric of our everyday lives and the force that it exerts on us. Rather than seeing this as a solely negative force, this dissertation expands the range of affects that are typically

attached to media use by acknowledging that the media can play a therapeutic role in the lives of disenfranchised or otherwise “separate” people. Instead of the paranoid assertion that heavy media usage leads to attrition, this dissertation adopts the position that we cannot guarantee in advance the particular effects that a media object will have before it is taken up by a particular audience member. In other words, it opens space for possibility and surprise, not only for media audiences but also for media researchers.

## **Preview**

I have structured this dissertation according to what I see as the two main phases of the research project. The first phase involved gathering survey data on how different groups understood thriving and the relationship between their thriving and gaming practices, using a snowball sampling method to recruit a diverse pool of participants across sexual orientation and social class. Using this data as a starting point, I then used textual, ethnographic and auto-ethnographic methodologies in the second phase to examine how the most popular genre among my participants—the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game - could inform the experiences of thriving my participants narrated. Chapters 2-4 describe the conceptual framework supporting my investigation and my survey methodology before moving into a discussion of my survey results. Chapters 5-7, meanwhile, discuss my methodology for analyzing an ongoing, large-scale, participatory text like *Final Fantasy XIV* as well as offer an analysis of the framework the game provides for structuring self-care and thriving practices.



The narrative arc of the dissertation, meanwhile, begins with an account of how self-care and thriving practices, of which gaming practices are a part, are subsumed and deployed by various neoliberal institutions for the purpose of reproducing the resources for immaterial labor. From there, it moves to a discussion of how the various practices produced by these forces can create cracks in the smooth reproduction of neoliberal capital, which in turn can create opportunities for escape and transformation.

CHAPTER 2  
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: AUDIENCE STUDIES, PRACTICE THEORY  
AND HABITUS

There are two major conceptual frames that are critical to how I approached this project. Over the course of this chapter, I will discuss how I conceptualized video game playing as a collection of audience practices and how I considered the relationship between broad cultural formations and structures on the one hand and the smaller-scale practices of people on the other. A guiding principle for this dissertation was to allow for the possibility of describing and analyzing video game practices that are surprising and perhaps even unique. However, given my commitments to critical cultural inquiry, I also did not want to naively assert that these moments of surprise are necessarily transformative of broader systemic structures, nor did I want to atomize my participants and ignore the larger contexts that they are embedded in. To allow space for both of these sometimes antagonistic impulses, I assembled a flexible conceptual framework that insists that people's lives are always lived in relation to particular structural forces. These structural forces, in turn, are both reproduced and remade through the practices of people.

**Media as a Resource For Everyday Life**

First and foremost I want to position this dissertation project within media studies and to argue that video game studies can benefit from the theories and methodologies of media studies, particularly audience analysis. I realize that, in some video game circles, this can be a controversial choice. Much of the work done

on video games has attempted to distance the medium of video games from other, more traditional media such as film and print (Crawford, 2012). In my review of video game research, this often results in the construction of binaries that are untenable, most notably the active/passive binary that frequently organizes the relationship between video games (active) and more traditional media (passive). Because of this, it is often assumed within these studies that the people who play video games are not *audiences*, or at least are not like *traditional media audiences*. Traditional media audiences are passive and receptive, whereas video gamers are more active and empowered.

I do not want this to sound like I do not acknowledge the specificities of the video game medium. Video games are not television or film or print, and thus the experiences of video game audiences are likely to be different from other types of audience experiences. For example, Frans Mäyrä (2008) has distinguished between two types of meaning-making in video games: *semiosis*, referring to the decoding of messages and media representations, and *ludosis*, referring to the meanings constructed through playful actions. While one could argue that *ludosis* could be a part of any media interaction (the playfulness of fan fiction, for instance), in video games *ludosis* is a necessary feature of the media interaction. As such, it serves as a unique resource for game players that could distinguish the experience of playing a video game from the experience of reading a book or watching a movie.

However I do not think this requires us to radically alter the ways in which we conceptualize media audiences. As Garry Crawford (2012) asserts, “it is quite clear that video gamers are different from other media audiences, but so too are

other audiences significantly different from each other” (p. 32). Over the years, audience researchers have developed a sensitivity to the contexts in which media interactions occur. This theoretical robustness comes from audience research’s engagement with the theories and methods of anthropology. Alasuutari (1999) has described this shift as a transition from “first wave audience research,” with its primary concern for how content was understood by audience members, to “second wave audience research,” which was more concerned with how media interactions were integrated into the everyday lives of individuals and communities. This shift resulted in the recognition that the category of “audience” was not as stable as it originally appeared to reception researchers. As Janice Radway (1988) acknowledged, early reception studies often struggled to account for the “dispersed” and “nomadic” features of audiences. Rather than occurring in a specific, bounded location, media interactions are instead dispersed throughout the social lives of people living in contemporary mediated societies and articulated with a variety of other social practices. As Radway (1988) further notes, much of the work in reception studies up until this point was grounded in transmission models of communication, which privileged the position of the “media text.” This “text,” in turn, was often thought of as objective and existing prior to its reception within particular contexts. This “ontologizing of the text,” to use Radway’s phrase, assumed that the text determined its mode of reception and thus divorced the text from the social contexts in which it was embedded. Moreover, it locked audiences into particular ways of consuming texts and limited the number of sites that audience researchers could “look for” media interactions.

This tendency to “ontologize the text” persists in video game studies. As Crawford (2012) asserts in his overview of video game audience research, the majority of work on video game audiences has focused almost exclusively on particular instances of play, particularly those that occur when a game player is sitting in front of a screen. What is often lacking in video game studies, then, is an awareness of the interconnectedness between the media and everyday life. This lack of awareness manifests not only in where video game researchers have looked for video game interactions (i.e. in front of a screen), but in the very conceptualization of games and play as creating a “magic circle” distinct from reality. The concept of the “magic circle,” based on the work of Johann Huizinga (1955) and popularized in game studies by the work of Salen and Zimmerman (2004), posits that games construct an alternate time and space that is perceived as distinct from “reality” (ignoring for now that what is often perceived and defined as “real” is in itself a social construct).

Researchers have expanded upon the “magic circle” by supplementing it with psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s (1999) concept of “flow” to further describe the experience of playing video games. “Flow” refers to a particular state in which an individual’s attention is completely occupied by a particular task. This is often a pleasurable experience as individuals tend to feel empowered since tasks that produce a flow state are at a kind of “sweet spot” of difficulty for the individual. Not too easy, since a too easy task would bore the participant and break the flow state, and not too challenging, since a too difficult task would frustrate the participant and

break the flow state. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) advocate a video game design philosophy centered on producing experiences of flow for players.

While I am willing to grant that producing “flow” experiences and ensuring the integrity of the magic circle is a frequent goal for game designers, both concepts are ill-equipped to describe the complexity of video gaming practices. For one, it privileges the gameplay elements of video games at the expense of their narrative elements. This, in turn, establishes a cultural system where video game designers do not feel accountable to the ramifications of the cultural representations in their video games, which can contribute to the erasure of some audiences or social groups. To illustrate the consequences of this ignorance, I want to turn to a recent exchange between Rob Pardo, former Chief Creative Officer at Blizzard Entertainment, and video game researcher Todd Harper (2014). Blizzard Entertainment is currently one of the most successful video game developers and publishers in the world, responsible for three major franchises: *Warcraft*, *Starcraft*, and *Diablo*. To give a sense of the impact that this company has, its *Starcraft* franchise has played a major role in the birth of the professional gaming and game-broadcasting phenomenon (Taylor, 2012), while *World of Warcraft* has proven so popular that it has sparked massive media panics and contributed to discourses about the “addictiveness” of video games (Crawford, 2012). In short, Blizzard is a major force in the field of video games. At an MIT Game Lab talk, Pardo emphasized that Blizzard seeks to create “epic entertainment experiences”, which he later defined in terms of “fun” and “gameplay,” rather than focussing on narrative experiences. When pressed by Harper about how this emphasis upon “fun,”

“gameplay,” and “epic entertainment experiences” impacts efforts to make more socially progressive content, particularly more inclusive images of women, Pardo responded, “I wouldn’t say that’s really a value for us. It’s not something that we’re against either, but it’s just not something that’s...something we’re actively trying to do” (as qtd. in Harper, 2014). Harper argues that this and other remarks from AAA-developers such as Nintendo create a false dichotomy between “fun,” “epic” gameplay experiences and “inclusive design or representation” that ignores the full range of the audiences of video games. “Inclusive design or representation,” for example the inclusion of same-sex pairings in Nintendo’s life-simulator *Tomodachi Life* (2014), becomes marked as inherently political, as something that threatens to distract from and disrupt the “magic circle” of play by making it “too real.” Meanwhile, white male heteronormativity remains unmarked and unpoliticized, the taken-for-granted center that organizes how we conceptualize gameplay experiences.

As a result, I want to broaden our critical vocabulary for describing video game practices beyond concepts such as “the magic circle” and “flow” by taking into consideration how those experiences are constructed and sustained by individual audience members. It is for this reason that I want to ally myself with researchers such as T.L. Taylor and Adrienne Shaw, who have drawn upon the theories and methods of cultural studies, feminist audience research, and qualitative ethnographic work in order to complicate our understanding of the relationship between video games and everyday life. I do not want to swerve too much into a history of cultural studies here (such a tangent could be its own book, after all), but I

do want to briefly signal how I am viewing cultural studies and why I think it is valuable to adopt some of its theories and methodologies in this project. In particular, I want to signal my alliance with *critical cultural studies*, whose lineage is often traced back to the Birmingham CCCS in the 1950s and 1960s and the work of scholars such as Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, Paul Willis, Dick Hebdige, Charlotte Brunsdon, Angela McRobbie, and many more. This work tended to employ Marxist and post-Marxist methods of analysis to intervene in the articulation of British working class cultural formations with conservative political ideologies (although critical cultural studies has diverged from those particular allegiances in the intervening years). I want to signal this alliance with critical cultural studies because it resonates with my own drive to collect, describe, and analyze alternative video game play experiences. As Adrienne Shaw (2010) has argued, much of the work in both the popular and academic press has described video game culture without considering the broader questions of how that culture is constructed. Yet one of the lessons of critical cultural studies is that descriptions of culture also constitute the boundaries of that culture. This is, by its nature, a political act, since these boundaries shape how recognition and various forms of capital are attached to some practices and people and denied to others.

Shaw (2010) proposes that if we are to study games culturally (which I am), we must in turn acknowledge the conflicts of cultural studies (p. 416). This involves wrestling with how video game culture is defined and deployed by both institutional forces and by individual video game players. Two resources that I have found helpful in working through how I conceptualize video game culture are Pierre



Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and Sherry Ortner's elaboration of practice theory, discussed in the next section of this chapter. Another resource that I wish to touch upon briefly here, though, is Lauren Berlant's (2008) concept of the *juxtapolitical* aspects of mass media culture. I do so at the end of this section because it situates what I see as my project's *political* goals as well as highlighting what I mean when I say that the media can function as a resource for everyday life. In her wide-ranging study of mass mediated women's culture, Berlant argues that the project of women's culture has been to construct an "intimate public" that allows individual women to imagine and recognize themselves within a mass community of women. This community is centered around the belief that there exists "a world of strangers who would be emotionally literate in each other's experience of power, intimacy, desire, and discontent, with all that entails" (p. 5). In other words, this intimate public is rooted in the belief in women's shared affective experiences of longing and desire, not in an abstract, politicized "identity." Berlant argues that this intimate public is not political, in the traditional sense of "maneuvering for resource control or contest in the electoral arena" (Henderson 2013, p. 130). Instead, this intimate public is *juxtapolitical*, existing alongside the field of politics. As Berlant (2008) describes, women's intimate public "thrives in *proximity* to the political, occasionally crossing over in political alliance, even more occasionally doing some politics, but most often not" ("Preface," para. 9). In fact, women's juxtapolitical intimate public is more often than not resistant to politics and structured as a relief *from* the political, which has so often been the site of women's disenfranchisement and disillusionment.

This is not to say that this intimate public does not have political effects. Berlant (2008) also emphasizes that this juxtapolitical intimate public also serves as an important site for the construction of “women’s fantasies, identifications, and attachments to particular identities and life narratives” (“Preface,” para. 13), which in turn shape how women think, feel, and act in the world. This offers quite a different valuation to the “relief from politics” provided by mass mediated cultures. Much of the work in cultural studies and reception studies has noted the compensatory features of popular culture and the media. For instance, Janice Radway’s (1991) groundbreaking *Reading the Romance* ultimately critiques her participants’ compensatory usage of romance reading, as seen in her assertions that they distracted her participants from “real” feminist political engagement. There is a particular logic of distinction that underpins that critique, a framework of thinking that, as Lisa Henderson (2013) has outlined, demands “an opposition between what can be counted as politics and what must, instead, be described (and demoted) as something else” (p. 131). Henderson continues, arguing that “For many authors in cultural studies, there is no significant politics in survival and its everyday gestures; for others, including me, there is no politics without them” (p. 131). I want to ally myself with Henderson in rethinking what gets to “count” as political and what must be dismissed as a distraction from “real” politics.

Moreover, by insisting on the political qualities of video gaming practices, we can begin to disrupt the assertion in gaming communities that the practices of a privileged few audience members are apolitical (for an example of this, see Rosenberg, 2014). By insisting that games should be “free of politics,” these

reactionary audience members are in fact campaigning for the maintenance of the status quo in gaming, which overwhelmingly privileges the perspectives and fantasies of white, straight, heterosexual, middle-class, cis-gendered men. Because of this, viewing gaming practices through the lens of survival, or even thriving, accomplishes two purposes. It helps scholars critique a politics of the Left that tries to draw a distinction between “real” politics and the “everyday gestures” that people need to survive, and it critiques conservative ideologies that work to frame the practices and meanings of the dominant group as neutral and natural.

Berlant’s concept of the juxtapolitical, then, is useful for a variety of reasons. For one, it establishes the stakes of mass media consumption, as mass media culture, including video games, provides individuals with resources for the construction of fantasies, identifications, and attachments. It also sets up two themes that are central to my investigation into video game culture – the idea that video games can provide individuals with fantasies of belonging, even if that fantasy happens at the expense of other attachments and people (as Berlant found in her analysis), and the idea that video games are often constructed as a relief from the political. As we can see in the exchange between Pardo and Harper discussed previously, or in the ongoing “GamerGate” controversy<sup>1</sup>, video games are rhetorically positioned against “politics” by white, straight, heterosexual, cis-

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<sup>1</sup> “GamerGate” can best be described as a loosely-organized reaction on the part of “traditional” video game audiences (i.e. white, straight, male gamers) to changing demographics within gaming communities (particularly the growth of women audiences). While some “GamerGaters” insist that their campaign is really about exposing corruption in video game journalism, their targets and tactics, including harassment and threats of rape, death, and doxxing (the unauthorized publishing of private or identifying features of a person online) have led many to conclude that its concerns are deeply rooted in misogyny.

gendered male developers and audiences. Berlant's concept of the juxtapolitical and her description of women's intimate publics helps us see that video game culture provides a similar "relief from politics" for straight, white male gamers. Here, though, "relief from politics" more often than not means "freedom from the pressures and demands of inclusivity," expressed as a disdain for political correctness and a desire to "not take things so seriously."

This opens up a plethora of questions for researchers to investigate. Is this one of the ways in which video games contribute to the well-being of straight, white male gamers? And if this is one of the major projects of video game culture, then what is its appeal for non-white, non-straight, non-male gamers? What resources does video game culture provide for the well-being of marginalized communities, for instance lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and other queer-identified individuals? What are the continuities and discontinuities between the gameplay experiences of these disparate groups? These are some of the problems that Berlant's concept of the juxtapolitical sensitizes me to. It also sensitizes me to the observation that people's media usage and participation in a particular media culture is as much affective as it is ideological. That is to say, it is crucial that individuals *feel* that they belong to a particular culture. In the meantime, though, I will turn to Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and Sherry Ortner's work on practice theory to further specify how I am conceptualizing video game culture, particularly as it relates to ongoing discussions about structure and agency.

## **Video Game Culture: Habitus and Practice**

In an interview with Brian Lennon (2015) of the Digital Culture and Media Initiative at Pennsylvania State University, Adrienne Shaw made an incisive comment about the relationship between structure and agency in media studies. Commenting on the relationship between textual analysis and audience research in media studies, Shaw noted that “An ideological critique shows us something about how society is structured” and “audience analysis show us something about how people live within that structure.” While Shaw was addressing the relationship between two broad bodies of media research, this statement can also serve as a bridge between how I am conceptualizing the relationship between digital media audiences and the media they consume and how I am more broadly conceptualizing the relationship between cultural formations and the people who reproduce and remake these formations through their everyday practices.

Shaw’s characterization of the relationship between these different fields of media research is a reminder that these fields are not mutually exclusive and that the relationship between media and audiences is not strictly oppositional. Underpinning Shaw’s brief comment is the idea that not only are people shaped by particular structures, but that people also inhabit these structures and potentially remake them. In other words, Shaw does not seem as interested in the opposition between media texts and audience practices as she is in their articulations. I want to elaborate on this relationship between cultural forms and audience practices and further specify how I am viewing video game culture by bringing in two conceptual tools from sociology and anthropology that are vital to

my project – Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus” and Sherry B. Ortner’s formulation of practice theory.

These two conceptual tools are vital for several reasons. For one, the relationship between structure and agency has been central to much of the theoretical landscape of media studies and, more specifically, the critical cultural audience research that this dissertation contributes to. As such, I want to specify my own position in these ongoing debates by aligning myself with Bourdieu and Ortner. Furthermore, I believe that video game studies would benefit from a serious engagement with practice theory. As discussed in the previous section, the discourse around video games in both the popular and the academic press tends to emphasize the interactivity of the medium and the freedoms video games provide to audience members. While it is true that video games are different from other media in that they require audience interaction to proceed, this does not mean that video game audiences are free of constraint. Practice theory, with its emphasis upon the ways in which broad structural forces and the practices of individual actors are articulated in specific contexts, can help us avoid this romantic view of audience agency and develop a more nuanced picture of the relationship between video game texts and audience practices. Finally, these conceptual tools are vital to this project because they foreground an aspect of the social that is often neglected in video game studies – class. While much video game scholarship has drawn attention to how gender, sexuality, race, and other social determinants (and their intersections) inform player practices, there has been remarkably little work on the influence or context of class, despite the deep imprint of class judgment (e.g. Turkle, 2011). By

bringing in habitus and practice theory, both of which are deeply rooted in problems of social class, I intend to fill this gap and provide a more nuanced analysis of the ways in which social class shapes and is shaped by video game practices.

First, I would like to turn to “habitus” and specify how I am using this term. This concept was developed by Pierre Bourdieu, one of the key figures in the development of practice theory. As Sherry Ortner (2006) has explained, Bourdieu began working at a time when many anthropologists and sociologists were attempting to move beyond constraint-based theories of subjectivity and the oppositional relationship between structure and agency that such theories entailed. In particular, Bourdieu grappled with Orthodox Marxism and its almost mechanistic theorization of the determination of subjectivity by economic forces. Bourdieu rejected the mechanistic determination of economic forces and in the process sought to reintroduce a notion of the acting subject typically excluded from the social analysis of that time (Johnson, 1993). However, Bourdieu also did not want to fall into the opposite trap of characterizing the acting subject as completely free of constraint, particularly class constraints. Rather than presenting structure and agency as oppositional, Bourdieu instead presented a theory that focused on the dialectical relationship between structure and agency, insisting that structures both constrain and produce the practices of people. Bourdieu does this by introducing the concept of “habitus” into our critical vocabulary.

“Habitus,” as I am using it, refers to the deeply embedded dispositions inculcated in the members of a particular class formation. It is here that I want to acknowledge my own departure from how the term has often been deployed in

social research. The term “habitus” has drifted a bit from Bourdieu’s initial use to indicate “cultural formations” more broadly. For example, Garry Crawford (2012) says that, “Habitus is similar to what other authors have described as the ‘culture’ of a particular group or society” (p. 110). Crawford then goes on to argue that what distinguishes “habitus” from other concepts of culture and makes it useful for video game audience research is that habitus is “embodied” (p. 110). I disagree with this characterization of habitus, not out of a wish to fetishize Bourdieu’s original intent, but because I feel that the utility of habitus as a conceptual tool is diluted if we lose sight of its relationship to class formations and structures.

To underscore this last point, I want to situate Bourdieu’s contributions to social theory, particularly his work on taste and distinction, in relation to the debates on class subjectivity that were going on at the time his work first appeared (and, indeed, are still ongoing). As Gibson-Graham et. al. (2000) have argued, much of the class theories and politics that Bourdieu was in conversation with during the 1970s and 1980s were concerned with a narrow range of actors and relationships. I named this body of work “Orthodox Marxism” earlier and will continue to do so for the sake of clarity. The problem with Orthodox Marxism, as Bourdieu and others engaged in social theory saw it, was its attachment to structural and determinative theories of class. Orthodox Marxism typically confined its focus to the production of surplus labor and the flow of labor value from worker to capitalist. This has been defined as “the” class process, while the positions of producer/worker/laborer and appropriator/capitalist are the only (or only significant) class positions that are recognized within this framework (Gibson-Graham et. al., 2000). From this



perspective, people's relationship to the production of surplus labor (which is fundamentally a relationship of exploitation) completely determines social life and consciousness. This positions class as the central contradiction of social life and class identities as fixed and univocal, since economic systems precede and are external to the identities that they structure.

What Bourdieu and many other social theorists have tried to do is to expand our vocabulary for talking about class and class processes and re-articulate the relationship between class and other social structures. A key aspect of this re-articulation has been a re-thinking of the relationship between class and culture. Orthodox Marxism typically characterized culture as a secondary effect of economic forces. From this perspective, culture was subordinate to and guaranteed by one's relationship to the mode of economic production. Social theorists of the 1960s (and continuing into today) rejected this view on a variety of fronts. For one, it ignored how economic forces are themselves at least partially discursive constructions, and thus culture can inform economic ideas and processes in ways that cannot be accounted for from the Orthodox Marxist perspective. Second, it failed to account for the significant scope and power of other social structures, such as race, gender, and sexuality. By centralizing class as the organizing contradiction of social life, Orthodox Marxism was not able to account for the particular effectivities of these other social structures.

These critiques of Orthodox Marxism resulted in what I will call a post-structuralist conception of class subjectivity. From this post-structuralist perspective, class subjectivity is both a material and discursive relationship to the

production, appropriation, and distribution of wealth and labor, which Gibson-Graham et. al. (2000) have identified as “class processes.” These processes interact with, and are thus shaped by, other social practices and institutions, and as a result can be articulated with others aspects of social existence that are potential sources of identity. This is to say that class subjectivity is formed in interaction with, and often filtered through, other social experiences such as gender, race, and sexuality. These and other dimensions of experience vary within and across class location in the life of individuals. As a result, class subjectivity is not guaranteed by one’s social position in a hierarchy (as though we do not inhabit different positions as laboring bodies in different contexts), nor can we assume that it is the organizing center of individual or collective identity since subjects are overdetermined - produced through the intersection of multiple social forces. Discussions of class processes, then, can be extended to a variety of cultural sites, such as the expression of aesthetic tastes, cultural legitimations of authority, and the affective investments in particular politics and identities. What each of these sites has in common, however, is a concern with what Bledstein (1976) has called the “cultural control over the release of personal and social energies” (p. 80).

This broad detour into post-structuralist conceptions of class hopefully helps establish the theoretical landscape from which Bourdieu’s particular theoretical contributions sprang. In fact, Bourdieu (1984) played a key part in shaping post-structuralist conceptions of class through his work on taste and distinction. This work was responsible for articulating new relationships between culture and class as well as expanding social theory’s ability to account for the effectivity of a

multitude of social and cultural forces, all of which are the hallmarks of a post-structuralist conception of class.

In his work on taste and distinction, Bourdieu (1984) broadly argues that society is composed of multiple fields that organize and distribute resources (both material and symbolic) according to distinct logics. These fields function semi-autonomously since the resources earned or accrued in one field do not necessarily translate to other fields, although there are often correspondences. Bourdieu uses the metaphor of “capital” to describe how these fields function semi-autonomously. According to Bourdieu’s analysis of capital, power and privilege are differentially distributed according to one’s possession of types of capital, specifically economic capital (what you own or earn), cultural capital (what you know), social capital (whom you know), and symbolic capital (prestige and social honor). Using this as an organizing framework, Bourdieu argues that different distributions of capital variably position individuals within social hierarchies that shape their access to power, privilege, and authority within specific fields.

Of particular importance to my study is Bourdieu’s emphasis upon cultural capital as a way to analyze the expression of class distinction and exclusion. As Sarah Thornton has argued, “cultural capital is the linchpin of a system of distinction in which cultural hierarchies correspond with social hierarchies” (as qtd. in Sender, 2003, p. 334). Of critical importance to Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital is his reevaluation of the concept of “taste.” Rather than simply referring to individual preferences for cultural objects, taste also reflects and reproduces cultural hierarchies. As Bourdieu explains, taste often fulfills the social function of

legitimizing and naturalizing social differences. Since one's tastes are often thought to be "natural" and "untrained," distributing access to power and prestige on the basis of one's tastes appears more egalitarian than distributing power on the basis of unearned economic capital or social position. However, as Bourdieu argues, taste often corresponds with education and social origin (and thus class) because it is learned. This in turn articulates cultural hierarchies with social hierarchies, as different dispositions correspond with different social locations and experiences. For example, Bourdieu spends much time analyzing how the "pure gaze," a privileged aesthetic disposition that emphasizes a disconnected and distanced consideration of cultural objects on their own terms, corresponds with a particular class position since it involves the removal of art from its relation to a social world, from necessity, and from the body. Bourdieu's move was to argue that this aesthetic disposition (and indeed all expressions of taste) is shaped by a particular disposition towards and understanding of the world, which Bourdieu calls habitus. This disposition towards the world, in turn, is produced by a particular class formation. This extends what are traditionally seen as "markers" of class, such as speech style, to include preferences for cultural objects and even the style in which these objects are consumed.

In Bourdieu's social theory, habitus is the link between large structural formations and the actions of people "on the ground." Habitus refers to the ways in which class formations are internalized as dispositions that shape a person's attitudes and behaviors. While this likely reproduces social structures, such reproduction is not guaranteed. This is absolutely crucial to note and is a place

where many people (myself included) have tended to misunderstand Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Some have criticized Bourdieu's framework for erring too much on the side of structure, making it difficult to account for change and movement within Bourdieu's conceptualization of habitus (e.g. Garnham & Williams, 1980, p. 222; Alexander, 1994, p. 136; McNay, 1999, p. 100). For example, Richard Jenkins (1992) has written extensively on what he perceives as this blindspot within Bourdieu's theory. While Bourdieu argues that there is a process of adjustment between a particular field (or objective, external social positions and circumstances) and the subjective habitus of an individual, Jenkins (1992) notes that fields tend to produce and privilege certain understandings of this external, objective environment. The objective social positions and experiences of a particular field, then, tend to reproduce a particular habitus in its subjects. Consequently, it can be difficult to account for how fields and the dispositions and understandings associated with this field shift and change. As Jenkins (1992) contends, it often seems as if the habitus of an individual and the external circumstances of a field are bound in a closed feedback loop, with each simply confirming the other (p. 73). Even a committed Bourdieu scholar like Sherry Ortner (2006) admits that Bourdieu, in his early work, tends to over-emphasize how the production of a subject's habitus tends to shape people to accept the dominance of others (p. 5).

I would argue, though, that this over-emphasis on structural determination in Bourdieu's early work is a result of the structural theories that he was in conversation with at the time. In short, to speak to structuralists Bourdieu phrased his critiques of that structuralism in terms that would be legible to structuralists.

Later works by Bourdieu are much more clear in their critique of structuralism by arguing that a subject's habitus is shaped in relation to the structures they inhabit but are not guaranteed by those structures. For example, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) state that:

Habitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structure (133).

What is needed, then, is not a rejection or even a significant modification of Bourdieu's theory. Instead, what is needed is an elaboration of how a person's habitus is not fixed by its origins in a particular structure but rather exists in a dynamic relationship with it. Just such an elaboration is present in Sherry Ortner's (2006) work on 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 and systems on the one hand and the smaller scale practices of social actors on the other. As stated previously, Bourdieu was 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 (2006) 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.

I do not want to focus at length on Ortner's use of the body of critical work rethinking power since I have devoted much space in previous sections to discussions of power and dominance. I will simply note that Ortner's articulation of power and practice theory focuses less on direct resistance and more on the ways in which domination is always shot through with ambiguities and contradictions. Consequently, the social reproduction of structures through the practices of social actors is always imperfect and thus vulnerable to transformation by these very practices.

Instead, I want to focus on Ortner's work articulating practice theory with the "historic turn" in social theory and anthropology and with the work of cultural studies. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) insist, habitus is the product of history. Rather than insisting that a person's habitus is "fixed" by the histories that precede it, though, Bourdieu and Wacquant instead declare that habitus is an *open* system of dispositions because of its status as the product of history. Ortner (2006) picks up this "historic" thread in her own articulation of practice theory, arguing that practice theory works best when practices are historicized. This is because socially organized practices are processual, unfolding at various rhythms and articulating with different events of different scales. Consequently, the meanings assigned to these practices may differ dramatically over time. Here Ortner references the work of Marshall Sahlins to argue that differences may exist between how practices are understood by social actors and the meanings assigned to that practice by the larger

cultural formation or symbolic order. Simply put, a particular practice may have consequences not foreseen or 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.

Similarly, Ortner draws on the work of cultural studies and media studies to develop a more precise definition of culture in practice theory. As Ortner notes, much of cultural studies relied on a mostly un-reworked definition of culture as a symbolic framework or schema that produces particular subjects who see, feel, and imagine particular things while constraining them from seeing, feeling, and imagining other things. Cultural studies' primary contribution to the thinking of culture, according to Ortner, was to deploy this old definition of culture in new narratives – narratives of power and inequality. Ortner calls this the “new-old” concept of culture and traces its roots to the Birmingham School of the 1970s, particularly the ethnographic work of Paul Willis and the media studies work of Stuart Hall.

Another key development in the re-thinking of culture in social theory came from media studies. According to Ortner, media studies conceptualizes culture as a collection of public texts that can be analyzed for the ideological work they perform. This theory of public culture depicted culture as more mobile than the classic formalist definitions of culture that characterized particular forms of culture as “belonging” to particular social groups. While cultural systems could still be



articulated with particular cultural formations by historical processes, culture's partial mobility assured that it could be deployed and appropriated in a variety of social contexts.

Consequently the ideological work of public culture, particularly its role in reproducing social structures of dominance, had to be rethought. Classic models of cultural production, wherein textual meanings are fixed by cultural producers and passively consumed by audiences, were no longer adequate to deal with the wider distribution and increased mobility of mass media like radio and television.

Perhaps the most famous critique of this classic model of cultural production is Stuart Hall's (2000) "Encoding/Decoding" theory, which conceived of cultural production and reception as separate but related moments in the circulation of cultural texts, neither of which were guaranteed by the other. As Ortner explains, the theories of culture developed by scholars such as Stuart Hall can help practice theory escape the specter of functionalism, with its emphasis on social stability and reproduction, and account for the dynamic relationship between larger social structures and grounded, individual practices.

What Ortner's elaboration and expansion of practice theory does to a concept like habitus, then, is to bring its dynamic and transformational elements into focus. Rather than referring to a static disposition locked into place by a subject's social origin, a person's habitus is instead open to change as it is subjected to new experiences. These new experiences, in turn, have the potential to modify the structures that originally produced a person's habitus and enabled the practices of social actors. The concept of habitus, conversely, can help us identify and map the

class processes that structure the practices of social actors. These class processes do not fix class dispositions so much as provide the field upon which these dispositions and their trajectories are shaped. As Bourdieu (1993) himself notes in *The Field of Cultural Production*, the relationship between different class dispositions in a particular field “receives its particular content in a particular space” (p. 72). Moreover, “the scope allowed to dispositions varies according to the state of the field (in particular, its autonomy), the position in the field and the degree of institutionalization of the position” (p. 72). Bourdieu’s model, then, is not the static model of class subjectivity described by some scholars, but a dynamic system in which structures are both reproduced and subjected to modification. Habitus is, above all, an open system of dispositions that is produced by history (i.e. “receives its particular content in a particular space”) and is shaped by the practices of social actors.

### **Summary and Synthesis**

Pulling back to examine my approach to studying gaming practices more broadly, we can see that I have assembled a flexible conceptual framework that foregrounds the relationship between large-scale structural and institutional forces, on the one hand, and the individual practices of social actors, on the other. This approach is useful not only for video game researchers, but also for scholars interested in the reception of cultural forms more generally. Consequently, I thought it would be useful to provide a brief summary and synthesis of my

conceptual framework in addition to the in-depth discussions of its constituent parts that I have focused on in this chapter so far.

This conceptual framework begins with the theories of media reception studies, particularly its conceptualization of the relationship between media practices and everyday life. Simply put, the consumption of cultural forms is not somehow separate or distinct from the other practices that compose a person's life, but are deeply imbricated in and constituent of the lives of social actors. That is, media forms do not simply reflect life after the fact, but are used to help shape and constitute that very life. Therefore, media consumption practices should not be examined in isolation, but instead must be situated in the particular social lives and histories of the people who engage with them, if we are to develop a fuller understanding of the role of media in everyday life. The way that I propose we do this is to view media as a resource for the practices that compose a person's life, which I have referred to as "everyday life" for the sake of simplicity. These resources, in turn, are not limited to the symbolic and ideological resources that have traditionally concerned media and cultural studies scholars. As contemporary media research, most significantly Lauren Berlant's (2008, 2011) work on media and public affect, has demonstrated, cultural forms and consumption practices also help construct and mobilize emotions and affects that can have a dramatic impact on the practices of social actors. As such, we must not only attend to how audiences understand and interpret the media they consume. We must also expand our objects of study to include how media make people feel and the consequences of

these feelings as people move through the other spaces and practices that compose their lives.

This conceptual approach to the reception of cultural forms, then, centers audience members and focuses on the practices that emerge from or are otherwise related to their consumption of particular media objects. As such, a central theoretical issue that it addresses is the relationship between broad social structures and institutions, on the one hand, and the agency of social actors, on the other. In contrast to viewing the relationship between structure and agency as oppositional, though, I align myself with social theories that view them dialectically, and thus are more interested in their articulations and interactions. I do this in order to better see and account for the indeterminate nature of power and its effects. Social structures and institutions, while certainly powerful, are never totalizing, meaning they can never guarantee a particular outcome as they are reproduced through the practices of social actors. Instead, they are shot through with ambiguities, which can in turn lead to modifications or transformations as they unfold over time.

In order to account for this dialectical tension between structure and agency within my conceptual framework, I employed two theoretical tools. The first was Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. *Habitus*, as the internalization and embodiment of a particular social class position, enables researchers to understand how a person's history and experiences inform their attitudes and behaviors. However, crucially, *habitus* is open to modification and transformation as a person moves throughout the world and encounters new experiences. While one could

argue that Bourdieu declines to elaborate on this due to his focus on the reproduction of social structures, his successors have developed this idea. This leads me to the second theoretical tool I mentioned at the opening of this paragraph – Sherry Ortner’s (2006) account of practice theory.

Like Bourdieu, Ortner is less interested in the opposition between structure and agency than in their articulation, in particular how they inform and shape each other. From this perspective, social structures and institutions produce the practices of individual social actors but, crucially, cannot guarantee how they ultimately unfold. Because of this, the power exerted by social structures and institutions is always shot through with ambiguities and contradictions, potentially opening these structures and institutions to modification and transformation by the practices of social actors. This resonates with the field of media studies, particularly audience and reception studies, which emphasizes the indeterminacy of cultural forms and their responsiveness to the cultural contexts in which they are received. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and Ortner’s account of practice theory can help us elaborate on this by drawing our attention to how specific cultural forces, particularly social class, are brought to bear on an individual’s practices vis-à-vis a particular cultural form and how those practices, in turn, can unfold unpredictably, sometimes reproducing social structures while at other times modifying or even transforming them.

## The Field of Video Gaming Practices

Having established my conceptual framework, I now turn towards how other scholars have described the field of video gaming so as to provide a sense of the histories and hierarchies that have shaped and continue to shape video gaming and how it is imagined in video game studies. My point of entry into discussing how the field of video gaming is structured and the variety of institutional, social, and personal processes that contribute to this structuring is simple - I will begin with my conversations with other gamers. In a preliminary interview for this study and conversations with other self-identified gamers, my interlocutors demonstrated a remarkable degree of reflexivity about how the field of gaming is structured to privilege certain kinds of gaming practices above others. My interlocutors not only demonstrated an awareness of how positions within the field of gaming are organized through the mechanisms of taste and distinction, but also how their own personal histories inform their gaming practices.

For example, an early interviewee, Raven, described a situation during *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011) where she rejected what she felt she was “supposed to do” in the game. Instead of progressing the plot of the game and pursuing quests (which the game encourages), Raven chose to hunt and gather various ingredients in order to make potions. This, in fact, comprised the majority of her activity in *Skyrim*. While this is entirely possible given the way the game is designed, Raven expressed an awareness that this was not a *preferred* choice within the game through her own acknowledgment that this choice was at odds with the imagined, dominant play style encouraged by the game and, presumably, preferred

by most players. Even within a game as reportedly open-ended and responsive to player choice as *Skyrim*, there are preferred ways of engaging with and progressing through the game that structure certain kinds of play. This may not originate only from the game itself (although the game certainly exerts some pressure), but also from its situation within the broader field of gaming, which privileges certain types of play practice above others. Mia Consalvo's (2007) work on cheating is particularly relevant here, as she uses the practice of cheating in video games to open up a broader discussion of how the field of gaming is structured. Building and expanding upon Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital," Consalvo proposes the concept of "gaming capital" to describe the dynamism of play practices among players as well as their relationship to both the game industry and its surrounding paratextual industries, notably gaming journalism and websites such as *GameFAQs* ([gamefaqs.gamespot.com](http://gamefaqs.gamespot.com)) dedicated to constructing walkthroughs and strategies for various games.

It is important to note here that not all gameplay experiences are given equal weight within the field of gaming. That is, 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. My previous work on teabagging<sup>2</sup> in the *Halo* series of games (Myers, 2017), for example, demonstrated that particular gaming styles were privileged above others within the *Halo* gaming

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<sup>2</sup> "Teabagging" here refers to a player practice popularized by the video game series *Halo* in which a player's avatar repeatedly crouches over the body of a fallen opponent's avatar to simulate rubbing their genitals on the player's corpse. Although it is generally used as a tool of shaming, it can also be considered a signifier of closeness between players as teabagging leaves a player vulnerable to counterattack and thus is typically only done among friends.

community. In particular, participants favored practices that focused on developing strategies to efficiently achieve the win conditions established by the game. These strategies were also the most frequently described as “serious” by participants. Strategies and practices like teabagging that were superfluous to, or even interfered with, achieving these win conditions were frequently denigrated by participants or otherwise marked as “frivolous.” I argued that these statements were evidence of the process of acculturation that characterizes a player’s entrance into the *Halo* gaming community. Certain practices, such as teabagging, became an index of a player’s degree of acculturation. Those who teabag were seen as not being fully aware of the norms and rules that govern “appropriate” behavior in the *Halo* community. These norms and rules of appropriate gaming behavior, in turn, intersected with heteronormative structures of gender and sexuality (since teabagging was frequently practiced by male players on other male players) and class structures of bodily propriety and restraint.

This process of acculturation is not unique to *Halo*. T.L. Taylor, in *Play Between Worlds* (2006) and *Raising the Stakes* (2012), provides an overview of player induction and social progression in both MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games) and E-Sports. She describes a system where players “are not only taught how to play, but how to *be*” (Taylor, 2006, “Becoming a Player,” para. 7, emphasis original). In essence, Taylor argues that how players engage with video games is often misrecognized as a style, when in fact how players act in games corresponds with players’ ways of being, acting, and thinking. In short, the process



of acculturation built into games and gaming communities shapes and is shaped by a player's habitus.

What is relevant to my study, then, is the type of habitus that the field of gaming privileges and how different players respond to this when their reasons for playing video games do not conform to the narrow range of dispositions that the field of gaming privileges. My work on teabagging has helped me see that many of my participants were invested in the idea that gaming was "serious." This type of gaming was then opposed to more "frivolous" gaming practices such as teabagging. These were players who, by and large, took gaming seriously in a broader cultural environment that was, and continues to be, dismissive of gaming.

This particular disposition towards games is not unique to gaming audiences. I would argue that many game developers, the paratextual industries that have arisen around games, and even much of the academic work on games are also invested in cultivating the idea that games are "serious." Now I am clearly not saying that gaming is not "important." I am writing a dissertation on the impact of gaming practices on the lives of its practitioners, so clearly I believe gaming is important! I am instead pointing to how the categories of "serious" or "important" have been deployed in the various fields that intersect in gaming communities, such as games journalism and academic research, and how that deployment frequently occludes or delegitimizes a variety of different play practices. I am also particularly troubled by the failure of much work in gaming studies to critically interrogate these definitions of "serious," particularly how "serious" often corresponds to dominant hierarchies of value.

Now, some might find it odd that I bring up dominant hierarchies of value and style in a conversation about gaming. After all, aren't video games (and the people who play them) devalued cultural objects? I would argue, though, that if we are to have a critical discussion of gaming culture, we must examine gaming *in context*. And gaming exists in a subordinate relationship with other fields of cultural production. As such, it is to be expected that there are certain homologies between the field of gaming and the fields of other, more valued cultural practices. Jenkins (1992) writes that homologies exist between fields for two main reasons. On the one hand, as people move across fields they naturally translate the logics of one field into the logic of another, leading to similarities in practices and dispositions between two fields. On the other hand, though, homologies between two fields can be produced when a stronger, more dominant field "impinges" on a weaker field. The weaker the field, the stronger this "impingement" becomes (p. 78). Thus it makes sense that the field of gaming, due to its subordinate status in the broader culture, is influenced and shaped by other, "stronger" fields of cultural production.

This "impingement" manifests in a variety of ways. I see it in both academics' and gaming journalists' emphasis on the "highly social" aspects of video games in an effort to "disprove" stereotypes of the solitary gamer disconnected from the world around him. For instance, a headline from the tech website CNET proudly shouts that "Study finds online gamers aren't antisocial basement dwellers" (Moore, 2014). More recently, a Washington Post article reported that "the myth of the lonely gamer playing in solitude is dead" (Selk & Guskin, 2018). As Adrienne Shaw (2010) has noted, studies that report to "discover" that gamers are social are often

juxtaposed with the stereotype of the “single player” or solitary gamer (p. 413). Rather than interrogate and push back against the denigration of solitary gaming practices, though, these articles and studies instead intersect with and reinforce normative ideas of proper audience dispositions and their accompanying classist and heterosexist foundations.

We also see an enormous amount of attention given in gaming studies to games, genres, and communities that privilege highly social play experiences. Well-received studies such as T.L. Taylor’s *Play Between Worlds* (2006), Mia Consalvo’s *Cheating* (2007), and Bonnie Nardi’s *My Life as a Night Elf Priest* (2010) all focus on MMORPGs (*Everquest*, *Final Fantasy XI*, and *World of Warcraft* respectively) that require players to enter virtual environments populated by other players. Similarly, a growing subset of gaming studies focuses on the burgeoning e-sports scene (Taylor, 2011; Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2012). Now I do not want to criticize these individual studies for focusing on social play practices. On the contrary, I have found them all to be provocative and inspirational. My worries are more directed at the literature on gaming as a whole and the relative lack of discussion of play experiences that differ from these highly social ones or the “serious play” of competitive *Halo* gamers. I am worried that my own play experiences and the experiences of my interlocutors frequently go unacknowledged by the broader gaming culture around us. This is not surprising given gaming’s subordinate relationship with other media and cultural practices. However, these strategies of legitimation threaten to police and diminish play practices and the subjectivities and dispositions they can produce.

Circling back to my research on teabagging, I would argue that teabagging exemplifies some of the transgressive potential of play and its ability to circumvent, recontextualize, and otherwise upend the rules of a game. As an emergent game play mechanic born from players' creative use of *Halo's* crouch mechanic, teabagging functions as an interruption in the game. While I do not want to deny its location within misogynist and homophobic discourses of trash-talking, several participants noted that it provided them with a type of perverse pleasure, or could even be used as an index of the closeness between friends. By arguing for the seriousness of first-person shooter games, though, the participants who disapproved of teabagging attempted to constrain these other ways of interacting with the game and its rules, thus limiting the types of pleasure and social attachments that one can derive from playing video games.

In this way, we can see that some of the participants of my study worked to 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 pro-social audience behavior and consumption (despite teabagging's manifestly social character). 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 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 and

undisciplined bodies and a lack of restraint, threatens the respectability that certain gamers attempt to cultivate.

This is all to say that gaming practices are a site of struggle among different groups with different interests and resources. To return to the subject of gaming capital, Consalvo's (2007) concept emphasizes the dynamism inherent in the field of gaming that is so frequently lost when other scholars use Bourdieu. This dynamism is, of course, not free from structure or power. Consalvo acknowledges the disparity of power between game players, the larger game and paratextual industries (including game magazines, strategy guides, and game mods that can reconfigure or add to a game's existing code), and indeed the broader social hierarchy beyond gaming, in defining and distributing gaming capital. However, this system of distinction is, crucially, open-ended. As Consalvo (2007) writes, "players themselves further shape gaming capital, especially as new media forms offer individuals more opportunities to share and the game world grows even larger" ("Gaming Capital," para. 7). Consalvo reminds us that Bourdieu's metaphor of capital, which can be circulated, exchanged, invested, and redistributed, can also help us think about *movement*. So while gaming and paratextual industries have greater access to and more power to distribute gaming capital, players are not devoid of agency. Most importantly, the different forms of power and capital accumulated by particular institutions are not fixed and stable, but open to redistribution. While I do not want this to devolve into a romantic assertion of audience agency, I do want to allow space in my theoretical framework for

indeterminacy and the ability of players to have some role in shaping their gameplay experiences.

The form this agency takes could simply be choosing from the variety of positions offered in a particular field. As Bourdieu has posited, fields structure the positions and standpoints available to individuals and organize these positions through the distribution of various forms of capital. In the example that I have been developing using Raven, one could view her decision to focus on collecting butterfly wings in *Skyrim* as assuming a particular position within the field of gaming. While some might argue that Raven's preference is simply a "matter of taste," Bourdieu helps us see that "matters of taste" are neither natural (i.e. they are cultivated and trained) nor are they without consequence.

Bourdieu's concepts of field and cultural capital do not only refer to what is consumed, though. Rob Drew (2005), in his study of American karaoke performance styles, also notes that cultural capital influences how one performs that consumption. This, in turn, counters certain assertions by cultural theorists (notably John Seabrook and David Brooks) that the contemporary urban middle-class blurs cultural and class boundaries through their attachment to cultural practices and objects associated with a variety of classes, most notably the working classes. Drew, however, argues that by bringing ethnography to bear upon our understanding of taste cultures, we can see that the expression of class distinction and exclusion through cultural forms and practices is much more enduring than these scholars think. Rather than viewing participation in karaoke as a symbol of

blurring class boundaries, Drew argues that different styles of karaoke and their correspondences with particular social locations actually reassert these divisions.

One could draw many comparisons between video games and karaoke because they are both highly performative and deeply embodied leisure practices and are expressive of class culture. In fact, Crawford (2012) has insisted that one of the reasons why Bourdieu's concept of habitus is useful in examining video game experiences is because of the embodied nature of video game playing. Thus while Drew argues that class hierarchies can be reproduced and modified through the performance of karaoke, I would argue that similar social hierarchies can be reproduced or modified through the embodied performance of video game play. Consequently, we must not only pay attention to what is being played, but also to how, in order to begin to draw connections between a player's habitus and their play practices.

To preview what this analysis looks like, I want to return to Raven and her habitus. As she describes it, Raven has a complicated class narrative. A biracial child growing up in poverty in suburban Connecticut, Raven did not have direct access to much of the technological resources necessary to support a gaming hobby. In fact, much of this technology was acquired secondhand from her more affluent best friend, who would give her his old gaming consoles when he upgraded to newer ones. As a result, Raven always felt "one step behind" other gamers. While other gamers and the gaming industry had already moved on to newer generations of consoles, Raven was only just discovering the previous generation.

This feeling of being “out of step” with the larger field of video gaming persists even to this day, despite the fact that at the time of our interview Raven had since “caught up” with the gamers around her. She still feels there are significant gaps in her gameplay experiences, having never played certain games that are frequent reference points for the gamers around her. This is undoubtedly compounded by her status as a biracial woman who grew up poor.

Yet despite these feelings, Raven also fiercely, defiantly identified as a gamer. She differed from some of the other people that I have spoken to, though, in her definition of what a gamer is. She insisted that one’s status as a gamer is largely dependent upon the intensity of their attachment to the medium of video games, and not their access to particular technologies or competency at playing games. This particular construction of gaming identity was, in part, influenced by her early participation in other fandom communities that were organized around an intense attachment to their media object of choice (*Sailor Moon* and *Gargoyles*, in this case) – fandom communities that were also highly gendered female. In addition to her participation in various fandom communities, Raven also had access to higher education (as of our interview, she had achieved a Bachelor’s degree in English Literature and was working towards an MA in the same field). As a result, she was deeply familiar with various critical social theories, particularly post-structural feminist scholars like Judith Butler and critical race scholars like bell hooks, both of whom she referenced throughout our interview.

I suggest that this helps explain why she was drawn to gathering herbs and collecting butterflies in *Skyrim* and why she was so defensive of this practice. Other



elements of *Skyrim's* game design, like fighting, can be quite demanding of players, requiring both precision and quick reflexes. Raven frequently derided herself as an unskilled video game player (although, having witnessed her play, I would say that she is quite skilled), and as such participation in these other aspects of *Skyrim* triggered her anxieties about her own self worth. Collecting ingredients and brewing potions is comparatively relaxing, however, since these elements require very little reflexive reaction and suffer no time constraints. While Raven was willing to acknowledge that such practices may be disparaged by others despite their popularity among other gamers (she noted the popularity of cooking and life simulation video game genres as evidence of this), Raven attributed this disparagement not to the lack of skill that these practices require, but to their association with middle-class women's labor and dominant constructions of femininity. In Raven's narrative of her taste preferences, then, we can see the complicated articulation of structures of gender and class, as gendered divisions of labor and leisure as well as access to technology shape one's access to particular video game communities and their preferred styles of play.

My interview with Raven helps us see, then, that if researchers are going to discuss how social actors inhabit particular positions with a field, they must also account for the ways in which that position is overdetermined. That is to say that a person's habitus intersects with the resources and repertoires learned from other fields and communities. As Anthony Giddens has argued, the self is made "amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities" (as qtd. in Sender, 2012, p. 17).

While Giddens was specifically referring to identity, I do not see why the same could

not be extended to habitus. This seems a logical move considering the post-structuralist framework of class subjectivity that I have constructed in this chapter. As stated above, class processes are often articulated with other social institutions and determinants, and as such a person's relationship to class processes is often variable and filtered through their experiences with gender, race, sexuality or other social structures. In this way, post-structuralist theories of class subjectivity share some of the same elements as critical theories of identity (e.g. Hall, 1996c; Couldry, 2000; Gilroy, 2004; Appiah, 2005), particularly the assertion that identities are unstable, multiple, and performative, as well as with feminist theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and post-colonial theories of hybridity (Bhabha, 2003).

However the insights and vocabularies provided by post-structuralist theories of class subjectivity, of which habitus and practice theory are a part, are particularly suited to the questions and concerns that this dissertation addresses. As we have seen in my discussion of Raven's gaming practices in *Skyrim*, her experience playing video games is embedded in narratives of snobbery and insecurity - what Sennett and Cobb (1972) have called the "hidden injuries of class" - as well as narratives of subversion, modification, and transformation. If we are going to fully address the complexity of video gaming practices, then, we must give class its due. Habitus and practice theory offer us a way to address issues of class in gaming experiences. This is especially crucial to my concern with the relationship between gaming practices and thriving because thriving (at least in the field of gaming) is frequently expressed in relationship to practices of labor and

productivity. For some, a sense of thriving is achieved through the recognition of gaming practices as valuable and “serious.” For others, like Raven, thriving is achieved through the freedom to gather virtual butterflies in peace. I believe we must hold both of these ideas of thriving in mind if we are to address the complexity of thriving’s place in the field of gaming.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY I

#### ACCOUNTING FOR CLASS AND SEXUALITY IN SURVEYS AND ACCOUNTING FOR EMBODIMENT IN DATA COLLECTION

Methods are fundamentally about the choices one makes over the course of research. What distinguishes academic research from other forms of research is not necessarily the steps we take to gather and analyze data. Rather, it is the reflexive disposition that our training as social scientists attempts to cultivate. We are trained to not only make decisions concerning how we will collect data, but to think about how these decisions are shaped by our theoretical and material circumstances and how these decisions, in turn, inform the knowledge that a research project constructs. A dissertation chapter devoted to methods, then, should be more than a step-by-step guide to how data was collected. It should also document the author's ongoing reflection on the choices made and the lines of inquiry pursued as well as the conditions under which those choices were made. It should be honest and humble about the boundaries imposed upon the research project by the author's decisions about what kinds of data to collect and how to collect that data. Perhaps most importantly, though, it should give the study's audience some degree of comfort that the author's methodological decisions were capable of producing meaningful data. This study deployed two primary methods to collect data. The first was a qualitative survey that gathered information on participants' background, gaming practices, and perspectives on thriving and self-care. The second method was a hybrid video game observation/textual analysis designed to

observe how participants constructed a video game text and the meanings that could be produced through that practice. This chapter focuses on my decision to use a qualitative survey, which will involve discussing how subjects were recruited, the affordances and limitations of this method, and the context in which this method was chosen and deployed.

### **Participant Recruitment**

The primary data set I used to analyze my participants' gaming practices and how they defined terms like self-care and thriving was created using a qualitative survey I designed and 70 participants completed. Before I can discuss the affordances and limitations of specific instruments used to collect data from participants, I will first consider how research participants were recruited for this study. This necessitates examining not only the specific ways that participants were chosen, but also how I chose to define certain individuals as relevant to my study and how I subsequently invited these individuals to participate in my study.

I initially described my ideal participants as "people who play video games" and not, as may be traditionally done, "gamers" or "the video game audience." For many, the term "gamer" and the phrase "people who play video games" are interchangeable. In practice, however, "gamer" is the subject of much debate within video game communities, as both institutions and social actors seek to define and delimit who "counts" as a gamer. As Shaw (2012) has noted, though, much of this debate relies upon the industry's construction of the "hardcore gamer" as the ideal market (p. 31). This construction of the "hardcore gamer" often resembles the stereotypes of gamers frequently found in various (non-video-game-related) media.

Juul (2010) describes the hardcore gamer stereotype as someone “who has a preference for science fiction, zombies, and fantasy fictions, has played a large number of video games, will invest large amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoys difficult games” (p. 8). Additionally, this hardcore gamer is frequently represented as a young, white, heterosexual male who is socially isolated, uneducated, and by and large unsuccessful in both his public and private life. The hardcore gamer is often frequently contrasted with the “casual gamer” who, in addition to having a “preference for positive and pleasant fictions, [playing] few video games, [committing] little time and few resources toward playing video games, and [disliking] video games” (Juul, 2010, p. 8), is often represented as female.

My goal in referencing these stereotypes is not to “disprove” them. Study after study, in the video game industry and in academia, has found that the stereotypes of the hardcore gamer and the casual gamer fail to live up to their claims to represent “people who play games” at almost every level (e.g. Crawford, 2012; Lifecourse Associates, 2014). What I was concerned with were the ways in which hailing participants as “gamers” would narrow the range of participants I could recruit for my study, so much so that I would be unable to address my research questions sufficiently. The gaming practices that this project is concerned with do not neatly correspond to the gaming practices typically associated with hardcore or casual “gamers.” Also, as Shaw (2012) has noted, there may be correlations between a “gamer” identity and other identity categories that could shape whether or not a person chooses to identify as a gamer. In her qualitative

study of gamer identification, for instance, men were much more likely to identify as gamers than women. In addition, Shaw found that the negative connotations associated with the category of gamer and with the practice of gaming more generally were relevant in shaping whether or not people identified as gamers.

My fear, then, was that by initially presenting this as a study of “gamers,” I would be denying myself access to large communities of people who, for a variety of reasons, may not identify as “gamers.” Recent events, particularly the “GamerGate” controversy, have only heightened this fear, as men claiming to represent “gamers” have systematically targeted and harassed women and other marginalized groups because of their demands for inclusivity in the field of video gaming. As a result, it would have been problematic to hail some communities as “gamers” when the term “gamer” is a term frequently deployed by groups and individuals who abuse and harass them.

For this reason, I was careful to refer to my potential participants as “people who play games” rather than “gamers.” I also intentionally excluded any references to other identity categories in my recruitment materials so as not to reintroduce hegemonic definitions of gamer identity through the backdoor. Instead, I asked my participants in the survey itself how they identified. While I did ask participants how they identified in relation to the explicit categories of race, gender, and sexuality, I made the question open-ended and encouraged participants to use the terms and categories that they were most comfortable with.

This strategy corresponded better with the post-structuralist theories of identity that are deployed within cultural studies by drawing attention to the

process of identification and acknowledging the role that individuals play in this process. Stuart Hall (1996) argues that attention to the process of identification forces us to take into account not only how discursive formations construct specific subject positions for individuals to occupy (through what Althusser has described as “interpellation” or “hailing”), but also how subjects respond to this hailing, which is never smooth but overdetermined. Hall insists that “there is the *production* of self as an object in the world, the practices of self-constitution, recognition and reflection, the relation to the rule, alongside the scrupulous attention to normative regulation, and the constraints of the rules without which no ‘subjectification’ is produced” (p. 13). Focusing on the process of identification rather than a specific identity category such as “gamer” acknowledges the role the individual plays in the process of self-constitution. It also, as Shaw (2012) argues, allows researchers to acknowledge that “an individual may identify with a variety of social categories (e.g. being a woman and Latina and bisexual and a gamer), without the *a priori* privileging of a particular category at the outset (p. 30).

So, ultimately, how did my participants choose to identify themselves?

Regarding their relationship to the identity “gamer,” the majority of my participants felt comfortable identifying as a “gamer” when explicitly asked their opinion on the term. However 25 of the 70 participants in my study declined to. Unsurprisingly, the overwhelming majority of those participants (16) were women while 8 were men and 1 chose not to identify their gender. What was surprising, though, were their reasons for refusing to identify as gamers. I had anticipated that women would be less likely to identify as gamers than men because of the exclusionary and



misogynistic practices of gamers, practices that have become more visible and public due to the infamous GamerGate event. However, only 1 woman made any reference to the misogynistic practices of gamers when discussing her refusal to identify as a gamer, whereas 2 men referenced these practices when justifying their refusal to identify as gamers. The overwhelming reason participants cited when discussing their refusal to identify as gamers was more banal and less overtly political. They simply felt that they did not devote enough time or energy to the practice to justify calling themselves gamers. For example, one participant wrote that she does not identify as a gamer because, “I’m not willing to put in that much time or effort into gaming because for me it’s not about the actual game for me. I’m more interested in having fun with others and challenging myself once in a while with interesting concepts and ideas.”

I want to unpack this response a bit because it references another issue at play in gamer identification that must be acknowledged. As I stated, responses such as this were more banal and less overtly political than expected, but that does not mean that these responses were free from the politics of gamer identification and the misogynistic assumptions embedded in its institutional definition. This respondent, Janice, invokes an implicitly gendered binary when discussing the logic of how specific gaming practices either are or are not articulated with a gamer identity. She describes her gaming practices as “having fun with others” and “challenging myself...with interesting concepts and ideas” to illustrate why she does not identify as a gamer. She contrasts this with her idea of what a “gamer” is, one who is explicitly invested in the medium of video games (perhaps to the exclusion of

others). She also implicitly connects “gamers” with competitive practices, as evidenced by her own stated preference for cooperative gaming practices (“having fun with others”) and the concomitant belief that such a preference disqualifies her from identifying as a “gamer.” This logic reflects a broader cultural trend whereby women are discouraged from participating in communities centered around technology through the persistent message that these communities are not for them (Cassell & Jenkins, 1999; de Castell & Bryson, 1999; Fron et. al., 2007a; Fron et. al., 2007b; Chess, 2011). This is done in numerous subtle yet nevertheless pervasive ways. As the respondent under discussion exemplifies, one of these ways is through the belief that certain highly gendered practices, such as the feminine-gendered cooperative practices my respondent mentions, are not welcome in these spaces. It does not matter that this is objectively false – numerous games on every platform either heavily feature cooperative modes of play or include single player modes where you only compete against a pre-programmed artificial intelligence. Competition is only one mode of interacting with video games and with other players through video games. Yet nevertheless the articulation between masculine-gendered competitive practices and video games remains prominent in popular conceptions of gamer identity and is reinforced through several institutions, including video game advertising and enthusiast journalism, that cater to and reinforce this narrow definition. Such misogynistic forces implicitly discourage women from identifying as gamers and must be acknowledged even when women do not explicitly name them.

In addition to the perception of a lack of accommodation for their preferred play styles, other participants cited that they prefer other practices to gaming, such as reading or watching sports, when describing why they do not identify as gamers. Similarly, others wrote that gamers are primarily defined by a passion for the medium of video games, a passion they do not share. All of these reasons reinforce a conclusion that Shaw (2012) drew from her study on gamer identification processes – that gamer identification is not just shaped by one’s relationship to the institutional identity of gamer but also an individual’s relationship to other identities, contexts, and the medium of games itself (p. 40). It also emphasizes another point that Shaw (2012) makes in her study on the process of gamer identification – that how participants “identify themselves...must be understood as a particular, momentary articulation of how they view themselves in relation to what they believe is the purpose of the study” (p. 32). It is also only a particular, momentary articulation in relation to what they believe a “gamer” to be. As one of my participants explained, “[Defining who a gamer is] is a bit tricky because the definition seems to have changed quite a bit over the years. Once upon a time, a gamer was simply someone who played and enjoyed video games. But now that most of the population enjoys playing some form of video game, the term has changed to reflect a smaller subset of players.” Similarly, other participants stated that they may have considered themselves gamers at one point in their lives, but current circumstances, such as the increased demands of work and family, prohibited them from playing video games.

Turning away from my participants’ relationship to a gamer identity, how else did my participants choose to identify themselves? Unsurprisingly, participants frequently invoked dominant identity categories such as gender, race, and sexuality to structure their responses. With regards to gender identity, 26 participants identified as male and 38 participants identified as female. In addition, 3 participants identified as transgendered, genderfluid, or genderqueer, while another identified as non-binary with the provision that this identity is contingent upon their political goals at the time. Turning to race, 48 participants identified as White or Caucasian, 7 participants identified as Biracial or Multi-racial, 7 participants identified as Asian, 3 participants identified as Hispanic or Latinx, and 1 participant identified as Native American. Finally, with regards to sexuality, 38 participants identified as Straight or Heterosexual, 13 participants identified as Bisexual, 8 identified as Queer or Pansexual, and 3 identified as Gay or Lesbian. These findings are summarized in the table that follows.

Table 1: Participant demographics by gender, race, and sexuality

<b>By gender</b>		
	Female	38
	Male	26
	Other (transgendered, non-binary, etc.)	3
<b>By race</b>		
	White/Caucasian	48
	Asian	7
	Hispanic/Latinx	3
	Native American	1
	Bi-racial/Multi-racial	7
<b>By sexuality</b>		
	Straight/Heterosexual	38
	Bisexual	13
	Queer/Pansexual	8
	Gay or Lesbian	3

## **Class Identification and Class Culture**

Class, which as I discussed in my conceptual framework is a significant interpretive frame for my study, was a more complicated identity to determine and is worthy of a more in-depth examination. Crucially, I invited my participants to discuss their relationship to class very differently than to other categories of difference. Whereas I used one question to directly ask my participants how they identified broadly, wherein they typically invoked the dominant identity categories discussed above, I invited them to discuss their relationship to class more obliquely and across multiple questions. I chose this strategy for several reasons, all of which deserve elaboration.

One factor that influenced this decision was my concern that my participants would not have the same fluency when discussing class that they would have when discussing other categories of difference. This is not to say that I thought my participants would not have an understanding of class – they absolutely do. Rather, I assumed that, since my participants would be predominantly (though not exclusively) American, other categories of difference, particularly race and gender, would be more salient and self-evident to my participants than class would be. As a result, other categories of difference would overpower class and threaten to displace class as my participants' primary explanatory principle for their practices. This assumption was borne from previous research on class identification processes, particularly Sherry B. Ortner's (2003) *New Jersey Dreaming*, which wrestled with the relationship between race, ethnicity, and class. In this study, which began as an investigation of class identity, Ortner found that her research

participants insisted on the centrality of their ethnicity despite Ortner's attempts to steer the conversation towards class.

This lead Ortner to conclude that, while class and other categories of difference are analytically distinct, they are so mutually implicated in the American context that it is neither possible nor desirable to pull them apart (p. 73). A reasonable audience member might then ask, "Well then why did the author of this dissertation separate class from other categories of difference in his survey? Does this not reinforce the idea that class can be somehow pulled apart from these other categories?" My answer to this lies in the pressures of research and the fact that all research is situated in a particular context. Due to the constraints imposed upon me by my health and economic resources (which I will discuss in more detail below), I was committed to using surveys to gather data rather than other methodologies deployed by studies similar in subject and scope, such as interviews or participant observation. Surveys differ from these other methods primarily in the amount of interaction they allow between researcher and respondent. The temporality of interviews and participant observation create the conditions for a dialogue to emerge between researcher and participant as both must interact with one another in real time. While the topics discussed can be, and often are, initially determined by the researcher, the dialogic nature of these methodologies creates the conditions for the emergence of topics unanticipated by the researcher that can then be pursued more deeply should both interlocutors consent. This is precisely what happened to Ortner (2003) while conducting interviews for her *New Jersey Dreaming* project. As Ortner describes it, she initially defined the project in terms of

class issues, which she wanted to bring more strongly to the forefront of ethnographic and anthropological research. However, it was her participants' persistent determination to foreground their ethnic identities as the explanatory principle of the social divisions in their community that convinced Ortner of the interrelationship between race, ethnicity, and class at the level of discourse, and that the discourse of one is frequently "hidden" within the discourse of another (p. 69). My decision to use surveys, though, naturally foreclosed the possibility that I could allow class issues to emerge indirectly through the use of dialogue. As such, to prevent issues of class from getting lost in the mix, I decided to separate out questions of class from the other, broader question of how a participant identifies.

This is one of the benefits of a survey - it allows researchers to more efficiently gather data related to their research questions through the use of direct questions. However, a casual glance at my survey (provided in Appendix A) would lead a reader to notice that I did not, actually, ask a direct question about how participants identify themselves in relationship to the category of class. Here we run into a few other complications that a survey designed to assess a participants' class identification must account for. One of these is that, as noted above, how participants identify themselves during a research encounter is a "particular, momentary articulation of how they view themselves in relation to the study" (Shaw, 2012, p. 32). This is particularly problematic when asking about participants' class identifications in a survey, since class differs from other signifiers like race and gender in that it does not often mark a person inescapably (Felski, 2000, p. 38). This is not to say that other categories of difference are stable and

coherent, merely that class is frequently understood by people as fluid and mobile, whereas there is still controversy over the indeterminacy of other identifications. Any attempt to capture a person's relationship to class by directly asking them what their class is potentially fixes what is in actuality a moving target, rendering it difficult to understand the different class fractions a person almost inevitably moves through over the course of their life. These other class fractions leave a durable impression on a person's beliefs and behaviors, as Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* orients us towards.

In addition to the problem of "fixing" the moving target of class and thereby preventing a researcher from taking note of the various class-defined social locations that shape a person's understanding of the world, another feature of class that presents a hurdle when attempting to directly inquire about class is the structure of feeling produced through class mobility. Felski (2000) argues that shame is analytically important when discussing class mobility as it is one of the dominant feelings produced through the process of class mobility. Movement up or down social hierarchies tends to inculcate feelings of shame in people as they are taught to feel embarrassed about either where they have come from or where they are going. In the case of certain class fractions like the lower middle-class (to which many of my participants either belong or have belonged at some point in their lives), these feelings of shame are intensified as the class fraction itself has historically been an object of scorn (Felski, 2000, p. 37). In a research situation where follow-up questions are precluded, I thought that directly asking for participants' class



identifications would result in near-unanimous declarations of belonging to the middle-class.

As a result of the specific challenges of asking about class identifications in a survey context, I instead asked questions related to particular markers of class. These questions solicited information about traditional, “objective” markers of class, such as the participant’s education and occupation and their parents’/caregivers’ education and occupation, as well as information about the shape of the discursive field from which they draw their understandings of class. Information about a participant’s relationship to the discursive, cultural level of class was gleaned from questions about their taste in video games and other popular media, as well as their caregivers’ attitudes towards video games.

Furthermore, when analyzing participants’ responses, I resisted the urge to strictly categorize their class identity and sought instead to use the markers of class discussed to contextualize their gaming practices. What was gained by this strategy? For one, this strategy resists the idea that class identity and *habitus* are coherent and stable. Categorizing a person’s class threatens, in my mind, to reintroduce essentialist concepts of class identity and experience through the back door. Using particular class markers to contextualize a person’s experiences, however, offers a way to investigate the relationship between a person’s class and their gaming practices without reproducing the idea that a person’s particular class position necessarily guarantees a particular practice. In other words, contextualization rather than categorization enabled me to account for class mobility and trajectory as well as the potential durability of class experiences as a

person moves through different class fractions. While messier, such a conception of class is also more valid. I think it better enabled me to account for the relationship between a person's class trajectory and their media usage, particularly their gaming practices. It also opened space to account for the durable nature of a person's *habitus*. Rather than drawing strict correlations between a person's momentary class status and their gaming practices, as a categorization strategy would encourage, I was instead able to approach questions of class and media usage more holistically.

To give you an idea about the class cultures of my participants, though, it is necessary to describe some of the factors that informed the shape of those cultures. This is not to say that these are the only factors that shaped my participants' class experiences. My participants have moved through a variety of class fractions. Some have identified with particular class fractions at certain times in their lives only to move away from them in others. Like one's gamer identity (and, I would contend, like all identities), my participants' class identities and experiences are best understood as momentary articulations situated within a specific context. Rather than using these factors as fixed markers of my participants' class locations, then, I used my participants' class narratives as a jumping off point for the more careful considerations of class experiences found in this dissertation.

To begin with, I would summarize my participants as predominantly located within the class fraction commonly known as the "lower middle-class." Rita Felski (2000) has described the lower middle-class, or *petite bourgeoisie*, as residing outside of the classical opposition between the unruly and pleasure-seeking

working classes, on the one hand, and the domineering, repressed bourgeoisie on the other hand. The lower middle-class, then, has neither the revolutionary potential of the working class nor the cultural and economic status of the bourgeoisie. As Felski writes, the lower middle-class “has typically been an object of scorn among intellectuals, blamed for everything from exceedingly bad taste to the rise of Hitler” (p. 34). It is a class fraction predominantly marked by structures of feeling organized around shame and insecurity, caught between the cultures of the middle and upper classes, which look down upon the lower middle class, and working class cultures, which are marked as vulgar and thus denied to members of the lower middle class in their efforts to maintain respectability.

Why do I locate my participants predominantly in that class fraction? Several reasons. One is the distribution of my participants’ parents’ educations and professions. As a reminder, I inquired about the education and professions of my participants’ caregivers due to my reliance upon the concept of habitus to frame class culture. A person’s habitus is formed from an early age and, although capable of transformation, is nevertheless durable. Consequently, a person’s childhood experiences with class and class cultures remains a fundamental element of their habitus, even if they have moved through other class fractions.

In total, 50 participants described their father’s (or step-father’s) education and 56 participants described their mother’s (or step-mother’s) education. The remaining participants declined to describe their parents’ education and, despite the invitation to discuss other caregivers besides parents, no one mentioned any caregivers outside of parents and step-parents. I surmise that the reason for the

greater number of mothers described is because of the social bias towards women as caregivers – several participants mentioned absentee fathers and, in cases of divorce, mothers were universally named as the primary caregiver. Of the fathers described by my participants, the distribution of the highest educational level achieved fell fairly evenly across a spectrum between terminating their education at high school and completing some form of a graduate degree: 17 fathers completed college (defined as attaining a terminal 4-year degree), 12 completed high school, 12 attended college but did not finish, and 9 at least began work on a graduate degree. Regarding mothers, the sample was more heavily weighted towards the completion of a college degree: 27 completed college, 11 completed high school, 10 attended college but did not complete a degree, and 8 at least began work on a graduate degree.

Regarding parental occupations, the majority of participants described parents who had professional or service industry careers. Only 10 participants described their fathers as having a traditionally working class career – 7 simply described their father’s career as “blue collar,” 1 said their father worked in construction, and 2 labeled their father’s work as “manual labor.” Mothers’ careers were less varied and skewed towards traditionally “pink collar” jobs – the 3 most popular careers cited were teachers (9), stay-at-home caregivers (8), and nurses (8).

In an attempt to gather more information about my participants’ inculcated disposition towards video games, I also inquired into whether or not their parents regulated their video game use, since the overwhelming majority of my participants grew up with video games. This helped me tap into their cultural attitudes towards

video games. As an emerging new media, particularly during my participants' childhood, many anxieties about media usage and popular culture have been attached to video games by various institutions and social actors. Assessing whether or not parents deemed video games necessary of regulation would help me gain insight into how video games were positioned early in my participants' lives. Were they seen as threatening? Destructive? Productive? The responses provided were almost evenly split. 33 participants stated that their parents placed some sort of limit on their video game practices, typically in the form of limiting the amount of time spent playing video games or managing what types of video games were played (e.g. banning violent video games). Meanwhile, 31 participants stated that their parents placed no restriction on their video game play. When separated by education, college educated parents were more likely to regulate game usage than to not regulate it (23 to 13), while high school educated parents exhibited the opposite tendency (16 did not regulate versus 11 who did).

### **Snowball Sampling and Diversity**

As can be seen, then, my recruitment strategy allowed me to tap into groups that are traditionally underrepresented in gaming studies, particularly women and bisexual and queer people. Race, meanwhile, was the least internally diverse category, a development that I only begrudgingly accepted and so want to devote a little space to exploring. There are at least two factors, in my mind, that lead to the privileging of white participants in my study. One was my decision to use a snowball sampling method to recruit participants. In a snowball sample, the researcher typically begins with one or more members of a desired social group and

asks that person to recommend other friends, relatives, or acquaintances in order to continue interviewing in the same social group (Press, 1991, p. 179). At the outset of my study, I initially relied on people who were members of particular identity groups as starting points to begin recruiting participants. Those groups, however, were Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer-identified people and people from working and professional class backgrounds, not members of a particular race or ethnicity.

My decision to base my snowball sample on sexuality and class identities, as opposed to other identity categories like race and ethnicity, was in turn informed by several factors. With regards to sexuality, I wanted to begin there because, as the Pardo-Harper debate and “GamerGate” controversy revealed, sexuality has become a “flashpoint” in recent conversations about gaming. Moreover, these events suggested to me that playing video games may mean something quite different for white, straight cis-gendered men than it does for LGBTQ people, vis-à-vis self-care and thriving. It also raised the question of why LGBTQ people would even see gaming as a resource for self-care and thriving when dominant groups in the gaming community are often opposed to their inclusion. This contradiction suggested to me that sexuality was a productive lens by which to frame the conversation about the relationship between gaming, thriving, and self-care and develop a nuanced, complex understanding of that relationship. Class was also an important dimension of self-care and thriving to account for given my conceptual framework and theoretical alliances. I felt that if I was going to tap into a diversity of thriving

practices, as demanded by my research questions, it would be necessary to recruit participants from a variety of class backgrounds.

My initial snowball participants, Raven and Katia, were promising starting points for the project since they both belonged to non-dominant groups with regards to their sexualities and class positions. Raven identified as a multi-racial, bisexual woman. Her class background, meanwhile, was complicated – raised in poverty by her mother, she was able to attend college and even begin a Bachelor's program that she was unfortunately forced to leave due to chronic illness. She described herself as split between multiple cultures, both in regards to her race and in regards to her class, which gave her a complex and nuanced perspective on how these cultures have informed her life chances. Moreover, as an extroverted participant in a LARPing (Live Action Role Playing) community, she could provide me with access to a diverse community that was deeply invested in gaming. Katia, on the other hand, identified as a white, bisexual woman who was raised on a farm in rural New England. Her father earned his GED from the military and worked in a plate shop while her mother attended college (but did not finish her degree) and worked in various office jobs throughout Katia's childhood. Katia attended college but, like her mother, never finished her degree, instead leaving college to work full time. She currently works as a pension analyst, a position that thankfully grants her the ability to work from home since, like Raven, Katia suffers from a chronic illness (multiple sclerosis). Katia is also deeply invested in gaming and is an active participant in several Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs), especially *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). She has

invested hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of hours in the game and has developed an intimate social circle from the other players that she has encountered and played alongside, relationships that extend to other games and even into the non-virtual world.

By starting my snowball samples with these participants, with their experiences with marginalized communities and class mobility, I had hoped to encounter other participants with similarly diverse experiences. This, however, leads me to the other factor that greatly influenced the racial composition of my sample. In asking Raven and Katia to introduce me to other people who may be interested in participating in my study, I specifically mentioned sexuality and class as two variables that I wanted to ensure were diverse and declined to mention other variables like race. At the time, I wanted to ensure that I would be able to recruit as many participants as possible and so did not want to place too many limits on my recruitment criteria. This turned out to be fortuitous since Raven and Katia were only able to help me recruit approximately 20 participants, or a third of the number that I was aiming for to help ensure valid and reliable conclusions. I ended up turning to other acquaintances who were less heavily invested in gaming communities and, crucially, were situated in regions other than New England. These included a biracial woman who currently lives in the Southeast region of the U.S. and an Eastern European professor who currently works at a small Midwest state college. Like with Raven and Katia, I specified that I was interested in people who play video games but was planning on paying particular attention to sexuality and class in my analysis.



These decisions resulted in the sample for the study, a sample that is diverse in some respects but not in others. By specifically mentioning sexuality and class during recruitment, I was able to ensure that these categories were satisfactorily varied. However, by declining to specifically control my sample population for race, my snowball sample reproduced biases towards white perspectives. The conclusion that I draw from this is that diversity along any particular social axis, such as race, is not something that can be guaranteed by the methodological tools that we use or, when using a snowball sampling method, the initial participants recruited. Diversity is a goal that requires constant intervention on the part of the researcher. It must be cultivated throughout every stage of the research process according to the particular goals of a given research project.

However, I do not want to give the impression that every research project involving human subjects must achieve a diverse sample across every conceivable axis of social difference. Such a possibility would not only be impractical in terms of the time and financial resources necessary to generate this diversity, but also would not adequately service every project's goals, and could in fact hamper specific research projects. This is why I stated at the outset of my discussion of the racial composition of my sample that it was a limitation of my study, yes, but not a disqualifying limitation. While some may argue that the sample constructed for this dissertation project is inherently biased and thus worthy of dismissal, I agree with Lindlof and Taylor (2011), who argue that such charges tend to misunderstand the goals of qualitative research more generally. One of the ways in which qualitative

research differs from quantitative research is qualitative research's emphasis on "comparability" rather than "generalizability."

This emphasis is particularly suited to the development of "weak theory" (Sedgwick, 2003). In her book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick contrasts "weak theory" with "strong theory," and suggest that weak theory is particularly suited to helping us see openings and 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, suggest 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, rather than a theory that seeks general applicability. Such a theoretical project is particularly suited to both the goals of my dissertation project and its practical constraints. Thus while the arguments that I am making and the theories that I am developing are necessarily limited by my project's small, non-random sample, I would put forth that such a sample size and

the specificity it afforded has given me a greater ability to see the fractures and transformative possibilities that individual practices always introduce into broader structures of domination. Moreover, since all of my participants were presented with the exact same questions, due to my reliance on surveys to gather data, it was easier to compare and coordinate my participants' responses than they would have been using other methodologies, like interviews, which tend to be fairly specific and unique. Such outcomes are very much in line with this dissertation's goal of investigating alternative practices and meanings that are frequently ignored or dismissed in the gaming community, the academy, and the broader culture.

### **We Need to Talk About the Body in Qualitative Methods**

One of the most critical choices made during the data gathering period of my dissertation was my decision to use surveys to gather information about my participants rather than interviews, which other researchers in my field have more frequently deployed. The primary motivation for this decision, however, was not theoretical but practical – my physical health demanded that I use a less physically intensive methodology than interviews. As such, I feel it is crucial to discuss my body and the way it has shaped both the data I collected and the resulting written account of my research. This is not an unheard of move in qualitative research, particularly since the reflexive turn of the 1970s and 1980s demanded social science researchers account for how their particular positions in the field affected their work. Much of this work has come from ethnographers and anthropologists that have taken up the problem of gender and sexuality in fieldwork and how their associated experiences both challenge conventional, “objective” accounts of

ethnographic work and open up new sources of knowledge (e.g. Fine, 1993; Newton, 1993; Kulick and Willson, 1995; Goode, 1999; Kendall, 2009). In turn, numerous scholars have extended the insights into embodiment found from more traditional ethnographies to the study of virtual and online communities (e.g. Baym, 2000; Kendall, 2002; Markham, 2005;).

As Annette Markham, one of the premier ethnographers of online communities, has argued, “perception always involves embodiment, and this cannot be set aside in the context of studying life online” (Markham, 2005, p. 809).

Researchers have paid less attention, however, to the actual physicality of the body and its capabilities. Considerations of the body and its limitations and affordances are frequently excluded from written accounts of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The consequences of this exclusion are severe, as Laura Ellingson (2006) explains. Driven by her own experiences with chronic pain, illness, and disability, Ellingson argues that the erasure of the body from traditional qualitative research accounts “obscures the complexities of knowledge production and yields deceptively tidy accounts of research (p. 299). Ellingson contends that qualitative research writing is still haunted by the idea of the “disembodied researcher” and its assumptions of a body (and, by extension, a subjectivity) that is unrelated to the practice of knowledge production.

Despite the “narrative turn” in qualitative research writing, which acknowledges that researchers are imperfect social actors interpreting their observations from a particular perspective (Denzin, 1997), Ellingson (2006) contends that much qualitative research writing still follows a strict social science

approach that declines to account for the body's presence in research. It does this in two ways. It can erase the subject and body of the researcher entirely from the account through such conventions as using the passive voice. Conversely, it can allow a heavily circumscribed and cursory acknowledgement of the author's body and subjectivity, for example by using the personal pronoun "I," without carefully examining the body through which the research practice was performed. Both methods diminish the presence of the body in research accounts and reproduce the fiction of a disembodied, neutral mind that is capable of dispassionately and objectively observing the world around it (p. 301). The consequences of these practices, according to Ellingson, are nothing less than the reproduction of the fiction that research can be conducted from a neutral, unmarked position and the concomitant silencing of marginalized voices that, by necessity, cannot remain unmarked: "When...researchers' bodies remain unmarked – and hence naturalized as normative – they reinscribe the power of scholars to speak without reflexive consideration of their positionality, whereas others' voices remain silent or marginalized by their marked status" (p. 301).

For the final section of this chapter, then, I want to focus on my body, its affordances and limitations, and the ways in which my relationship with my body shaped the knowledge produced over the course of this dissertation project. I do this for several reasons. For one, the genesis of this project lies in my relationship with my body, specifically my own experiences with injury, disability, and mental illness. To cope with chronic pain or ameliorate the bursts of panic and periods of depression triggered by various environmental stimuli and internal chemical

reactions, I would turn to video games. Playing a game like *Diablo III* (Blizzard 2011) at 3 o'clock in the morning when I could not sleep from pain was one of the few comforts I could find when I herniated a spinal disc in my neck. Even now, after recovering from that injury, I find myself thinking back to those moments with something approaching fondness. Similarly, whenever I have the luxury of anticipating a panic attack, I drop everything and turn on a video game to focus my attention elsewhere and lessen the intensity of a particular trigger. Playing a video game is arresting enough to hold at least some of my attention and creates time and space for my brain to process the event that precipitated the panic, oftentimes interrupting my body's panic response. It was experiences like these that led me to think about the relationship between video games and survival, and by extension, self care and thriving. These experiences made me curious about whether or not other people used video games in a similar way and the conditions that could give rise to such a practice. And they lent this project a particular urgency for me, a drive to add these experiences to current conversations about media usage and culture.

Yet how we talk about the body's role in research is just as important as acknowledging its presence. Drawing on post-structuralist feminist theories of embodiment and performativity (e.g. Butler, 1993; Grosz, 1999; Balsamo, 1999) and research practices like autoethnography (e.g. Denzin, 1997; Ellis, 1997; Ellis and Bochner, 2000), Ellingson encourages qualitative researchers to write about their own bodies in their research accounts. Such a practice is integral to reflexivity, which Ellingson (2006) describes as the continual reminder that research is always conducted from a particular perspective and the practice of thinking through the

implications of a given researcher's specificity (p. 307). To this end, Ellingson recommends three research writing methods that researchers can use to make their bodies visible. One is to write autoethnographically about the research process, using a layered organization that alternates between traditional social science writing and brief narratives that dramatize the research process, thereby problematizing the researcher-researched distinction and showing how research is conducted under and implicated in specific conditions. This is the route that I have chosen, mainly because such a practice forces me to consider details and experiences that are typically erased from a traditional research account but were vital in determining the shape of my research project. By bringing these experiences to the foreground, I want to not only describe my own research practices more fully, but also challenge what I see as the normative body, which includes the brain and its processes, that underlies most qualitative "best practices." In short, I want to acknowledge that best practices assume a particular body, a body that the researcher may or may not inhabit throughout the research process. I want to acknowledge that knowledge production always occurs under particular conditions that inevitably influence the form and content of the produced knowledge. My small contribution to this political project of de-centering a normalized, unmarked body from qualitative methods research is to make visible my own body and its experiences with pain, injury, illness, and disability and map how those conditions informed the written research account you are currently reading.

## **Pain and Its Uses in Qualitative Research**

I can now trace the length of my C6-C7 nerve down my body with precision. It starts at the base of my neck and moves down the back of my left shoulder blade. From there it travels down the back of my arm through my left tricep before wrapping around to the front of my arm near the elbow. It finally travels down the front of my forearm before terminating in my left index and middle fingers, whose movement and strength the nerve controls. I know the path this nerve takes through my body because every millimeter of my C6-C7 nerve was on fire for the better part of four years.

The C6-C7 nerve gets its name from where it enters the spine and connects to the central nervous system. It enters the spine between the sixth and seventh cervical vertebrae, the small bones that form the spinal column. The sixth and seventh cervical vertebrae are considered the last two vertebrae of the neck. They are delicate bones that are loosely connected to allow for the neck's articulation and range of motion. Between each vertebrae is a rubbery disc that acts as a cushion for these bones. These discs act as shock absorbers, cushioning the spine from the daily shocks and strains that accompany the mundane acts of moving and twisting we all do as we move through the world. At the beginning of 2013, for reasons I still do not know, my C6-C7 disc slipped from its place and bulged into the left side of my neck.

My body hated this. I know this because my body made its displeasure known in a dramatic fashion, by inflaming the tissue around where the disc was now inappropriately placed. By itself I imagine this would have been tolerable, if not



comfortable. An inconvenience, to be sure, but a manageable one. The problem, as I painfully discovered, was the C6-C7 nerve. For when my C6-C7 disc bulged out into my body and my body responded by inflaming the tissue around my disc, it narrowed the channel where the nerve entered my spinal column. The medical term for this, as I learned from my first MRI report, is “stenosis.” The stenosis that resulted from my herniated disc severely compressed my C6-C7 nerve. This compression sent searing pain all along the length of my left arm.

Now I wish I could describe this pain in a detached, objective way. I wish I could describe my pain using some sort of metric that has been established and refined in the medical community for decades. I cannot. I cannot because, as I learned over the course of several years of doctor’s visits and physical therapy sessions, pain is deeply and inextricably subjective. It cannot be abstracted from the body and compared across different bodies. We all respond to conditions like a herniated disc in unique and specific ways. What may be simply uncomfortable for one person can be debilitating for another. The best way that doctors have developed to describe and measure pain is to ask patients to compare the intensity of their pain to their previous experiences with pain and determine whether it is more or less. A 10 point scale is used, with 1 meaning “no pain” and 10 meaning “the worst pain you can imagine.” So I will use this scale, with the caveat of course being that it is imperfect and imprecise.

On average, my pain level hovered around a 6. This is a pain that cannot be ignored or forgotten when the mind is focused on other tasks. It is ever present, demanding attention. Depending on the events of a particular day, the pain would

climb to an 8 or 9. I remember one night walking into my bedroom at 1 am, my arm on fire, weeping from pain and asking my partner to take me to the doctor in the morning because I was almost out of pain medication. When on narcotics such as hydrocodone (more commonly known as “Percocet”), the drug I best responded to, my pain level would dip to a 4. This is a much more manageable level. A level 4 pain could be shunted to the back of my mind for brief periods of time so that I could focus on the other tasks that I needed to attend to, such as writing or grading essays. At my worst, I needed to take a 5mg tablet of hydrocodone every 4 hours to function.

This treatment, however, was not sustainable. As a narcotic, hydrocodone has a high risk of addiction and dependence, and so my primary care physician monitored my intake of the drug closely over the duration of my treatment and recovery. Every two weeks I would need to see him to receive another prescription. Initially, when I was unable to see him due to the heavy workloads of a doctor working at a university health clinic, I had to go to walk in care and wait anywhere from 1 to 4 hours to see an unfamiliar doctor and request a refill of narcotics to sustain me until my next appointment with my primary care physician. This, of course, triggered concerns amongst the other doctors in the clinic. This led to me having to sign a legal document saying that I would only request narcotics from my primary care physician. Breaking this agreement would result in my immediate termination as his patient.

These events were further complicated by my mental and emotional condition. Prior to my injury, in 2010, I was officially diagnosed with moderate

anxiety and began treatment. This treatment consisted of both medication and therapy. By the time of my injury, the medication was ongoing but the therapy was not. Anxiety is like any other chronic illness. Some days it is barely noticeable. Other days, due to various triggers, it can be exasperated. My relationship with narcotics, as I learned, was something that could easily trigger my anxiety. Sitting in my doctor's office every two weeks discussing my pain level and how many pills I would need, I would feel debased. I felt like an addict, begging for drugs, always afraid that someone else would decide that my pain was insufficient to require treatment. I learned how to perform my pain for others, to keep my neck still and unbent, to hold whatever device I was looking at directly in front of my face rather than in a lap, to wince and breathe heavily when moving to communicate the pain. I was relieved when, four months into my injury, my first MRI confirmed that my C6-C7 disc was herniated. I now had visible evidence that something was wrong. I was no longer solely dependent upon my fragile testimony.

These feelings would surface again every time I took a prescription for hydrocodone to be filled at my pharmacy. Every visit the fear would emerge – “They won't give them to me this time. They will decide that I have reached my limit. I am taking too much.” The thoughts would spiral and continue to swirl until I had the pill bottle in my hand. Safe for another two weeks. Then the process would repeat again. On and off. For four years.

Throughout this ordeal, I needed to work. To maintain my health insurance coverage, I worked as a teaching associate at my university. During the majority of this period I worked in a university first year writing program, teaching students the

fundamentals of college writing. I was expected to teach 1 or 2 classes (depending on the semester) of 15 students each as well as attend training sessions every week. The grading load was heavy – the course consisted of 4 essays between 4 and 6 pages long, each with multiple drafts that I needed to comment on. Due to the nature of my injury, though, holding my neck at an angle for extended periods of time was inadvisable. And so what little energy I had to work each day was consumed by the bare minimum needed to keep my classes running. During this time I was also supposed to be moving forward on my dissertation proposal, but that was impossible given my teaching demands. I could not meet the physical and cognitive demands of intensive reading and writing. My proposal was placed on hiatus unofficially, which felt close enough to a failure to sting. My mood suffered. My anxiety spiked. I began to feel depressed.

Mercifully, there were extended periods of time where my symptoms abated long enough to produce some work on my dissertation. Four months after my injury first manifested I underwent a medical procedure where steroids were injected directly into my spine. This did not correct the herniated disc but it did ease the inflammation around it enough so that the tissue was no longer violently squeezing my C6-C7 nerve. Although I did not know it at the time, this would only grant me about a four month reprieve. During that time, I was able to rest, recuperate, and slowly build up my tolerance for extended periods of intensive reading and writing. But just as I was beginning to hit my stride, my symptoms began to return. Once again, my life contracted to the size of my injury. I resumed

taking hydrocodone, teaching my courses, and sitting very, very still in a recliner whenever I could.

This cycle of pain-steroids-rest would repeat three times, with each period of rest lasting between 4 and 7 months. I received my last steroid injection in November, 2014. It was my last because, for the first time, the injection failed to have any noticeable impact on my pain. After exhausting every other possibility, surgery was now my only option. I was referred to a neurosurgeon, who agreed that an anterior cervical discectomy and titanium fusion was necessary. In layman's terms, this meant the surgeon would enter my spine through the front of my neck (less muscle to cut through meant less pain and therefore a quicker recovery), cut out the offending disc, decompress the nerve (i.e. cut away the irritating tissue), and attempt to stabilize the spinal column by fusing the bones together directly using a paste made from cadaver bone and a small titanium plate.

In the middle of February, 2015, I had my first operation. My partner would later inform me that the surgery took much longer than was planned due to the severity of my injury. When I was in recovery, the neurosurgeon informed him that my disc was one of the worst he had ever seen – it was twisted and sinewy with bone spurs that made removing it challenging. I am oddly proud of this. Again, it was tangible evidence that this was not in my head – that I was not simply using this as an excuse to dodge the difficult work of preparing a dissertation. Within the medical discourses of our time, my injury was knowable and my pain understandable. The benefits of this cannot be underestimated. Despite my fears and anxieties, I was fortunate enough to have doctors who, for the most part, believed what I said and

did their best to help me feel better. I know others who have not been so fortunate in their dealings with medical professionals.

After that first surgery, I was optimistic. After a month of paid medical leave, I resumed teaching and working on my dissertation prospectus. I created the prospectus under the assumption that I would have a “normal” body once I began gathering evidence. This seemed reasonable – my surgery was completed and I had every reason to believe that it was a success. My pain was no longer overwhelming and I was able to wean myself off of hydrocodone (a process that lasted three months). In my prospectus, I stated that I planned to gather data from participants using interviews and observations – classic methods for the qualitative audience research that I was positioning my project as. During my defense in September of that year, I do not recall any of my committee members commenting on those methods. Most of the discussion vis-a-vis methodology revolved around my recruiting methods and how I would interpellate and define the demographics of my participants (a process I have discussed above). My methods for gathering data, on the other hand, were so conventional as to be unremarkable. Other studies like my study had collected data this way and were successful, so it followed that these methods were appropriate.

Once that was finished, I began the challenging tasks of recruiting participants and interviewing them. During this period, though, I would also learn that my recovery from the surgery that I thought would definitely resolve my bodily problems was not going well. My body, it seems, was rejecting the spinal fusion. The spinal fusion was necessary to stabilize the spinal column. Otherwise I risked

having my spine collapse down onto my battered C6-C7 nerve, sending me back to square one. As I said before, the fusion was attempted using donated cadaver bone. My body did not like this, apparently, and simply absorbed the bone without fusing, leaving my spine in a precarious position. Even using a medical device called a bone growth stimulator accomplished nothing. Another surgery was needed. I scheduled it for the last day of February, 2016, a little more than a year after my previous surgery.

This surgery would be much more traumatic, both physically and emotionally. Instead of an anterior discectomy, my surgeons would need to perform a posterior surgery. This meant they would have to cut into my spine from the back, with all of its attendant muscles. Also, rather than use cadaver bone to perform the fusion, they would use bone extracted from my hip, which meant another incision in my lower back, with all of *its* attendant muscles. This resulted in a much more intensive recovery. Rather than going home that day, I would need to stay in the hospital overnight to make sure that my pain levels were manageable. Once I was discharged, I would need to spend a significant period of time (more than the month I had spent previously) resting. No exercise. No driving. My days once again consisted of being very, very still. About all I could manage to do through the haze of narcotics was watch television. Even playing video games was too overwhelming – my muscles would tense from the excitement and exacerbate my pain.

Again, throughout all of this, progress on my dissertation research project was impossible. I could barely leave my bed, let alone recruit participants and conduct interviews. The immobility and dullness began to significantly impair my

mood. As a good student, I had underestimated how central my productivity had been to my sense of self-worth. Now, with my research project screeching to a halt for the foreseeable future, I felt worthless. I was not working. I was not earning money. I was sitting all day, feeling like a burden as my partner went to work and took care of me. Already prone to anxiety, I now slipped into a deep depression. By the following June, simply leaving my bed was an effort. I distinctly remember one day, at or near my lowest, when I spent six hours trying to motivate myself enough to take a shower. Six hours telling myself to get up, hop in the shower, you don't even have to wash your hair, just turn on the water. Six hours fighting the dread that that task summoned within in. What is usually a source of relief and renewal for many became an impossible task for me. I might as well have been trying to climb a sheer cliff in the rain. After six hours of trying to coach myself into a shower, I gave up. It was then that the wrongness of this situation crystallized. This was not how I typically responded to things. This was not normal. Later that week, at the suggestion of my partner, I contacted my former therapist and scheduled an appointment to meet with her. At my therapist's suggestion, I also met with a psychiatric medicine prescriber and revised my medication intake. By January, 2017, we had finally hit upon a combination of therapy and medication effective enough for me to move throughout my day without feeling a crushing dread at the thought of performing the simplest of tasks. It was also around this time that I received word from my neurosurgeon. The surgery was a success. My spine had fused. I was officially healed.



Throughout my recovery, an image kept appearing to me that felt like the best representation of my situation. It helped me to understand my situation, to control and delimit it. I saw myself standing in a black space. Perhaps it was the bottom of a pit. Regardless, the space had a floor and it felt like the bottom of *something*. All around me, stretching as far as I could see, was the broken glass of my life. From the time I was diagnosed with my herniated disc and, subsequently, depression, my life was in a constant state of shattering. But, in late 2016, almost 4 years after my moment of injury, I began to feel like I could start cleaning up the shards. And that is what I am still doing.

So, to summarize the timeline that I have established:

- January 2013: Injury
- May 2013: First steroid injection; temporary recovery
- September 2013: Symptoms return
- November 2013: Second steroid injection; temporary recovery
- September 2014: Symptoms return
- November 2014: Third steroid injection; no recovery
- February 2015: First Surgery
- September 2015: Successful Prospectus Defense; data collection commences
- December 2015: First surgery classified as a failure; data collection interrupted indefinitely
- February 2016: Second Surgery
- June 2016: Officially diagnosed with depression; treatment commences
- December 2016: Recovery

Why do I discuss this? What is its relevance to this research project? What is the relationship between the knowledge constructed over the course of this research project and the body that constructed it? To put it simply, my body and its wounds and chemical imbalances determined the boundaries of my research project

and the methods available to me. Due to my body's condition, I could not only consider what qualitative tools were best suited to answer my proposed research questions. My process had to be more iterative and considerate of my body's condition. To illustrate, I will describe the context surrounding my decision to use online qualitative surveys to gather data on my participants' video game practices and interior perspectives.

In my original prospectus, I had proposed to gather participant data using interviews. This method has a long and well received history in the field of media audience research. Also, given my interests in peoples' cultural contexts and interior thought processes, I believed that interviews were the best opportunity to address my research questions due to their ability to create a dialogue between researcher and participant and potentially create a more textured and surprising account than other methods, such as survey, could construct. However, I neglected to account for the role of my body in constructing this data, specifically the demands that such a method would place on my body. Interviews, while not the most physically demanding exercise imaginable, still have a significant physical component, a physical component that a more normative body could easily handle and thus ignore. For one, interviews require the researcher to be present with the participant in some fashion. Due to my physical limitations, in-person interviews were a tremendous hurdle as they would require me to drive to an agreed upon location and sit in an unknown environment for at least an hour, then drive back home. The other option, tele-conferencing via telephone or online interfaces such as Apple's Facetime, Google's gchat, or Skype, would be more manageable but also

emotionally demanding. For reasons I do not fully understand, tele-conferencing activates my anxiety far more than face-to-face conversations do. Since I was already extremely emotionally fragile when I felt ready to begin collecting data, tele-conferencing and its accompanying anxiety spike was daunting.

What finally eliminated interviews as an option, though, was the effort required to transform the interviews into a form that could be easily analyzed. Since interviews, whether conducted in person or via tele-conferencing, occur through the medium of speech, it is necessary to record them so that they can be analyzed at a later date. In order to facilitate this, interviews are typically transcribed into a script so that they can be coded and notated. Transcribing, however, is a tremendous physical undertaking for someone whose neck is compromised. A one to two hour interview could take me upwards of five hours to transcribe, depending on various factors. Multiply that by 30 (the general number of interviews that I was aiming for), and you have 150 hours of labor devoted to simply transforming my data into a useable state. That is 150 hours of sitting in front of a computer and typing, deleting, fast forwarding, rewinding, and slowing down. Even with an ergonomic work station established, I knew that this amount of labor was too burdensome for my body.

I laid out these issues with my advisor and she agreed that, in my present condition, interviews would be nigh impossible. Rather than abandon the research project, though, I decided to honor my limitations and seek out alternative methods for gathering the type of data I needed. The method that seemed the most promising was online qualitative surveys. The construction of the survey was

relatively simple – I simply adapted my interview schedule, which only required some small adjustments and modifications to wording (see Appendix A for a copy of my survey). Recruitment also was facilitated by using an online survey. Instead of trying to coordinate a time and place where both I and a participant could be present simultaneously, I was able to create a survey using SurveyMonkey and distribute a link to the survey through various channels, including the social media accounts of myself and other participants. This enabled participants to take up the survey at their leisure as well as interrupt and return to the survey should they need to. This was a considerable advantage since the survey was quite long. It contained 26 open-ended questions and took around an hour to complete (according to a sample of my participants). Having my survey exist on a website that enabled users to log in and out empowered participants to more easily break down and slot the survey into their own specific schedules, which helped mitigate the hour long demand of the full survey and thus helped ensure a high completion rate of the survey.

Of course, a survey is not without its limitations. Due to the asynchronous nature of the survey and the anonymity of my participants, I was unable to ask follow up questions to clarify and deepen my participants' responses. What I saw was what I got. Similarly, any confusion a participant may have had about a question I was asking could not be easily remedied. Just as I had to rely solely on my own interpretation of a participant's answers, my participants could only rely on their interpretations of my questions. This fractured our ability to co-construct meaning and introduced a certain amount of ambiguity into my data.

Also, the asynchronous element of the survey and the anonymity guaranteed to my participants meant that potential tangents introduced by my participants could not be further explored or developed. The dialogic nature of face-to-face interactions can often give rise to topics and feelings unanticipated by the researcher. The researcher can then decide to either explore these tangents further or leave them be should they be too far afield from the particular goals of the research project. This reduces the possibility of surprise, of encountering the unanticipated and unforeseen in a research project, which can often be a great opportunity to further develop and complicate our understanding of a particular phenomenon and how we theorize it. That is not to say that I did not encounter surprises when analyzing my participants' responses. I absolutely did, as I will discuss in later chapters. However, those surprises could not be used to further develop and refine later participant encounters, and so their ability to impact the trajectory of my research project was subsequently limited.

Yet what was gained through online surveys? For one, I was able to gather more participants than I had initially projected, thus increasing my ability to recognize significant patterns by giving me more data to work with. Another benefit was a greater ease in comparing the responses of different participants. Interviews can often feel *sui generis*, as each interview takes on its own shape and form as the conversation unfolds. As such, it can be difficult to compare the responses of different participants, as there are frequently differences between *what* the participants are responding to. This is not a problem for online surveys, though, which guarantees that all participants are at least responding to the same questions,

worded in the exact same way. This was particularly beneficial for my project, which is interested in how different social contexts and identities shape people's video gaming practices.

But perhaps the greatest affordance of the online survey, though, was the ability to continue with my research. Due to the physical demands of interviewing, I risked being incapable of completing my dissertation if I insisted on doing interviews. My body was (and still is) unruly and unpredictable. While I was, for the most part, healthy throughout the process of gathering and analyzing data, I had no way of predicting that that would be the case. When accounting for the risk of further debilitation and incapacitation, I decided that some knowledge was better than no knowledge at all.

This brings me to what I feel are the significant takeaways of my experience performing qualitative research with an unruly, injured body. What follows are my attempts to theorize my experience and extrapolate the core ideas that will inform (hopefully) how I perform qualitative research in subsequent projects. These are not "best practices," because as I have stated previously I believe that the concept of "best practices" presumes a particular, normalized body. They are instead ongoing issues that I feel my qualitative research, and perhaps all qualitative research, would benefit from engaging with.

The first idea is that bodies are aleatory and unstable, as opposed to fixed and stable. As my story shows, my body moved through a variety of states over the course of my research project – from injury to treatment to recovery. This was not a linear process, but an iterative one. I would frequently move back and forth

between these various states, all the while having to make decisions about the shape of my project under these shifting conditions. This is in line with poststructural feminist theorizing of the body and embodiment (e.g. Battersby, 1999; Birke, 1999; Butler, 1999), which explicitly resists representing the body as a fixed, solid entity. For example, Birke (1999) argues for an understanding of the body as a self-organizing entity that responds to changes in the environment in an active way rather than simply the passive unfolding of a genetic blueprint. Similarly, Battersby (1999) has argued that we should think of the body as a “dissipative system” in relation to its environment, where differentials of energy flows cause new states or forms to irrupt out of potentialities. These representations of the body challenge traditional conceptions of the body as well as its boundaries and the concomitant relationship between self and other. No longer an opposition, self and other exist in a mutually determining relationship as both inform one another.

Another takeaway from my experience is that the body has an agency of its own and is not simply the “property of the mind-self” (Ellingson, 2006, p. 306). In traditional research accounts, researchers tend to emphasize the mental processes and decisions that shaped the research project. From this perspective, the mental/intellectual aspects of theorizing, data collection, and analysis are privileged as the most important challenges that researchers wrestle with when constructing a research project. The body of the researcher is rarely represented in research accounts as an active agent that exerts its own force on the research project. Yet this is precisely what my body did over the course of data collection, analysis, and theorizing in this research project. It constantly asserted itself through the

mechanisms of pain and relief, communicating what was and was not sustainable. My methodological decisions were not born solely from intellectual considerations of the “fit” between my research questions, theoretical framework, and methods of data collection. I also had to take into account the affordances and limitations of my body and construct a research project that it could adequately perform. However, I recognize that this is not a revolutionary argument. As I have noted, other researchers, most notably Ellingson (2006; 2017), have written about the ways in which their bodies and its capabilities have informed their research practices. What I want to use my experience to do, though, is to extend this conversation to include considerations of mood disorders and other neurological challenges. My research practice was informed not solely by my physical injury, but also by its intersection with my chronic experiences with anxiety and depression. The brain and its neurochemistry, after all, are fundamentally physiological and that physiology can shift and exert its own effects, as can any other part of the body. As with other feminist theorizations of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), though, I want to stress that this was not simply an additive process. My physical injury and my mood disorders intersected to create an experience that was qualitatively different from the parts of its constructions and I do not, indeed cannot, think about them separately.

I do not want to end this chapter, though, by only discussing the limitations that my body placed upon my abilities to construct knowledge. I feel it would be a disservice to neglect the affordances of doing research with an injured, anxious, depressed body. The single greatest benefit of conducting research under these



conditions has been an increase in my capacity to empathize with my participants and the subsequent ability to notice phenomena and experiences that frequently go unobserved. Just as Ellingson (2006) noted that her experiences with chronic pain and illness became a point of connection between herself and her subjects that enabled them to develop a stronger relationship, so too has my experience with pain, injury, depression, and anxiety sensitized me to those experiences in my subjects. The significance of this, I feel, cannot be overstated. As Ruggiero (2000) has noted, a significant theme that has emerged from decades of media audience research, particularly the uses and gratifications tradition, has been that individuals frequently use the media to manage their mood. Indeed, the most frequently stated reason for playing video games by my participants was to alleviate stress, anxiety, and depression. As a person who has used, and continues to use, video games for this purpose, and also as a researcher trained in qualitative research methods and social and cultural theory, I am in a unique position to observe, describe, and theorize this practice.

This brings me to the final takeaway of how a greater consideration of the body can benefit qualitative media research. Simply put, such a consideration can open us to new experiences and thus new areas of study and research. Without the experience of sitting in front of a television at 3 o'clock in the morning, desperately trying to distract myself from the searing pain in my left arm with a game of *Diablo III*, I do not think I would have imagined this research project. My own vivid experiences using video games to survive another day inspired me to notice how other people use video games for the same purpose, if under vastly different

conditions. It was the experience of my embodiment, then, that provided the impetus for this project. I am not saying that every qualitative research project has to focus on the researcher's body to the extent that I have in this chapter. Different projects require different tools. But I do think that most, if not all, qualitative research projects would benefit from a greater consideration of the role the researcher's body plays in the construction of knowledge. At worst, a consideration of the body can give the researcher a deeper understanding of their own position in relation to their subjects, with subjects here meaning both the researcher's chosen topic of inquiry and potential participants. At best, though, a greater attention to the body can open us to new experiences and practices that would go unobserved otherwise, and in turn foster a greater understanding of and empathy towards the people we interact and construct knowledge with over the course of our projects.

## CHAPTER 4

### PLAYING TO SURVIVE, BUT NOT TO THRIVE

#### GAMING PRACTICES UNDER NEOLIBERALISM

Before delving into the details of the survey data collected from my participants and the themes, patterns, and discontinuities that emerged during my analysis of the data, I want to share a moment that occurred during my proposal defense that, in hindsight, turned out to be prescient. As we were wrapping up and gathering our things to leave, a committee member turned to me and, in a conversational tone, recommended a recent blog post from a colleague that she had come across (Cale, 2015). In this blog post, the author, Grace Cale, made a distinction between self-care and self-soothing, noting that they were not necessarily synonymous with one another. Self-care practices, Cale argued, are the practices that make us do our best, not necessarily the practices that make us feel better. As such, self-care practices like time management or budgeting may actually harm a person's mood in the present (because they require an active engagement with things that may trigger one's anxiety or depression), but serve to help them flourish and prosper in the long run. In fact, the categorization of some activities (like playing video games?) as self-care may be a misrecognition, since our attachment to those categories may be preventing us from engaging in other practices that improve our lives.

There is a lot to unpack in this casual encounter that nevertheless stayed with me over the course of this dissertation project. Now, at the conclusion of this iteration of my research project, I have a clearer understanding of what my

committee member was trying to communicate in that moment (I think, I hope). Perhaps colored by Lauren Berlant's (2011) observations and warnings in *Cruel Optimism*, my committee member was focusing my attention on the non-necessary connection between pleasure and relief, on the one hand, and thriving and prosperity, on the other. As a (relatively) young cultural studies scholar interested in media reception practices and cultural change, I have a tendency to fall into the trap of constructing a binary opposition between structure and agency and uncritically celebrating any reception practice that seems to result from the exercise of an individual's choice. One way to interpret my committee member's comment, then, is as a reminder to contextualize my participants' practices and interpretations of those practices in the broader cultural structures and systemic forces that shape them without ever completely determining them. My committee member was perhaps encouraging me to look at the relationship between structure and agency in all of its complexity without assuming in advance what I would find (such as resistance) and to not assume that self care was necessarily "good" (or necessarily "bad").

I bring this encounter up at the beginning of my first data analysis chapter because this episode, I think, is expressive of a tension that is foundational to my interpretation of my participants' understanding of both "thriving" and "self care." I had initially assumed these two terms to be relatively isomorphic or synonymous with one another when I developed my survey, for example when I asked

participants to define “thriving” and “self-care” in the same question.<sup>3</sup> My participants, however, drew subtle but important distinctions between them. Untangling these distinctions lead to a greater understanding of the structure of feeling, to use Raymond Williams’ term (Williams & Orrom, 1954), that my participants and their practices were embedded in. I would come to define this structure of feeling in terms of ambivalence and reluctance, which would frequently express itself in the distinction my participants constructed between thriving and self-care. Once this distinction was established, my participants would frequently and enthusiastically categorize their video game practices as a form of self-care yet hesitate to associate these same practices with thriving.

This chapter, then, will concentrate on the distinction between self-care and thriving constructed by my participants and the cultural logic of neoliberalism that I believe underpins this distinction. In short, I interpret my participants’ understandings of self-care and thriving as set in motion by a neoliberal rationality (Brown, 2006) that demands an individual take personal responsibility for the maintenance and repair of the self. Playing video games, like other self-care practices, can be viewed as a form of “immaterial labor” in that it “produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (Hardt & Negri 2004, p. 109). These practices of “self-repair” are necessary for the renewal of workers’ mental and emotional resources required by the intellectual and affective demands of much labor in the service-focused economy of the post-Fordist contemporary moment.

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<sup>3</sup> For more information about how I specifically invited my participants to discuss these issues, see questions 21-24 of my questionnaire (provided in Appendix A).

From there, this chapter will contend that my participants' distinction between "self-care" and "thriving," as well as their enthusiastic labeling of their video game practices as self-care and reluctance to label those same practices as examples of "thriving," is expressive of a hierarchy of value embedded in this neoliberal rationality and, to a lesser but still important extent, to certain progressive ideologies of the left. While self-care practices such as video games are necessary in order for my participants to manage and renew their affective states, and thus perform wage labor, these practices were not necessarily valued as highly as other practices that they viewed as actively contributing to their growth and prosperity. In fact, in some cases my participants viewed their self-care practices as actively inhibiting their growth and thus their ability to thrive. Finally, I will conclude this chapter by considering that rather than asking participants to denigrate or even forego completely their attachment to self-care practices like playing video games, we should be more critical of the terms of thriving established by both neoliberal and progressive rationalities by drawing attention to a facet of thriving that my participants mentioned but did not develop thoroughly – the ability to imagine new possibilities. Doing so will help us see that, while the presumed goal of self-care practices is maintenance and thus the reproduction of the status quo, self-care practices can also produce fissures in the smooth reproduction of the status quo. This line of thinking will be further developed in later chapters where I will examine the specific mechanisms of the popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) *Final Fantasy XIV*, and suggest ways in which the experience of playing the game can destabilize and interrupt neoliberal rationalities.

## **Defining Neoliberalism**

Since neoliberalism is a broad and ambiguous term, I want to specify how I am using the term. I have found Wendy Brown's (2006) figuring of neoliberalism as a "political rationality" to be particularly productive. In contrast to an ideology, which Brown contends stems from or masks a specific economic reality, Brown argues that contemporary neoliberalism is best understood as a political rationality in the Foucauldian sense in that it is "a normative political reason organizing the political sphere, governance practices, and citizenship" (p. 693). For Brown, this occurs when a specific form of market rationality is imposed upon political and social spheres, resulting in the organization of these distinct yet interrelated fields according to a market rationality.

While this can be seen in a wide variety of state policies, particularly the outsourcing and privatization of social institutions like welfare, education, and the prison systems, of particular relevance to my discussion is Brown's observation of the type of subjectivity privileged by the political rationality of neoliberalism. Brown argues that neoliberalism represents the ideal subject and citizen as an individual autonomous entrepreneur and consumer "whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for 'self-care' – their ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions, whether as welfare recipients, medical patients, consumers of pharmaceuticals, university students, or workers in ephemeral occupations" (p. 694). Self-care, then, is central to how a neoliberal political rationality measures and distributes value and prestige across various subjects and practices. Within this framework, a person's worth is informed by

their capacity to take care of themselves and to not rely upon the interventions of others, particularly the state, to provide for themselves. Conversely, any lack or failure is rendered the fault of the individual rather than the result of systemic, institutional inequalities that distribute more resources (whether it be economic, symbolic, or cultural) to some groups and less to others. While this is perhaps a broader understanding of “self-care” than the definition most frequently put forward by my participants, Brown’s assertion of the necessity for self-care under neoliberal regimes of thought are important to keep in mind as we move into a discussion of my participants’ responses. The need for self-care practices was considered self-evident by my participants, a mundane feature of contemporary life that may go unmarked.

### **Participant Definitions of Self-Care**

So how did my participants define self-care and thriving and why do I argue that their definitions are expressive of a neoliberal political rationality? As discussed in the previous chapter, I constructed a survey to elicit responses from my participants. Because of this, I feel it necessary to discuss how I framed these issues and how this may have shaped the responses that were gathered. The term “thriving” is not a term that is familiar to the groups of people that I solicited. To use Kenneth Pike’s (1967) traditional sociolinguistic vocabulary, I was cognizant of the fact that the word “thriving” was an “etic” term to describe the practices of my participants, or a term belonging to an “outsider” account of a community’s behaviors and practices. This was a conscious decision on my part since, in the



spirit of experimentation and discovery, I wanted to explore whether or not this term could be applied to the practices of video game players and thereby shift how researchers think about these practices.

However, since thriving was an “etic” term, I was also aware that my participants might not be as fluent in defining the term and applying it to their practices as they would other, more familiar terms. As a result, in my survey I also asked questions about these more familiar terms that I thought may be related to the concept of thriving. One of these terms was “self-care.” I do not want to delve too far into the history of this term, since such an endeavor could be its own dissertation, I imagine. I will simply note that this term originated in activist cultures, particularly the feminist consciousness raising practices of the 1960s, as a way to acknowledge the mental and emotional toll that progressive struggles could have on their practitioners and to encourage activists to disengage from these practices as needed and without guilt (Harris, 2017). It has recently moved into mainstream culture, though, primarily due to contemporary corporate mindfulness movements that promote self-care as a technique to renew workers (Kinnamon, 2016).

This is simply to argue that the term “self-care” has a greater purchase among the groups that I engaged with, particularly in relation to labor and leisure practices. As such, I used “self-care” as well as other familiar terms like “stress relief” in conjunction with the less familiar term “thriving” so that my participants could better pin down their understanding of the term “thriving” through the acts of differentiation and analogy. The decision to pair “self-care” and “thriving” in my

survey was fortuitous, in hindsight, because it led to a surprising discovery – that these two terms were not, in fact, isomorphic with one another or even different parts of some greater whole. According to my participants, they referenced entirely different categories of practice that, while related, were nevertheless distinct from one another. It was the quality of this distinction, in turn, that led me to believe that these terms were primarily understood by my participants through the lens of neoliberalism.

To see this, I will now (finally) turn to my participants' responses and closely discuss the themes and patterns that emerged both between and across the axes of difference, class and sexuality, that I used to construct my sample. My participants defined self-care primarily as a set of practices that they felt were necessary to sustain their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. When asked to define self-care, 49 out of 70 participants, or approximately two-thirds of my sample, described self-care (broadly) as practices that one does to take care of yourself. To avoid the circularity of this definition, though, and to give a more accurate sense of what was typically meant by my participants when they used this phrase (as determined by their accompanying explanations), I instead reinterpreted this definition as “maintaining and supporting one’s health.” This was by far the most frequently stated definition. The nearest alternative definitions were “making time for yourself” (8 participants) and the companion to supporting one’s health, “preventing harm” (6 participants), and even these were mentioned in conjunction with “supporting one’s health” approximately 50% of the time. In addition, while a small subset of participants defined self-care exclusively in relation to mental

health, the majority of participants defined self-care more holistically as maintaining one's mental, emotional, and physical health. Surprisingly, this definition was fairly uniform across differences in both sexuality and class experiences, a fact I attribute to the pervasiveness of the discourse of self-care in the contemporary moment.

As I've stated, the number of participants who stated some variation of the definition of self-care as supporting one's health was considerable. While I do not think it useful to examine each and every instance in depth, I do want to provide a sense of how this idea was expressed in the language of my participants. What follows, then, is a sample of participant responses.

For example, Isaac said:

As for self-care, I would say that it is the practice of not only taking actions to protect and preserve oneself physically, but to prevent psychological/mental/emotional damage caused by overexertion or overstimulation.

Leslie:

I define "self-care" as doing anything (or not doing something) in order to produce optimal personal benefits, whether that is relaxation, improving skin care, bonding with a loved one, keeping oneself at a distance from toxic people, maintaining one's sanity, improving or maintaining good health, and so on.

Nicole:

Self care involves treating yourself well physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. This can mean different things for different people. But in general, self care involves living out your life's purpose. You stay away from places, people, or situations and things that make you feel "shitty" or feel stressed out.

Casey:

Self-care is doing what I need to have enough energy and emotional capacity to do these things [previously stated activities like producing art and spending time with friends]. Physical hygiene and living space upkeep, exercise, games and other relaxing activities, challenges like problem solving.

For an example of how supporting one's health and preventing harm were frequently articulated with one another, another participant, Normand, stated:

I would define "self-care" as the act of ensuring that your own needs are met, whether that is getting enough sleep, getting treatment for anxiety or mental illness, or cutting back on activities when you are not feeling up to them. Essentially, it is ensuring that you are prioritizing your health (physical, mental, and emotional).

And finally, Cindy said:

taking care of your self so you are as mentally and physically healthy as you are able to be.

I want to take some space and expand upon the understanding of self-care as the maintenance of a person's physical, mental, and emotional self by linking it with an idea that is pervasive in physiology – the idea of homeostasis. As evidenced by the examples I provided above, the term "self-care" was frequently articulated with both stability and renewing and maintaining one's body so that they can perform tasks they either needed or wanted to do. Isaac perhaps best expressed this through his use of the words "protect," "preserve," and "prevent." The image this conjures is of a body at risk, vulnerable to change and depletion from both within and without. This is not a desirable state. Rather, it is a state that a person must correct or, at the very least, compensate for. At the center of the idea of self-care, then, is the achievement of a fixed, stable body. This idealized body is able to maintain a particular state of physical, mental, and emotional being against the various fluctuating contexts that the body encounters through the mundane process of living and moving through the world. Self-care, then, becomes a technology of homeostasis.

It is important to note, however, that homeostasis is not a strictly natural process, but is also a discursive construct. As Lynda Birke (1999) describes it,

homeostasis is deeply articulated with the idea of a fixed and stable body. This fixed and stable body, in turn, has been an organizing principle in contemporary physiological discourses of the body. Homeostasis, in this view, works to support the idea of a fixed and stable body, along with the concept of genetics, since the latter purports to tell us how the body should be while the former tells us how the body works to stay where it should be.

Yet while homeostasis is considered by many to be a “natural” process, the process of homeostasis, as well as the homeostatically-inclined practice of self-care, belies the amount of intense and ongoing work that must be performed in order to sustain any degree of stability in the body. It is here that Birke productively links physiology with cultural studies, particularly Judith Butler’s foundational work on gender and performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Specifically, Birke focuses on Butler’s emphasis on iterated practices in order to produce and maintain the fiction that a particular bodily performance (such as gender) is actually a natural, biologically-determined state. As Birke notes, much of the body’s interiority (its muscle mass and composition, for example) are likewise produced through iterative practices.

I include this brief consideration of homeostasis and its discursive components in order to demonstrate how compatible my participants’ understanding of self-care is with the political projects of governmentality and neoliberalism described by Foucault. By putting forward the idea that self-care is a technology of homeostasis, my participants implicitly invoke an image of the body as perpetually vulnerable and at risk. This vulnerability and uncertainty in turn, is

produced through the various circulatory practices of engagement and interaction, most notably labor practices, that my participants engage in, as well as the interior processes of the body, which has its own will and effectivity. In short, the discourse of self-care problematizes the management of personal vulnerability and risk produced through the practices of everyday life, most notably labor practices. This, in turn, resembles (in microcosm) the broader concerns of the political project of governmentality, which above all else is concerned with the management of risk and uncertainty, not on a personal scale, but on a population scale.

Foucault (2007) traces the idea of governmentality (if not its actual emergence in policy) to the economic and spatial practices of the 18<sup>th</sup> century European town, which diminished the presence of walls in order to allow for greater trade and circulation. This greater economic freedom came at the cost of greater insecurity as the barriers between the town and its environment, between inside and outside, were suppressed, allowing for previously unforeseen events to arise, both positive and negative. It is here we see the emergence of governmental mechanisms of security that aim to maximize the benefits of this increased circulation while minimizing its costs. Hence we begin to see a greater emphasis on infrastructures such as roads that aim to regulate and control the movement of individuals as well as a greater concern with public hygiene, particularly as it relates to a greater density of new bodies inhabiting the town (Terranova, 2009).

Maximizing the benefits of circulation and exchange while minimizing or compensating its costs - these are the very terms by which my participants typically defined self-care. Yet while the practice of governmentality is aimed at managing

and controlling entire populations, the domain of self-care is the individual. I contend that this logic is evidence that the overarching political rationality of neoliberalism, which the techniques of governmentality described by Foucault implicitly support (Baerg 2009; Terranova, 2009), informs and shapes how my participants defined self-care. Of particular relevance is how the rationality of neoliberalism encourages people to displace the responsibility for the care of the self from the state onto the individual in a greater effort to privatize previously public services and subsume the political to the economic (Brown 2006). Caring for the self thus becomes a moral and ethical imperative for the individual, and failing to do so makes the individual vulnerable to censure, shame, and the removal of citizenship status and its attendant privileges.

I see suggestions of this anxiety in my participants' frequent references to the "need" to care for the self. The word "need" was one of the most frequently used words by my participants when defining self-care. Yet despite its frequency, there was very little discussion as to what these needs were or where these needs came from. Sometimes, my participants would link these needs to the physical needs of the body, such as when Beryl stated that self care can be "sleeping when you need sleep." However, participants were just as likely to leave the details of these needs unspoken, particularly the origins of these needs, leaving me to flesh out the cultural assumptions underpinning these assertions. As I have already suggested, I think the frequent yet ambiguous invocation of "need" by my participants suggests how deeply embedded their understanding of self-care is in contemporary neoliberal discourses of individual accountability.

Take the following phrases, written by three different participants:

Chris:

Self-care - making sure you get things done that need done

Casey:

Self-care is doing what I need to to have enough energy and emotional capacity to do [other] things

Ada:

Self care is the act of recognizing that you need to take time to unwind and take care of your mental health.

All three of these participants express self-care as necessary in order for other necessary practices to occur. Yet all of these participants also decline to examine why these other practices are so necessary, or even what they are necessary for. At times, as in Ada's description, it sounds like self-care is necessary for the maintenance of sanity, which further begs the question of what is depleting her sanity, not to mention why it is necessary to maintain her sanity, or even what state of mind gets to "count" as sanity. At other times, as in Casey's and Chris's description, it seems as if self-care is necessary for the continued performance of labor and the work of relationships. Prior to the quote provided, Casey specifically mentions "feeling satisfied and motivated to produce art and express creativity, have goals and work toward them, enjoy spending time with friends frequently ... tackle intellectual problems and engineering projects, [and] have good heart-to-hearts" as examples of things that require the energy that self-care replenishes.

Yet why are the practices of cultural production, labor, and relationship maintenance so important? For evidence of their importance, let us simply acknowledge that my participants feel these demands so strongly that they feel compelled to cultivate a range of support practices just so they may satisfy these



demands. As I have been arguing, I believe that at least some or part of these demands stem from the political rationality of neoliberalism, specifically its equation of productivity and self-sufficiency with moral worth. Now, I do not want to argue that this is the only force at work in these situations. The needs described by my participants are complex and overdetermined, emerging from an intersection of structural pressures and personal preferences. However, I do contend that it is important to acknowledge neoliberalism's force if we are to comprehend the meaning of self-care in our contemporary moment. This argument will become clearer upon examining the distinction between self-care and thriving constructed by my participants, to which I now turn.

### **Participant Definitions of Thriving**

Whereas the concept of self-care was easily recognizable to the majority of my participants, as evidenced by the ease with which they described it and the correspondences between their definitions, the concept of thriving was, on the whole, more unfamiliar. It is in their definitions of thriving and their opinions on the relationship between thriving practices and video gaming practices that we can also see the most significant divergences along the primary axes of difference this dissertation investigated – class and sexuality. In this section, then, I will describe the different ways in which my participants defined thriving as well as their general ambivalence towards the idea that video games can be used to thrive. Ultimately I will contend that a person's experiences with insecurity and vulnerability, particularly as they relate to marginalization, were a significant influence on

whether or not they viewed video games as part of thriving. In short, the closer a participant was to the idealized dominant subject position (i.e. straight and middle-class), the less likely they were to support the belief that playing video games could contribute to a person's thriving.

Turning to definitions of thriving, the most frequent definitions of thriving given by my participants was "prospering," an umbrella term under which I aggregated other similar terms used by my participants like "growth" or "improving," and "happiness." All told, roughly an equal amount of participants made some reference to "prospering" in their definitions of thriving as made some reference to "happiness," with 23 participants referencing prospering and 22 participants referencing happiness. These two definitions alone comprised almost two-thirds of all participant responses to the question of how to define thriving. The remaining definitions were more specific and can be best described as components of these two broad states, including things like "being in control," "being financially secure," and "being healthy." While these two terms, "prospering" and "happiness," share many similarities, I will treat them separately because I want to highlight what I think is a significant feature to keep in mind when thinking about the relationship between thriving and neoliberalism, particularly as it relates to video gaming practices – the quality of movement. Simply put, "prospering" and its related terms imply a sense of movement towards and change for the better, while "happiness" largely implies a static state. Happiness describes a state of fulfillment and satisfaction with what has already been achieved, while prospering describes a perspective that is more oriented towards the future and what has yet to be

achieved. These two states are, of course, not mutually exclusive. In fact, there was significant overlap between the two definitions among respondents. Yet by disentangling the two concepts we can better understand why there was a certain degree of ambivalence about categorizing video gaming practices as “thriving” when very little ambivalence existed when categorizing video gaming practices as self-care.

To begin, let us examine “happiness” more closely and discuss how this concept was articulated with thriving by my participants. Interestingly enough, “happy” (along with its variants) was the third most frequently used word by my participants in their definitions of thriving, the first and second being “thriving” and “life” respectively. This suggests that happiness and how it is understood are important subjects to consider when trying to grasp how thriving is understood. While several participants declined to go into detail about what constitutes “happiness” to them, the ones that did can provide us with a glimpse into the cultural framework that some of my participants are working within when they defined thriving. Take Marnie, for instance, who defined thriving in the following way:

I would define thriving as excelling in all areas of your life, such as mental and physical health, your social life, occupation, and most importantly happy with yourself and your life.

Or David:

Thriving is one is at their peak in their life and are generally happy, at ease, challenge themselves, and take life in stride. They have many things to look forward to like fun events, friendships, personal projects, problem solving, dreaming, and loving themselves and others around them unconditionally

And finally, Patty:

Thriving: A general enjoyment for life, needs are being met. Finances are stable and kept in the black regularly, enough food in the fridge, loneliness is minimal

From these participants' discussions of what constitutes happiness, a few themes begin to emerge. Each participant, for instance, made reference to relationships, whether they be romantic or platonic ("social life;" "friendships," "loneliness is minimal"). Labor and productivity are also important to thriving for these participants. This could specifically be wage labor, as Marnie and Patty reference, or it could be the more nebulous feeling of being productive and challenged, as David claims. I would put forward that these are conventional models of success. As Halberstam (2011) notes, success in a capitalist, heteronormative social structure is often equated with wealth accumulation and a particular level of emotional maturity, often measured by one's ability to create and maintain a nuclear family. Despite the recent critiques of these models of success that have arisen in the wake of the financial crisis of the late 2000s and the growing recognition of queer subjectivities, these models of success still have a great deal of purchase in the fantasies of people.

This definition of thriving was fairly well represented among the different identity positions my participants inhabited. Moreover, this definition was also most frequently expressed by those participants who could be read as belonging to the lower middle-class and middle-class, as well as participants who have moved between these two class fractions. While I hesitate to make any general claims based on this data, since my sample size does not support it, this data suggests that

structures of feeling that are frequently articulated with the middle class, most notably security, could orient subjects towards a more static conception of thriving. This is further supported by a curious element that I noted among the participants that I would describe as “comfortably” middle-class, i.e. those participants whose parents, childhood experiences, and life trajectories closely align with the imagined ideal of a professional class – highly educated, with stable employment, and with no notable familial insecurities described. These participants specifically mentioned “control” when describing happiness, in contrast to the other participants who were not so closely aligned with the middle-class ideal, who never mentioned the term. I note this to show how the particular idea of happiness expressed by some of my participants, with its foundation in capitalist, heteronormative measures of success, is closely related to feelings of security, so much so that the participants who one would predict would have the least amount of experience with insecurity, based on their class biographies, also describe being in control as a key element of thriving when other participants do not.

All of this is to argue that a participant’s understanding of thriving is deeply informed by their class experiences, particularly as they relate to experiences of control, uncertainty, and vulnerability. The less experience a participant had with insecurity and vulnerability, whether resulting from economic troubles, familial disturbances, or health problems, the stronger the tendency to describe thriving in static terms such as happiness. Moreover, these participants were also more likely to categorize “being in control” as a significant component of that happiness. Again, though, I want to carefully qualify this argument. The differences that I am

describing are subtle variations in intensity, not stark contrasts. All categories of participants, no matter the axis of difference used to differentiate between them, were likely to describe “thriving” as “happiness.” It is just that the terms used to describe this happiness were slightly different for participants who aligned most closely with the idealized middle-class subject. That is, there was a stronger tendency to characterize happiness in terms of “control,” which is consistent with a middle-class experience that remains relatively unmarked by the deep feelings of insecurity and vulnerability described by other participants.

But what about the other dominant definition of “thriving” put forward by my participants – “prospering?” As stated above, while similar to “happiness” and frequently appearing alongside it, the definition of “prospering” connotes a sense of mobility and transformation that “happiness” does not. For instance, take the following examples of this definition:

Beryl:

At the same time, I consider thriving to indicate being in a state of mind where you're growing and changing, developing thought patterns and skills

Isaac:

I've never given much thought to the definition of thriving, but I'd say that it refers to a living being not only living and surviving, but growing and developing beyond its previous level or capacity.

Leslie:

Seeing as “thrive” comes from the Old Norse *þrifa*, which means “to grasp,” and eventually took on the meaning of flourishing or prospering, I'd say that I define thriving as attaining, or making positive progress in attaining, that for which I am grasping toward.

In the definition of “thriving” as “prospering,” we can see a greater distinction between “thriving” and “self-care” in addition to the added emphasis on

mobility. As described at the beginning of this chapter, the definition of self-care favored by my participants was closely related to the idea of homeostasis, whereby the subject achieves a state of stability in the midst of fluctuating internal and external forces. The definition of “thriving” as “happiness” only differs from this definition of self-care in the degree to which the subject is emotionally satisfied with this state of stability. The definition of “thriving” as “prospering,” however, introduces the idea that a desire for growth and improvement, and hence a degree of uncertainty, is important to some participants’ conception of thriving. However, while this degree of uncertainty means that positive outcomes are not guaranteed, and thus implies there is some risk involved, participants did not mention this risk in the “prospering” definition of thriving. This leads me to conclude that the degree of risk inherent to the conception of thriving being constructed by my participants is so small as to be negligible.

Here I find it productive to remind the reader of Csikszentmihalyi’s (1999) concept of “flow.” As discussed in the conceptual framework chapter of this dissertation, “flow” refers to a particular state in which an individual’s attention is completely occupied by a particular task. What I want to draw attention to is the role that difficulty plays in the creation of a state of flow. As described by Csikszentmihalyi, the pleasurable experience of flow is generally produced by a task that is at a kind of “sweet spot” of difficulty for the individual – not too easy and not too hard. In short, it is a task that a subject must work to achieve, but that the subject is reasonably confident that they can achieve with the skills that they currently possess. This is the kind of challenge that would best describe the

uncertainty implied by the “prospering” definition of thriving – a challenge that pushes the subject and encourages some growth and development without truly threatening or dismantling the established world order of the subject. It is positive growth within a particular context or structure that does not radically alter that context or structure – a carefully controlled and managed uncertainty.

### **The Bigger Picture of Thriving**

Before progressing to a discussion of how participants viewed video game practices in relation to thriving and self-care, I want to take a step back and provide an overview/synthesis of the predominant ways that my participants defined thriving and how that relates to the broader political rationality of neoliberalism that I argue is central to this understanding. As stated above, the definitions of thriving as “happiness” and as “prosperity,” while distinct from one another, frequently emerged together in a definition provided by a single participant. Thus despite their differences it is important to acknowledge that these definitions are frequently tangled together and presented as coherent in the understanding of thriving expressed by my participants. This leads me to what I have decided to call the “half-real” component of thriving (an homage to Jesper Juul’s (2005) famous description of video games as “half-real”). I say “half-real” to signal the idea that the experience of thriving, as defined by my participants, is both an imagined, prosperous future state and a present, though still idealized, state. In the imaginary of my participants, then, thriving exists as a state where the two contradictory



experiences named above (“happiness” and “prosperity”) can be, at times, reconciled with one another.

This resolution, in my thinking, is crucial to the ideological work of neoliberalism. As stated above, the “happiness” of thriving, as described by my participants, aligns with what Halberstam (2011) has identified as success in a capitalist, heteronormative social structure – the accumulation of wealth, the establishment of stable relationships, both romantic and platonic, and participation in productive labor. The “prosperity” aspect of thriving, meanwhile, orients participants towards neoliberalism’s desire for continued growth and acquisition. The “half-real” nature of thriving, then, with its promise of both present and future happiness and growth, can be a powerful ideological tool to reconcile participants with the political rationality of neoliberalism and its promises and fantasies.

What is left out of this fantasy is, of course, the exploitative and alienating elements of capitalism, which extracts physical, intellectual, and emotional labor from the bodies of its subjects, transforms it into capital, and then distributes this capital unevenly throughout the population according to logics that are infused with racism, heterosexism, misogyny, and other divisive ideologies. Hence the need for self-care. Self-care becomes the mechanism whereby the individual subject repairs itself from the injuries that are continuously inflicted in a capitalist, heteronormative social structure that only deems certain class locations and expressions of sexuality as valuable and worthy. Should the subject find herself outside of the narrow range of class locations and sexualities privileged within this capitalist, heteronormative social structure, the injuries inflicted are deeper and the

wounds sustained more chronic. The project of self-care, under these conditions, becomes more and more consuming. Yet it is a necessary condition of thriving. By “necessary condition,” I mean that although self-care does not guarantee that one will thrive, one cannot thrive without it. And at least some of my participants were aware of this particular relationship between self-care and thriving. One participant, Ilene, expressed this idea at its simplest when she stated that, “Self care is being able to take care of yourself mentally and physically. Thriving is the above AND exceeding it.” In fact, the statement that thriving is “more than just surviving” appeared in 8 participants’ definitions of thriving, lending weight to the idea that self-care is a necessary element of thriving.

To summarize, participants broadly defined thriving in two, non-mutually exclusive ways – happiness and prosperity. This led me to conclude that thriving, as it was understood by the members of the particular class fractions I engaged with, is “half-real,” composed to varying degrees of satisfaction with a present state of affairs and an orientation towards an imagined future of even greater prosperity. Thus, the best working definition that I can provide is that thriving is the process by which people support and sustain their life worlds while imagining a better future.

Before thriving can be achieved, then, a participant must first be able to survive, i.e. maintain their physical, mental, and emotional health. Thus self-care is a necessary condition of thriving. However, the demands of self-care and the resources needed for self-care are not distributed equally, largely as a result of economic and ideological structures that privilege certain social locations above others. One of the ideological projects of neoliberalism, though, is to obfuscate the

structural origins of these inequalities and displace those origins onto the individual subject, demanding the individual subject be responsible for their self-care while at times depriving them of the very resources needed to take care of the self. This is the broad structure in which the predominantly lower-middle class and middle-class participants of my study situated their understandings of both self-care and thriving.

### **How Gaming Practices Relate to Self-Care and Thriving**

Now that I have established the broad ideological structure through which my participants' understandings of self-care and thriving are made legible, I will turn to the practice of playing video games and discuss how this practice is situated in relation to the more general self-care and thriving practices of my participants. In short, my participants were generally responsive to the idea that video gaming practices could be a vital part of one's self-care practices. However, when it comes to thriving, my participants were more ambivalent about the idea that video gaming practices could help someone thrive, with several outright questioning or denying that this could occur. Lauren Berlant (2011) has noted a similar affective stance in women's literary culture, a stance that she has termed "cruel optimism." For the sake of specificity, however, I will refer to this observation as the "paradox of self-care" – the belief that something that is necessary for one's repair and renewal also prevents that person from moving beyond "just surviving." Self-care, from this perspective, can be seen as contradictory to thriving, despite its status as a necessary condition of thriving. In other words, it is possible, or at least plausible to

believe, that video games can both help and harm a person, often simultaneously. For the remainder of this chapter, I will attempt to unpack and develop this finding while analyzing how this idea was distributed across the various axes of difference that my dissertation is concerned with.

Turning to the observation that my participants advocated for the importance of video gaming practices to self care, the strongest evidence in favor of this interpretation was not so much in what was said as in what was not said in their survey responses. By this I mean that there was no overt disagreement with the idea, expressed in the survey, that video gaming practices could be a part of a person's self-care practices. In fact, self-care could be read as one of the most, if not the most, important reasons for playing video games, according to my participants. This can be inferred from their motivations for playing video games. Relaxation was the most popular reason cited for playing video games, with 34 participants, or roughly half of the population, claiming that they played video games at least partly for relaxation or relief from stress. In addition, this motivation was the most frequently cited across the various axes of difference ascertained by my survey. Meanwhile, other motivations for playing video games that were frequently cited, such as "Fun" (16 participants), "Distraction" (13 participants), and "Escape" (9 participants), are all closely aligned with the primary goal of self-care – the maintenance of health, including its repair and renewal. While I would hesitate to claim that playing video games is a necessary part of my participants' self-care practices, since only a handful claimed as such, the evidence warrants the softer claim that video gaming practices are compatible with the larger project of self-care,

as expressed by my participants. Indeed, as I will argue in the following chapters, there are certain features of video games, such as their emphasis on repetition and achievement, that make them particularly well-suited to the project of self-care under neoliberalism.

When it comes to thriving, however, the picture is more ambiguous. While my participants easily, even sometimes enthusiastically, linked video game practices with self-care, they were on the whole more ambivalent about the relationship between video games and thriving. When directly asked about whether or not video games contributed to their experience of thriving, and how they did so, the most frequently stated idea was that video games did contribute to thriving because of their ability to help people relax (20 participants). However, an almost equal number of participants (17 participants) outright stated that video games do not contribute to thriving, and in fact could actively detract from thriving. Take the following statements, which are fairly representative of the reasons given for why video game practices do not contribute to thriving:

Patty:

Since games are a form of escapism for me (and life has been stressful lately) I do not think they help me thrive, but they do help me feel a bit more stable and calm, so they've been a huge relief for self care.

Nicole:

Not really, I wish I did not play video games. They are a distraction from daily stressors, but take time away from the better more "real" things in life, such as spending time with friends, or enjoying the outdoors. To me thriving would be to not play video games and experience life in a more expansive way

Pauline:

Personally, I don't think gaming is helpful just because it's not real. You are not doing anything productive at all. Physically you aren't being healthy and mentally you're just muting your emotions and feelings which isn't healthy.

Several themes emerged from these statements. One is the idea that video games can detract from thriving even if they contribute to a person's self-care. The second is the idea that video games can distract a person from the "real" practices in life that actually contribute to thriving, such as companionship and productivity. Both of these ideas are consistent with a broader cultural suspicion of media, in particular video games. Discussions of video games in the mainstream tend to focus disproportionately on the relationship between video games and violent behavior, particularly in times of crisis and trauma (for example, the frequent occurrence of mass school shootings). I am less interested, though, in whether a causal relationship exists between these two variables – if one does it is subtle and must be contextualized within a variety of other factors, such as family life, availability of firearms, and treatment by others (Anderson et. al., 2010). What I am interested in is the broader cultural suspicion of video games, in particular, and mass media, more broadly. This distrust has been a feature of the American cultural landscape since at least the turn of the twentieth century and is deeply tied to ideas of citizenship and participation in public life, as Butsch (2008) has argued. That is, the mass media and the audiences that mass media cultivates are continually evaluated on the basis of their proximity to "the conscientious, cultivated and informed citizen" (Butsch, 2008, p. 2). Of course what constitutes a "conscientious, cultivated and informed citizen" for critics of the mass media is often grounded in conservative

ideals of a rational individual capable of reasoned, “objective” analysis (i.e. a straight, white, heterosexual, middle-class male). Since the terms of citizenship often go unexamined by media critics, these criticisms frequently reproduce and reinforce class and social hierarchies. Also, as Henry Jenkins (2006a, 2006b) has noted in his wide-ranging studies on participatory media cultures and fandoms, these criticisms are frequently revived and redeployed as new media, such as video games, emerge.

What I want to contribute to this ongoing conversation is the idea that a person’s perception of thriving and its relationship to new media is often seen through the lenses of these popular discourses, which emphasize the threat of media to democracy and reason. This can be seen by the responses of a subsection of my participants, such as the representative statements provided above, but also in participants’ suspicion towards the types of experiences that they assume video games provide. Key among these experiences are distraction and escape. Distraction and escape, while not the most frequent motivations for playing video games named by participants, were referenced enough times by enough participants (roughly 20 participants, or a little over a quarter of my population) that it is worthy of further investigation. Of particular interest was the division between participants as to whether or not the distraction and escape provided by video games are beneficial or harmful. Two-thirds of the participants that referenced distraction were either outright dismissive of it or at least skeptical of its benefits. For instance, Albert claimed that, “On the other side of that coin however, I have been known to play too much. Sometimes, I do it out of habit and as a way to

distract from things I should deal with.” Similarly, Gordon denied that playing video games helped him thrive by noting that the time he spent on video games could have been better spent on other activities: “No, they don't help me thrive. There are some games I wouldn't trade for any other experience, like Portal or SOMA. But most of the time I've spent playing games would've made me thrive more if I'd spent it doing something more useful.”

Participants who spoke of video games as an escape, however, were much more positive in their assessment of video games' ability to promote thriving. Of the nine participants who explicitly mentioned escape (the same number, by the way, who explicitly mentioned “distraction”), only 1 participant characterized it as potentially harmful. The others claimed that the escape provided by video games was welcome and beneficial. Take Arlene, for instance. Arlene claimed that, “Being taken ‘out of this world’ and engrossed in another world is absolutely what I need when the stresses of the world start to become too much.” Similarly, Rory claimed that, “They help me thrive by increasing the amount of happiness I feel per day, I also use them to take care of my emotional well being when I need to escape for a little while.” Perhaps the most specific instance of the value of games as a form of escape, however, came from Ilene, who described how video games helped her to escape from her chronic pain and illness (an experience I share):

Yup - I wouldn't be able to endure my life without games. Thanks to a very painful treatment (50+ injections of irritants into EVERY joint to cause scar tissue) I've gradually been building up my strength and ability to function. I would have given up long and ever ago without games. Being chronically ill also takes a toll on my mental health. It gives me an escape from those demons as well.



The distinction between “distraction” and “escape” is a good reminder that varying your wording throughout a survey can help draw out significant differences in participants’ understanding of a phenomenon. Ostensibly, the terms “distraction” and “escape” describe the same phenomenon – the ability of video games to interrupt a player’s attention and focus it elsewhere. Yet this function of video games must be contextualized in the actual practices of players, specifically in relationship to what their attention is being taken away from and how this displacement of attention affects the other areas of a player’s life. Anxiety, depression, labor, family and relationship problems, even boredom – these were the experiences that participants were most likely to say they interrupted with video games. Probing further, we can begin to contextualize these experiences with escape and distraction in the broader fabric of these participants’ lives. We can use the examples we have already seen as a starting point for what this contextualization looks like in practice. Arlene, for instance, spoke of “being out of this world” as a beneficial experience since it relieves various pressures that have built up over time and prevents them from overwhelming her. Speaking more broadly, though, why would the experience of “being out of this world” be perceived as a way to relieve these pressures? What in Arlene’s life may have predisposed her to seek refuge in fantasies rather than confront her problems more directly?

Before I continue in my analysis of Arlene’s comment, I do want to clarify one thing though. In using a phrase like “seek refuge in fantasies” I want to establish that I am not trying to evaluate this practice. This is difficult, of course, since I am using a language and speaking to an audience that are both already steeped in

cultural skepticisms about the value of fantasy and escape vis-à-vis transformation and change – namely that fantasy and escape can potentially distract from real, lasting transformation and change. I want to suspend that linkage when discussing my participants and ask that my audience does as well, for by suspending that familiar dismissal of fantasy I contend we can see the practices of fantasy and escape from a newer, slightly more gentle perspective. This, in turn, will allow us to see a more productive relationship between fantasy and transformation.

Returning to Arlene, though, we can contextualize her attitude towards escape within the broader social relations of her life. Arlene grew up in a community that she described as “super white” and “very Republican.” Her parents had relatively stable careers – her mother, an elementary school teacher; her father, a computer programmer for a large corporation. From what I have gathered of her childhood, her life was relatively stable if not fully comfortable. Arlene’s father was rarely home when she was awake, due to his job, but her mother was able to stay at home and care for her and her siblings for the first fourteen years of her life. Luxury was beyond their grasp but their hard work was rewarded with relative security. By traditional social metrics, then, Arlene could be considered middle-class – her parents were professionals with at least some higher education and Arlene herself (at the time of my survey) was in the process of completing a Bachelor’s degree in musical theater.

This picture of middle-class identity, however, is complicated by other features of Arlene’s life. Despite growing up in a “super white” and “very Republican” community, Arlene herself did not identify as such, instead preferring

to categorize herself as a “black sheep.” This difference was brought further into relief when discussing her sexuality, which she described as “pansexual.” In addition, Arlene’s middle-class position was somewhat precarious at the time of our correspondence. Despite currently being enrolled in college and having parents who were comfortably professional, she still felt the sting of deprivation, at least when it came to fitting her gaming habits into a budget that was stretched thin. This did not prevent her from playing video games, though. It simply meant that she had to resort to creative measures that people with limited (if any) disposable income frequently resort to. In Arlene’s case, this meant replaying video games (“if she has to”) and sharing video games with her girlfriend, who is also a gamer.

Yet what cultivated this passion for video games in Arlene? Contrary to the conventional wisdom that video games are the province of adolescent males, Arlene was introduced to video games by her mother. Arlene’s mother had played video games frequently in her youth and, in turn, used video games as a way to bond with her daughter. As Arlene describes it, seeing Arlene become attached to video games was “very satisfying” for her mother. And so we can begin to better understand the circumstances of Arlene’s life that predisposed her to viewing video games as beneficial escape and source of renewal. These certainly include early access to video games and a familial environment that cultivated the necessary technological competencies to enjoy them. More broadly, these circumstances also include an environment that valued video games as well as a general feeling of disconnect from her local community.

And what of players who were more pessimistic about the value of video games, who felt they were a distraction from other, more worthy endeavors? Earlier I quoted Nicole, who stated that she wished she did not play video games. Nicole even went so far as to claim that thriving and playing video games are incompatible with one another: “To me thriving would be to not play video games and experience life in a more expansive way.” How can we make sense of this claim? Again, one strategy is to contextualize Nicole’s video game practices within the broader social and personal structures of her life. Like Arlene, Nicole specifically marked herself as different from “white European standards.” Yet while Arlene’s differences were the result of her political and sexual orientations, Nicole’s were the result of racial and ethnic differences. Nicole described herself as an American Indian woman, specifically a Dakota woman from the Yankton Sioux Nation. As a result of her ethnic identity, Nicole’s class affiliations are more complicated to situate than Arlene’s. While historically indigenous people in the United States have been subjects of racial discrimination and horrific exploitation by the state, Nicole made little reference to those larger forces. Instead, Nicole focused on her parents’ professions – her father is the Executive Director for the tribal college of their reservation and her mother is the school psychologist and Director of Special Education for their tribally run schools. As for Nicole herself, like Arlene she is currently a full-time college student.

As we can see then, both Nicole and Arlene both described themselves as distinct from the presumed dominant group of white, conservative American men. This also, by extension, positions them outside of the imagined primary audience of

video games. In short, these are two subjects who, according to conventional wisdom, would not feel comfortable identifying as gamers. However, Arlene became a video game enthusiast who uses video games to both sustain herself and prosper, while Nicole became a casual video game player whose relationship to the medium is more fraught. The largest single factor that I can point to to explain this divergence is their childhood experiences with video games and their resultant cultural attitudes towards the medium. As described, Arlene grew up in an environment that valued video games and encouraged their consumption – her father was involved in the technology sector and her mother was a video game enthusiast herself who used video games as a way to bond with her children. Nicole’s environment, on the other hand, was significantly less accommodating to the practice of video gaming. While Nicole cannot remember her parents ever directly regulating her usage of video games, according to Nicole they did not have to since she “was not that addicted” to the games she occasionally played. Her use of the term “addiction” here is key, since it signals a frequent worry among video game critics that the medium is harmful to its audience. The rhetoric deployed by Nicole to describe video gaming practices, in other words, aligns her quite closely with the prevailing discourse of video games as harmful, a discourse that has been well-documented by previous scholarship (Taylor, 2012; Shaw, 2014; Myers, 2017). In the absence a significant force to counteract it, the dominant negative discourse of video games seems to have exerted a gravitational force that pulled Nicole’s perception of video games into its orbit.

What I want to emphasize, through these examples, is that the perception of video games as either an “escape” or a “distraction” is overdetermined, or constituted through a multitude of forces that exist in varying intensities depending on the various social positions and trajectories of a subject. In addition to larger structural determinants such as race, gender, and sexuality, though, a significant factor in how people incorporate video game practices into their lives is their attitude towards the medium of video games itself. In short, issues of taste are critical, and by extension issues of social class. From this perspective, whether or not video games are dismissed as a distraction, used as a form of self-care, or seen as contributing to a person’s sense of thriving is significantly shaped by a person’s *habitus*. A person’s disposition towards the medium of video games itself becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy vis-à-vis the issue of thriving, as the people who are dismissive of video games in general are also less likely to use video games as a tool for thriving while the people who are more accepting of video games are also more likely to see them as a potential tool of thriving.

The more localized data concerning the relationship between escape, distraction, and *habitus* mirror a broader pattern that emerged from my data. Of the 16 participants who claimed that video game practices either do not contribute to thriving or actively impede thriving, 11 were closely aligned with the middle and lower-middle class fractions, meaning their parents worked in stable, professional careers throughout their childhood, they had a significant amount of formal education, and they were either currently employed in or positioning themselves to be employed in professional careers themselves. Meanwhile, only 60%

(approximately) of my participants who either currently are or have been closely aligned with the middle and lower-middle class fractions agreed that video games, under certain conditions, could contribute to thriving. Participants aligned with the working class fraction (either in the past or in the present) were more likely to claim that video games could contribute to thriving, with 80% making such claims.

This does not mean that there is a strict correlation between one's class position and their disposition towards video games. My sample size is too small and too biased to support such a claim. Instead, I want to make the more modest claim that a person's particular relationship with security and vulnerability, which is significantly informed by their relative position to the dominant modes of being in a particular social structure, exerts some influence on their attitude towards video games and how they use video games. To put it more simply, a person's *habitus* shapes, but does not guarantee, their video gaming practices. The more closely a person identifies with the dominant social structure and its preferred ways of being, in this case with the structures of capitalism, neoliberalism, and heteronormativity, the stronger the tendency to dismiss the potential of video games to promote thriving. Those who inhabit positions that are closer to the edges of these social structures, however, tend to have a more open and generous disposition towards using video games as a technology of thriving. This makes sense since the edges of a social structure are the most vulnerable positions to inhabit, and therefore the most porous. Subjects at the margin of society, then, are in a better position to question or reject the logic and perspective of dominant groups as well as the most likely to be exposed to alternative ideas and practices.

I do not want to romanticize this marginalization, of course. I would suggest that part of the reason why marginalized people are more likely to embrace video games as a potential resource for self-care and thriving is that they are routinely denied access to other, more conventional and more accepted resources for self-care and thriving, like medical care, a secure and adequate source of income, and a healthy balance between labor and leisure. As they so frequently do, people on the margins make do with what is available. This frequently leads to the creative repurposing of particular tools, such as media. The practice of using video games to care for the self or, less frequently, prosper and thrive is related to experiences of deprivation (whether acute or temperate) and vulnerability within a capitalist, neoliberal, and heteronormative social structure.

If this is the case, as I have been arguing, where can we go from here? What trajectories and paths are opened to us through learning this? One path would be to cultivate a gentler and more compassionate disposition to the practice of playing video games, particularly among marginalized groups. This is a path I wholeheartedly advocate for. Dismissing these practices and associating them with social problems does little to remedy the marginalization that people with limited cultural and economic resources experience on day-to-day basis. Another path, one that I will be following in the coming chapters, is to take these practices of self-care and thriving seriously and begin investigating the potential resources for thriving that the medium of video games offer to its audiences. Again, this does not entail somehow forgiving or forgetting the conditions that give rise to this creative use of video games. It does, however, entail taking a more protective stance towards these



practices and making space for the idea that playing video games can have a transformative effect on individuals and social structures.

## CHAPTER 5

### METHODOLOGY II

#### OR, HOW CAN WE READ A TEXT LIKE FINAL FANTASY XIV?

Having established the discourse of self-care and thriving that my participants situated themselves in relation to, as well as the relationship between the medium of video games and these discourses, I will turn to the medium itself in these next three chapters to consider the final research question of my dissertation – what features of video games contribute to a person’s experience of thriving? This will involve focusing on the mechanical and narrative features of video games that my participants named as contributing to their self-care and/or thriving practices.

For the sake of organizational clarity I have divided this discussion into three chapters. This first one will discuss the methodology I employed to choose and analyze a specific video game text, *Final Fantasy XIV*. The following chapter discusses why video games are particularly suited to self-care practices, as well as how those self-care practices can be, and have been, used by various stakeholders, including video game producers and immaterial labor industries, to renew certain resources necessary to support immaterial labor regimes. This will involve discussing how certain experiences associated with video gaming practices, such as relaxation and distraction, are produced, and how audience members are re-routed from leisure back into labor. The final chapter will focus primarily on what video gaming practices can offer to cultural understandings of thriving, particularly their ability to help players imagine different futures and ground feelings for those futures in the present. The argument of this chapter will diverge from previous

discussions of gaming practices (e.g. Terranova, 2009; Baerg, 2009, 2014) that locate gaming's disruptive potential to neoliberal structures of domination in their social, networked components. Instead, I will argue that, in certain contexts, solitary video gaming practices have more to offer transformative social projects than other social gaming practices.

To begin, I want to clarify an analytic issue that may arise among my audience of video game researchers. Within both of the analytic chapters, I will be discussing the ludic features of video games (the "game" part) and the narrative features of video games (the "video" part) together and in relation to one another. While some researchers choose to disentangle and separate these elements in their analyses, often for good reasons, such an intellectual schema would work at cross purposes to the goals of my dissertation. My participants discussed both the ludic and narrative elements of video games in relation to self-care and thriving, and so separating them from one another would misrepresent their statements. On a more theoretical level, however, I would also argue that separating these elements from one another or, to push it even further, from the surrounding context in which these elements are consumed, potentially misunderstands how video games are experienced by actual players.

While analyses of specific video game texts can benefit from such distinctions, since they allow for finer, more detailed descriptions, analyses of video game practices potentially do not since players do not necessarily experience the ludic and narrative elements of a video game separately. While some gaming genres, such as mobile puzzle games, may emphasize ludic elements more heavily

while other genres, such as visual novels, focus more on narrative elements, the majority of video games contain some combination of both. As Jesper Juul (2005) argued in his influential study *Half-Real*, video games are “half-real” in the sense that they are combined from the articulation of “real” ludic elements, such as rule systems that structure how players engage with the video game, and “fantasy” narrative elements, such as the imaginary world and characters that players are encouraged to both observe and inhabit. The necessary articulation of a game’s narrative and representations and a game’s code and machine actions, in turn, has become one of the guiding assumptions of recent video game analyses, as can be seen in Malkowski and Russworm’s (2017) introduction to the edited collection *Gaming Representation*.

Moreover, attempting to distinguish between the ludic and narrative elements in a discussion of how video games produce specific experiences runs the risk of misrecognizing either or both. This is because narrative discourses and assumptions are often embedded within discussions of a game’s mechanics, and vice-versa. For an example of this, let us look at the following instance from my data:

Albert:

Laying waste to enemies with a starship can be a good way to let out pent up frustration.

Here Albert references the mechanical features of a game, namely the game’s win condition (defeat an enemy) and the presumed relationship (competition) that the game attempts to structure between the player and the game environment by this win condition. This relationship is also presumably managed by a particular set of

rules that further structures how a player interacts with the game and, should the game have social components, with how players interact with one another through the game. However, his reference to a “starship” also gestures towards the fantastical narrative elements of the game. He is not just engaging in an abstract or theoretical competition, as one would find in, say, a game of checkers or Tetris. No, he is the pilot of a starship. He is engaged in a particular fantasy. This narrative, in turn, brings with it specific tropes, expectations, and assumed experiences that players have more or less fluency with and thus further shapes a player’s experience playing a video game. The genre of science fiction that Albert references, for instance, has traditionally been imagined by cultural producers, marketing experts, and even mainstream audiences, as a male-driven genre, with the majority of its consumers figured to be male. Thus these tropes may be more familiar to male players like Albert than they would be to female players. This familiarity, in turn, may shape a player’s comfort with the game in question, and subsequently how it is used as a source of self-care and renewal. Thus both the mechanical and narrative features of the video game, and their articulation, may be crucial to cultivating Albert’s desired experience – “to let out pent up frustration.” We can imagine that a different combination of ludic and narrative elements would have produced a different experience.

### **But Which Game to Choose?**

Since we are moving from a discussion of how players understand and frame their experiences playing video games towards a discussion of how video games

work to produce specific kinds of experience, a change of methodology is necessary. Broadly speaking, my analytic focus is transitioning from the audience of a particular medium towards the medium itself. However, I used the surveys my participants completed to determine what texts I approached and how I approached them. In other words, I foregrounded my participants' experiences and used those experiences to guide my analyses of particular video game texts. This approach to textual analysis has a rich history in reception studies. The most famous instance of this methodology is in Janice Radway's (1991) research into the practices of romance novel readers, detailed in *Reading the Romance*. In her study, ostensibly a reception study, Radway devoted a significant amount of space to analyzing the texts of several romance novels to construct an idea of the structure these novels built, which her participants subsequently found so appealing. Her choice of texts to analyze and her reading/analytic strategies, though, were informed by the surveys and interviews she conducted with particular romance novel readers, specifically what novels her participants mentioned as being their favorites. Moreover, Radway deduced from her surveys and interactions with romance novel readers that one of the primary reasons that they read romance novels was to vicariously experience the love and care that the novels' heroines were given by the male love interests. Working backwards from this insight, Radway was able to use psychoanalytic theories to analyze how the novels structured this experience, giving us further insight into the ideological structures created by a text and how audiences inhabited those structures.

Similarly, I first gathered information about my participants' video game preferences and practices and used that information to determine what video game texts I would analyze and, subsequently, what features of those texts I would choose to focus on. As we noted in the previous chapter, video games were frequently used for the purposes of relaxation and relief, which were in turn vital elements of my participants' self-care routines. In fact, it was video games' ability to help players relax that reportedly made them so valuable to my participants' self-care practices. A closer examination of my participants' responses also gave me some insight into the features of video games that produced these experiences, such as their use of repetitive tasks that require a lesser degree of attention and their use of tropes from familiar genres of fiction, like science-fiction and fantasy. Thus, before investigating any particular video game, I had already narrowed my analysis to focus on those features of video games most commonly cited by my participants to help with relaxation and release.

This still left unanswered the question of what texts to analyze. In my survey I asked my participants to name the games or types of games they frequently played as well as to describe particular instances where a game helped them feel relaxed. From these questions I compiled a list of 160 different video games and video game series, taking care to note how frequently each one was mentioned and whether or not it was mentioned in conjunction with discussions of self-care and its related experiences, such as stress relief and relaxation. From this list, I determined that the most frequently cited genre, in both number and in discussions related to self-care, was the the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (hereafter

referred to by its common acronym, MMO). Popular MMOs such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004), *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (Electronic Arts, 2011) and *Final Fantasy XIV* (Square-Enix, 2013) were also among the most frequently cited individual games.

The popularity of this genre among my participants presented some unique challenges to my efforts to analyze video game texts. For one, these games, true to their generic categorization, are massive. While commitments to other games, particularly single player video games, are measured in hours (often with the in-game clocks that are a common feature in many games), commitments to MMORPGs are typically measured in *months*. For instance, *Final Fantasy XIV* rewards players with in-game collectibles and costumes for their avatar to wear once they have subscribed to the game for a certain number of months. Consequently, MMOs also tend to include more content than games from other genres, both in the sheer amount of content and in the types of content available to players. As if that was not enough, these games are also regularly updated with new content. Some of these updates amount to little more than simple additions, such as small areas or quests. Other updates, particularly the ones marked by the producers as “expansions,” can radically expand and alter how the game is played. These expansions are akin to full games themselves and are often treated as such, with marketing and distribution to rival any new game.

To give my audience an idea of the enormous scale of these games, I will use the game I ultimately decided to focus on, *Final Fantasy XIV*, as an example. To date, *Final Fantasy XIV* consists of the base game, first released in 2010 and significantly



revised in 2013, as well as two expansions: *Heavensward* (2015) and *Stormblood* (2017). The bulk of the gameplay of *Final Fantasy XIV* consists of quests, or tasks assigned by a character controlled by the game (colloquially referred to as an “NPC,” or “non-playable character”). These tasks consist of a relatively small number of activities, such as defeating certain monsters or gathering certain items, that are limited by the game’s emphasis on combat and exploration. However, these quests are frequently used to develop the player’s understanding of the game’s narrative, including the mythology of the world, the personality and histories of the narrative’s substantial cast of characters, and the cultures of the various races and nations that populate the world. Many of these quests, in turn, are grouped together into “quest lines,” or a series of quests that develop a specific plot through a gated progression mechanism where the completion of one quest unlocks the next quest in the chain. These quest lines can consist of anywhere between 6 quests, in the case of a given class’s initial quest line, to approximately 440, in the case of the main scenario quest line.

What is more, there are also specific challenges for players to attempt, such as defeating more difficult versions of the main scenario’s enemies, structured competitions between different groups of players (known as PvP, or “player versus player,” battles), and the Gold Saucer casino complete with various smaller-scale gambling games. On top of the narrative and gameplay content, there is also a considerable social component that players may either choose or decline to participate in to varying degrees. These include using “duty finders,” which players unfamiliar with one another can use to group together to complete specific tasks,

intentionally forming groups with acquaintances, or even forming large organizations, or “free companies,” each with their own player defined purposes, organizational structure, and, to the extent afforded by the game, culture and ideology.

As we can see, then, *Final Fantasy XIV* is a massive and complex game with a variety of components that players may choose or decline to engage with depending on their specific contexts and personal needs, desires, and histories. And remember, *Final Fantasy XIV* is only one game in the MMO genre. Other representatives of the genre, including the famous *World of Warcraft*, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, or even *Final Fantasy XIV*'s MMO predecessor, *Final Fantasy XI*, are of a comparable scale, having had years to accumulate new content and revise their existing content. Attempting to analyze even a small number of these games would be, to put it mildly, ambitious. Given the institutional pressures to produce a written account of one's research in a reasonable amount of time, not to mention the limited resources of energy and attention necessary to produce knowledge while occupying a specific body, I decided that analyzing multiple MMORPGs was unfeasible.

For this reason, I chose to focus my energies on analyzing one representative game of the MMORPG genre. Several issues were weighed and considered, including the goals of my research project, my access to a particular game and the platform(s) the game could be played on, and my own gaming skills and competencies. Before beginning this research project, I had only dabbled with the MMORPG genre. I had played several games in the genre previously but never to “completion,” a hazy term in a genre that emphasizes endgame content and the generation of player-defined

goals but that I am using to mean the completion of a game's main scenario quest line. However, my lack of experience playing games in the MMORPG genre was not a significant drawback due to the wealth of experience I had playing other similar genres, especially the single player role-playing video game ("RPGs") that MMOs were derived from. These genres are closely related to one another and in fact the tropes, mechanics, and trends of one genre are frequently adopted and revised by the other. I have been playing role-playing video games since I was an adolescent and count the genre among my favorites, particularly the long running series *Final Fantasy*, and so my ability to grasp the mechanics of the MMO genre and participate fully was never a significant problem.

With mechanical prowess an insignificant factor, and seeing that the most popular games in the MMO genre had similar mechanics, my choice was significantly influenced by my personal taste and familiarity with the particular franchise that the MMO was a part of. As I briefly mentioned above, I was (and still am) a fan of the *Final Fantasy* series. The *Final Fantasy* franchise is a long running and well-received role-playing video game series, with 15 entries in the main series (as of this writing) and numerous spin-off and side games, as well as various cross-media tie-ins such as the big-budget Hollywood film, *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001), and various books, television projects, art installations, and concert series that are too numerous to list here. While the vast majority of the games in the series are single-player games, it has had two significant MMOs – *Final Fantasy XI* (2003), which although dated is still currently running, and *Final Fantasy XIV* (2010). I decided to focus on *Final Fantasy XIV* largely due to my familiarity with and fondness for the

*Final Fantasy* series. Over its three decades of existence, the *Final Fantasy* series has developed a vast collection of tropes, iconographies, and references that are frequently re-used and redeployed across its various games (each of which features an entirely new cast, new mythology, and frequently new game mechanics). I reasoned that my familiarity with the *Final Fantasy* series would ease me into the at-times overwhelming territory of the MMO genre, as many of the tropes and mechanics of that genre were reconfigured and adapted for the *Final Fantasy* audience. *Final Fantasy XIV* was also a good choice due to the popularity of the game. It currently has approximately 14 million subscribers (Sato, 2018). This is a number that is equaled only by the well-known *World of Warcraft* and dwarfs the numbers of other recent MMOs, such as *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (2011) and *Rift* (2011).

Yet there was another significant factor behind my choice to focus on *Final Fantasy XIV* that I would be remiss not to mention. I reasoned that my familiarity with the *Final Fantasy* franchise would also help mitigate some of the anxiety I develop when playing MMOs. This was not an insignificant benefit – one of the largest issues that needs to be managed when I play MMOs is my anxiety. One of my specific anxiety triggers, in fact, is playing video games with other people. I am almost exclusively a solitary player. In fact, over the course of my discussions with friends and colleagues who play video games as well as the more formal interactions I have had with research participants, I was struck by how solitary I prefer my video game practices to be. When observing other people play video games, either formally or informally, I usually note some form of social interaction. Sometimes

these interactions are formally structured by the video game, as when people play a cooperative mode in a video game together either in person or online. Other times social interactions occur more spontaneously, such as when a video game player begins talking to other people who are present in the room with them but who may or may not be not playing the video game.

In my own personal video game practice, however, I try to limit this social interaction as much as possible by playing single-player games almost exclusively, or ignoring the multiplayer components of video games when necessary, and playing alone as much as possible. Part of this preference can be attributed to my personality – I am an introvert who is easily overwhelmed by too many demands on my attention. Consequently, having to rapidly shift between the physical and mental demands of a video game and the emotional demands of managing relationships with others, whether they are in person or online, strangers or family, is a considerable drain on my resources. Another reason for my solitary play style is that, growing up, I would frequently use video games as a retreat from social interactions. Therefore the association between “video games” and “solitude” was a part of my *habitus* from an early age, well before I ever consciously identified as a “gamer,” and my adopted isolation from other people meant that this association was rarely challenged and I never learned how to play video games with others.

Rather than view this issue as something to be quarantined off from my analysis of *Final Fantasy XIV*, though, I decided to treat it as an opportunity to focus on a type of video game practice that frequently escapes video game research – the single player experience. This perspective allowed me to take for granted that

games are inherently social and move the conversation towards the broader question of how games are social by considering what types of sociality are afforded by particular games and how those types of sociality are then taken up and adopted through the practices of gamers. One of the largest shifts in the perception of the video game audience in the past decade has been the emerging acknowledgement that video game practices are deeply social, and not only in multiplayer video games. Video game practices, like all media reception practices, are embedded in physical environments and are performed as a part of people's everyday lives, and as such become a part of the social lives of peoples. Video games are the subject of conversations between friends or the object around which a gathering is organized. They are tools for creating and sustaining relationships between family members, as we saw in the previous chapter's discussion of Arlene's gaming history. Or they are played while other people go about their lives around the video game player.

This is all to say that there should no longer be any question about whether or not video games are social. They are. What instead remains to be investigated are the kinds of sociality that people engage in while playing video games and through playing video games, as well as the different stakes of these various socialities and the status extended to them by the various actors and institutions that inform these practices, from broad social institutions like the American educational system the news media to the more local and specific practices of communities of gamers and individual gamers themselves. Investigating these questions not only promises to expand our understanding of sociality beyond a reductive binary of alone/together, but will also help researchers see how video

games are used by people to strategically manage and control the various aspects of sociality, such as its duration and its intensity.

Positioning myself as a solitary gamer while playing a fundamentally social genre like the MMO, then, allowed me to suspend the assumptions of multiplayer sociality that are generally attributed to the genre and instead consider the different types of sociality that are made available to the player by the game, what types are discouraged, and what types are outright denied. This, in turn, enabled me to better observe and assess the differing values that that the game implicitly assigned to different types of sociality and thus better understand how subjects are hailed as “social” and how a subject may, in turn, respond to this interpellation.

This was a tremendous benefit, and not only because, as Lindlof and Taylor (2011) remind us, the position of cultural outsider can allow the researcher a better vantage point to interrogate some of the assumptions and “taken-for-granted” elements of the culture (p. 143). It was also specifically beneficial to my project because a significant portion of my participants noted that one of the main attractions of the MMO genre was that it enabled them to manage social interactions depending on their fluctuating needs and desires. This included the ability to withdraw from social interactions entirely should they prove threatening, overwhelming, or otherwise undesirable. While other analyses, then, have emphasized the multiplayer and communal elements of MMOs, my analysis comes at questions of sociality from a different angle by taking the solitary player as the starting point and questioning the centrality of a multiplayer, communal sociality to the MMO genre. Such a perspective enabled me to better observe how a specific

MMO, *Final Fantasy XIV*, works to enable and encourage some types of sociality while discouraging or denying others. As we will see in my analysis, this privileges certain play practices above others, potentially reproducing cultural norms concerning sociality that can reinforce the marginalization of vulnerable subjects.

### **Blending Textual Analysis, Participant Observation, and Auto-Ethnography**

My analysis of *Final Fantasy XIV* has as much in common with the social science method of participant observation as it does with the practice of textual analysis. This is not an altogether unique approach to video game analysis, particularly of genres that emphasize sociality, like MMOs. Extensive research on the genre, including Mia Consalvo's (2007) work on *Final Fantasy XI*, T.L. Taylor's (2006) work on *Everquest*, and Bonni Nardi's (2010) work on *World of Warcraft*, have explicitly positioned their respective analyses as ethnographies. Given the unique characteristics of the MMO genre, this approach makes sense. The persistent worlds of MMOs strongly resembles the traditional ethnographic "site" and the aforementioned studies treated them as such, with the researchers visiting the site of the MMO daily, observing the practices of various actors, interacting with other players, and developing a deep and holistic understanding of the gaming community's social practices and systems of meaning.

My approach to *Final Fantasy XIV* differs from the more ethnographically-oriented accounts of Consalvo, Taylor, and Nardi in important ways, however. The most important distinction is that I was not interested in developing a holistic



account of the social practices of the MMO. Instead, I was interested in a specific type of practice – gaming as self-care and thriving. While in a classic ethnographic account the researcher tries to enter the field with as open a mind as possible and, through immersion, gradually develop an understanding of what is significant or not in the site’s cultural world, I had a specific interest in a narrow range of practices derived from my survey data.

Moreover, due to the data obtained from my survey, I had already developed an understanding of how my participants understood self-care and thriving, as well as how my participants broadly used video games to facilitate these practices. What remained to be investigated were the specific affordances and limitations of video game texts to the practice of self-care and thriving. Looking at how a specific video game works to structure a person’s play could help contextualize the video game practices described by my participants and thus improve our understanding of the complex relationship of determination that exists between video game texts and their audiences. As Sonia Livingstone (2004) reminds us, reception research exists at the intersection between *textual* and *social* determinations. While the previous chapters focused primarily on the social determinations that shaped my participants’ play practices, particularly social class, the remaining chapters will focus on the textual determinations

Such a purpose will also help fill a gap that other video game and reception scholars have noted. Garry Crawford (2012) in particular has argued that the field of video game studies has a tendency to overemphasize the interactive qualities of video games, and by extension player agency and choice. However, this tendency

threatens to obscure the textual determinations of video games, including how video games reproduce and cultivate a range of particular ideologies and discourses that players must, in turn, negotiate as they play. This is not to say that there exist no good analyses of the ideological aspects of video games. There are numerous exceptional analyses, such as the work of Andrew Baerg (2009, 2014), Gerald Voorhees (2009), and Pérez-Latorre and Oliva (2017). It is merely to state that there is still much work to be done on this front, particularly regarding the MMO genre.

This stance also further situates my particular research within the field of cultural studies as opposed to other theoretical approaches to reception, such as the uses and gratification tradition. Returning to Livingstone (2004), she argues that media reception studies tend to be unbalanced towards treating the media as a technological object, located within a specific spatio-temporal context, rather than as a text, located within a specific discursive context. Thus, media reception studies have tended to focus more extensively on how various media are taken up and used by particular actors while declining to investigate the discursive context of a media object's reception, particularly how media products produce multiple and changing symbolic messages that audiences must negotiate as they consume the product. If anything, this tendency has been intensified in video game studies due to the overt technical nature of video games themselves. It is tempting to frame video games as a technological object that is taken up and used by gamers, much like a refrigerator or vacuum cleaner, and many self-identified gamers treat video games as such. However, doing so *exclusively* obscures the cultural side of video games and risks

missing the discursive context of a given video game and its attendant ideologies and values. Framing video games as a text, however, brings these aspects of a game to the forefront and can help correct the broader cultural tendency to treat video games solely as a technology and not as a cultural product that can cultivate particular ways of seeing and understanding the world.

Yet if video games are a text, what kind of text are they? Decades of reception studies research has demonstrated that different media require different analytic tools if we are to effectively study them (Crawford, 2012). Video games are not books, after all, which in turn are not films which in turn are not television series. However, how video games differ from other media is a point of contention among video game researchers. Personally, I do not hold the view that video games are distinct from other media because they are *interactive*. Reception studies, particularly Henry Jenkins' (2006a) research on convergence culture and the resultant blurring of the distinction between producers and audiences, has demonstrated persuasively that all media can be, and indeed are, interactive, if only because they require audiences to interpret them. What matters, then, is not the interactivity of media but *how* and *to what degree* they are interactive. A useful place to start in this discussion is the work of video game scholar Espen Aarseth (1997), who has called video games "ergodic texts," meaning they require a non-trivial amount of work on the part of the player in order to get through them. James Newman (2002) expands on this conceptualization, cautioning us to not assume that all video games and video game practices are "uniformly ergodic," or require the same amount of work. Different genres and different games within a genre require

different types and intensities of labor to get through them. Even the same game may demand different things from its audience at different parts of the game, such as when it shifts from an action-intensive section that requires precise control and focused attention to a cinematic cutscene that requires a player to simply spectate or, at most, press a button to progress the cutscene. We must also remember that different video game practices also diversify the ergodic demands of a given game, as the growing body of literature on video game “spectating,” spearheaded by T.L. Taylor (2018), has demonstrated.

This presents a challenge to any textual analysis of video games that is quite unique from the challenges of other media. While, to be sure, we can never be certain that we share the same interpretation of a film or book with others due to the polysemic nature of language and communication, with video games we can never be certain that we even share the same *text*, as the actions of a player can often produce dramatically different narratives. This is particularly true in a genre like the role-playing game, which tend to emphasize player choice and agency, and its offshoot the MMO, which includes both a large amount of content and different types of content that players can either play through or, at times, ignore.

So how does one analyze a text like *Final Fantasy XIV*, with its wide variety of activities for players to engage in and complex narrative for players to read, watch, and interact with? My initial plan was to observe people playing the video game and gather data to be analyzed from these observations. My thinking was that, in order to get a sense of the video game text, I had to first give participants the opportunity to construct the text through their choices. While this no doubt would have

produced interesting and productive results, a number of reasons compelled me to seek other ways to gather the data I needed to answer my research questions. One of these was simply the material circumstances of producing knowledge while inhabiting a body. Since my mobility was limited, to observe people playing in person I would have had to find people very close to me who play the game. Despite the MMO being the most popular genre cited by my participants, and *Final Fantasy XIV* being one of the most popular games in that genre, none of the participants within close proximity to me played *Final Fantasy XIV*. While I could have provided copies of the game myself, such an option was not feasible due to the extensive financial burden it would entail, from purchasing the game to subsidizing subscription fees.

However, the dominant factor influencing my methodological decisions was not the material circumstances of my research, important though they were. Instead, the strongest influence were the specific goals of my research project. For reasons that I stated above, I was interested in analyzing a video game text to learn more about how a game works to structure and influence the practices of players, rather than how players responded to that structure (since I had already gained insight into this from my surveys). Consequently, I decided it was not necessary for me to observe players playing *Final Fantasy XIV* in order to draw meaningful conclusions about the textual determinations of the game. *Final Fantasy XIV*, though accommodating to a wide variety of play styles and interpretations, does not completely sacrifice structure (no game does). Players are introduced to their various options over the course of the game's linear introduction, which features

extensive tutorials on various aspects of the game. In addition, certain features of the game are gated behind certain narrative milestones, and so a player must play through the game's primary storyline. Thus while I could not guarantee that I would make the same decisions as other players, I could be sufficiently confident that we would be responding to the same set of available options. Ultimately, I was more interested in the options themselves, as well as the textual determinations these options introduced and the ideologies they advocated, than the choices players made. Consequently, player observations would have been gratuitous.

This does not mean, however, that I did not attempt to account for the options other players chose. In my playing of *Final Fantasy XIV*, I consciously chose options that I would not choose were I playing the game solely for fun. Oftentimes, however, the different options did not produce radically different results. As I have said before, I think we as video game researchers tend to overemphasize the interactivity of video games, thereby diminishing the structuring effects of video game texts. While people can make choices in a game like *Final Fantasy XIV*, those choices are still limited. Oftentimes, these limitations and their ideological significance are overlooked or diminished in discussions of gaming audiences that focus primarily on how players use video games and not on the cultural context of this usage. Thus my focus on the textual elements of *Final Fantasy XIV* can be seen as a contribution to the ongoing efforts to correct for this imbalance toward how players use video games and away from the multiple, diverse, and changing symbolic messages that video games invariably produce and players must negotiate. This imbalance does not exist only in video game studies, as Livingstone (2004)

notes in her survey of reception studies more broadly, but is particularly apparent and in need of supplementation.

And so, finally, this brings us to an explanation of what I actually did to gather and analyze data. For approximately 3 months, beginning in January 2018, I would log in daily to my designated server on *Final Fantasy XIV* and play the game for a minimum of 45 minutes. Over the course of this observation period, I focused primarily on completing the main story quest line of the initial game, *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn*. I also participated in other quest lines, most notably various character class quest lines and crafting class quest lines. I also participated in other game modes, specifically Player vs. Player (or PvP) contests, but refrained from engaging heavily in those modes since they conflicted most heavily with my own personal play styles. While I focused primarily on developing one character whose primary role was healing and supporting other characters, I experimented with other classes to gain a sense of the play options made available by them as well as the narratives that they were situated within. During this time period, I would make daily journal entries describing the events that I had participated in, various story developments, and my feelings while playing the game, particularly how various game elements affected my mood and general emotional disposition. These notes became the basis for my analysis, which broadly organized my notes according to the various game modes and their respective demands, the position that players were encouraged to adopt in relationship to these demands, the narrative and how it situated my avatar, and my own personal reactions to these textual determinations. I was particularly interested in the relative intensity of the various

game requirements, since one of the primary goals of video game play for my participants was relaxation and stress release, as well as the subject position of the player's avatar within the overall story of the game and the representations of characters and events constructed by the game. This allowed me to identify the dominant attitudes and ideological assumptions of the game regarding the practices of self-care and thriving.

In addition to playing the game, however, I also wanted to somehow acknowledge the complexity of gaming practices and gain a sense of how others beyond me play video games. As other video game reception scholars have noted (e.g. Taylor, 2006; Consalvo, 2007; Crawford, 2012; Shaw, 2014), gaming is a complex practice that does not just consist of a person in front of a screen that exists in a vacuum. Other people may or may not be present. Other media and technologies may or may not be present. A person's attention can shift, voluntarily and involuntarily, between various objects of focus. In addition to the informal observations of other people's gaming that I both did during this project and have done at various times throughout my life, I also observed and recorded three video game play sessions with three different sets of participants to develop an understanding of how other people beyond myself play video games and how this could influence how video games are used for self-care and thriving. One observation occurred with a female participant in her home who live-tweeted her video game session to a group of friends and followers she had acquired on-and-offline, one observation occurred with a female and male couple playing a popular



online game together in their home, and the final observation was of a solitary woman playing a single player game in her home.

What these observations demonstrated, and which my analysis will attempt to account for, is that gaming practices are diverse, complex interactions between various social actors, media technologies, and cultural contexts, each with their own determinations. Even though in the coming chapters I will be focusing primarily on the textual determinations of video games, since I believe this is an element that is most in need of elaboration in the literature on video games and video gaming practices, I also do not want to lose sight of the fact that textual determinations are only one part of a greater assemblage of forces. Thus while I do want to give these textual determinations their due, since they do structure and shape gaming practices, I also do not want to assert that the effects of these textual determinations are in any way guaranteed. As practice theory (Ortner, 2006) has acknowledged repeatedly over the past thirty years, the relationship between individual practices and broader social structures is complicated. It is tempting to represent these variables as simply oppositional, but the theoretical perspective that I have been advocating for over the course of this project demands a more complicated understanding of this relationship. Thus, before I discuss my analysis of the textual determinations of one text, *Final Fantasy XIV*, I want to establish that these are not meant to be understood as guarantees of particular meanings that are passively taken up by an audience. Instead, I want to view them from the now-classic perspective of Stuart Hall (1996a) as determinations in the *first instance*. While Stuart Hall's model of cultural consumption has been challenged for its reductivity, I

still find his concept of determination in the first instance a useful tool for understanding the relationship between video games and audiences that I have both observed and experienced. Hall's concept grants power to a text, yes, but not absolute power. The video game provides the material for understanding our circumstances and imagining our futures, but it does not guarantee how those materials will be used. In the chapters to come, I want to describe and offer up an interpretation of the resources *Final Fantasy XIV* provides for the personal projects of self-care and thriving.

## CHAPTER 6

### VIDEO GAMES, SELF-CARE, AND THE LABOR-LEISURE CYCLE

It is April 9, 2018 – my 70<sup>th</sup> day in Eorzea. As the Miquo'te<sup>4</sup> healer Masha'to Birwani, I have conquered vicious beasts, socialized with heads of state, routed a colonizing force, and even felled a god or two. Today begins another kind of adventure, though. I am back at level one, having decided to develop my skills as a botanist. I have spoken with the guildmaster in Gridania, one of the main city-states in the region, and received the tool necessary to begin plying the botanist's trade – a cheap axe. With the money earned from my previous adventure I am able to buy a shabby set of work clothes – the only clothes my weak botanist has the skill to wear, apparently (clothing in Eorzea often have level restrictions attached to them). Axe in hand, I set out into the forest surrounding the city-state of Gridania, intent on finding easy trees to log. Right outside of the city gates, a patch of forest stands, with several trees glowing. I look at my map in the corner of the screen to confirm. These are the trees I am looking for – a stand of level 5 mature trees, the only trees my botanist currently has the skill to log. I approach a tree and begin gathering resources. A menu opens listing what resources I can gather from this tree and the chances of my gathering attempt succeeding (Figure 1). Since it is my first time gathering these particular resources, all I see are question marks with a 25% chance of being gathered. I select an item to gather with the press of a button and watch as my character swings his axe. It lands with a weak thunk. Nothing. I select the item

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<sup>4</sup> In the narrative of *Final Fantasy XIV*, the Miquo'te are a race of people with cat-like physical features, such as pointed ears and tails.



Figure 1. A screenshot from *Final Fantasy XIV* illustrating the display used when gathering materials.

again, hoping that this time will succeed. Another weak thunk. The third time I try, though, a satisfyingly resonant chop rings out. Success.

A flurry of information briefly appears on screen as the item (a piece of latex) is placed in my inventory and the experience points are added to my current supply. Experience points, in *Final Fantasy XIV*, are a quantified representation of my development in a particular class (i.e. occupation). After a pre-determined amount of experience is accrued, my level will increase by one, raising my statistical attributes, or quantified representations of certain traits (like my strength and perception) that roughly determine the success and failure of particular skills. Level gains may also grant your character access to new actions, which are particular skills specific to a class that allow a character to perform certain functions. After four more successful whacks at various trees, my character gains enough points to

level up. A flurry of activity occurs again as my character flashes with light, the traditional *Final Fantasy* fanfare plays, and a large gold caption proclaiming “Level Up” appears on the screen with a smaller notification telling me what skill I’ve learned (“Auto-Triangulate”). The celebration dies down after about ten seconds and I return to chopping down trees, gathering resources, and earning experience points. After my character has gained three more levels, a notification appears telling me that the next quest in the botanist class’s story is now available. I return to the head of the botanist’s guild and am tasked with gathering a set number of a particular item. I return to the forest and resume chopping.

I offer this vignette as an introduction to how video games can be used for self-care and the particular self-care practices made available to players by video game texts. After playing *Final Fantasy XIV* for a considerable length of time, I decided to focus on developing my crafting classes, ostensibly in the hope of being able to acquire the best (or at least better) equipment and thus participate more effectively in later story content. I approached the crafting classes with a degree of ambivalence since they require an extensive amount of what is known vernacularly as “grinding,” or engaging in a repetitive series of tasks in order to achieve a particular in-game goal, usually gaining levels or acquiring loot. Grinding is nearly ubiquitous in MMOs and is often treated as a chore, with many in the gaming community bemoaning its necessity or proclaiming it to be bad game design. A dictionary-style entry on grinding for *Techopedia*, for example, states that while grinding may appear to run counter to good game design, it is actually necessary for providing players with a sense of achievement and to create a more even playing

field for players by providing less skilled players an easier way to progress through the game and catch up with more skilled players. Meanwhile, over on the enthusiast news site *RPGFan*, writer Tina Olah (2018) criticizes the overwhelming amount of side quests and minor objectives game producers employ as padding whose only purpose is to artificially extend the amount of time a player must invest in a game to complete it.

As I said, though, I approached the crafting classes in *Final Fantasy XIV* and their concomitant grinding with ambivalence, not dread or frustration. Yes, grinding can be boring. But it can also be relaxing. As I chopped down tree after tree after tree, I would frequently enter into an almost meditative state that did not require a great amount of attention or cognitive work. The ease and repetitiveness of the demands of the crafting classes were precisely the elements of the game that I actively sought out at times. And I am not alone in feeling this way. My participants routinely noted this experience as one of the reasons why they seek out video games, as opposed to other media. Cindy, for instance, said that video games “make me happy and they help with my stress levels because it gives me something to focus on for a while. I have very bad anxiety but this helps me get away from all the real and made up problems my brain tries to focus on constantly.” David, as well, noted that a recent game of *Call of Duty* “involved little thinking (I could escape from the thinking that homework always presented). In conclusion, it let me be a vegetable who played off of muscle reflexes for a while.”

I want to use this particular relationship with elements of game design as a jumping off point for a discussion of how games can be used for self-care, how

games attempt to structure and control these self-care practices, and the possibilities that are opened up as players confront, submit to, re-work, and recontextualize these game elements. My discussion is thus positioned somewhat precariously between the Scylla and Charybdis of two competing discourses of self-care and its value within contemporary American society. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, I will label one position “conservative,” due to its relationship with the American political right, and the other “progressive,” which is articulated with the American political left. As I demonstrated earlier, the ways in which my participants characterized and spoke about self-care and thriving were deeply informed by what Wendy Brown (2006) has called the political rationality of neoliberalism. With the growing centralization of immaterial labor (Hardt & Negri, 2004) in post-Fordist economic structures, things like attention, rationality, and emotional care have become the raw materials needed for capitalist accumulation. As such, methods and practices are needed for the renewal of these resources, and so capital (as manifested in the practices and policies of corporations) has begun to authorize and promote a variety of self-care practices, particularly mindfulness, for this purpose (Kinnamon, 2016). Video games have become increasingly important to the capitalist subsumption of self-care practices, as critics in both the academic and mainstream realms have touted the ability of video games to develop skills valuable to an immaterial economy, like pattern recognition, problem solving, and decision making (Beck & Wade, 2004; Wark, 2007; Calleja, 2010; Gee, 2014). Yee (2006) makes this elision between labor and leisure explicit, noting that “every day, many of them [i.e. MMO players] go to work and perform an assortment of clerical tasks,

logistical planning and management in their offices, then they come home and do those very same things in MMORPGs” (p. 69).

However, despite their apparent utility, video games are also frequently positioned as a threat to the smooth operation of capital accumulation. As Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) have argued, while capitalism is very good at subsuming the practices and ideologies that initially appear to threaten it, this subsumption is never total. Specifically grounding this observation in the structure of the gaming industry, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter insist that while the possibilities and potentialities of digital worlds and gaming practices frequently feed back into and reinforce the workings of capitalism and imperialism, this feedback loop is not guaranteed. That is, gameplay can and, as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter demonstrate, does link to radical social action (p. xxxiii). The same could be said of using video games for self-care.

The conservative discourse of self-care attempts to manage this precarious position, simultaneously encouraging the aspects of self-care practices that are conducive to the smooth functioning of capital accumulation and the production of proper neoliberal subjects while attempting to mitigate the excesses of self-care that threaten to undermine it. For video games, one way this is accomplished is through the pathologization of excessive video game playing, which can be seen most obviously in the popularization of the idea that playing video games can be addictive or, even worse, can produce violent, destructive subjects (see Turkle, 2011; Alter, 2017). While this tactic is not necessarily original, since as Butsch (2008) has demonstrated emerging media are frequently approached with suspicion, the



framing of video game playing as a public health and safety concern is particularly intense, prompted by the (relatively) recent phenomenon of mass school shootings and the subsequent efforts by conservative policy makers and institutions like the NRA to scapegoat the video game industry. This ambivalence towards using video games for the purposes of thriving, in turn, frequently emerged among my participants when discussing how they use video games for self-care.

This can be seen in statements like one made by Nicole, who quickly moved between appreciative and critical moods when discussing how video games help her escape:

Escaping and relieving stress are interrelated for me. I did this yesterday while playing Mario Run for the same reasons. It's a fun game. I was stressed out about schoolwork and some lame dude. The game helped only for the time I played it. But afterwards, I realized I wasted time playing the game when I could have done work or gone to bed.

If the conservative discourse of self-care reluctantly embraces the practice of self-care, the mere fact that self-care can be used as a tool for the reproduction of capital and domination is enough for those on the left to view self-care with suspicion. This is what I call the progressive discourse of self-care, which approaches the practice of self-care through a lense shaped by paranoia. As Kinnamon (2016) notes, critics on the left frequently dismiss self-care as yet another tool of neoliberal ideology or biopolitical control since the logic of practices frequently used in the service of self-care in the contemporary moment, “like flexibility, self-management, and stretching could not be more perfect for an era of capitalism known for precarity and entrepreneurialism” (p. 191-192). This can be extended to analyses of the role of the media in the contemporary moment, as

certain media genres have been harshly critiqued for doing the ideological work of the various dominant lacunae of power in a social structure organized around the political rationality of neoliberalism, such as the state and the labor economy (Ouellette, 2004). Sender (2012), for instance, argues that the reality television genre aligns well with neoliberalism because it “demands that subjects take responsibility for the self, tolerate risk, and look to mediated experts for guidance on navigating modern life” (Sender, 2012; p. 8). Video games, likewise, are vulnerable to this critique. Scholars such as Millington (2009, 2014), Chess (2011), Baerg (2009, 2014), and Pérez-Latorre and Oliva (2017) have noted how video games and the paratextual industries that support them, notably the advertising industry, use both their narrative and ludic elements to promote a version of subjectivity that is amenable to neoliberalism.

However, a growing body of literature on both self-care and video games have attempted to chart a different path through these competing discourses of self-care, one that simultaneously acknowledges how video games can be recruited by oppressive power structures, like the state and labor economy, to perform various tasks while also refusing to surrender the practice of self-care to these structures of domination. Kinnamon (2016) exemplifies this position, persuasively arguing against the dismissal of self-care and its associated practices simply because they can be recuperated by capital. Following Sedgwick’s (2003) call to disentangle the awareness of large, systemic forms of oppression from a critical demand to view the consequences of these systems in a specific, usually pessimistic way, Kinnamon insists that simply because self-care and its related practices *can* be recuperated by

capitalism, it does not necessarily follow that they *will* be. Such a theoretical move allows the critic to, as Sedgwick (2003) writes, “unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller” (p. 124). Specifically referring to self-care, Kinnamon turns to the work of Michel Foucault, specifically his discussions of “care of the self,” to find an alternative epistemological stance towards self-care that allows for the possibility that attention to and repair of the self may be “a portal into the pleasure, collective enjoyment, and political change so desired by critics” (p. 194).

In other words, the feedback loop between labor and leisure so desired by capital is not guaranteed in the practice of self-care but is dependent on the local and contingent relationships between a person and the various practices used by that person to understand and care for themselves. This theoretical position forms the foundation of my analysis of the text of *Final Fantasy XIV*. Knowing that my participants frequently used MMOs, represented here by *Final Fantasy XIV*, to care for themselves, renew themselves, and repair the damages wrought by relationships, labor, and various moods and illnesses (i.e. *living*), I posed the following questions to the text:

1. How does *Final Fantasy XIV* work to repair the psychic damage of living inflicted upon participants?
2. How does *Final Fantasy XIV* work to re-route players back into labor once they are repaired?
3. What avenues of escape are afforded to players and how can they be activated?

## **Escaping into Final Fantasy XIV**

To begin, let us consider the role of escapism in playing MMOs. Escapism was a powerful explanatory device for my participants, and was often deployed when discussing their motivations for playing video games. Contrary to popular opinion, and even the opinions of my participants, I do not view video games as inherently escapist nor do I view escapism as an avoidance of the real, and thus worthy of condemnation. As Calleja (2010) has demonstrated, these perspectives are underpinned by two problematic binaries – the virtual world/physical world binary and the artificial/real binary, most commonly expressed in game studies as the “magic circle” of video games. Calleja, based on decades of ethnographic and theoretical work on gaming practices, notes that the easy separation between game and nongame that these binaries suggest does not hold up under scrutiny. Games, in other words, are deeply imbricated in the particular social and cultural contexts in which they are played and in turn shape and are shaped by feedback loops between these various forces. This quality of video game practices, in fact, is what the conservative discourse of self-care recognizes and seeks to exploit. Ultimately, Calleja contends that escapism is not an inherent part of video game practice, but the result of “the particular qualities of the specifically situated engagement” (p. 338).

If escapism is produced by a “specifically situated engagement,” then what are the various forces that can produce this experience? We have already looked at this question from the player side of video game practices and have noted several factors that urge people to seek relief and renewal in video games, most

predominantly the exhausting effects of immaterial labor. Now we will turn to *Final Fantasy XIV* to help develop an account of the forms of escape, relief, and renewal that video games can provide to players. Here again Calleja's (2010) work on escapism and video games provides useful insights into how video games help produce escapist experiences. Fundamental to their discussion of escapism and video games is the idea that games can engage and capture the attention of players in a variety of ways. These include stimulating cognitive activities like pattern seeking, problem solving, and decision making as well as providing appealing sensory and aesthetic experiences.

It is this variety of ways to be engaged that is perhaps central to why video games are so valuable as tools of self-care. As Taylor (2006) observed in her ethnography of the MMO *Everquest* (1999), MMOs afford players the opportunity to dynamically set and pursue particular goals by providing a wide variety of complex systems and tasks to engage with. *Final Fantasy XIV* is no different, allowing players to form local organizations for specific purposes, explore different environments, casually socialize with friends, develop their character's equipment and skills, participate in various competitions with other players or the computer itself, and perfect their character's appearance, wardrobe, and personal living space (to name a few potential goals). The variety of complex experiences that MMOs like *Final Fantasy XIV* afford to their players makes the genre particularly appealing to players not only because players have the ability to tailor their play experience to particular needs and moods, but also because the player can seek different experiences within the same game as their needs and desires shift. Emily describes how one MMO, *Star*

*Wars: The Old Republic* (Electronic Arts, 2010; abbreviated as *SWTOR*), affords her this opportunity:

The escapism factor and the social factor definitely help, and in games like *SWTOR*, you can easily set your own pace of play, opting to just hang back and craft if you don't feel like throwing yourself into epic quests. On more than one occasion I've stepped into *SWTOR* specifically so that I can set my character down in a room surrounded by stuff I've collected in-game, or to listen to a song I like at a cantina I frequent. It's nudged me back from the edge of anxiety attacks on more than one occasion.

While studies on MMOs tend to emphasize the communal practices afforded by these games, play experiences like the one described by Emily reveal that the ability to withdraw from social activities and play alone is also a valuable affordance, particularly if we are examining video games through the lens of self-care. I would suggest that the experiences of players like Emily offer a different perspective on the relationship between control and play experiences. Much research on control in video games have approached the topic from the perspective of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), or how players use a game to achieve an experience of being meaningfully in control of an experience. Kerr et. al. (2006) have described the flow experience as “hitting the ‘sweet spot’ between the annoyance of a task that is perceived as trivial and the frustration of a task that is perceived as too difficult” (p. 71). Research on game design (e.g. Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) have emphasized “flow” as the experience players desire the most when playing video games. While I do not dispute that the experience of “flow” can indeed be pleasurable, play accounts by people like Emily remind us that other significant experiences are made possible.

The motivations for play described by Emily and other participants is not organized around the achievement and maintenance of a flow state, but rather the achievement of what media psychologists have termed “excitatory homeostasis,” or the choosing of media to “achieve an optimal level of arousal” (Bryant & Davies, 2006, p. 26). This can be achieved through an increase in intensity, such as when players play to alleviate boredom, but crucially it can also be achieved through the de-escalation of intensity. Media are well suited to modifying one’s mood, level of arousal, and attention, and video games in particular afford players the opportunity to precisely adjust and tweak their affective resources (Calleja, 2010, p. 346). This precision is afforded by a variety of game design techniques and mechanisms. For instance, most video games nowadays allow players to modify a game’s difficulty level, scaling it up or down depending on their desired level of challenge. *Final Fantasy XIV*, on the other hand, exemplifies another mechanism through which a game’s design allows for a wide range of experiences – the availability of a wide variety of objectives. To illustrate this, I will use two examples from my own experiences playing the game. As discussed above, I would frequently engage in crafting and gathering activities when I wanted to de-escalate my mood or otherwise withdraw from stimulation. These activities were well-suited to this task since they are relatively simple – they require few button presses, are not dependent on a player’s reflexes, and are extremely repetitive.

However, on the other end of the spectrum, during moments of high stress (such as when my anxiety was activated), I would seek out more intensive activities in order to disrupt my thought patterns and disengage from spiraling thoughts and

emotions. I remember one instance, approximately two months into my time with *Final Fantasy XIV*, where I intentionally sought out what I deemed the most demanding activities the game had to offer – participating in a multi-player dungeon – in order to distract myself from a piece of bad news I had received. Dungeons, in *Final Fantasy XIV*, are complex mazes featuring stronger enemies with more complicated A.I. patterns than those encountered during regular play. As a result, dungeons require players to team up with one another, usually in groups of four, to complete them. Unlike crafting and gathering, dungeons are anything but calm. The added difficulty of the dungeons requires players to be constantly alert to what is occurring on the screen, forcing players to respond quickly to constantly changing circumstances. The necessity of playing with other humans also brings with it the added complication of coordination and communication between players, as each player is assigned a designated role within the dungeon based on their character's class or profession.

In addition to all of this, there is the visual design of the game. Gray et. al. (2005) have used the term “juiciness” to describe a type of interface that provides positive feedback through excessive visual spectacle. Referring back to my opening vignette, I did not just receive a notification telling me that I had leveled up. My character erupted in sparks as a fanfare played and giant gold letters reading “Level Up!” appeared on the screen. Such excessive displays exemplify “juiciness” since they do not just communicate information to the player, but also provide an immediate, pleasurable experience in and of themselves. As Juul (2010) notes, juiciness also enhances the experience of feeling competent, or clever, or otherwise





Figure 2. A screenshot from *Final Fantasy XIV* illustrating the visual spectacle on display when participating in a dungeon (with the names of other players obscured).

powerful when playing a game (p. 45-49). While juiciness is an element of all video games, to one degree or another, it is particularly pronounced in *Final Fantasy XIV*. This is most evident during multiplayer dungeons, when every character's actions produce spectacular effects that fill the screen (Figure 2).

While this can be disorienting, especially because it makes it difficult to determine what exactly is occurring on screen, it also amplifies the game's ability to attract and hold a player's attention and satisfy a desire for increased intensity. For those playing to de-escalate their mood, meanwhile, *Final Fantasy XIV* also offers a variety of aesthetically pleasing landscapes to wander and explore at their leisure, ranging from forests to deserts to snowfields. As Calleja (2010) notes, inhabiting beautiful landscapes like the ones found in *Final Fantasy XIV* can create a stronger

affective reaction in players than viewing beautiful landscapes in nonergodic media since the player is afforded the opportunity to explore these landscapes for themselves (p. 346).

What is significant about these affordances, however, is not only what they allow people to do, but also what they allow people to *refuse*. Oftentimes, choosing not to do something can be more important than choosing to do something. Implicit in the quote from Emily above is the conscious refusal to engage in the other elements of the game that would be too demanding at the time. This sentiment was echoed by several other participants, specifically when they were asked whether or not they prefer to play games alone or with other people. The majority of participants responded with some variation of “it depends.” What “it” depended on varied from participant to participant, such as the availability of other people to play with and the genre of the game. Significant for my discussion, however, was the importance placed upon the player’s mood when deciding whether or not to play with others. This can be seen in the following quote from Cindy:

It depends on my mood. I go through phases where I always want to be with people and sometimes I just wanna play the game by myself. MMOs in particular are this way for me. I love group activities but some days I pass just so I can get my own stuff done in the game. ... Really it all comes down to this: How is my depression today? If it isn't great I wanna play alone so I can go at my own pace and take lots of breaks. If it is good, I'm going to want to play with friends and chat.

When interpreting this response, and the numerous others like it, it was important that I contextualize the practices described within the broader context of the participant’s life. In Cindy’s case, it is relevant to note that she was, at the time, employed as an executive assistant to the CEO/owner of her company. Such an

occupation would necessarily involve a high amount of immaterial labor, since it involves emotionally supporting someone else. As a person who suffers from depression, these demands upon Cindy's mental and emotional reserves are particularly acute. During her leisure time, then, it is not surprising that Cindy would choose an activity that allows her to control people's access to her.

What I want to suggest, then, is that in the context of immaterial labor, where workers are expected to respond to the demands for their attention and emotional reserves from a variety of people or risk losing their jobs, there can be something particularly alluring about a leisure activity that affords a person the opportunity to refuse such demands. *Final Fantasy XIV* affords this, to a certain extent. While the main storyline of the game does require players to group up with others periodically, the majority of the social elements of the game can be refused. The consequences of this refusal, in turn, are minimal. For instance, when playing through the game I would frequently (usually once or twice a session) receive an invitation to join a "Free Company," *Final Fantasy XIV*'s name for a guild or an in-game, player-organized community of people. Once the notification appeared, the game would give me 300 seconds to respond to the invitation before deleting it. If I chose to respond (which I almost always did), I would simply have to accept or decline the invitation with either a "yes" or a "no," as well as respond to the following notification confirming my decision, again with a "yes" or a "no." The harshest penalty would be my own feelings of guilt for declining an invitation, but that gradually morphed into annoyance due to the frequent occurrence of these invitations. Aside from the small affective costs of declining an invitation, then, I

received no obvious penalties from refusing to engage with other people. *Final Fantasy XIV*, then, affords players something that immaterial wage labor frequently withholds from workers – the opportunity to refuse demands on their attention with minimal consequence. Since the majority of my participants were engaged in various forms of immaterial wage labor when they filled out my questionnaire, this affordance would be appealing, perhaps even necessary, for participants to be able to use *Final Fantasy XIV* as a tool of self-care.

I mention all of these elements of *Final Fantasy XIV* to reinforce the idea that video games are particularly well suited to modifying and regulating a person's affective state. MMOs like *Final Fantasy XIV*, meanwhile, perhaps best exemplify this since they afford players a variety of ways to play, from calm, almost meditative practices like crafting and gathering to intense battles with opponents requiring a high degree of attention and coordination with others. This is not to say that other media forms are not capable of affording a variety of ways of engagement, either intrinsically or through the creative practices of audiences. The uses and gratifications afforded by television viewing vary dramatically, for instance, depending on whether one is watching alone, or with others, or engaging in certain practices like live tweeting. But few media so obviously afford audiences these differing modes of engagement and are explicitly designed to do so as video games. In other words, other media forms, for example television and film, rely on the labor of their audiences to open up many of their potentialities, while video games do some of that work for the audience through flexible design practices. This can be something as simple as offering different difficulty settings or as complicated as

*Final Fantasy XIV's* presentation of multiple game modes, each with their own intensity, for players to choose and move between. It is not surprising, then, that immaterial workers so frequently turn to video games in their downtime, since video games, particularly MMOs, are designed to be flexible and responsive to a player's affective state, and thus are well suited to helping players achieve "excitatory homeostasis."

### **Returning From Final Fantasy XIV**

To summarize, we have discussed why people, particularly immaterial workers, incorporate video games into their self care practices and how video games, particularly MMOs, are well-suited to these practices because their flexible designs allow audiences to modify and regulate their affective states. Now we will turn to a discussion of how MMOs can be used to re-route audiences back into capitalist modes of wage labor. This is not to say that MMOs, and self-care practices more generally, are necessarily a part of a feedback loop between labor and leisure. As Kinnamon (2016) has noted, self-care practices are particularly precarious in how they may be utilized, and thus can be made to work in multiple ways (p. 186). I do not want to fall into the trap of thinking that a particular strategy or practice must always be presumed to reinforce dominant power structures because they lack an a priori immunity to this (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 132-133). Simply because a given practice can be used for a particular purpose does not mean that it will always be used for that purpose. Conversely, choosing to unpack the mechanisms whereby a given practice can be or has been used to reinforce dominant power structures does not mean that I think that this is the only effect of these practices. One of the

strengths of practice theory is the flexibility derived from its emphasis on local, contingent relationships. Such flexibility allows me to adopt a necessarily precarious position whereby I can more clearly investigate the fluctuating openings and foreclosures that emerge when people use video games for self-care and thriving.

For it is frequently the case that video games can and do work to reproduce the functions and ideologies of capitalism, particularly contemporary post-Fordist capitalism and its emphasis on immaterial labor, as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) have persuasively argued in their political-economic analysis of the video game industry. MMOs like *Final Fantasy XIV* are perhaps more invested than other game genres in perpetuating the labor-leisure cycle whereby people use leisure to rest and renew their depleted energies before returning to work since a significant amount of their revenue is generated through monthly subscriptions. While the frontier rhetoric of the game's promotional materials offers the player the fantasy of escaping the pressures of the "real" (meaning non-virtual) world, as evidenced by its recent tagline "Adventure Awaits You Beyond the Horizon" (Square-Enix, 2018), the reality of gaming practices ultimately undercuts this possibility as the player must use the wages earned outside of the game in order to sustain their "adventures beyond the horizon," and thus must log off and return to work eventually.

So if play in *Final Fantasy XIV* must be sustained through the maintenance of the leisure-labor cycle, what specific mechanisms does the game deploy to encourage this play practice? While there are multiple mechanisms deployed, for the remainder of this chapter I want to focus on a select few practices utilized by

*Final Fantasy XIV* to illustrate how the game works to re-route the player back into the real world, the possible ways that players may escape this attempt to capture and manage their play practices, as well as the discourses that render these avenues of escape problematic. Play practices, after all, can open players to precarious and aleatory experiences of pleasure and escape that have the potential to disrupt and transform a player's relationship to particular social hierarchies and distributions of value. From this perspective, play practices, such as using video games to repair the self from the attrifying effects of immaterial labor, are a site of struggle between capitalism and its subjects. By examining the areas where control is exerted, we can begin to understand how this control may be refused, undermined, transformed, or otherwise eluded.

### **Interrupting Gameplay**

Turning to the specific mechanisms *Final Fantasy XIV* uses to capture and manage the practices of its players, one in particular stands out – the game's "interruptibility." Jesper Juul (2010), in his analysis of the design features of contemporary casual games, contends that the ability of a game to be interrupted is crucial to its ability to be flexibly integrated into the daily rhythms of a diverse audience with unpredictable schedules (p. 36-39). As Juul notes, interruptibility has several components, from the functional to the psychological, that shape whether a player feels it is appropriate to interrupt their gaming session. On a purely functional level, a game must afford players the ability to save their game state and return to it at a later moment in time. The flexibility of a game's save design has a

large influence on how interruptible the game may be. Early games (e.g. those released on the original NES console) were limited in their storage capacity and so only allowed the player to save the game state at pre-designated areas or moments, if they allowed the player to save at all. Contemporary games, particularly downloadable mobile games, often include frequent opportunities to save the game as well as auto-saves, where the game itself creates a save state after a certain period of time or upon encountering a particular trigger. Many gaming platforms, like mobile devices and current consoles, also feature the ability to suspend the game at any point and return to the game at a later date should the need arise. This allows the player to theoretically halt and resume game play at any time, allowing the player to integrate any game into any schedule.

*Final Fantasy XIV* deploys a number of these functions. Players can log in and log out at their leisure in practically any area. I say “practically” only because I cannot confirm whether or not this ability is available in every area since I did not encounter every area during my field work. However, I entered enough areas and engaged with enough game modes that I am comfortable stating that *Final Fantasy XIV* can be interrupted in most areas with ease and, crucially, little to no negative consequences to the player. The only time I ever observed a player be punished for interrupting their game was when I had to leave in the midst of exploring a dungeon with other players. This is understandable, since leaving a dungeon not only inconveniences the player who is leaving, but also inconveniences all of the other players exploring that dungeon with them. However, my punishment for doing so only included being locked out of participating in other group activities for a set



amount of time (in this case, one hour). Outside of this one experience, no other voluntary interruptions to my play were penalized, thus supporting *Final Fantasy XIV*'s commitment to interruptibility.

However, functional components are not the only elements of interruptibility. Juul (2010) also notes that the psychological components of interruptibility are just as, if not more, important as the functional components. The psychological components of interruptibility refer to the game making players feel like it is acceptable to interrupt their play. That is to say, it is not sufficient for a game to be functionally interruptible. After all, all games are functionally interruptible at any moment since the platforms and devices they are played on can be turned off, either by choice or by chance. However, just because a game *can* be turned off does not mean that a player will *want* to turn it off. To account for this, games communicate the acceptability of interrupting the game in a variety of ways. For one, certain games notify players in advance how long a particular activity can take or is expected to take. In *Final Fantasy XIV*, for example, players are given a 60 minute time limit to complete dungeons, thus allowing players to plan accordingly. However, the more common method for a game to communicate the acceptability of interrupting the game is to provide what Juul (2010) has called “break-facilitating moments,” or the moments when all pressing tasks have been achieved. In *Final Fantasy XIV*, the interface updates all tasks in the game (known as “duties”) as you reach certain milestones within the task. Once complete, a large chyrion appears and a musical fanfare plays notifying you that the duty has been completed. Players can track multiple duties simultaneously. However, the game is designed so that tasks

are clustered together in specific areas which the game guides players through. For example, once the player completes one duty in the main storyline, another becomes available. At predetermined points in the main storyline duty chain, the next task will direct the player to another area in the game, where more duties are available. This cycle continues throughout the entirety of the game's storyline. These duties, generally, can be accomplished quickly (within a few minutes), affording the player a great amount of flexibility to determine how long they will play the game. If time is limited, a player can quickly log into the game, complete a few quests, and log out quickly. If the player has more leisure time to spend, they can participate in many quests or in other areas of the game (such as dungeons) that are more time intensive.

*Final Fantasy XIV* further incentivizes players to interrupt their play time by providing a "resting bonus." Should a player log out in a safe zone (such as a town), upon returning to the game they will be granted a bonus to the amount of experience they earn when performing routine actions like killing monsters or crafting items. The duration of the bonus corresponds to the length of time the player was logged out, with longer resting periods resulting in longer bonuses. Experience points are used to gain levels, progress through the game, and unlock specific content like mounts and dungeons. Therefore, the faster one can progress through levels, the faster they gain access to specific content. The resting bonus can help diminish the psychological pull to spend more time in the game by making gaining levels more efficient for players who can, or must, take breaks. This, in turn, makes the game more adaptable to the varying rhythms of different players.

## **Awareness of Time and Self-Governance**

Another thing that is important to note when discussing how the game facilitates the feedback loop between labor and leisure is its overt cultivation of an awareness of time. As I have mentioned, early discussions of game design (e.g. Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) emphasized Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow experience as ideal. One of the defining characteristics of the flow experience is the loss of an awareness of time. As Csikszentmihalyi observed, people involved in activities they found especially engaging reported losing track of time or feeling as if the activity was somehow "outside of time." However, the leisure-labor cycle is reinforced through an awareness of time, particularly how much time is spent on leisure practices. Consequently, it stands to reason that a game like *Final Fantasy XIV*, which is deeply imbricated in the leisure-labor cycle due to its reliance upon a subscription model to generate profits, would need to employ certain strategies to persistently remind people of the passage of time. I have already discussed some of these strategies, such as the establishment of time limits for completing certain elements. However, I contend that the most persistent and effective method *Final Fantasy XIV*'s uses to cultivate this awareness of time is the displaying of the real world time, which by default is located in the upper right hand corner of the screen. While this display can be altered or even hidden by players, doing so requires the active effort of the player, who must go through three layers of menus to change the display. As such, it is likely that the majority of players would choose to leave it as is. Thus, while it is absolutely true that video games can work to construct different

temporalities (see Hanson, 2018 for a thorough analysis of game temporalities), it is important to note how these temporalities intersect with other temporalities and the various forces that shape these intersections.

This disposition towards monitoring and measuring one's time is further reinforced by the other methods *Final Fantasy XIV* deploys to cultivate a disposition towards monitoring and governing the self, specifically its use of statistics to quantify and measure the characteristics of the player's avatar. Drawing on Bogost's (2007) concept of "procedural rhetoric," Baerg (2009, 2014) has argued that video games cultivate an "entrepreneurial self" that is amenable to the demands of neoliberalism and capitalism by positioning players as risk managers who must monitor conditions, use the information at hand to make decisions, and take personal responsibility for these decisions. Players, then, must cultivate a deep awareness of constantly changing conditions in order to achieve victory in a video game. While Baerg's (2009, 2014) analyses were specific to the sports genre, he acknowledges that this analysis can be extended to any genre of video games that forces players to adapt to changing situations and mediate the information players receive to manage these situations, like *Final Fantasy XIV*. As noted above, *Final Fantasy XIV* provides players with a near-constant stream of information related to whatever task they have chosen to pursue at a given moment, including, but not limited to, the current objectives of a particular task, how much of an objective they have accomplished, and the success or failure of an individual action.

Players are also encouraged to monitor and manage their avatar's growth and characteristics thoughtfully. Like other MMOs, *Final Fantasy XIV* provides

players with several menus' worth of information about their avatar's condition that can be accessed at any time. This information is typically represented as a list of quantitative measurements of particular characteristics that the game determines are relevant to the avatar's performance, such as the character's physical strength or intelligence. Players must use this information to develop their character and outfit them with equipment suited to their particular role within the game. As Baerg (2014) contends, this procedural rhetoric positions players as "entrepreneurial selves who must manage risk by making constant assessments of the data being presented to them" (p. 199). This positioning, in turn, aligns players well with a neoliberal political rationality that approaches life from an economic standpoint where subjects are responsible for monitoring and managing themselves, selves that are in turn made intelligible and controllable through the quantification of the body. I argue that this aspect of *Final Fantasy XIV* reinforces other attempts by the game to encourage the player to adopt a mindful disposition towards the self and carefully monitor and control themselves, particularly when it comes to how their time is distributed between playing video games and other, more authorized, labor practices. In short, the design interfaces of *Final Fantasy XIV* encourage players to spend time in the game, but not too long. As we will see in the following section, however, this is not the only mechanism through which the leisure-labor cycle is sustained. The more generalized suspicion of video games in contemporary American culture also works to prevent players from spending too much time on gaming, an outcome that frequently works to re-route the player back into labor.

## **The Value of the Suspicion of Gaming to Neoliberalism**

As I discussed in the beginning of this chapter, self-care is something of a double-edged sword for the reproduction of immaterial labor. It can renew resources like attention that are necessary for the reproduction of immaterial labor, but it can also serve as “a portal into pleasure and political change” (Kinnamon, 2016, p. 184), potentially disrupting capitalism. As such, self-care practices can be seen a site of struggle between subjects, who want to escape from the exploitative demands of capital, and the forces of capital, which seek to capture and subsume those practices for the reproduction of immaterial labor. Video games, as a tool for self-care, are deeply implicated in this struggle. Like other self-care practices, my participants appreciated video games for the relaxation and release they provided. However, for many this appreciation existed alongside a suspicion of the eventual consequences of this relaxation. In this section, I will argue that this suspicion is representative of a broader cultural disposition towards video games that positions them as threatening to the reproduction of the social order. This widespread suspicion of video games, meanwhile, intersects with neoliberal imperatives to monitor and regulate the self as players are encouraged to carefully observe how long they play video games and to interrupt that play if it has gone on too long.

Researchers and critics have documented the existence of this widespread suspicion of video games and their effects extensively. For instance, Shaw (2012) has noted that this disposition towards video games was a critical factor in whether or not video game players identified as “gamers.” In my study on the practice of teabagging in video games (Myers, 2017), I similarly noted a defensiveness amongst

my participants towards their gaming practices which I argued was rooted in the devaluation of these practices by more mainstream cultural forces and institutions. Meanwhile, there is a long tradition, in both the academic and the popular press, of criticizing video games for their links to aggression (e.g. Anderson et. al., 2010), isolation (e.g. Turkle, 2011), and addiction (e.g. Alter, 2017). Even more celebratory accounts of video game practices, such as Gee's (2014) analysis of how gaming can contribute to literacy and learning and Beck & Wade's (2004) narrative of how gamers are shaping business practices, are motivated by attempts to recuperate video game practices for the wider public.

This suspicion surfaced repeatedly in my participants' discussions of video games, particularly when asked whether or not they felt video games helped them take care of themselves and/or thrive, as can be seen in the following examples:

Aphonse:

I feel like they do the opposite for both. While they one day may help me thrive, as I would like to work in or with videogames for a career, they currently are only a time draw away from school, and often lead me to neglect aspects of self care.

Nicole:

Not really, I wish I did not play video games. They are a distraction from daily stressors, but take time away from the better more "real" things in life, such as spending time with friends, or enjoying the outdoors. To me thriving would be to not play video games and experience life in a more expansive way.

Pauline:

Personally, I don't think gaming is helpful just because it's not real. you are not doing anything productive at all. Physically you aren't being healthy and mentally you're just muting your emotions and feelings which isn't healthy.

Even when noting the value of video games for self care, several participants felt it necessary to qualify their statements by acknowledging, and thereby confirming, the threat of video games to productivity. For instance, Velva stated:

They do help me take myself out of my head. As long as they're a balanced part of my life, I don't think it's a negative effect. The problem comes if I play video games instead of seeing people, or sleeping enough, or anything along those lines. I don't think I do that, and that I do a good job of prioritizing the appropriate things

Approximately one-third of my participants expressed some sort of unease about their video game practices and concern that video games could or did interfere with other aspects of their lives. Now, I will acknowledge that it is debatable whether or not these expressions were reflective of the internalized beliefs of my participants or were superficial performances informed by the questionnaire context. The research setting is a context distinct from other contexts, with its own logic and available subject positions that are constructed and mobilized by both the researcher and participants during the research encounter. Given the formality of the questionnaire context, as well as the perception of academic work as “serious,” it is within the realm of possibility that these responses did not actually express their internal beliefs, but were instead expressive of what they imagined they should say in an “official” setting, thus gaining a certain degree of cultural status. Even if this were the case, however, this would make my argument stronger, not weaker, since it would be further evidence of the privileged status of this disposition.

And what is the content of this disposition? As we can see in the above examples, it is primarily characterized by the feeling that one should be doing something better. In other words, this disposition is structured by a hierarchy of



value in which the practice of playing video games ranks below other practices. And what are these other practices? Education, socialization, exercise, therapy, and overall productivity were the most frequently cited categories of practices that video games distracted from. These practices align particularly well with the conventional value systems of American society, which, as Halberstam (2011) has argued, are fundamentally structured by capitalism and the heterosexual reproductive matrix where worth is determined by wealth accumulation and reproductive maturity (p. 2). While there has been a push within the video game industry to align video game practices with these more conventional practices, such as by emphasizing the productive aspects of play (Chess, 2011) or the isomorphic relationship between video game play and immaterial labor (Yee, 2006; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009), the responses of my participants suggest that this effort to realign video game practices with conventional productivity has not yet thoroughly convinced the public. Shame and ambivalence still deeply structure many of the dispositions of my participants towards video games. This shame, though, sits alongside a strong desire to play video games. In conjunction with each other, the desire to play video games and the social stigma attached to playing video games can help sustain the leisure-labor cycle by encouraging players to play, thereby renewing the resources necessary for the continued operation of immaterial labor, and to interrupt that play to return to other, more acceptable practices.

## Conclusion

To summarize, this chapter has broadly argued, using *Final Fantasy XIV* as an example, that video games can repair and renew the attentive and emotive resources necessary for the continued operation of immaterial labor by affording players a variety of tools to achieve a state of “excitatory homeostasis” (Bryant & Davis, 2006). In addition to these tools for self-care, the design of games like *Final Fantasy XIV* also affords players the ability to monitor and interrupt their play sessions, which when combined with neoliberal imperatives to regulate the self and engage in more productive activities can re-route players back into the forms of immaterial labor that capital can extract value and profits from. In this narrative I have described, self-care becomes a site of struggle between people and the institutions of capital, as people seek to escape from the enervating demands of immaterial labor and recuperate their depleted psychic and emotional resources while capital attempts to ensure that this escape is only temporary. Before moving on to the next phase of my argument, however, I want to provide a few qualifications for this argument. The first is that this struggle between people and capital is not a necessary feature of self-care, but is instead the historical product of intersecting forces and goals that simultaneously produce, limit, and escape one another. That is to say, while this chapter has focused the majority of its space on mapping how video games can be used to sustain the leisure-labor cycle that immaterial labor is dependent upon, this outcome is by no means assured. Otherwise, various actors and institutions would not have to work so hard to

maintain it! There are cracks in the smooth operation of this process, which I will examine in more depth in the next chapter.

The final qualification is simply that, by noting how these practices can be subsumed by capital, I do not wish to ignore the very real benefits the practice of self-care can have for individuals. In noting how these practices can help reproduce exploitative relationships, I worry that others may interpret the target of my criticism to be the people who engage in these practices rather than the structures and institutional apparatuses that make these practices necessary. In short, I want to acknowledge that practices can have different effects depending upon the level of abstraction we are looking at. For the people who use video games to relax and escape, this practice is necessary and vital for their continued existence. It is when we examine these practices in relationship to their broader historical, social, and cultural contexts that the more problematic elements appear. As Ortner (2006) has insisted, however, local practices can and frequently do have unanticipated and transformational effects on these more abstract levels. In regards to self-care, Kinnamon (2016) too suggests that these practices can create “portals to pleasure” that resist the subsumption of these practices to the workings of neoliberal capitalism. In the next chapter, we will explore these potentials in *Final Fantasy XIV* and use them as a way to think about how video game practices can become a part of a different narrative than the one analyzed in this chapter.

## CHAPTER 7

### HOW WE CAN USE VIDEO GAMES TO THRIVE

This chapter extends ongoing conversations about the practices of self-care and thriving by examining how video games can be used for thriving. This will require not only continuing my analysis of *Final Fantasy XIV*, but also constructing a definition of thriving that differs slightly from the one presented by my participants. In short, this chapter argues that video games can, and frequently are, used to thrive, if we work to disentangle the concept of thriving from the version offered by neoliberalism.

To begin, I will return to Kinnamon's (2016) discussion of self-care and mindfulness to provide examples of how these practices can be aligned with other liberating practices. She does this by reminding readers that self-care practices do not necessarily function as a tool for the reproduction of capital and the exploitation of workers. Capitalism, after all, does not produce the urge for self-repair or self-fulfillment, but instead subsumes and exploits these already existing desires in its subjects (p. 192). For Kinnamon, the historical articulation of self-care with capitalism, particularly capital's contemporary neoliberal expression, has created a paranoid tendency among critical scholars to reject all forms of self-care in favor of collectivity and socialization. By decoupling mindfulness and other forms of self-care from capitalist reproduction, Kinnamon suspends this paranoid rejection of self-care and encourages the adoption of a reparative stance that opens self-care practices up to new potentials.

To show the other forms that self-care practices may take, Kinnamon turns to Michel Foucault's (1988) discussion of the "care of the self" in the third volume of his *History of Sexuality* trilogy. In this work, Foucault argues that Greco-Roman asceticism encouraged its subjects to turn the self into an object of contemplation and transformation by engaging in attentive practices like reflection, introspection, and contemplation. Foucault ultimately suggests that these ascetic practices could become part of what he terms "practices of liberty," which can help people navigate power relationships thoughtfully and with a minimum of domination. Thus, contrary to the contemporary paranoid assertion that self-care practices can, and therefore will, encourage the atomization of people, Foucault's discussion of self-care reveals a different configuration of forces that enabled the ascetic practices of self-care to be re-routed back into the social in such a way that the subject conducts their affairs with an eye towards minimizing, not reproducing, exploitation and domination.

By comparing the asceticism of the Greco-Romans and the contemporary mindfulness movement, Kinnamon contends that one of the most significant factors that limits the ethical and transformative potential of self-care in capitalist societies is the lack of a social infrastructure to support these practices. As Foucault noted, the care of the self was built into the institutional structures of Greco-Roman society, namely its schools, mentoring and teaching practices, and the spiritual services offered by philosophers. Self-care under neoliberalism, however, is seen as a personal responsibility, and thus displaced onto the individual. Kinnamon concludes her article by posing the question of how self-care can be articulated with

pleasure, collective enjoyment, and political change within a socioeconomic context that is organized against this possibility.

This concluding chapter will use this question as a jumping off point to discuss how video games can be used for thriving. As I have done in previous chapters, my starting point will be how my participants defined thriving. Unlike previous analyses of my participants' responses, though, I will depart from their definitions quickly. This is because, if we are to think about how gaming practices can be portals into pleasure, collective action, and political change – in short, if we are to use gaming practices to rethink the world and our position within it – I believe it is imperative that we rethink how we conceptualize thriving. As noted in Chapter 4, my participants were ambivalent about whether or not gaming practices contributed to thriving. I argued that this was because their understandings of thriving were rooted in conventional models of success and failure, where success is measured by the accumulation of wealth and the achievement of emotional maturity (Halberstam, 2011). Thriving, to my participants, was largely understood as the accomplishment of these milestones.

I want to tread carefully here because I do not want to dismiss the desires of my participants. The problem is that these desires have been subsumed by neoliberal institutions and used to reproduce exploitative, exclusionary conditions. This is to say that I do not think my participants are wrong to want these things. Wanting security, personal fulfillment, healthy relationships, and entertainment are understandable and valuable. However capitalism and heteronormativity work to circumscribe these desires through exclusionary hierarchies of value. What I want

to argue with this chapter, then, is that it is possible to think about thriving in a way that does not reinforce this status quo, and playing video games can help us do so. This is because, while institutions like capitalism and heteronormativity attempt to capture and regulate people's desires, that capture is never total. People's desires are varied and excessive. Escape is possible, and if nothing else gaming is very useful for escaping.

This chapter, then, will think through how video games provide openings for escape, transformation, and the ethical negotiations of power relationships. In particular, this chapter will look at two mechanisms for escape, sociality and narrative, and discuss the openings they may create in the smooth reproduction of immaterial labor when used for the purposes of self-care. These openings may not contribute to thriving, as understood within the conventions of capitalism and neoliberalism, but I contend that they may provide opportunities for a different kind of thriving by providing players with the tools to imagine, support, and enact different kinds of worlds.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive account of all of the ways playing video games can create or exploit fissures in the reproduction of structures of domination. My aim is more local and specific, in keeping with Sedgwick's (2003) exhortation to "unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller" (p. 124). My analytic strategy, then, was not to look for what could be generalized to larger populations from my experience and the experiences of my participants. Instead, I tried to approach *Final Fantasy XIV* in an open and curious affective register, to look

less at what *was* happening and imagine more what *could be* happening. Such an approach does not necessarily preclude the admittedly likely possibility that the transformative potential of playing *Final Fantasy XIV* could be subsumed and re-routed back into capitalism. It merely notes that such an outcome is not guaranteed by the particular configuration of forces and relations between media audiences, cultural producers, and the structures of domination that I have described. By softening my conclusions and limiting their scope of applicability, I aim to replace the paranoia of critical thinking first named by Sedgwick (2003) in favor of an interpretive practice characterized by openness and hope. This approach is aligned with similar interpretive practices and theoretical stances, such as “plausible optimism” (Henderson, 2013), “weak theory” (Sedgwick, 2003; Gibson-Graham, 2006) and “reparative reading” (Sedgwick, 2003; Kinnamon, 2016). Although organized around different objects and goals, these interpretive practices and theoretical stances share an optimistic, yet discerning attitude towards the relationship between people’s local practices and the larger institutional structures those practices are situated in. These theoretical practices are deeply committed to the idea that the structures of domination, on one level, can never completely guarantee the quality or consequences of local practices, on another level.

### **The Privileging of Togetherness in Cultural Criticism**

I want to begin my analysis of the fissures in neoliberal capitalist reproduction with a discussion of the particular kinds of togetherness and collectivity that *Final Fantasy XIV* constructs and supports. Collectivity and



togetherness have a particularly powerful hold on the political imaginary of the left, particularly as a mechanism through which social change is achieved. For instance, in their analysis of the global ascendance of neoliberalism and Empire, the well-regarded critical scholars and activists Hardt and Negri (2004) argued that hope and transformation rested within what they called the “multitude,” or the rebellion of many actors, at many points, against the different instantiations of Empire. As Kinnamon (2016) has noted, the suspicion of self-care practices among leftist critics is deeply rooted in a more general refusal to place oneself at the center of one’s attention (p. 192). Collectivity and other forms of togetherness are frequently figured as a necessary condition of social change.

This privileging of collectivity extends, I would argue, to video game criticism. The presumed isolation of gamers is a frequent source of tension within mainstream media coverage of video game culture. Early coverage of video game culture frequently invoked the image of the solitary gamer in order to confirm and validate suspicions about the negative effects of video games. More recently, however, coverage by researchers, journalists, and gaming enthusiasts has turned to disproving this stereotype by citing empirical evidence contradicting the image of the solitary gamer (Shaw, 2010). Various companies also regularly release industry reports on demographics and play practices to demonstrate how gamers are social (e.g. Lifecourse Associates, 2014). Meanwhile, as discussed in my introduction, recent video games scholarship has tended to gravitate towards necessarily social games, like MMOs, games with heavy competition components, and other social gaming practices, such as spectating.

When we move to discussions of the political effects of video games, collectivity and togetherness is still the privileged mechanism through which transformation is thought to occur. For example, in his analysis of the neoliberal ideologies embedded in the sports game genre, Andrew Baerg (2014) introduces the work of network scholar Tiziana Terranova to the field of video games studies in order to think through how players may escape being (re)absorbed into capitalist practices and neoliberal rationalities. Terranova (2009) suggests that political theorist Maurizio Lazzarato's (2004) concept of "sympathetic cooperation" can help us imagine alternatives to a neoliberal political rationality based on market-based competition. According to Terranova, this theory positions cooperation as the "key mechanism in the production of a value that can no longer be abstractly economic – but is inseparable from subjective, social values such as truth-values, aesthetic values, utility values, existential-values" (p. 256). Throughout her article, Terranova attempts to chart the genealogy of the subsumption of the realm of life to economic practices which underlies the political rationality of neoliberalism. Within this rationality, the ideology of the market, specifically a market driven by competition, is figured as the primary engine of life and determiner of value. If we are to rethink and transform this structure of domination, Terranova suggests, we must turn towards work that attempts to theorize social life outside of the terms and subject positions provided by a market-driven political economy. Lazzarato's concept of sympathetic cooperation, for Terranova, is an example of such work because it introduces an "immanent ethics" into social-economic life whose value is produced through means other than exchange value (p. 256). In other words, Terranova

argues that sympathetic cooperation allows for production that exists outside of pure market mechanisms. Instead of treating each other as actors within a market system, sympathetic cooperation encourages people to engage one another as human beings. Cooperation, then, offers an alternative model of production, and by doing so provides a much needed check on the presumed immanence and “naturalness” of the market. This forms the foundation of Terranova’s arguments about network culture, where we can see examples of this kind of production in action.

Returning to video game studies, Baerg (2014) suggests that Terranova’s work on network culture could be extended to video games, thus providing game scholars with ways to think through how the neoliberal governmentality embedded in games that Baerg has documented could potentially be transformed or superseded by other social structures. The cooperation and togetherness afforded by social networking technologies, of which contemporary video games make extensive use, are at the center of how games scholars have theorized transformative social practices. As such, it is worth considering how these practices are deployed within games, using *Final Fantasy XIV* as an example.

### **Constructing the Need for Togetherness in Final Fantasy XIV**

After all, cooperation between players is a necessary feature of *Final Fantasy XIV*. It is rendered necessary through the construction of its class system and the gating of content behind mandatory cooperative challenges, namely dungeons. We will begin with *Final Fantasy XIV*’s class and character creation mechanics. “Class,”

in the vernacular of video games, does not refer to the subject position organized around the distribution of capital, labor, and recognition, as it has in earlier parts of this dissertation. Instead, “class” in *Final Fantasy XIV* and most other role-playing games refers to the classification of characters according to their abilities, and is an extremely common way for both analogue and digital games to organize character abilities and shape a character’s mechanical development. Sometimes, as in *Final Fantasy XIV*, this classification is formalized and transparent, as players are asked to select a class for their character from amongst a pre-determined pool of available classes. In other role-playing games, however, the class systems are less rigid and defined, allowing players to mix and match abilities from a variety of classes. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the social science-based definition of class as “social class” and the video game-based definition of class as “mechanical class” (since class is often a part of a game’s mechanical systems and design). As Gerald Voorhees (2009) explains in his overview of the mechanical class systems in the single-player games of the *Final Fantasy* series, how mechanical classes are designed and relate to each other can reveal how players are encouraged by the game to think about and manage social differences. This, in turn, shapes what forms of cooperation and collectivity amongst players are possible within the game, which can grant us insight into the affordances and limitations of aligning MMOs like *Final Fantasy XIV* with the transformational social practices described by Terranova (2009) and Baerg (2014).

Voorhees (2009) broadly argues that *Final Fantasy* can be understood as a toy for learning how to approach and manage the differences players routinely

encounter as they move through the increasingly diverse, multicultural world brought about by social movements and the increasingly centralized role of globalized, immaterial labor. He makes this argument by describing the series' treatment of mechanical classes and difference across the first twelve entries in the series. He organizes the series' varied approaches to mechanical class and character differences into three "moments" that roughly correspond to the chronological unfolding of the series. The first moment, roughly spanning the game's first six entries, incentivizes the player to cultivate a heterogenous party, with each character having distinct abilities that complement one another. For example, the instruction manual of the first *Final Fantasy* explicitly encourages players to create a party composed of different classes of characters if they want to be prepared for the game's challenges. Following this, the default party of four characters in the first game is a Warrior, who focuses on defending other characters, a White Mage, capable of healing and bestowing various positive effects on characters (commonly referred to as "buffing" in contemporary video game vernacular), and a Black Belt and Black Mage, capable of inflicting physical and magical damage on enemies respectively.

As Voorhees describes, these classes are initially not tied to any particular racial, ethnic, or other cultural signifiers. In the first *Final Fantasy*, the characters are complete blank slates, devoid of any histories or personalities saving the ones that a player imaginatively imposes on them. As the series develops, however, playable characters are given pre-scripted personalities and histories, resulting in particular classes becoming articulated with specific races, ethnicities, and cultures.

For example, the character of Rydia in *Final Fantasy IV* is the last surviving member of a clan of summoners capable of invoking the powers of great spiritual beings. Consequently, she is the only character capable of using the “summon” ability in the game. However, despite the gradual development of characters with distinct personalities and traits, the game still incentivizes the player to cultivate a diverse party through the rigid and differential distribution of abilities across characters.

The rigid class and character structure of the first moment in *Final Fantasy* changes in the second moment identified by Voorhees (2009), which consists of *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) and *Final Fantasy VIII* (1999). Whereas before players had very little choice when it came to distributing abilities to characters, *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy VIII* featured mechanical class systems that allowed for players to determine the distribution of abilities. *Final Fantasy VII*, for example, introduced the “materia” system, whereby abilities were linked to specialized items called “materia” that could, in turn, be assigned to any character. A materia allowing a character to cast a lightning spell, then, could be attached to any character, whereas before the ability to cast a lightning spell was limited to a particular character. However, as Voorhees notes there were still limits to this character customization imposed by the game producers, although less obvious than in previous games. This came in the form of rules restricting certain classes of weapons to certain characters and the statistical growth of characters as they gained levels.

For Voorhees, these modifications are significant from a cultural perspective because they express a more flexible orientation towards identity construction. In previous iterations of the game, a character’s statistics and abilities, and

subsequently their entire development, were pre-determined. This was expressive of a kind of “biological determinism,” if you will, where a character’s class and, later, race, ethnicity, and culture determined their capacities. *Final Fantasy VII* and *VIII* broke with this rigid determinism by allowing players to direct the distribution of a character’s abilities, thereby removing the rigid class system of previous *Final Fantasies* and disentangling a character’s ludic development from their personality, culture, and history. However, the limits placed on this distribution were also significant, as Voorhees argues, because it allowed the game to continue to incentivize creating diverse parties. While every character could do anything, not every character could do everything equally well. While this may reintroduce certain essentialisms through the back door of game mechanics, Voorhees is particularly optimistic about this moment in the *Final Fantasy* series because it still forces the player to wrestle with the conditions of operating in a world that is suffused with social difference while resisting essentializing or erasing those differences.

This facet of the *Final Fantasy* series is greatly diminished in the third moment identified by Voorhees, comprising *Final Fantasy X* and *Final Fantasy XII*. Here the mechanical class structure is relaxed to the point of irrelevance as *Final Fantasy X* and *Final Fantasy XII*’s character development systems (called the “Sphere Grid” and “License Board” respectively) ultimately allow for every character to do everything equally well. While this does have the effect of completely disentangling a character’s history and personality from their capacities, it does so by ultimately erasing any differences in capacities. As *Final Fantasy X* and *Final Fantasy XII*

progress, players are incentivized to develop characters along converging paths until all of the characters are uniform. In addition, while *Final Fantasy X* does limit weapon types to specific characters, the differences between these weapon types are minimal as the weapons are able to be customized by the player. *Final Fantasy XII* erases even these minimal differences by allowing every character to equip every type of weapon. The consequences of this, as Voorhees explains, is the minimization or outright erasure of differences between characters as players are incentivized to create a homogenous party of characters who individually are capable of anything and everything. These systems, in turn, are expressive of a particular ideological response to multiculturalism, which is to represent difference as something to conquer and move beyond.

This history forms the foundation of the mechanical class system that *Final Fantasy XIV* deploys. Unlike in single-player *Final Fantasies*, however, players are not given a predetermined cast of characters but must instead create their own avatar, who functions as their representative in the game world. Players do this at the commencement of the game, where they must assign their avatar a particular race, gender, mechanical class, and appearance. However, while gender and race remain immutable, thus betraying an investment in certain forms of biological determinism, a character's mechanical class, and thus their capacities, are unfixed and changeable. Once they have reached a certain level in their class's development, players are free to switch their character's class to any other available class and develop that class as well. However, unlike *Final Fantasy X* and *Final Fantasy XII*, *Final Fantasy XIV* is an MMO that heavily emphasizes cooperating and coordinating



your actions with other players. Providing a service for socialization is a powerful attraction for players, since the game can become a way to create and maintain relationships between people. Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter (2009) have gone so far as to argue that the multiplayer capabilities of subscription-based MMOs like *Final Fantasy XIV* are critical to generating profit for the game's producers, since players frequently rely on MMOs to create and sustain relationships, which encourages players to continue playing the game, which in turn requires maintaining a paid subscription to the game (as of this writing, a subscription to *Final Fantasy XIV* costs \$14.99 a month).

This means that there is a significant incentive for the developers of the game to encourage players to play with others. One way this is accomplished is through a mechanical class system that ensures that there are differences between each player's avatar that significantly hinder, if not outright prevent, a solitary player from accomplishing all of the game's tasks. The developers of *Final Fantasy XIV* construct the necessity of interdependence between characters by preventing players from distributing abilities between the various classes. Thus, like *Final Fantasy X* and *XII*, *Final Fantasy XIV* allows a character's avatar to master every single ability in the game. However, *Final Fantasy XIV* prevents a player's character from accessing all of those abilities simultaneously. When a character switches classes, they lose access to all of the abilities of their previous class. While these abilities can be regained by reverting back to that class, class changing is prevented during certain segments, particularly those segments (like "dungeons") that

explicitly require a party composed of multiple players. You can do it all, *Final Fantasy XIV* seems to be saying, just not at the same time.

I propose that these changes to the class system in *Final Fantasy XIV* represent, to use Voorhees' terminology, a "fourth moment" in the franchise that synthesizes the first and second moment's emphasis on negotiating difference with the third moment's emphasis on player customization. By making each class a discrete profession and locking abilities to a particular class, the game allows for players to experiment and play with a variety of roles while still maintaining a need for interdependence and cooperation. The necessity of negotiating difference is most clearly demonstrated in the design of dungeons. "Dungeons" in *Final Fantasy XIV* are complex mazes that feature stronger enemies and better rewards than a player would find elsewhere. While players could technically play through dungeons alone, the game design strongly discourages this approach. Since enemies in dungeons are stronger, more numerous, and have more complex A.I. routines than conventional enemies, a solo player is likely to be overwhelmed and killed unless they possess extremely powerful equipment that is usually only (legally) obtainable by participating in dungeons. Furthermore, while participating in dungeons may be optional diversions in other MMOs such as *World of Warcraft* and *Rift*, in *Final Fantasy XIV* a player must participate in dungeons to progress through the main storyline and unlock particular benefits, such as "mounts," or vehicles, typically animals, that a player can ride to travel to objectives faster.

However, in my experience the strongest incentive to "group up" to play in dungeons is found in the game's "dungeon finder" tool. First introduced in *World of*

*Warcraft*, dungeon finder tools have since become a near universal feature in MMOs because they are a convenient way to assemble a fast and, significantly, temporary group to undertake a specific challenge. While the game provides players with the ability to create other, more stable groups and communities, the dungeon finder tool enables players who either are not part of such organizations, like solo players, or whose regular party members are unavailable to quickly pair with other players and undertake a given challenge. This greatly increases a player's control over their progression through the game's story as they are not so dependent on the schedules and demands of other players. *Final Fantasy XIV* openly encourages players to use the dungeon finder, even going so far as to include it in the quest descriptions of dungeons (e.g. "use the dungeon the finder tool to enter Sastasha").

To use the dungeon finder, a player must simply select the tool from the system menu, select which challenge you want to undertake, such as a specific dungeon or boss fight, and wait for the system to pair you with other players. What is significant for my discussion, however, is the logic the tool uses to assemble groups. When using the dungeon finder, the tool automatically registers you as one of three "roles" ("tank," "damage," or "healer") based on the mechanical class you have currently assigned to your character. These roles correspond to the mechanical class's traditional function within an MMO group, with tasks such as attacking enemies, defending the party, and healing or supporting other party members distributed between the different roles. For the dungeon to commence, these three roles needed to be filled according to the composition determined by the game (typically one tank, one healer, and two damage dealers). As fewer classes

were designated as “tank” and “healer” than “damage,” these roles usually took longer to fill (although, since I played primarily as a healer, my wait times were probably shorter than the majority of players). In dungeons, while overt communication, either by voice or by text, is not required, coordination and cooperation is. Successful completion of a dungeon requires each player to understand how their class functions in a group and what tasks they are expected to perform, which differs significantly from solo play where a player is responsible for everything. The distinction between solo and group play is so sharp that *Final Fantasy XIV* employs an entire tutorial section prior to the first dungeon encountered during the main story that explicitly teaches players what these expectations are and how to best fulfill them. For example, as a healer my training section focused on how to use abilities to heal wounded players, how to heal multiple characters, and how to dodge enemy attacks while healing. During a dungeon, I would focus on these activities (which comprised a very narrow spectrum of the abilities available to my character) while leaving other players to carry out their own activities.

As such, the class system employed by *Final Fantasy XIV*, best expressed through its dungeon design and the accompanying dungeon finder tool, creates and reinforces the differences between individual characters and makes these differences significant and, crucially, unavoidable. This works to undermine the procedural rhetoric of *Final Fantasy X* and *XII*, which Voorhees (2009) argues incentivize homogeneity and thus expresses an “ethnocentric, assimilationist approach to coping with cultural difference,” where difference is ultimately erased

as characters progress. This “assimilationist” rhetoric is largely incompatible with the class system of *Final Fantasy XIV*, which encourages the creation of heterogenous parties. This, in turn, is largely influenced by the social conventions of the MMO genre and the economic incentive to extend a player’s engagement with the game, and thus their subscription, through these social mechanics.

### **The Limitations of Togetherness in Final Fantasy XIV**

However, just because *Final Fantasy XIV* encourages some form of cooperation between players does not necessarily mean that it will generate the sympathetic cooperation imagined by Lazzarato (2004), Terranova (2009), and Baerg (2014) that could potentially counteract a market-centered neoliberal political rationality. In my experiences with *Final Fantasy XIV*, I have encountered several limiting factors embedded in both the design of the game and the communities of practice that have emerged around the game that work against practices of sympathetic cooperation. The first limiting factor that I want to discuss are the material limits to cooperation. As I stated previously, *Final Fantasy XIV* does afford players the ability to communicate with other players via in-game text-based chat and voice chat. However, that ability can, and often is, limited by the hardware needed to efficiently communicate with one another, particularly when playing on a dedicated gaming console like the Playstation 4 (as I did). Voice chat, the most efficient means of communication, requires a specialized external microphone, such as the ones found in specialized gaming headsets, that a player must acquire independently of both the console hardware and the gaming software.

Should a player decide to forego voice chat, they must communicate with other players via the in-game chat. Here again players are faced with material limitations. Players may type messages to other players using either an external Bluetooth keyboard or an in-game keyboard. An external keyboard is more efficient than the in-game keyboard. For one, players do not have to press multiple buttons to access the external keyboard – the game recognizes when an external keyboard is being used and so pressing any key on the keyboard automatically enters the players into chat.

Another, more significant barrier to communication, and hence to sympathetic cooperation, is the design of the in-game keyboard that players must use to communicate with other players if they do not have access to external microphones or wireless keyboards. While the design of the in-game keyboard resembles a traditional QWERTY keyboard, moving between keys requires pressing buttons instead of moving your hand through space. Compared to the other communication technologies discussed, using the in-game keyboard is slow, requiring minutes to input messages that would require only seconds in other methods. This limitation can be devastating in a game that requires quick reactions to changing battlefield circumstances. Lacking access to either an appropriate microphone or a wireless keyboard, and thus reliant upon the in-game keyboard, I would generally just decline to communicate at all when I played with other people. Such a practice, while not ideal, was also not treated as unusual or aberrant by the random players I was paired with. In my experience, few players made use of any of the chat features while playing through dungeons. The majority of chat messages

occurred at the commencement and conclusion of dungeons (i.e. before and after any challenges occur), and were limited to polite, generic greetings and expressions of gratitude. I was also never overtly chastised for declining to participate in these ritual exchanges, as I have been for failing to follow communication expectations in other, offline contexts.

This led me to believe that it was a generally accepted norm within the *Final Fantasy XIV* that chatting with strangers during multiplayer events was not expected. While this type of overt communication was not necessary for the completion of the game's challenges - during three months of daily play my groups never failed to complete a task - I would contend that it is a significant limitation for the achievement of the sympathetic cooperation that Terranova (2009) and Baerg (2014) optimistically put forward as an alternative to the competitive ethos of market-driven neoliberal political rationality. As Terranova describes, sympathetic cooperation can function as a check on neoliberalism's market-based ideology by encouraging people to treat one another as full human beings, rather than as actors in a market system. While the communication practices afforded by *Final Fantasy XIV* did not necessarily position players as actors in a market system, they also did not necessarily encourage players to think of one another as full human beings. Here I will again use myself and my experiences as an example. As an introvert who also suffers from anxiety and depression, interactions with people, particularly strangers, in a competitive context with clear win and lose conditions can be a fraught experience. In order to navigate these circumstances, I would often try to think of the other characters on screen with me not as avatars controlled by other

humans, but as computer-controlled characters similar to the numerous other computer-controlled actors I had encountered during solo play. I will not say that I was ever able to fully believe this, but approaching multiplayer activities from this perspective helped me to see how little *Final Fantasy XIV* does to encourage players to treat one another as full, entitled human beings rather than objects existing in a representational space. To be fair, it does not necessarily prevent this, either. But by making the ethical treatment of other players the responsibility of the players, and not a standard feature of the game's design, *Final Fantasy XIV* does little to ensure that players are treated with dignity and respect. In a competitive gaming context with emotional stakes, it is all too easy for players to slide into behaviors that may marginalize or traumatize other players. While there are mechanisms for players to report abuse to the game's moderators, this is a reactionary mechanic that again displaces the responsibility for policing abuse on to the victims of abuse.

This leads to another challenge players face in the construction of sympathetic cooperation – the disjuncture between the expectations established by the game and the social and cultural expectations that players bring to and construct through the game. As I mentioned before, *Final Fantasy XIV* provides an extensive tutorial program prior to the commencement of the first multiplayer activity mandated by the main storyline. This tutorial program introduces players to their designated role within multiplayer activities and, thus, establishes specific mechanical expectations for what players are supposed to do within that context. However, I was not required (or even encouraged) to learn about how the other designated roles (“tank” and “damage”) were expected to perform in multiplayer



activities. In other words, *Final Fantasy XIV* does not provide a framework for understanding how other players play, either mechanically or in a broader, cultural sense.

This can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts between players, particularly when the mechanical expectations put forward by the game and the expectations of the players are out of alignment. This was illustrated to me during one dungeon experience. I was conforming to the expectations the game had established for how a healer performs in dungeons – I was healing targets and staying out of the way of enemies. However, this did not meet the expectations of at least one other player, who sent me a message through chat: “Healer you know you can do damage as well?” My field notes at the time made note of the feelings of embarrassment and anger that this comment provoked in me – embarrassment at failing to meet the expectations of other players and anger at what I thought was an unreasonable demand. Unsure of the social protocols in this circumstance, I acquiesced to the player’s request and began damaging enemies in between healing allies. Later I asked several friends of mine more familiar with the culture of MMOs whether or not this was a common expectation of healers. They replied that damaging enemies, in addition to healing, was not a requirement of healers, but that it was “nice when it happened.”

I point to this example, however, not only to illustrate how the expectations established by a game and the social conventions that emerge around the playing of a game can diverge from one another, but also to note how the demands of sociality in *Final Fantasy XIV* can fall unevenly on different players, thus shaping who has

access to the networked spaces and the self-care practices provided by the game. Much has been written about how online gaming spaces are often fraught with tension and abuse, particularly for vulnerable and marginalized populations who fall outside of the imagined audience of video games (e.g. Gray, 2014; Chess & Shaw, 2015). What I want to note is that even (relatively) gentle recommendations like the one provided to me in the encounter described above can fall harshly on players who, for various reasons, already perceive online spaces as threatening. While I do not want to generalize my experiences of shame and embarrassment to other players, or even claim that such a reaction is common, I do not want to dismiss it outright either. What I instead want to do with this experience is suggest that there is a range of communicative expressions and practices in online spaces outside of overt hate speech, offensive language, or other overt forms of abuse that can nevertheless alienate people from these spaces. Without sufficient structures in place to educate players on how to create inclusive spaces and establish communicative norms that privilege diversity, the sympathetic cooperation that Terranova (2009) argues can provide alternatives to the neoliberal privileging of market competition will remain elusive in online spaces.

### **Thriving and Togetherness in Final Fantasy XIV**

What does this have to do with thriving? As I have discussed before, my participants frequently connected thriving with success and fulfillment. However, the success and fulfillment imagined by my participants were largely constructed within an ideological framework that only recognizes success and fulfillment using

traditional (re: heterosexual, capitalistic) markers: individual productivity and achievement, accumulation of wealth, and emotional maturity marked by the establishment of a domestic family. Again, I want to reiterate that there is nothing necessarily wrong with using these as markers for thriving. What is problematic is when they become the *only* markers for thriving, and as such become part of a normative system that maintains structures of domination through the distribution of both material resources and symbolic recognition.

*Final Fantasy XIV*, by and large, does little to challenge or expand this conception of thriving through its social mechanics. As I argued in the previous chapter, its design is at least partially invested in a neoliberal social-economic formation that is dependent on re-routing people from self-care practices of recuperation and renewal back into productive labor practices that can be monetized and exploited. This social-economic formation, in turn, is discursively supported through the articulation of success with wealth accumulation and the establishment of stable social relationships. While one of the elements emphasized in the *Final Fantasy XIV*'s marketing is the ability to establish social relationships and build a community – its website prominently advertises that players can “form lasting friendships and memories” – in practice there are several barriers in place that prohibit this, from the mechanical limitations of the game's interface to the cultural norms and expectations of players developed in response to the game's affordances and limitations. As network scholars like Baym (2000) and Markham (1998) remind us, players do not enter into online spaces as blank slates. They instead bring with them the cultural norms and attitudes cultivated in other spaces,

which in turn inform their behavior and practices in online spaces. By declining to explicitly codify a set of inclusive norms and practices and tutor players in them in a way similar to how the game tutors players in its mechanics, it is all too easy to reproduce the social conditions that make other public spaces so threatening to members of marginalized communities. This, in turn, makes it challenging to establish the sympathetic cooperation discussed by Lazzarato (2004), Terranova (2009), and Berg (2009, 2014). In my own informal discussions with friends who play MMOs, they argued that the best way to ensure a welcoming social experience in MMOs was to play with friends met in other contexts, either offline or through other social media platforms. This is not to say that such relationships cannot be established using the tools provided by *Final Fantasy XIV*. Rather, my argument is that the design of the social components of the game does not encourage the formation of these relationships and thus makes it more likely that the public created in the game will reproduce the conditions that make public spaces threatening for vulnerable groups.

### **The Problem of Togetherness on the Left**

This brings me to a larger problem with how the Left has imagined the unfolding of change and progress. As I touched upon at the beginning of this chapter, I believe there is an overemphasis on sociality and togetherness in Left political thinking, as both a mechanism for structural transformation and the imagined result of this structural transformation.

Kinnamon (2016) explicitly challenges this tendency on the Left, writing

What may result is self-neglect or an overestimation of collectivity, as if liberation and joy result from the mere act of togetherness. Critics often refuse work on the self because it becomes interchangeable with a neo(liberal) architecture of control, and because it is, in fact, immaterial labor. But if capitalist recuperation simply cannot be avoided, is it worth parsing out a difference between “self-care” in service to capital and the kind of “care of the self” so lauded by Foucault? (p.192).

While Kinnamon reserves her critique of the overemphasis on collectivity and togetherness to the domain of Leftist political thinking, I would extend this further, arguing that, at least within American culture, there is deep cultural belief in the superiority of togetherness. Susan Cain (2012), in her popular analysis of the cultural significance of introversion, calls this “The Extrovert Ideal” (p. 4). As she describes it, the Extrovert Ideal is

the omnipresent belief that the ideal self is gregarious, alpha, and comfortable in the spotlight. The archetypal extrovert prefers action to contemplation, risk-taking to heed-taking, certainty to doubt. He favors quick decisions, even at the risk of being wrong. She works well in teams and socializes in groups. We like to think that we value individuality, but all too often we admire one *type* of individual – the kind who’s comfortable “putting himself out there.” (p. 4)

My critique of this tendency within the Left does not rest on the idea that structural transformations cannot occur through social collectivity and togetherness. It is likely that, for some people at least, collectivity and togetherness are necessary conditions of thriving. My problem is that, by overemphasizing collectivity and togetherness, we are potentially overlooking other mechanisms for social transformation and limiting how we imagine a more utopian society whose resources, both material and immaterial, are distributed more equitably. My worry

is that we risk alienating people who thrive best under social conditions that afford them the ability to withdraw from togetherness.

### **Imagining Different Futures**

I believe that the example of *Final Fantasy XIV* can help us see both the limitations of a progressive politics centered on collectivity and togetherness as well as the transformative potential of withdrawal. Returning to my participants, 23%, or roughly a quarter, outright said that video games do not promote thriving. This percentage was slightly higher for people who identified as straight (29%) than for people who identified as a non-normative sexuality (20%). Within a neoliberal political rationality, and the subject positions, practices, and life narratives that it privileges, it would be challenging to imagine playing video games as a component of thriving. In an ideal world organized by neoliberalism, playing video games would help people care for themselves and repair the psychic damage wrought by immaterial labor so that ultimately they could return to labor. Thus, while playing video games can be instrumental to the reproduction of immaterial labor, and consequently neoliberalism, it is not the imagined goal of this social formation. When asked to define thriving, as discussed in chapter 4, my participants largely described an affective state of happiness and satisfaction produced through meaningful labor and relationships, typically projected into the future. No participants stated that playing video games, in and of itself, was thriving.

However, if a quarter of my participant population rejected the idea that playing video games could be a part of thriving, the rest of my population (i.e. 77%

or approximately three quarters) were at least willing to consider the idea that playing video games and thriving were compatible with one another. I am saying “willing to consider the idea” because “thriving” was not a word that was native to the gaming communities that I was able to tap into. I certainly had never encountered it as a member of different gaming communities. Consequently I believe that, for many of my participants, being exposed to the concept over the course of my questionnaire was the first time they were asked to consider the relationship between these two practices. So it would be unrealistic to expect many participants to enthusiastically endorse an interpretation of their practices (i.e. that gaming helped them to thrive) that was alien to them.

Approximately three quarters of the population, though, were willing to consider that this relationship existed. What I am interested in exploring for the remainder of this chapter are the features of video games that can potentially lead players to experiences of thriving and how that can help critical cultural scholars rethink the mechanisms through which social transformation can occur. On its surface, it would be hard to imagine *Final Fantasy XIV* contributing to thriving, either from a neoliberal perspective, since it is not a form of productive labor, or from a more progressive perspective, since the types of communities afforded by the game are not especially aligned with the types of communities imagined to be encouraging of a more just and equitable world. However, I contend that *Final Fantasy XIV* can provide valuable tools for the practice of thriving. You just have to know where to look. Critical gaming scholars have typically foregrounded the social elements of gaming as the best engines of social transformation through gaming.

However, I contend that there are other potential avenues for imagining future worlds outside of collectivity and togetherness. If we only look for transformative practices in collectivity and togetherness in *Final Fantasy XIV*, we risk missing what I think is its most valuable contribution to progressive politics – its *fantasy*. This fantasy, moreover, is not produced through its social mechanics, which as we have seen risk reproducing existing uneven social relationships, but in its narrative and world.

Now, critical scholars in game studies and more broadly have been skeptical of attributing too much significance to a game's narrative and representations. I believe part of this stems from institutional pressures to establish game studies as a distinct sub-field in media studies. This has led gaming scholars to privilege the ludic qualities of video games, since these are the most obvious elements that separate video games from other media, such as television and film (Crawford, 2012). Even when critical scholars do acknowledge the narrative components of video games, there is still a tendency to assert that the ludic elements carry more weight, and thus have more impact on an audience.

Take, for example, Pérez-Latorre and Oliva's (2017) recent analysis of the popular video game *Bioshock: Infinite* (2013). Like myself, they are deeply concerned about the relationship between video games and neoliberal values and ideologies. In particular, Pérez-Latorre and Oliva are concerned with how neoliberal ideologies can be embedded in game design techniques. Drawing upon Bogost's (2007) concept of procedural rhetoric and building on ongoing conversations about the relationship between video game narratives and gameplay,



Pérez-Latorre and Oliva use the case study of *Bioshock: Infinite* to argue that there can be friction between the narrative and ludic dimensions of video games. In the case of *Bioshock: Infinite*, the dystopian narrative elements of the game implicitly question the status quo and critique social problems such as inequality, oppression, and racism. The ludic elements, in contrast, reinforce neoliberal values of individualism, competitiveness, consumption, and entrepreneurship as a method of constructing the self through their emphasis on gradually building and customizing a character through the thoughtful purchase of upgrades and clever use of limited resources.

However, Pérez-Latorre and Oliva do not conclude their argument with these two clashing elements balanced in a state of tension. Instead, Pérez-Latorre and Oliva argue that this “balanced plurality” and its presumed “ideological neutrality” is undermined by the articulation of neoliberal values with *Bioshock: Infinite’s* core gameplay mechanics (p. 16). It is here, I believe, that audience studies can productively enter this conversation and provide added insight into the relationship between video game practices and neoliberal ideologies. Pérez-Latorre and Oliva (2017) decline to elaborate their argument that *Bioshock: Infinite’s* political neutrality is undermined by the ideologies embedded in its gameplay mechanics because the core gameplay mechanics of the game outweigh its disruptive dystopian narrative. In this way they reproduce the unfortunately common idea in game studies that the narrative elements of video games are somehow less significant than the gameplay mechanics, which are figured to be the “essence” of the video game (Soderman, 2017) Now I do not want to claim that such an interpretation is

not possible. Certainly in video games, which are complicated assemblages of narrative and ludic elements, some elements may be given greater weight and importance than others. My point is that such a claim cannot be taken for granted in an analysis. In declining to discuss why they think that the political values of *Bioshock: Infinite* are weighted towards its gameplay mechanics, Pérez-Latorre and Oliva risk reproducing the assumption within game studies that gameplay mechanics are more significant than the narrative elements of a video game.

This is where audience studies can intervene and expand upon the foundations established by Pérez-Latorre and Oliva. As Janice Radway (1988) has argued, texts do not guarantee a particular interpretation or mode of reception. Instead, they are produced within and distributed throughout multiple social and cultural contexts. While the production of a text and the text itself have powerful determining effects upon its reception, we should be careful to specify that this is not determination by way of a guarantee of a particular outcome, but instead is more like what Stuart Hall (1996a) refers to as determination in the first instance. This is a form of determination whereby a media text establishes a particular horizon of interpretation that individual readers work within when creating their own interpretations.

In short, the relationship between the ludic and narrative elements in a particular video game is complex and unstable, situated as it is at the intersection of the interests of cultural producers, textual features, and audience practices. Therefore we cannot assume that the ludic elements of a game are more significant than the narrative elements without examining how actual people play the video

game. As Adrienne Shaw (2014) reminds us, interpellation requires both a hailing and a response to that hailing. While she was referring specifically to identity construction, I think this idea can be productively expanded to include many kinds of textual encounters – there is the text, and then there is how people respond to the text, and one cannot necessarily be inferred from the other. Declining to account for this runs the risk of misunderstanding the practices of actual video game players.

Returning to my participants, I think it would be a mistake to argue that gameplay mechanics are more important than a game’s narrative design for a large amount of them. When I asked about players’ tastes in video games and their criteria for evaluating video games, 33 participants (roughly half of the sample) stated that the thing they looked for the most when evaluating a video game was the game’s narrative. This preference was expressed along several dimensions, of course. Some simply stated that they looked for a “good story” or “plot.” Others went into more detail. For example, Ilene stated that she plays “a lot of cinematic or story rich games. It helps me get lost.” Another participant, Teressa, stated that she looks for whether or not “the scenario, the story, and if the game can entertain me for a couple of hours. A good game to me is a title that travels [sic] my mind to another world. Games that are completely away from...reality always catch me.” Some participants mentioned plot in conjunction with characterizations. For example, Normand wrote that,

“Character and story are #1 for me, and character more so than story; I can play through a game with shitty gameplay and a mediocre story if the characters are awesome enough, whereas a game with good gameplay but no good characters has to have something else really outstanding (atmosphere, inventive mechanics, or something similar) to recommend it if I am going to play it long enough to beat it.”

Meanwhile, other participants explicitly placed narrative above gameplay in their hierarchy of gaming values. For instance, Arlene stated that a video game’s storyline was her “only real criteria. If a game has a fascinating storyline but shorty [sic] gameplay, I will keep going. But of course the vice versa is true as well - no matter how good the gameplay, I will lose interest without a storyline that interests me.”

Now I do not want to claim that a stated preference for a game’s narrative means that the game’s narrative and its attendant ideologies have the greatest impact on an individual player. After all, texts can have subconscious effects on audience members that can be just as profound as those that the audience is aware of. Moreover, as discussed in chapter 5, the narrative elements of a video game are inextricably connected with all of the other elements of a video game, which are in turn experienced simultaneously by the player along with other information streams from outside of the screen. These various elements create an assemblage that is different from the sum of its parts, and so to hold up one element as *the* most important element is to misrepresent the experience of playing video games. Instead, I provide these examples to question the unspoken assumption that structures many analyses of video game texts - that the core gameplay mechanics of a video game ultimately determine the ideology and political perspective of a video game text. The responses of my participants, with their emphasis on non-ludic elements such as narrative and representation, suggest that there are certain

situations where a player's experience of a video game text may be dominated by the game's story or characters. Ultimately, then, the meaning of a game text and the effect it has on an audience cannot be extrapolated from the text itself. It must be situated within the context of reception, which is separate from and never completely guaranteed by the text itself.

All of this is to argue that, in certain contexts, the narrative dimensions of a video game are important to consider, particularly if we are to understand how playing video games can support a person's thriving. To reiterate, while a notable proportion of my participants rejected the idea that video games can contribute to experiences of thriving, a larger proportion were at the very least receptive to the idea. Moreover, my participants expressed preferences for the narrative elements of a game, including but not limited to a game's plot, characters, and world-building. This leads me to think that, in the case of *Final Fantasy XIV* and other MMOs, if we are examining how video games can contribute to experiences of thriving, which includes imagining better futures, we can productively begin our investigation by looking at a game's narrative elements, not in how the game constructs community and togetherness, as suggested by digital media scholars like Terranova (2009) and Baerg (2014).

This is because of an often-underestimated function of media narratives in contemporary American contexts – their ability to construct and sustain fantasies. While many critical scholars have dismissed fantasy, perhaps justifiably, as naïve flights of fancy or wishful thinking, I think a more productive stance to take towards fantasy is the one outlined by Lisa Henderson (2013) in the final chapter of her book

*Love and Money: Queers, Class, and Cultural Production*. Here, Henderson argues that fantasy, in its more optimistic and whimsical connotations, is central to the critical question of culture's role in world-making. It is worth quoting her reasoning for this at length:

There is a lightness in flight and wish, an antiprogrammatic disposition and an energy worth holding onto – culture not only as form but a range of feelings that exceeds the distrust typically assigned to critique. If religious fantasies of deliverance (or liberation theology, protest rock, science fiction, or sexual scene-making) tell us anything, it is that fantasy gives futures feeling and form in the present, making it possible to imagine alternatives and to see what is already sustaining. It makes thought about futures more open – less driven or tethering or like hedging a bet than a real-time form of creativity (p. 129).

In my experience playing *Final Fantasy XIV*, I did not find the fantasies described by Henderson, the ones that allow us to bring the future into the present and see what is already sustaining, in the game's cooperative, multiplayer segments. Instead, I found them when I withdrew from the togetherness of the game and engaged in practices more amenable to solitude: reading its texts, watching its cinematics, listening to its music, and consuming its unfolding plot. This is not to say, again, that others do not or can not find resources for the sustenance of imagined futures through the game's social aspects. It is to insist, however, that this is not the only form of sustenance available to players, and perhaps not the best place in the game to find sustenance in the present or resources for imagining a more equitable and just social structure in the future. Sustenance can also be found in solitude and withdrawal from togetherness, and at least in *Final Fantasy XIV* I would argue that withdrawing from the social elements of the game affords players a better

opportunity to observe and reflect upon the more progressive elements of the game, elements that I found encouraging, heartening, and even inspiring.

### **Diversity and Inclusivity in the World of Final Fantasy XIV**

So, why do I claim that *Final Fantasy XIV*'s narrative is progressive, and why do I think it can enable players to better imagine a world with a more equitable distribution of resources, both material and symbolic? I first want to begin with how the game positions the player's avatar within the game's larger narrative. The game opens with a dream sequence in which the player's avatar, spurred on by a mysterious voice, confronts a threatening person wearing black robes and a flame-like mask. Once the avatar awakes, the player discovers that they are in the midst of traveling to one of the game's three primary city-states, Gridania, Ul'dah, or Limsa Lominsa, which one determined by the mechanical class chosen by the player during the character creation segment. While mechanically similar, as each city-state functions as a tutorial segment for the game as well as a hub for significant in-game organizations and institutions, the culture and politics of each city-state are significantly different from one another. Gridania is a theocracy, founded on the symbiotic relationship between the people living in the city and the elemental spirits of the surrounding forest, Ul'dah is a sultanate whose culture is organized around trade and commerce, while Limsa Lominsa is a newly-established thalassocracy (its prior life was a haven for pirates and outlaws).

What is immediately established in this introductory segment and, prior to this, the character creation segment where these cultural and political differences

are first explained, is that the world of *Final Fantasy XIV* is one premised on difference. Diversity is the baseline of the world, a feature that is reinforced thematically throughout the game. The primary antagonists of the game are the Garlean Empire, an imperial fascist regime that is attempting to conquer and homogenize Eorzea. Gridania, Ul'dah, and Limsa Lominsa, in an effort to repel the Garlean Empire, have joined together in an alliance called the Eorzean Alliance. Notably this alliance does not diminish each city-state's sovereignty or cultural specificity. Instead, the internal diversity of the Eorzean Alliance is explicitly framed as its greatest strength and is instrumental in ultimately frustrating the imperialistic efforts of the Garlean Empire.

There is much in the geopolitics and culture of Eorzea that is supportive of a progressive politics – namely its staunch anti-imperialism and championing of diversity. What I primarily take from this world, however, is the idea that there can be structuring forces in society that do not resemble hierarchies. Difference exists in the Eorzean Alliance, but those differences exist in a horizontal, rather than vertical, relationship with one another. Through cooperation and communication (several of the game's main quests revolve around establishing and maintaining lines of communication between the various heads of state), the Eorzean alliance is able to function smoothly despite the looming threat of war and without collapsing into fascism. Given the current political atmosphere in the United States, where we are routinely reminded by media institutions of the nearly-insurmountable cultural gaps between various factions (liberals and conservative, Democrat and Republican, Red and Blue), it is heartening to be able to escape into a world that is organized



differently, and thus helps players construct a feeling for the imagined potentials embedded within the world of Eorzea. If, as Kenneth Burke (1968) has proposed, literature, and by extension electronic media and narratives (Brummett, 1985), can function as “equipment for living” by naming recurrent situations and providing audiences with ways of negotiating these particular circumstances, I would suggest that it is equally important to consider the “equipment for fantasies” that media provide. For, as Adrienne Shaw (2014) has noted, representation and, by extension, narrative is important because it “provides evidence of what could be and who can be possible” (p. 41). Likewise, Dayan and Katz (1992) have also noted that one of the powerful ritual functions of the media is to not only report what is, but also what *ought* to be. That is, the media can act as a catalyst for change by tapping into and releasing hopes and other submerged social forces. In short, representation and narratives, as sites for the exercise of and struggle over power (Couldry, 2012), inform not just how we see and understand the world around us, but also the various potentials and possibilities for different social configurations and relationships that are available to us.

The importance of this cannot be underestimated. Take, for example, the neoliberal understanding of the naturalness of economic processes. As Terranova (2009) has detailed, one of the ways that Western political economists of the 18<sup>th</sup> century attempted to limit the sovereign exercise of power was by asserting the naturalness of economic processes, namely the market and its underlying mechanism of competition. Within this “regime of truth” (to use Foucault’s term), economic processes are figured as “laws” or “rules” (much like the laws of physics)

that are immanent to social institutions and organizations and thus should be treated as beyond the domain of sovereign power (Terranova, 2019, p. 237-239). Within this framework, the state can only hamper or interfere with the function of these economic laws. This regime of truth reverberates to this day, legitimizing an entire array of policies and procedures that find their current expression in a neoliberal political rationality, such as the deregulation of the market and the extension of economic processes and practices to other domains.

One of the ways in which a neoliberal political rationality asserts its legitimacy is through the idea that there is no *outside* to the economic practices of the market and competition, that they are fundamental to the organization of life. *Final Fantasy XIV*, throughout its narrative, represents alternative modes of economic being, thus providing players with resources to imagine alternatives to capitalism. To see an example of this, we can turn to a small series of quests located in the city-state of Gridania. As stated above, Gridania is unique amongst the other city-states in Eorzea for being a theocracy. This theocracy is founded on the symbiotic relationship between the residents of Gridania and the elemental spirits that inhabit the surrounding forests. Through quests and conversations with computer-controlled characters, or NPCs, players can learn that the city-state of Gridania actually exists at the mercy of the forest elementals, and must routinely consult with the elementals to discuss how to manage Gridania, particularly its population, consumption practices, and any city development projects, in order to ensure that the presence and activities of the city-state do not cause undue harm on its surrounding environs.

In other words, Gridania is an example of state whose economic policies are not primarily framed in terms of the neoliberal market. Consequently, its residents are free to adopt subject positions that are significantly different from the ones typically afforded by a capitalist economic structure. This is dramatized in a particular quest. This quest is not mechanically original – it simply requires the player to locate and talk to different NPCs located in a small area. Its presentation is also simple, consisting of dialogue text that the player can click through, as opposed to other, more cinematic moments in the game that feature scripted camera movements and fully-voiced dialogue. However, side quests like this contribute to the world building of the game by introducing players to the different perspectives of the residents of Eorzea and how these perspectives interact with one another. The quest in question involves a conflict between a merchant from Ul'Dah and an animal breeder of Gridania. The merchant wishes to purchase animal stock from the breeder but for reasons he cannot understand the breeder refuses to sell his stock. Consequently, the merchant asks the player's character to gather information on the breeder so that the merchant may understand the breeder's needs and desires and thus better negotiate with the breeder. By speaking with several other NPCs throughout the area, the player learns that the breeder does not wish to sell to the Ul'Dahn merchant because he cares for his animals and does not trust the merchant to treat them with care and respect. Ultimately, the merchant, frustrated by the breeder's refusal to adopt the traditional concerns of a seller in a capitalist market, gives up on negotiations and leaves the farm.

This small narrative arc in the game, I contend, provides resources for imagining different subject positions than the ones typically offered by capitalism. In a typical capitalist exchange, the merchant and breeder would be buyers and sellers of a particular commodity in a particular market. The buyer desires to sell his commodity for the highest price possible, the seller desires to pay the cheapest price possible, and so the two must compete with one another to negotiate the price of the commodity. These are the subject positions that the merchant in *Final Fantasy XIV* assumes are in play in his exchange with the animal breeder. The breeder, however, is playing an entirely different game, one not necessarily premised upon the market logic of competition. He refuses to reduce the animals he breeds to a commodity, thus bringing another set of ethical concerns to the moment of exchange that upsets the smooth operation of the market. The breeder's position, in fact, resembles the practice of sympathetic cooperation discussed by Lazzarato (2004) and Terranova (2009), and thus models an alternative means of organizing economic life than the means typically afforded by neoliberal market capitalism. The breeder's position is no longer based on the abstract commodity value of his animals, but on other truth-values, aesthetic-values, and existential-values, such as his animal's health and well-being. This introduces new affective relations into the moment of exchange, something that the Ul'Dah merchant is unprepared for and unwilling to accommodate. The exchange, in turn, breaks down as the merchant abandons his pursuit for the breeder's animals. The breeder, at least in my reading of this quest, seems mostly relieved by this and returns to what is truly valuable to him – maintaining the well-being of his animals.

Now, admittedly this is only one small narrative quest in a game that literally has hundreds. It is not even a part of the main questline of *Final Fantasy XIV*, and so it is possible for players to miss this quest entirely, or merely fulfill the mechanical requirements of the quest without engaging with the narrative. However, this quest is emblematic of the broad purpose of side quests in *Final Fantasy XIV* – world building. Side quests like the one I have described help to develop the player’s understanding of the fantasy world of Eorzea, particularly the different cultures, politics, and lived experiences of its imaginary inhabitants. As such, these side quests are fundamentally premised on the management of difference. This intersects with the dominant theme of the main storyline, particularly in the moments that end the arc of the core game’s storyline. The player ultimately confronts and defeats the fascistic leader of the Garlean Empire’s military, bringing a momentary (but by no means definitive) halt to the Empire’s efforts to conquer the region and unify its cultures, religions, governments, and economies. The success of the player is explicitly attributed by the game, through the text of important supporting characters, to the strategic alliances forged between the different city-states (Figure 3). Difference, in other words, is a critical resource in the resistance against totalitarianism and fascism, a theme that strongly resonates with contemporary critical social and political theories of scholars such as Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004), Terranova (2009), and Baerg (2009, 2014).

Thus, when looking for potential openings in the smooth reproduction of a neoliberal rationality in video games, the case of *Final Fantasy XIV* suggests that we may have a better chance of finding them in the spaces that allow for solitude and



Figure 3. Screenshot from a dialogue sequence in *Final Fantasy XIV*. Minfilia, the character speaking, is the leader of one of the organizations (“The Scions of the Seventh Dawn”) that is part of the Eorzean alliance. Here she extols the virtues of diversity.

withdrawal rather than cooperation and togetherness, or at the very least allow for strategic movement between these two states. In my experience playing *Final Fantasy XIV*, I felt more relief and sustenance, the hallmarks of self-care, when I was alone. This is unsurprising considering my introverted personality and concomitant relationship with anxiety and depression. However, I also found more than just sustenance and relief when I was alone in Eorzea. I was also able to encounter a world different from my current world, one where state governments embrace and cultivate diversity and different ways of organizing economic life outside of competition and capitalism.

In the narrative elements of *Final Fantasy XIV*, I was able to find resources for imagining alternatives to the current social order and cultivate a feeling for what those alternatives could be like. This, I would argue, contributes to an experience of thriving that is not limited by heteronormativity and capitalism. This experience of thriving is structured by a feeling for a future that is better than the present not because a person has satisfied the narrow requirements of heteronormativity (i.e. the establishment of a reproductive, monogamous family unit) and capitalism (i.e. the accumulation of wealth). The fantasy offered by *Final Fantasy XIV* is one that sustains different ways of being in the world and treats them with dignity.

When viewed through the hegemonic lens of thriving expressed by the majority of my participants, then, it is difficult to claim that playing video games can contribute to thriving. But I would put forward that that is a limited understanding of thriving. The alternative understanding of thriving that I am offering, one structured by a feeling for a way of organizing economic and social life around difference and dignity, does allow for the possibility that playing video games can be sustaining and transformative. This is not a naïve assertion that playing video games can overthrow hegemony and rid us of power, since I acknowledge that there are many many discursive and mechanical forces both inside and outside of the game that work to undermine these feelings and recuperate them for capital. It is more a gentle reminder that cultural struggle is not a zero-sum game in which all resistance ultimately collapses back into and is recuperated by structures of domination.

## **Conclusion, or Sometimes It's Good to be Left Alone**

Ultimately, this chapter is a reminder that structural forces of domination are not totalizing, nor do they guarantee a particular experience or interpretation of a cultural text like *Final Fantasy XIV*. *Final Fantasy XIV*, as a digital MMO game set within a franchise that frequently wrestles with questions of multiculturalism and social difference (Voorhees, 2009), provides a lot of different players a lot of different narrative and ludic content. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the game does not provide a consistent and coherent message about our relationship with different structures of power or strategies with how to cope with, let alone transform, conditions of domination. What is surprising, in my playing of the game, is that what I would call the progressive resources of the game, the components that can help players imagine different social configurations of power and more equitable relationships within institutions like the state and the economy, were not found by participating in the social activities of the game. Instead, it was by withdrawing from others and playing the game alone that I was best able to appreciate the game's fantasy world.

In short, then, can video games help people thrive? I would argue that yes, they can, because they can help people imagine different worlds and develop cultural strategies that can make a difference. This argument, however, is premised on a different and unfamiliar definition of thriving, one that is not afforded by hegemonic narratives that measure success and value in terms of wealth accumulation and reproductive labor. I will admit that this is not the understanding expressed by the participants of my study. And so the understanding of thriving



that I am putting forward is not descriptive of understandings that already exist, but is more a response to what I see as the limitations of the understandings put forward by my participants. Nevertheless, it is grounded in practices of consumption and play that do exist in the present. My participants reported moving between various modes of sociality during their play time and favored MMO games that were designed with this fluidity in mind. Moreover, my participants also expressed a preference for game narratives, with some going so far as to say that a strong narrative could outweigh any ludic components of a game that they found dissatisfying. Yet while they were ambivalent about whether or not video games could help them thrive, I would insist that video games can help us thrive if we look beyond the narrow constraints of hegemonic definitions of success and failure. And so my specific intervention into discussions about media and thriving is to suggest that what is needed are not different consumption practices, per se, but different cultural understandings of those practices. For playing *Final Fantasy XIV* offers us a fantasy world with different relationships and modes of being from those offered in the worlds of many of my participants, and thus can help us develop a feeling for those worlds, a sense of what it would feel like to live in those worlds. These feelings, as Lisa Henderson (2013) argues, help ground these utopian imaginings in the present and develop strong emotional attachments to these ideas. By looking for where these attachments already are, critical cultural scholars can then develop different strategies around these practices and help use the energy of these attachments to make a difference. After all, how can we make better worlds if we do not know how to recognize them in the present? By remaining mindful of the open-

ended potential of practices like playing video games, we also remain open to different ways of being in the world and to the different openings and opportunities that these ways create. If we recognize how practices like playing a video game or withdrawing from people can create and sustain differences and shift distributions of power in the present, we will be better equipped to develop new strategies and responses to the ever-shifting distribution of power in the future.

Again, this does not ignore the possibility that these practices can, and often will, be recuperated by hegemonic forces in an effort to control and manage resistance. I acknowledge that the video game practices that I am describing are rare and that the particular way of understanding thriving that I am describing is not popular. I acknowledge that neoliberal policies and practices frequently exploit the practices of self-care and thriving described throughout this dissertation, and that playing video games frequently resembles the types of labor performed in an immaterial economy and thus can be used to prepare people for those jobs, as Yee (2006) noted more than a decade ago. However, I also acknowledge that these outcomes are not guaranteed, and that by only paying attention to how practices are foreclosed and recuperated by systems of power we may miss openings and fissures that can be used to make a difference. Stuart Hall (1996b) elegantly summarized the risks of this attitude when discussing approaches to black representation in the media:

Cultural hegemony is never about pure victory or pure domination (that's not what the term means); it is never a zero-sum cultural game; it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture; it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out of it. There is a kind of 'nothing ever changes, the system always wins' attitude, which I read as the cynical protective shell that...sometimes prevent them [cultural critics] from developing strategies that can make a difference. It is as if, in order to protect themselves against the occasional defeat, they have to pretend they can see right through everything – and it's just the same as it always was (p. 468).

Sedgwick (2003) called this tendency in cultural criticism paranoid and suggested weak theory and reparative readings as a way to correct this imbalance, and critical social scholars such as Gibson-Graham (2006), Henderson (2013), and Kinnamon (2016) have expanded on this to offer alternative ways of analyzing social movements, media representations, and self-care practices, respectively. My analysis of video game audience practices works to synthesize and adapt these theories for the field of video game studies and audience studies and map the tensions and openings that considering the question of thriving can create. It is in that spirit that I leave my audience with one final anecdote from my time spent in Eorzea.

As I stated above, all players begin their time in Eorzea traveling to their chosen starting city-state. This is because all player characters are “adventurers,” a class of citizen not bound to any particular nation – in other words, an immigrant. While this serves the functional purpose of creating a coherent reason for why in-game characters must constantly provide exposition about the world's different cultures, geopolitical relations, and economic structures, it also signals the game's general attitude towards difference and diversity. Rather than presenting immigration, difference, and diversity as a “problem” to be solved, the narrative of

*Final Fantasy XIV* instead frames them as opportunities for new possibilities and, ultimately, a source of strength. To this end, each of the city-states in Eorzea have instituted policies and programs to support and sustain immigrants to their cities, such as setting aside land specifically for immigrant housing and establishing organizations, like the “Adventurer’s Guild” to help them acclimate to their new home. This is not without its tension. The first task given to any new player character is to register with the Adventurer’s Guild by speaking with its local representative. Over the course of this process, though, your character encounters members of the local police force who express immediate distrust of your character due to their immigrant status. The representative of the Adventurer’s Guild, however, openly chastizes the police for treating your character that way and reminds them that the head of state has ordered all immigrants to be supported and treated with dignity. In the face of contemporary American politics, which has seen a rise in nationalist and protectionist rhetoric and an intense suspicion of immigrants, *Final Fantasy XIV* offers a gentler treatment of immigrants and immigration, one in which the harsh blows of racism and prejudice are met with equally forceful shaming and censure by those in power, not repeated by the head of state. In short, *Final Fantasy XIV* offers players the opportunity to escape the brutality and harshness of contemporary American attitudes towards immigration and difference and develop a feeling for a world in which immigration and difference are not just carefully policed and managed, but are also encouraged, supported, and sustained by the state. Isn’t that a nice fantasy?

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION, OR WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

As we come to the end of this dissertation, I would first like to return to Foucault's (1988) concept of "care of the self" and Kinnamon's (2016) elaboration of this concept. As previously discussed, Foucault derived his "care of the self" from Greco-Roman ascetic philosophies and practices that urged people to "attend to oneself." This attention to the self, meanwhile, could have transformative effects not only on the individual practitioner, but also on social practices. As Foucault discusses in *Care of the Self*, Greco-Roman practices of self-care constituted a social practice in two significant ways. For one, these practices, which emphasized reflection, introspection, and careful contemplation in addition to rest and renewal, could prepare people to act in a more ethical way with others. This does not mean that the self-care practices examined by Foucault eliminated structural imbalances of power within Greco-Roman society. They simply afforded the opening of the field of power to greater circulation. In other words, the care of the self creates space for the exercise of "practices of liberty," without necessarily guaranteeing that these practices of liberty will emerge (Foucault, 1988, p. 114).

The second way in which the care of the self is a social practice is in how the practice was built into the infrastructure of social institutions like schools, mentoring and teaching, and spiritual services (Kinnamon, 2016, p. 193). An entire social infrastructure, then, supported the Greco-Roman practices described by Foucault. For Kinnamon (2016), this is the primary distinction between the "care of the self" described by Foucault and the "self-care" practices promoted by

corporations and other neoliberal institutions and agents. The contemporary mindfulness movement, Kinnamon argues, occurs in a context where socioeconomic conditions are organized against a social infrastructure that supports a true “care of the self” in Foucauldian sense, a care of the self that promotes “practices of liberty.” Instead, the corporate deployment of self-care practices are instead used in service of the accumulation of capital and thus the reproduction of conditions of exploitation and inequality.

Kinnamon, however, does not urge critics to turn our attention away from the self or reject self-care practices like mindfulness as hopelessly subsumed by neoliberal interests. Instead, Kinnamon encourages us to use Sedgwick’s (2003) reparative reading practices to see the potential openings that self-care and mindfulness create and to consider how to use these practices to create different futures. Kinnamon describes this juxtapositioning of Foucault and Sedgwick as a move “from the paranoid preemptive theorizing of how we got here to what to do in the meantime” (p. 194).

This concern about the relationship between self-care practices and social justice is particularly relevant in the field of video game studies, as video game scholars have wrestled with how to disrupt gaming culture’s investment in neoliberalism and imagine more progressive and transformative trajectories. For instance, in her essay “Racism, Sexism, and Gaming’s Cruel Optimism,” digital media scholar Lisa Nakamura (2017) critiques gaming culture’s attachment to “procedural meritocracy,” a pathway to social justice where marginalized groups earn the right to participate in gaming culture, with its attendant pleasures and possibilities, by

excelling in video games. By doing so, these marginalized gamers embody the liberal values of “self-reliance, unfettered competition in unregulated space, in short, a neoliberal fantasy of the entrepreneurial self’s power in precarious times” (p. 247). However, this “model minority” approach to social justice is a poor pathway to social justice since fails to address and change how the field of gaming is stacked against people of color, women, queers, and other marginalized communities. Extending Lauren Berlant’s (2011) critique of contemporary US culture to video games, Nakamura argues that the neoliberal fantasy of procedural meritocracy exemplifies a “technocratic form of cruel optimism,” an attachment that, rather than helping one achieve “the good life,” instead destroys the very conditions of “the good life” (p. 247). Nakamura contends that, if social justice for marginalized and vulnerable peoples is to be achieved in the field of video games, gamers must first let go of this faith in meritocracy and discover “how to make another world when the one you’re in excludes you” (p. 249).

This dissertation enters these ongoing conversations on gaming practices, self-care, mindfulness, and social justice by mapping an alternative way to think about the value of gaming practices for gaming audiences, in turn demonstrating that recuperation by neoliberalism is not the foregone conclusion of a person’s attachment to the medium of video games. It does this by posing an unintuitive yet productive question – what is the relationship between thriving and gaming? I say that this question is “unintuitive” because these two terms, “thriving” and “gaming,” are almost never paired together, either in scholarly conversations or in the conversations occurring within different gaming communities. As I have (hopefully)

demonstrated, though, pairing these terms, and thereby opening space for the possibility of their coexistence, can help us gain a better understanding of the role of media consumption in everyday life, specifically its role in helping people construct and sustain their life worlds and imagine new possibilities, which I call “thriving.” As my participants noted, foundational to this is survival, or the ability to meet basic needs and continue functioning on a day to day basis.

When I began this dissertation, I thought that my participants would enthusiastically embrace the idea that gaming practices could help them thrive, and indeed already were helping them to thrive, once I introduced them to the pairing. I even imagined that my research interventions could help them see their gaming practices as more valuable than they had previously thought. Instead of something shameful, viewing their gaming practices through the lens of thriving could help gamers attach more value to those practices.

As is usually the case, however, my data presented a more complex picture of the relationship between gaming and thriving. Instead of enthusiastically embracing the articulation of gaming and thriving, my participants’ attitudes towards this pairing were distributed along a range of affects. Some did enthusiastically endorse their connection, but just as many were suspicious of gaming’s ability to help them thrive, with some going so far as to reject the possibility entirely or insist that gaming could prevent people from thriving. Meanwhile, though, the overwhelming majority of my participants claimed that gaming was a vital component of their self-care practices, or the practices most geared towards survival.



In short, then, my participants thought that gaming could help them survive, but were more ambivalent about its ability to help them thrive. This leads to what I have called the “paradox of thriving” – the belief that practices that are most supportive of a person’s survival can also inhibit their thriving. From this perspective, growth and sustenance are not the results of self-care. Rather, paralysis is, as people are resigned to rely upon a practice they feel will ultimately hold them back. This orientation towards the medium of video games and gaming practices, I argue, is expressive of a broader attitude towards leisure and labor that is reflective of what Wendy Brown (2006) has called neoliberal political rationality. This neoliberal political rationality takes the entrepreneurial subjectivities and logics of free market capitalism and works to extend them throughout the fabric of social life. This rationality works to free the individual, private enterprise, and the market from the intervention of the state and is accomplished through a variety of methods: eliminating funding of social service programs like welfare, privatizing public services, deregulating financial and banking industries, and undoing environmental and labor regulations (Dillon, 2018). All of this, of course, is in service to the goals of capitalism, specifically its goal to reproduce and proliferate capital.

Of particular relevance to my discussion of my participants, however, is the subjectivity that this political rationality privileges: that of the rational, entrepreneurial individual. Within this framework, people are not only presumed to be individuals free to make choices, but are also *morally obligated* to make “good” choices. The corollary of this is that should a person’s life be marked by insecurity

or deprivation, it is presumed to be a consequence of their poor individual choices. In other words, the vulnerable subject is framed as an entrepreneur who has made bad personal investments and must now suffer these consequences. In this way, responsibility is displaced from the particular social institutions and structures that create and reproduce inequality, such as gender, heteronormativity, and capitalism, onto the individual (Brown, 2006). Within this framework, individuals are responsible for taking care of themselves, a responsibility that my participants felt acutely. Video game practices then become articulated with self care practices as my participants reported using video games to disengage from demanding events or situations, like wage labor, and repair and renew their health, both mentally and physically, so that ultimately they may return to these demands. As scholars like Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) and Yee (2006) have argued, video games are particularly imbricated in the leisure-labor cycle of a post-Fordist economic system organized around immaterial labor (Hardt & Negri, 2004), as they are both a product of immaterial labor and help prepare subjects for immaterial labor.

Extending this line of thought, I also argued that this orientation towards gaming practices can be cultivated and encouraged by the text of video games. In my analysis of *Final Fantasy XIV*, I demonstrated how the video game text, composed of both narrative and ludic features, provide players with particular tools to repair and renew resources that are valuable to the reproduction of immaterial labor, namely the player's attention and emotional reserves. However, the self-care practices afforded by these tools are something of a double-edged sword, as they are also paired with mechanics that encourage players to monitor and govern their

gaming practices so they may interrupt their play sessions and return to other practices more valued by a socio-economic system structured around capitalism and heteronormativity. These mechanics included time management elements in the user interface of the game to better enable the self-surveillance of time spent in the game. These time management features work in conjunction with the broader cultural suspicion of video game practices to cultivate a particular state of mindfulness in players, one that can compel them to interrupt their gaming sessions and return to more appropriate practices like work and relationships, potentially reproducing the conditions that made escape so appealing in the first place. Put another way, games like *Final Fantasy XIV* can, and frequently do, work to reinforce the idea that the escape offered by the game should only ever be temporary, an idea that is further bolstered when we acknowledge that video games are frequently consumed in a broader cultural context that is deeply suspicious of gaming practices.

Yet this is not the only narrative that we can tell about the relationship between gaming, self-care, and thriving. As Ortner (2006) reminds us, structural conditions and systems can never completely guarantee how the practices they cultivate will unfold over time. Video game practices are no different. Practices are processes that are situated in particular contexts and unfold over time, thus opening up the possibility for cracks to emerge in the smooth reproduction of dominant social and economic systems like capitalism and heteronormativity. Acknowledging this, how can the self-care practices of video game audiences create these openings, and how is this related to thriving? I will begin with the second question because it

will provide some necessary context for my answer to the first. As a reminder, a critical element of thriving, for both my participants and myself, is the ability to imagine a better future. By imagining better futures, we are able to create a feeling for these futures in the present and, hopefully, begin to realize these future potentials. Now, I have argued that the political rationality of neoliberalism greatly informed the futures imagined by my participants, as can be seen in their definitions of thriving and in their attitudes towards their own gaming practices. This worries me, as it does so many other critical scholars and gamers, since it is expressive of a capitalist structure in which anything outside of the domain of capitalism (like some leisure practices) is subsumed and recuperated by capital, and thus becomes complicit in the reproduction of capital.

However, as my analysis of my time spent in *Final Fantasy XIV*'s online world of Eorzea demonstrates, this is not the only narrative that can be told about gaming practices. During my play, particularly when playing alone, I discovered narrative elements, plots, and representations that provided glimpses into social and economic structures that operated under logics that differed significantly from capitalism. These elements, in fact, were central to the game's plot, which positions players as members of an organization working to undermine the imperialist advances of a neighboring country. This led me to two conclusions. One is that, while there are certain structural and mechanical features of the game that work to reproduce the leisure-labor cycle that is necessary to the reproduction of immaterial labor, these rest alongside narrative elements that provide players with tools to

imagine different, potentially better futures and develop a feeling for these futures in the present.

My second conclusion is that playing alone in an MMO like *Final Fantasy XIV* can create space for cracks to emerge in the smooth reproduction of neoliberal subjects just as well as, if not better than, playing with people. This contrasts with the work of critical network scholars like Terranova (2009), Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009), and Baerg (2014) who have suggested that the social capacities of networked video games have the most potential to disrupt the reproduction of neoliberalism through gaming practices. In my experience, and I am willing to wager in the experience of others, playing alone creates the conditions for reflection and consideration that Foucault (1988) argues are necessary if we want our self-care practices to become part of “practices of liberty,” which are ultimately concerned with a more ethical navigation of social power. This is especially true in a video game with both a complex narrative and significant social elements, like *Final Fantasy XIV*, since playing alone offers players the best opportunity to experience the narrative of the game in their own time without having to worry about accommodating the different needs and schedules of other players. For instance, when playing cooperatively with other people I would often skip the cinematic introductions and conclusions that would occur in dungeons so that other people would not have to idly wait around for me. When I resumed playing by myself, I would then watch the scenes I had missed -since the game allows you to review specific scenes when resting at an inn.

## **Possibilities and Potentials**

And so, having reviewed the major components of my argument and the knowledge that I have constructed, where do we go from here? It is at this point that I am reminded of an observation that sparked Sedgwick's (2003) interest in reparative reading and weak theory. In her introduction to these concepts, Sedgwick tells the story of a discussion she had with activist scholar Cindy Patton about the genesis of HIV and the possibility that it was engineered by the American military. As Sedgwick recalls, her eagerness to discuss this potential conspiracy was interrupted by Patton, who reminded Sedgwick that, even if this conspiracy was true, such a discovery would not tell them anything that they did not already know. That the lives of the people hit hardest by the disease (gay men and African Americans) were cheaply valued by the American government. That the military routinely researches ways to efficiently kill both combatants and non-combatants. That people in power regard catastrophic environmental events calmly and from a distance.

As Sedgwick narrates, this encounter with Patton was enabling for her not only because it reminded her that knowledge is performative, but because it suggested an alternative to what Sedgwick calls "the hermeneutics of suspicion," which she argues had dominated the critical theory of her time. By drawing attention to the performative aspect of knowledge, then, Patton reminded Sedgwick that recognizing large systems of oppression and domination does not necessarily commit a scholar to a particular narrative outcome. The decision to locate the historically fraught origins of HIV, for instance, may be useful, but then again it may

not be. What Patton reminded Sedgwick of is that the decision to focus on this element is not a categorical imperative of critical theory. In short, we do not have to constantly re-discover that domination and oppressive social systems exist in order for our critical research to be legitimate. Paired with practice theory, we can also acknowledge that these systems of oppression can create and mobilize the potential for transformative practices to emerge.

We can see this reflected in the narrative arc of this dissertation. Having argued that my participants' practice of using video games to care for the self has its origins within a neoliberal political rationality, I also demonstrated that these practices can potentially help participants imagine different futures and social configurations outside of neoliberalism and develop a feeling for these futures in the present. With this new knowledge, though, where can we go from here? In my opinion, this knowledge enables us to identify and cultivate new vectors for change which can be harnessed by social critics and activists to make demands for a more just and equitable distribution of power. But what does this look like? I will briefly sketch some possibilities in the hope of providing you, the reader, with a more concrete image of this.

For instance, one of the problems that Kinnamon (2016) identified in the corporate subsumption of self-care practices was the lack of a social infrastructure to ensure these practices can lead to practices of liberty. The case of *Final Fantasy XIV* that I have described both demonstrates the need for such structures while also providing us with new ideas about how to create these structures. There is a slight disjuncture between *Final Fantasy XIV's* narrative themes, which emphasize

diversity and alliances across differences, and the social environments of many MMORPGs, which are frequently characterized by hierarchies of play styles and the disparagement of different ways of playing and, by extension, different ways of being in the world (Taylor, 2012). While this can manifest in overt displays of bigotry (Gray, 2014), even subtler forms of denigration, such as mocking a healer for not damaging enemies, can heighten anxieties about one's place within the community of the game, and thus create patterns of inclusion and exclusion that hit members of vulnerable communities the hardest.

Yet ironically, it is by documenting *Final Fantasy XIV*'s weaknesses – namely the dissonance between its narrative themes and its social mechanics and its eschewing of careful community oversight – that I discovered the greatest potentials for mobility and progress. Its narrative themes of diversity, inclusivity, and coalition-building, for instance, make it easier to demand that the game producers apply these same values to its social mechanics. *Final Fantasy XIV* features an extensive tutorial system that prepares players for the ludic challenges of the game. Why not a similar tutorial system to prepare players for the social challenges of diversity in an MMORPG? Such a system would enable its narrative themes to inform how its players interact with one another and, perhaps, cultivate a community where power is negotiated more ethically. This system, in turn, could be reinforced by actively monitoring in-game interactions with people and intervening in instances of abuse and discomfort, rather than passively relying on players to document and report this abuse themselves.



Of course, such a system would present several challenges to game designers and community managers. Not only would such a system carry a significant financial and labor burden, but it would also demand more of *Final Fantasy XIV*'s audience by requiring them to develop a perhaps unfamiliar social skillset. However, games already do this. *Final Fantasy XIV* has already invested a significant amount of time and money into developing a tutorial system organized around its ludic and mechanical demands, demands that in turn are perhaps unfamiliar to a significant number of players. And so I would put forward that the barriers to the implementation of such a system are not necessarily financial or mechanical in nature but cultural, since they are expressive of particular values. While at face value the idea of demanding players behave more respectfully towards one another may seem like an odious burden on a player's freedom, this complaint ignores all of the other limitations that games necessarily place on a player's freedom. Games are systems that privilege specific practices and values above others. What I am asking is for a game like *Final Fantasy XIV* to privilege, and hence potentially cultivate, values and practices that could lead to a more equitable distribution of power within its audience. These values are not completely foreign to *Final Fantasy* and its audience – as I and others (e.g. Voorhees, 2009) have demonstrated, managing diversity is central to the series' thematic structure. Hence by demanding *Final Fantasy XIV* to allocate resources to regulate its social communities and protect its most vulnerable players from abuse and discomfort, I am in fact asking *Final Fantasy XIV* to deliver on the promises its narrative has made.

This is the kind of demand that the knowledge I have cultivated in this dissertation can produce. By looking at gaming practices through the lens of thriving, we can begin to see how these practices can create feelings for different futures, ground those feelings in the present, and direct those energies towards realizing those futures. Kinnamon (2016) argued that one of the limitations of neoliberal self-care was the lack of a social structure to sustain and direct those practices towards what Foucault has called the practices of liberty. I share this worry, yet while Kinnamon was concerned with how economic and political systems and structures were organized against self-care and practices of liberty, I would argue that there are alternative paths that can transform self-care into practices of liberty. Through my analysis of the relationship between video gaming practices and thriving, I have attempted to chart such a path by showing how video gaming practices can help players care for themselves. These gaming practices, moreover, can lead to a kind of thriving that does not simply reproduce the terms of thriving established by neoliberalism, but can enable audiences to imagine different possibilities and futures.

This is not political practice in the traditional sense of electoral contests and maneuvering for resource control (Henderson, 2013), but this does not mean that it cannot have political effects. To return to an idea introduced early in this dissertation, the practices that I have described and analyzed in this dissertation are more properly called *juxtapolitical*. As Berlant (2008) describes it, the *juxtapolitical* exists in close proximity to politics, at times even crossing over into the political sphere, but more often than not is resistant to that sphere and structured as a relief

from the political sphere. Nevertheless, juxtapolitical practices, like the intimate public of women's mass-mediated culture analyzed by Berlant, can have powerful political effects since they help organize and mobilize people's attachments to particular fantasies, identities, and life narratives. Video gaming practices in particular can be powerful sites for the creation and reproduction of fantasies, identities, and life narratives since they require players to more fully participate in the unfolding of its events than other media. While some scholars have, rightly, argued that video games are frequently designed in such a way as to further entrench players in the rhythms and life narratives of neoliberalism and immaterial labor, I would argue that this is not the only possible outcome. Social practices like media consumption unfold unpredictably, creating openings in the reproduction of structures of domination that can, with enough force, become transformative. Ultimately, then, what this dissertation contributes to the fields of video game studies and critical cultural studies is a lens which can be used to identify potential gaps in the reproduction of neoliberal political affects through video games. By allowing for the possibility that video games can help people thrive, which I have done by simply questioning *if* video games can help people thrive, I have hopefully provided theoretical and methodological tools that can empower scholars to recognize the myriad of creative and unanticipated ways people already respond to and maneuver within the demands of neoliberal capital. While these practices are grounded in the present, they can also be oriented towards the future, a future that is by no means guaranteed by the structures of domination from which it originates. This is a stance characterized by an acknowledgement that people live under

varying conditions of domination and deprivation and the hope that these circumstances can be changed. People can imagine different futures. Video games can help people cultivate a feeling for these futures, thus grounding these futures in the present. It is perhaps not a likely outcome of consuming video games, but it is a possibility, and a powerful one at that. This dissertation asks critical scholars not to dismiss this potential as naive, but to recognize it and acknowledge that gaming, for some, is necessary for survival. And if it is a necessary condition for survival, then it is also a necessary condition for thriving.

APPENDIX A  
SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe your gender? Sexuality? Race? Are there any other terms or characteristics you would use to describe yourself? Please feel free to describe yourself in any way you wish.
  
2. Tell me a bit about where you grew up. Your family? What were your parents' occupation? Education?
  
3. Are you in school? What's the highest level of formal education you've completed? If you went to college, what was your major?
  
4. What is your occupation, if working? Work history?
  
5. How long have you been playing video games?
  
6. What is the first game you remember playing? Did you like it?
  
7. If you began playing video games while you were a child, did your care-giver ever limit how much time you were allowed to play video games? Why or why not?
  
8. Have you played video games consistently since then?

9. If you have not played video games consistently, what are some other things that were going on in your life that interrupted your video game playing?
10. Why do you currently play video games?
11. What platforms do you play on? Why did you choose those platforms?
12. What types of video games do you play? What are your three favorite titles?
13. What do you look for in games? What are your criteria for good games?
14. How do you find games you might like to play? Are there any specific news outlets, publications, or web sites that you use? If so, what are they?
15. Could you describe a typical gaming session for me?
16. Do you prefer to play video games alone or with other people? Are there particular types of games that you prefer to play alone? With other people?
17. Do you like to watch other people play video games? Why or why not? Are there any games or types of games that you prefer to watch other people play rather than play yourself? If so, why?

18. If you do watch other people play video games, how do you watch them play?  
In person or online (through a web site like Twitch or youtube, for example)?  
Do you interact with the player, and if so, how do you interact with them  
(talk, online chat, etc.)?
19. How would you define a “gamer?” Do you identify as a gamer? Why or why  
not?
20. What other type of media do you generally like? Television? Movies? Books?  
Music? Could you give me examples of TV shows, movies, books, or music  
that you enjoy?
21. How would you define “thriving?” How about “self-care?”
22. Do video games help you thrive or care for yourself? How?
23. Have you ever used video games as a form of escape? Could you describe for  
me a time when you did this? What game did you play? Why did you choose  
that game? What were you escaping from? To? Did it help you escape? Why  
or why not?

24. Have you ever played video games to relieve stress? Could you describe for me a time when you did this? What game did you play? Why did you choose that game? Why were you stressed at the time? Did the game help you relieve stress?



## APPENDIX B

### PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS

What follows are brief narrative descriptions of my participants and is intended to give the reader more context for interpreting the individual quotes and broader patterns that I analyzed and discussed in my dissertation. In order to preserve the possible intent of my participants, I defaulted to using the terms they used when describing how they identify rather than substituting them with other, more diplomatic terms (e.g. many participants used the term “female” instead of “woman”).

ADA described herself as Caucasian, female, and heterosexual. Both her mother and father received Bachelor’s degrees, but she declined to name their fields. Her father worked as a loan officer for an agriculture company and her mother worked as a bank teller. As of my survey, Ada was a full-time student working to complete her Bachelor’s degree. In addition, she also has a part-time campus job working in her college’s financial aid office. She only plays video games occasionally. Her favorite video games include *Super Mario Bros.*, the *Call of Duty* series, and *Lego Superhero*.

ALBERT described himself as a gay, male, Caucasian of Quebecois/Portuguese descent. His father earned a Bachelor’s degree and worked for the post office, while his mother earned a high school degree and worked for a large supermarket chain for 48 years. Albert has a Bachelor’s degree in management and works as an associate director for a commercial business

intelligence company. As of my survey, he had been playing video games for approximately 35 years. His favorite video games currently include *Star Trek Online*, *Stellaris*, and the *Civilization* series.

ALPHONSE described himself as male, heterosexual, Caucasian, and American. He grew up in Midwestern suburb. His father graduated from high school and his mother either had a two- or four-year degree from a university (he was unsure which). His mother worked at a restaurant and his father worked at a printing press. Alphonse, as of my survey, was a full-time college student majoring in English. He has been playing video games since he was five years old, approximately. His favorite video games genres include open-world RPGs and “Metroidvania” style platformers (“Metroidvania” is a portmanteau taken from the two most popular games in the genre: *Metroid* and *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*). His favorite video games include *Metroid Fusion*, *Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate*, and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

ARLENE described herself as a white, pansexual female of Irish and Scottish descent. Her mother has a Bachelor’s degree in Early Education and worked as an elementary school teacher, although she stayed at home for the first fourteen years of Arlene’s life. Arlene’s father went to a trade school and worked as a computer programmer for Johnson & Johnson’s. As of my survey, she was completing a Bachelor’s degree in musical theater. She has previously worked as a cashier at a large retail chain and a large chain bookstore. While her family has played video games all of her life, she only began playing video games in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade to impress

a boy she liked. Her favorite video games currently include *Pokémon Sun*, *Sly Cooper 3*, *Pillars of Eternity*, and the *Dragon Age* and *Divinity* series.

ASHLEY described herself as white/Caucasian, heterosexual, and American. She grew up in a Midwest city. Her parents graduated from high school and one worked as a banker, while the other worked as a liquor store manager. Ashley has a Bachelor's degree in Chemistry and Math. As of my survey, she was working as a chemical process operator at a large company. She has been playing video game since she was 3 or 4, approximately. Her favorite video game genres include survival and strategy games. Her favorite video games include the *Far Cry* series, the *StarCraft* series, and *Runescape*.

BERYL identified as white, female, and bisexual, but primarily described herself as an introverted, analytical person prone to fits of anxiety. She grew up in the Netherlands, in an area that straddled the line between rural and suburb. She currently lives with her mother and brother in the Netherlands (her father lives about twenty miles away from them). Both of her parents have some college education – her mother studied Dutch Language and Literature and her father studied Astronomy and Pedagogy. Neither finished their degree, though, and left school to found a software consulting firm that focuses on statistics and facilitation of services. Beryl had earned her Bachelor's degree in journalism two years previously and, as of my survey, was a freelance journalist specializing in gaming culture. She has been playing video games since she was four. Her current favorite genres are stealth games, RPGs, shooters, and city-building games. Her favorite

video games include *Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver*, the *Knights of the Old Republic* series, and *Dishonored*.

BONNIE described herself as female, straight, white, and American. She grew up in a United States suburb. Both of her parents have two-year business degrees. Her mother owned a cleaning company and her father worked at a medical supply company. Bonnie, as of my survey, was a full-time student majoring in Pre-Med and Spanish. She was also an employee at a mental health home. She has been playing video games for approximately two years. Her favorite game series is *Call of Duty*.

BRITTANY described herself as female, straight, white, and American. She grew up in a Midwestern suburb. Her mother earned a Master's degree. She declined to say how much education her father received, only stating that he was working at a McDonald's and going to school when he met her mother. They ran a restaurant and a dance studio. Brittany, as of my survey, was a full-time college student, majoring in Communications, Media, and Rhetoric. She was also employed as a restaurant manager. She has not played video games since she was in the fourth grade and does not have any taste preferences.

CAITLIN described herself as female. She grew up in a small Midwestern town. She declined to discuss her parents' educational background, but noted that her mother was a self-employed massage therapist and her father was a self-employed drywall finisher. She was a full-time college student, but as of my survey had not declared a major. She also works part-time as a Building and Event Manager at her campus student center. She does not play video games often,

typically limiting herself to mobile games. Her favorite video games include the *Just Dance* series, *Wii Sports*, and the *Mario Kart* series.

CASEY identified as a genderqueer, pansexual, white, American, kinky person living with mental illness. They grew up in suburban New Hampshire. They declined to describe their parents' educational background but did say that their mother was an RN and their father was a software engineer/manager. They have a Bachelor's degree in environmental science and, as of my survey, worked as a laboratory biologist and chemist. They have been playing video games for their whole life (25+ years). They play "pretty much everything" aside from fighting and sports games. Their favorite games include *Halo*, *Final Fantasy*, and *Bioshock*.

CHRIS described himself as male, heterosexual, and Caucasian. He grew up in Ohio and was raised primarily by his mother – his father was never around much. His mother was a high school graduate who worked in manual and domestic labor (as of my survey, she was working as a housekeeper at a hospital). He declined to describe his father's education and occupation. Chris has a Bachelor's degree in medical technology and, as of my survey, worked as the supervisor of a microbiology lab in a hospital. He has been playing video games since he was six years old. His favorite video game genres include RPGs and MMOs. His favorite games include the *Final Fantasy* series, *League of Legends*, and *Shadows of Mordor*.

CINDY described herself as a white, female, asexual American. She was born in Alabama, but went to college in Tennessee and lived in Los Angeles before returning to the South in 2010. Her mother had a high school education and worked as a hairdresser and factory worker before becoming a custodian at a local high

school. Cindy has some college education, but did not complete her degree due to severe depression. As of my survey, she was working as the executive assistant to a company CEO/Owner. She has been playing video games for approximately 30 years (“since I was a kid”). Her favorite genres include JRPGs (Japanese RPGs), MMOs, puzzle games, shooters, time management games, adventure games, and simulations. Her favorite video games include *Final Fantasy XIV*, *Destiny*, and *World of Warcraft*.

CLYDE described himself as a 21-year-old white, straight man. He grew up in a Midwestern city with his mother, a special education teacher, and his father, a professor at a local university (he declined to discuss his parents’ educational backgrounds). Clyde, as of my survey, was a full-time college student majoring in Mortuary Science. He also worked at a funeral home and is a licensed carpet installer. He has been playing video games since he was 5 or 6, or approximately 16 years. His favorite video game genres include shooters and “arcade” style multiplayer games. His favorite video games include the *Call of Duty* series, *Rocket League*, and the *Super Smash Bros.* series.

DAVID described himself as a white, male American who is 95% heterosexual and 5% gay (in his own words, he “thinks some guys are very handsome, hence 5%”). He grew up in a Midwestern city. His father earned a Bachelor’s degree and his mother a Master’s degree (he declined to mention their fields of study). His father was a software programmer and his mother was a school counselor. David, as of my survey, was a full-time college student, majoring in Communications, Media, and Rhetoric. He has been playing video games since he was 4 or 5 years old.

His favorite video game genres include FPS games, rogue-like games, and adventure games. His favorite video games include *Super Smash Bros. Wii U*, *The Binding of Isaac*, *Team Fortress 2*, and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*.

DEBBY described herself as female, white, and pansexual with asexual tendencies (she said this with a question mark, though, indicating uncertainty). She grew up in New Hampshire with her mother and father. She declined to indicate her parents' educational background, but noted that her father worked in an unemployment office in Massachusetts and her mother was a waitress at a chain restaurant. Debby, as of my survey, had earned a BFA and was working as a freelance artist and teacher. She has been playing video games since she was four or five and admits to playing just about anything except for sports and racing games. Her favorite genres include fighting games, FPS games, RTS ("real time strategy") games, adventure games, platformers, and indie games. Her favorite games include *Okami*, *Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles*, and *Transistor*.

ELEANOR described herself as a white, Jewish woman. She grew up in the New England area of the U.S. Both of her parents were college educated (although she did not specify what their fields were or what degrees they completed) and worked as full-time hospital staff workers. Eleanor has a Bachelor's degree in computer science and, as of my survey, was working as a software support engineer. She has been playing video games since she was 5. Her favorite video games genres include puzzle/adventure games. Her favorite video games include *The Legend of Zelda* series (in particular, *Link's Awakening*), *Rhythm Heaven*, and the *Dr. Mario* series.

ELMER described himself as a straight, white, American male. He grew up in a Midwestern suburb. His parents divorced when he was 5. His father attended college but did not complete his degree and has worked as a correctional officer and has had various other jobs in manufacturing and retail. His mother earned a two-year nursing degree and, as of my survey, was completing a four-year degree. She worked as a nurse. Elmer, as of my survey, was a full-time college student majoring in biochemistry. He has been playing video games since he was 7 or 8. His favorite video game genres include RPGs, shooters, and sports games. His favorite video games include the *Call of Duty* series, the *Fallout* series, and the *FIFA* series.

EMILY described themselves as genderfluid, AFAB (“Assigned Female at Birth”), bi-romantic, demisexual, white, and Canadian. They grew up in the suburbs of Canada. Their mother had a college degree and worked in the Alzheimer’s unit of a nursing home. Their father had a high school degree and worked for the government, specifically the Library and Archives Canada. They have some college education, studying animation, but left before finishing their degree due to a job offer. They currently work in an animation studio, doing television work and outsourced work for major studios like Disney and Warner Bros. They have been playing video games since 1990. They play RPGs mostly and their favorite video games include *Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars*, *Chrono Trigger*, and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*.

ERNEST described himself as a straight, cis-male, white American of English/Irish “extraction.” He grew up in Massachusetts in what he described as a “stable middle-class home” (which he defined as no divorce or separation between



his parents). His father has some college education but did not complete a degree and worked in a managerial position in the construction industry. His mother has completed a Master's degree in education and is a special education teacher, primarily in middle school. Ernest has earned a Ph.D. in the field of multi-disciplinary science/engineering. As of my survey, he was working as a senior quantitative analyst for a prominent 401(k)/mutual fund company. He has been playing video games for at least 25 years. His favorite genres include MMOs, 4X games (a strategy sub-genre where players control an empire and "eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, and eXterminate"), resource gathering games, and games with large unfolding narratives. His favorite games include *Stellaris*, *Minecraft*, and the *Assassin's Creed* series.

FLORENCE described herself as female, white and Native American, and American. She grew up in an industrial southern town. Her mother earned a high school degree and was a secretary while her father completed some high school, but did not earn a degree, and worked in construction. Florence herself earned a Bachelor's degree in nursing and, as of my survey, was working as a full-time nurse. She has been playing video games for 12 years, but has not been playing them consistently. She declined to discuss her favorite genres and video games.

FREDDIE described himself as a straight, white, American male. He grew up in a Midwestern town. Both of his parents earned four-year degrees, one in social work and the other in computer analysis. One parent worked part-time as a counselor for children and adults with special needs while the other parent worked full-time in various tech/data entry jobs. Freddie was, as of my survey, a full-time

college student majoring in Sports Management. He has been playing video games for as long as he can remember. His favorite video game genre is sports, but he will play non-sports games if they are incredibly popular (he cited the *Destiny* series and the *Call of Duty* series as examples).

GARY described himself as a straight, Hispanic, American male. He grew up in the Midwestern United States. Both of his parents attended college, but only one completed a degree. They worked for a school district as a coordinator and interpreter, respectively. As of my survey, Gary was a full-time college student majoring in biology. He also worked as a sales floor worker at Target. He has been playing video games since he was 5. His favorite video game genres include action, adventure, RPGs, FPSs, strategy, and horror. His favorite video games include *Destiny*, the *Halo* series, and the *Assassin's Creed* series.

GERT described herself as a straight, white, cis-gendered woman. She also noted that she is partially ethnically (not religiously) Jewish and also has Black family members, leaving her feeling alienated from white culture. Gert grew up in a working class town in a southern state. Her father had some higher education and worked at a blue collar job (Gert declined to be more specific). Her mother also had some higher education (more than her father), and was a stay-at-home mom. Gert herself has earned a Bachelor's degree in public policy, a Master's degree in education, and has also attended some law school. As of my survey, Gert was working in the public policy sector (initially non-profit but recently moved to government) on a range of issues related to children and families. She has been

playing video games since the late-1970s. She plays a diverse range of video game genres, but her “lifetime favorite game” is *Mass Effect 2*.

GORDON described himself as male, straight, white, and American. He grew up in New York City. Both of his parents had post-graduate educations – one of his parents worked as a journalist while the other worked as a lawyer. Gordon earned a Bachelor’s degree in evolutionary biology. As of my survey, he was unemployed, but has worked primarily as a writer and editor. He has been playing video games for approximately 18 years. His favorite genres include first-person perspective games, especially shooters, horror games, and “walking simulators,” a relatively new genre in video games that focuses on environmental storytelling by having players explore a designed space and use information from that space to construct a narrative. The most famous example of this genre is *Gone Home*. Gordon’s favorite games include *Soma*, *STALKER*, and *Pathologic*.

GONG described herself as straight, Asian, Chinese female. She grew up in China. Both of her parents completed undergraduate courses at a professional architecture college and worked as architecture engineers. Gong was, as of my survey, a full-time student at a Midwestern American college majoring in Communications, Media, and Rhetoric. She declined to mention how long she has been playing video games for, but from the context of some of her answers I can assume she has been playing video games since she was a child. Her favorite video game genres include adventure, puzzle, and escape games.

GRETCHEN described herself as heterosexual, mixed-race (part-European ancestry, part-Native American ancestry, specifically the Lakota/Dakota tribe)

woman. She grew up in a Midwestern city. Her mother has a Bachelor's degree in Education and her father attended college, but declined to complete his degree. Her mother worked as an IT coordinating manager for a major airline and her father worked as a driver for a limousine/town car company. Gretchen, as of my survey, was full-time college student majoring in Communications, Media, and Rhetoric. She also worked part-time as a student manager at a campus café and a server at a country club. She estimates that she has been playing video games for 17-19 years. Her favorite video games include *Mario Kart: Double Dash*, *Mario Party 4*, and *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody: Tipton Trouble*.

HELENE described herself as a cis-gendered white woman, Jewish, asexual, and biromantic "with a lean towards women." She grew up in the Southern United States. Her mother earned a high school degree and worked white collar jobs (Helene declined to be more specific). She did not describe her father's occupation or education since her parents divorced when she was three and Helene lived with her mother. Helene has earned a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and Linguistics, a Master's degree in Folklore, and as of my survey was ABD ("all-but-dissertation") in a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature, although she admitted that she would probably not complete that degree. As of my survey she was working as a manager at a tech support company. Helene has been playing video games for approximately 30 years. Her favorite video game genre is the RPG. Her favorite video games include the *Gabriel Knight* series, the *Portal* series, and anything related to the *Star Wars* franchise.

ILENE described herself as a disabled, white, Canadian female. She grew up in a small rural community. Her parents have attended some college, but she declined to discuss their areas of study or whether or not they completed their degrees. Her mother worked as an educational assistant and her father as a carpenter. Ilene, as of my survey, was working on a Bachelor's degree in Child and Youth studies. She was, at the time, unemployed due to her disability – she was born with a connective tissue disease that resulted in frequent dislocations and nervous system failure, among other things. However, after 20 years she is finally receiving medical treatment and is taking distance college courses while recovering. She has been playing video games all of her life, using them as a form of pain management. Her favorite video game genres include “every kind imaginable.” Her favorite video games include *The Witcher 2 and 3* and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

IRMA described themselves in complicated ways. They defined their gender as “politics,” meaning its expression was dependent on their political views in a particular context. They further described themselves as queer, Jewish, and white. Irma grew up in the Pacific Northwest. They declined to discuss their parents' educational background, but stated that their mother was an accountant and their dad was a librarian. Irma has earned a Ph.D. in Biology and was, at the time of my survey, an assistant professor in Biology. They have been playing video games “for as long as [they] can remember.” Their favorite games include the *Dragon Age* series, the *Civilization* series, and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

ISAAC described himself as cisgendered, mostly heterosexual (in the past he has been attracted to transgender men and women as well as non-

binary/genderqueer people in addition to cisgendered women), white, American man. He grew up in primarily middle-class New Jersey suburb. His parents both have post-graduate degrees – his mother has a Master’s degree in Library Science and his father has a Ph.D. in philosophy. His mother worked as a librarian before becoming a full-time stay at home mother while his father was a professor at a local state university. Isaac has earned a Bachelor’s degree in business administration and is currently working for a state government as a systems analyst and help desk technician. He has been playing video games since 1989 when his family purchased a Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) console. His current favorite games are *Shovel Knight*, *Mighty No. 9*, and *Saints Row IV*, but his “all-time” favorites are *Mega Man III*, *The Secret of Mana*, and *Super Metroid*.

JANICE described herself as biologically female, heterosexual, white/Caucasian, and American. She grew up in a rural Midwestern town. Her father has earned a Bachelor’s degree while her mother has received some specialized vocational training beyond high school. Her father worked for the government as a dairy inspector and her mother worked as a freelance court reporter. Janice, as of my survey, was a full-time college student majoring in English and Communications, Media, and Rhetoric. She has been playing video games for approximately 16 years. She does not have any particular favorite video game genres, although she generally prefers multi-player, party-oriented games. Her favorite video games include *Tetris Friends*, *Pokémon Go*, and *Stardew Valley*.

JESSICA described herself as a mostly-heterosexual, Caucasian Bulgarian woman who has lived in the United States for the past 14 years. She grew up in the

capitol of Bulgaria, Sofia. Both of her parents earned degrees from a technical/professional high school. Her parents worked in construction (father) and an architecture firm (mother) before starting their own household appliance repair business. Jessica has earned a Ph.D. in Communication and, as of my survey, was working as a professor at a Midwestern college. She has been playing video games since middle school, although not very consistently. Her favorite genres include hidden object and puzzle games. Her favorite video games include *Diablo III* and any hidden object games on her smartphone and tablet.

JOYCE described herself as a cisgender, heterosexual, neurodivergent, Caucasian woman. She grew up in a Midwestern middle-class suburb. She declined to describe her parents' educational background, but noted that both were lawyers. Joyce has a Bachelor's degree in Archaeology and the Ancient World from an Ivy League university and, as of my survey, was working in Quality Assurance in the video game industry. She estimates she has been playing video games for 18 years. Her favorite genres include RPGs, hidden object games, and story-driven puzzle games. Her favorite games include the *Kingdom Hearts* series, the *Harvest Moon* series, and *Enigmatis 1*.

JUNIOR described himself as an Asian, bisexual male from Japan. He grew up in a small city in Japan with his grandparents while his parents stayed with his two brothers, who were receiving long-term hospital treatment for lung cancer. His father worked as a systems engineer and his mother worked in a bakery. Neither attended college, but received degrees from vocational schools. As of my survey, Junior was a full-time college student in the United States, majoring in

Communication. He has been playing video games for 19 years. His favorite video games include *Mother 2 and 3* and *The Last of Us*.

KAREY described herself as a straight, white, American woman. She grew up in a lower income family in the Midwest U.S. Her parents divorced when she was very young and she has not stayed in touch with her birth mother or her birth mother's side of the family. Her father and step-mother both graduated from college, although Karey declined to mention their fields of study. Her father worked as a hospital computer technician and her step-mother worked as a receptionist at a law firm. Karey, as of my survey, was a full-time college student majoring in Management. She also was working in a retail job at a local thrift store. She has been playing video games since she was "old enough to sit still for more than 5 seconds." Her favorite video game genres include RPGs, FPSs, and snowboarding games. Her favorite video games include *Bioshock*, *Left 4 Dead*, and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

KATHRYN described herself as a heterosexual female. She grew up in a small Midwestern town. Her father attended a technical college (she declined to state whether or not he completed a degree) and her mother earned an associate's degree. Her father worked as a mail carrier and her mother worked as a secretary. Kathryn, as of my survey, was a full-time college student majoring in Human Services. She estimated that she has been playing video games since she was 10 years old, but only plays them once in a while. Her favorite video game genres include driving games, sports games, music games, and fighting games. Her favorite video games include the *Mario Kart* series, *DJ Hero 2*, and *The Division*.



KATIA described herself as a bisexual, white woman. She grew up in a farming town in the Northeastern U.S. Her father earned a GED through the military and her mother attended college but did not complete a degree. Her father worked in a plate job and her mother worked various office jobs. Katia completed three years of college, majoring in Computer Science, before leaving to work full-time. As of my survey, she was working as a pension benefits analyst. She has been playing video games since the 70s. Her favorite genres are MMOs and adventure games. Her favorite games include *World of Warcraft* and the *Legos* series.

KIRK described himself as a white, heterosexual, cisgendered American man. He declined to disclose where he grew up or his parents' educational background, but did state that his father worked in the aerospace industry and his mother was a stay-at-home mom. Kirk has earned a Bachelor's degree in computer software and, as of my survey, was working as a software developer. He estimated that he has been playing video games since he was four or five years old. His favorite video game genres include MMORPGs, simulation games, action games, and sports games. His favorite video games include *Guild Wars 2*, *NHL 17*, and *WWE 2K17*.

KIZZY described herself as a white, Ukrainian female. She moved to the United States when she was 3 (she declined to specify which part of the country). Her parents went to college and majored in computer science and dental assistance. She declined to discuss whether or not her parents completed any degrees or what their occupations were. As of my survey, Kizzy was a full-time college student majoring in Biology. She also worked at a library. The first video game she remembers playing was *Jax and Dexter*, released on the Playstation 2 in December,

2001. Her favorite video game genre is the RPG. Her favorite video games include the *Kingdom Hearts* series, *Final Fantasy X-2*, and *League of Legends*.

LESLIE described herself as a bisexual, cisgendered, white Puerto Rican woman. She is the sister of Nadine. She grew up in Northern Florida, in what she describes as a “split household” – her parents divorced when she was a child and both married other people. Both of her parents are college-educated – her father has earned a J.D. and her mother has earned degrees in special education and foreign language education. Her father was a lawyer and her mother was a high school Spanish teacher (Leslie declined to discuss what her step-parents’ occupations and educational backgrounds were). Leslie has earned a Ph.D. in English Literature and, as of my survey, was working in a teaching postdoc at a private university. While Leslie has been playing video games since she was a small child, she has only been consistently playing them for approximately a decade. Her favorite genre is the RPG and her favorite video games are the *Dragon Age* series, the *Mass Effect* series, and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

LUTHER described himself as male, straight, Asian, and Finnish. He declined to discuss his childhood or family background. He has completed high school and, as of my survey, was attending a vocational school. He has been playing video games for 9 years. His favorite video game genres include MMOs, JRPGs, and action games.

MARJORY described herself as Asian, Chinese, bisexual, and female. She grew up in a large city in China. She declined to discuss her parents’ educational background or work history. As of my survey, she was a full-time college student at

a Midwestern college majoring in Psychology and Communications, Media, and Rhetoric. She did not remember when she first began playing video games. Her favorite video game genres include life simulators and adventure games. Her favorite video games include *Plague Inc.*, *The Future War*, and *The Sims* series.

MARNIE described herself as a heterosexual, Caucasian woman. She grew up in a Midwestern suburb. Her father has attended some college and her mother has earned a Bachelor's degree and, as of my survey, was taking post-graduate online classes. Her mother worked as a burn nurse and her father worked for the government doing road work as well as has a side business (she declined to specify further). As of my survey, Marnie was a full-time college student majoring in Health & Wellness. She also worked at a group home for girls with mental problems. She has been playing video games on-and-off for 13 years. Her favorite video games include *The Sims* series, the *Mario Party* series, and the *Monkey Ball* series.

MARTI described herself as a cis-gender, bisexual, heteroromantic, first generation Lao Asian-American female. She grew up in a Midwestern city. Both of her parents have high school degrees. They divorced when she was in the fifth grade and Marti lived with her mother. Her mother has had various jobs over the years, the longest being at a medical company making medical devices. Due to her college financial requirements, Marti knows her mother makes \$28,000 per year. As of my survey, Marti was a full-time college student majoring in Communications, Media, and Rhetoric. She also had two part-time jobs: one in her college's student center tech crew and another as an office assistant in her college's Equity, Diversity, and Intercultural Programs office. The earliest game she remembers playing is *Final*

*Fantasy VIII*, released in 1999. Her favorite video game genres include RPGs, “building-world” type games, and visual novels. Her favorite video games include the *Mass Effect* trilogy, *Roller Coaster Tycoon*, *Planet Coaster*, *Heavy Rain*, *Life is Strange*, *The Walking Dead* series, and *Until Dawn*.

MARYETTA described herself as a cis-gendered, white, bisexual female. She grew up in a middle-class Midwestern neighborhood. Her mother has a Bachelor’s degree in English and her father has a Master’s degree in Business. She did not discuss her parents’ occupations in detail, only stating that her mother worked many different jobs throughout her childhood while her father was out of work. Maryetta, as of my survey, was a full-time college student majoring in Global Business. She has been playing video games for most of her life. Her favorite video games include the *Mario Kart* series, the *Super Smash Bros.* series, and *Paper Mario: The Thousand Year Door*.

MATHILDE described herself as a straight, Caucasian female. She grew up in the Midwestern U.S. Both of her parents have college educations (she declined to specify further). Her father worked as the head of a counseling business and her mother worked as an ophthalmologist’s assistant. As of my survey, Mathilde was a full-time college student majoring in Biology with an emphasis on Pre-Med. She also had a job as a CNA (Certified Nurse’s Assistant). She reported that she only plays video games when she is sick or cooped up in the house for many days at a time. Her favorite video game genres include fantasy games, Disney games, and movie-related games. Her favorite video games include the *Harry Potter* series, *The Little Mermaid* series, and *Thrillville*.

MICHAEL described himself as a queer, Italian-American, “Catholic-ish” man. He grew up in a large Northeastern U.S. city. Both of his parents were college-educated – his father has earned a Bachelor’s degree and his mother a Master’s degree (he declined to specify their areas of focus). His mother worked part-time as a speech pathologist and his father was a photographer. As of my survey, Michael was in the second year of a Ph.D. program, studying Art History. He was also employed as a student teacher at his university and has done freelance work for museums that he has worked for in the past. He has been playing video games since he was 6 years old. He enjoys playing long, immersive games, RPGs, platformers, and indie games. His favorite video games include *The Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask*, *Shadow of the Colossus*, and *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*.

MICHELLE described herself as a heterosexual, Asian, Chinese female. She grew up in a small town in a Chinese province before moving to a larger city at age 7 to attend boarding school. Her parents completed high school. Her mother worked as a housewife while her father worked as a businessman. As of my survey, Michelle was a full-time student at a Midwestern American college, majoring in Management and Communications, Media, and Rhetoric. She reported that she only plays video games occasionally. Her favorite video game genres include action games, action-adventure games, and sports games.

NADINE described herself as female, bisexual, White-Hispanic, and American. She is the sister of Leslie and grew up in Northern Florida in a split-household (her parents had divorced when she was a child and remarried other people). Both of her parents have college degrees – her father a J.D. and her mother degrees in both

special education and foreign language education. Her father was a lawyer and her mother was a Spanish teacher (she declined to describe her step-parents' educational backgrounds and occupations). Nadine has some college education and was planning on returning to college soon, as of my survey. She worked as a homemaker and a self-published author. She has been playing video games since she was a child. She says she plays every genre, but her favorite games include *The Forest*, *Elder Scrolls Online*, and *Don't Starve*.

NICOLE described herself as a straight, American Indian woman, specifically a Dakota woman from the Yankton Sioux nation. She grew up on a Midwestern reservation. She declined to report her parents' educational background. Her father worked as the Executive Director for their reservation's tribal college and her mother was the school psychologist and Director of Special Education for their tribally run school. As of my survey, Nicole was a full-time college student majoring in Psychology. She also worked in her college's Office of Sustainability. She has played video games since she was a young child. Her favorite video games include *Pokémon Go*, *Super Mario Run*, and *The Walking Dead*.

NORBERT described himself as a straight, Caucasian, American male. Both of his parents were college educated (he declined to specify further). His parents worked as a Nurse and an Insurance Adjustor, respectively. Norbert, as of my survey, was a full-time college student majoring in Communications, Media, and Rhetoric. He has been playing video games since he was 10. His favorite video game genres include sports games, adventure games, and shooters. His favorite video

games include the *Madden* series, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, and the *Borderlands* series.

NORMAND described himself as a gay, Hispanic/Latino, American male. He grew up in a Midwestern city. His parents divorced when he was three and both remarried later. His father earned a Bachelor's degree and worked as a manager at the U.S. Postal Service and his stepmother earned a high school degree and was also employed at the U.S. Postal Service. His mother earned a Master's degree and worked as a college administrator and his stepfather earned a Ph.D. and was the editor of a university press. As of my survey, Normand has earned a Ph.D. in English Literature and is an instructor and acting administrator at a small Native university in the Midwest. He has been playing video games for approximately 30 years. His favorite video game genre is the RPG. His favorite video games include the *Dragon Age* series, the *Persona* series, and the *Mass Effect* trilogy.

OSCAR described himself as a white, straight, cisgendered man. While he did not specify his parents' educational background, we can infer from their occupations (social worker and professor) that they had at least some higher education experience. Oscar himself has earned a Master's degree (he did not specify his area of focus) and, as of my survey, was working as a higher ed staff member. He has been playing video games for approximately 25 years. His favorite video games include *Hearthstone* and LucasArts graphic adventure games from the 90s (e.g. *The Secret of Monkey Island*).

PAT only described themselves as a "human full of flaws and anxiety." They are 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Polish-American and grew up in the Northeastern United States.

Their father has a high school degree and worked primarily in a factory. Their mother has a Bachelor's degree in education and has worked predominantly in the insurance industry. Pat has a Bachelor's degree in Art History and, as of my survey, was working as the registrar of a for-profit school. They have been playing video games on and off for years. Their favorite genres include fighting games and RPGs. Their favorite video games include the *Soul Calibur* series, the *Dragon Age* series, and the *Kingdom Hearts* series.

PATTY described herself as fluid/femme-presenting (preferred pronouns are she/her and they/them), panromantic, White, and Canadian. They grew up in a Canadian province. Both of her parents have a community college level education. Her father was a mechanic and her mother was a "jack of all trades." Patty has earned a Bachelor's degree in Animation & Graphics and as of my survey, was working as an animator for a Canadian production studio. She has been playing video games since approximately 1992. Her favorite video game genres include RPGs and simulators, while her favorite video games include the *Harvest Moon* series, *The Legend of Zelda* series, and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

PAULINE described herself as a straight, Asian (Hmong), American female. She grew up in a Midwestern city with her parents, who were refugees from Laos. She declined to report her parents' educational background and occupations. As of my survey, Pauline was a full-time college student majoring in Sociology and Communications, Media, and Rhetoric. She also worked in the residential office of her college. She has been playing video games since she was a child. The only game



she was “big on” at the time of my survey was *The Walking Dead*, which she enjoyed playing with her brothers.

RAFE described himself as male, straight, white, and British. He grew up on the east coast of England. His father left school at age 15 and his mother earned a Bachelor’s degree in Statistics. His father was a welder and, later, a health and safety manager at a local company that made electrical equipment and his mother was initially a computer programmer but left her job to raise her children. Rafe has a Bachelor’s degree in Philosophy and is currently working as a technical manager for a British television broadcaster. He has been playing video games since he was 4, so approximately 27 years. He declined to mention his favorite video game.

RAVEN described herself as a cis-gendered, bisexual, biracial (half-black, half-white), disabled woman. She grew up in poverty in a New England suburb. She was raised by her mother. She declined to disclose her mother’s educational background, but did reveal that her mother worked various jobs throughout her childhood. Raven’s mother is currently employed in Target. Raven has earned a Bachelor’s degree in English Literature and completed coursework in a Master’s program, but was forced to leave her program due to a chronic illness. She currently works as a freelance technical writer. Her favorite video game genres include RPGs, visual novels, and survival games. She has never disclosed her favorite video games to me, but I have witnessed her avidly consume and discuss games like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, *Don’t Starve*, and the *Pokémon* series.

REED described himself as a gay, Caucasian, Jewish, American male. He grew up in a small farming town adjacent to a college. Both of his parents have multiple

degrees (he declined to specify further). His father works as a college professor and his mother works as a housewife while also volunteering. Reed has completed some college, majoring in Computer Science, but had to drop out due to mental health reasons. As of my survey, he was working at a local movie theater. He has been playing games for approximately 11 years. He plays a wide variety of video games. His favorites include *Guild Wars 2*, *The World Ends With You*, *Final Fantasy Tactics A2*, *Fallen London*, and *The Battle Cats*.

ROGER described himself as a straight, white, heterosexual, American male. He grew up in a Midwestern town. Both of his parents completed two years at a post-high school technical college. His mother worked as a stay-at-home mom and his father owned several businesses, “including bartending and renting out buildings [sic].” Roger, as of my survey, was a full-time college student majoring in English and Secondary Education. He is also working at a grocery store. He estimates that he has been playing video games for 14 years. His favorite video game genres are fantasy and action games. His favorite video games are the *Pokémon* series, *The Legend of Zelda* series, and the *Uncharted* series.

RORY described himself as male, straight, Caucasian, and American. He grew up in a small Midwestern town. His mother attended some college but declined to finish a degree. She worked as a stay-at-home mom. Rory declined to describe his father’s educational background but did state that his father was an OBGYN, so I assume that he has completed a post-graduate degree. As of my survey, Rory was a full-time college student majoring in Communications, Media, and Rhetoric. He has been playing video games since he was 8 years old. His favorite video game genres

include FPS games, story-driven games, online multiplayer games, and sports games. His favorite video games include *The Legend of Zelda* series, *Rocket League*, and *Overwatch*.

SARA described herself as female, straight, white, and American. She grew up in a medium-sized town in Eastern Iowa. Her father has some college education, but declined to finish his degree, and her mother had a Bachelor's degree (she did not specify what field). Her father worked as a mailman and her mother as a social worker. Sara has a Bachelor's degree in History and Ancients [sic] Studies. As of my survey, she was working as a senior financial analyst at an insurance company. She estimated she has been playing video games since the late 80s. Her favorite video game genres are RPGs and turn-based strategy games. Her favorite video games include the *Diablo* series, *Civilization 4*, *Final Fantasy XIV*, and *Super Mario RPG*.

SAUL described himself as a heterosexual, white, American man. He grew up in a Midwestern suburb. He declined to describe his parents' educational background, but he did state that his father was a teacher and his mother was a politician, although she was a waitress while he was growing up. As of my survey, Saul was a full-time college student majoring in English. He also worked as a camp counselor. He has been playing video games for approximately 15 years. His favorite video games include the *Pokémon* series, *FIFA '17*, and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

TAMARA described herself as a straight, Caucasian, American female. She grew up in the Pacific Northwest and the Midwest. She declined to describe her parents' educational background. Her father worked as a general management

planner at a large company, her mother worked as a registered nurse, and her stepfather worked for a large farming company. Tamara, as of my survey, was a full-time college student majoring in Biology/Pre-Med. She also worked in her college's athletic office. She has been playing video games since she was 5 years old. Her favorite video game genre is the FPS. Her favorite video games include the *Left 4 Dead* series, the *Call of Duty* series, and *Halo 5*.

TERESSA described herself as a Brazilian female. She grew up in South, North, and Northeast Brazil. Her father has earned a degree in Business Administration and her mother has earned a degree in Special Education. Her father worked as a commercial manager in a large company while her mother worked as a stay-at-home mom. As of my survey, Teressa was a full-time student at an American college (she declined to state her area of study). She has been playing video games for 12 years. Her favorite video games include *Bully*, *Doom*, and the *Devil May Cry* series.

TERRENCE described himself as a heterosexual male of European and Native American descent. He grew up in a Midwestern town. His father earned a GED and his mother attended a vocational school for baking after high school. His father worked as a pizza delivery man and his mother worked as a baker at a local grocery store. As of my survey, Terrence was a full-time college student majoring in Sport Management. He was also an AAU basketball coach. He has been playing video games since he was 4 or 5. His favorite video game genres are sports games, FPS games, and RPGs. His favorite video games include *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*, *Kingdom Hearts*, and the *NBA 2K* series.

TONY described himself as male, heterosexual, and an “American mut” [sic]. He grew up in the Northeastern United States. Both of his parents have post-graduate degrees. His mother was a lawyer and his father was an IT manager. Tony has earned a Master’s degree (he did not specify his field) but, as of my survey, was unemployed. He estimated he has been playing video games since the days of the Nintendo 64 console, which debuted in the United States in September, 1996. His favorite video game genres include RPGs, shooters, and strategy games. His favorite video games include *Overwatch* and *Assassin’s Creed II*.

VALERIE described herself as female, biromantic demi, Puerto Rican and Irish, and American. She grew up in Iowa (which she was NOT happy about). Both of her parents graduated from college, although she did not specify their fields. Her father worked as a worker’s rights/comp lawyer while her mother was a library paraprofessional. Valerie has earned a Bachelor’s degree in Theater and English and is, as of my survey, was employed as a freelance stage manager and a library paraprofessional. She has been playing video games for 32 years. Her favorite video games include *Overwatch*, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, and *Dragon Age 2*.

VELVA described herself as a white, bisexual female of Syrian and Scottish descent. She grew up in an affluent suburb in New England. Her mother has earned a Ph.D. in Special Education and is now retired (she declined to state her occupation). Her father worked in finance but is now retired as well (she declined to state his educational background). Velva, as of my survey, had earned a Bachelor’s degree in Special Education and was working at a preschool/daycare center. She has been playing video games for 2 years. Her favorite video game

genres include building games, such as *Rollercoaster Tycoon* or *Minecraft*, or games with interesting storylines, like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

WILLIAM described himself as male, straight, Irish, and American. He grew up in the Northeastern United States with his single mother (his father left when he was 2) until he was 13, when he was legally emancipated. William declined to mention either of his parents' educational background or occupation. For himself, William has completed some college but declined to finish his degree in management since he says he was doing well enough without it. As of my survey, he was working as a franchise manager of 2 locations that are ranked among the top 5% of franchise locations for his company. He estimated he has been playing video games since 1984. His favorite video game genres include puzzle games and RPGs. His favorite video games include *Tetris*, the *Final Fantasy* series, the *Fallout* series, and *The Legend of Zelda* series.

ZITA described herself as a multiracial (black, white, Native American), American female. She grew up in a Midwestern suburb. Her mother has completed high school and her father has earned a vocational college degree. Her mother worked as a real estate agent and her father worked for Xerox before moving to a different company. As of my survey, Zita was a full-time college student majoring in Political Science and Human Services. She stated that she does not "really play video games" and that she is bad at them. When she does play video games, though, she prefers "building city ones" like *Celtic Village* and *The Sims* series.

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