Georgia State University

ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

Communication Theses   Department of Communication

7-15-2009

L337 Soccer Moms: Conceptions of "Hardcore" and "Casual" in the Digital Games Medium

Steven Andrew Boyer

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/communication_theses

L337 SOCCER MOMS

CONCEPTIONS OF "HARDCORE" AND "CASUAL" IN THE DIGITAL GAMES MEDIUM

by

STEVEN BOYER

Under the Direction of Ted Friedman

ABSTRACT

As digital games have become increasingly significant in the entertainment media landscape, the terms "casual" and "hardcore" have become the primary ways to describe gaming audiences, genres, and gameplay. However, these terms are saturated with outdated stereotypes involving gender, age, and class. Focusing on industrial discourse, this thesis examines this dichotomy, emphasizing areas of discontinuity and overlap to question why these terms have become so ubiquitous in gaming discourse and what functions they fulfill for a variety of groups including the industry, advertisers, and audience members. Ultimately, I suggest that these terms need to be replaced in order to move beyond restrictive stereotypes, proposing a new framework for digital games that takes into consideration user motivation, personal investment, and historical specificity.

INDEX WORDS: Digital games, Hardcore, Casual, Gender, Genre, Audience, Demographics, Gameplay, Industry discourse, PopCap Games

L337 SOCCER MOMS

CONCEPTIONS OF "HARDCORE" AND "CASUAL" IN THE DIGITAL GAMES MEDIUM

by

STEVEN BOYER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2009

L337 SOCCER MOMS

CONCEPTIONS OF "HARDCORE" AND "CASUAL" IN THE DIGITAL GAMES MEDIUM

by

STEVEN BOYER

Committee Chair: Ted Friedman

Committee: Alisa Perren
Greg Smith

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 1

Introduction: Conceptualizing a Digital Expansion

Digital games, whether played on the PC, game console, handheld system, or mobile device, are becoming increasingly visible in the media landscape. Nearly every major media conglomerate controls a digital entertainment arm while new independent producers and distributors pop up every day. Mergers like that of Activision-Blizzard, while not nearly as prominent as previous headliners like AOL-Time Warner, now make their way into the business pages, deemed "newsworthy" to a general audience that far exceeds any niche media enthusiast.

While the medium itself expands into mainstream consciousness, more and more people who previously would not have acknowledged any association with digital games are finding themselves drawn into the fold in one way or another. Now, over 58% of the American population over the age of 13 plays video games, with the industry boasting six million new gamers in the past year (Sheffield, 2009). For the industry, this means six million new consumers purchasing gaming products, but for society as a whole, these new audience members complicate previously established notions of how digital games function culturally. Beyond the medium's emerging economic relevance, digital games are rapidly acquiring cultural significance for a large number of people.

These two interrelated shifts have brought with them a new crisis with regard to addressing the audiences for digital games. While the medium was previously contained within the realms of either children's toys or the "geek" subculture, the rapidly increasing breadth of gaming audiences has made these conceptions seem outmoded. Certainly neither of these descriptions adequately explains the runaway success of the Nintendo Wii with audiences previously not engaged with the medium in any significant capacity and who transcend

boundaries of age and gender. Those companies that have continued to market their gaming

devices to the "geek" subculture, most notably Microsoft and Sony, have found themselves

struggling to achieve even a fraction of the Wii's astronomical sales numbers and cultural buzz.

By widening their appeal and abandoning established notions of gaming audiences, Nintendo's

success indicates the necessity for a reevaluation of the common perceptions associated with

digital games.

Amidst this changing landscape, two terms have emerged as the most prominent

descriptors of the primary perceptions of modern gaming: "hardcore" and "casual." The three

most common ways in which "hardcore" and "casual" are defined are as demographic categories,

game genres, and gameplay styles. "Hardcore" is generally characterized as a particularly

heavily invested young male (teens to early twenties) demographic group that spends a lot of

money and energy on games, focuses play on competition and expertise, and gravitates towards

complex and/or violent game genres like first person shooter (FPS) or real-time strategy (RTS)

games.   In contrast, "casual" is most frequently invoked to describe a seemingly unfamiliar

group of older (40-55+) female gamers who play to fill short periods of time for escape or

socializing and typically enjoy more simplistic puzzle or word games. These brief sketches in no

way encompass the wide range of embedded implications for each term, but do give a general

view of an often-assumed shorthand.

Audience members encounter these terms in advertisements, on labeled game portals, as

genre indicators on game purchasing websites, in the gaming press, and in frequent use in online

fan discourse. Those gamers more heavily involved with the medium in terms of keeping up

with the games press, actively participating in online forums, and regularly searching out new

products (which generally aligns more closely with the "hardcore" stereotype) are much more

likely to encounter this dichotomy and be aware of the implications inherent in the use of each term, while more "casual" gamers may not ever be aware of these ramifications, merely gravitating towards the "casual" term in order to find the types of games they are interested in. Though the terms are found throughout discourse related to digital games, the games industry legitimates their use by specifically using "casual" and "hardcore" in press releases and interviews, attaching them to specific audience demographics and game genres, and even going as far as creating entire "casual" production divisions. While certainly not accepted blindly, this "official" usage gives these terms significant discursive power which journalists, audiences, and broader culture must then negotiate.

In terms of my specific project here, it is this "official" usage which emphasizes the major issues involved with this type of dichotomy. As someone interested in cultural history, the use of terms which so inadequately describe current changes (such as the oft mentioned "rise of the casual gamer") not only paints a skewed picture, but continues to reinforce dangerous established stereotypes of race, gender, age, and class. When tied to the industrial sector, these distorted conceptions impact corporate divisions, distribution methods, and product manufacture, transforming the medium down the line and magnifying problematic assumptions. Altering this terminology would open the door for the industry to produce new types of games that truly respond to how people interact with the medium without the interference of preconceived notions of demographics or gameplay habits. This last issue hits home as someone who enjoys digital games on a personal level. In the end, I would just like games to expand to whatever new forms lay ahead, unfettered by constricting audience preconceptions and instead reveling in the realization that gamers of all age, gender, and class will play a game that truly resonates with them on some meaningful level.

On the surface then, these terms provide a valuable site of entrance for examining the major changes occurring within the world of gaming today, embodying a major collision between the medium's established devotees and the mainstream culture surrounding this previously subcultural entertainment form. The three main aspects of the terms (demographics, genre, gameplay) coincide in a clash between some "pure," established game form and the steady approach of outside influences, most concisely linked to the medium's increasingly broad appeal. As digital games become further integrated into mainstream culture, however, these two supposedly distinct spheres are rapidly blurring, exposing the difficulty in conceptualizing the medium in this type of dichotomized way.

In many ways, this process is similar to that apparent in other subcultural media formats which interact with dominant culture. The term "indie film," for example, has quickly become as contested as either "hardcore" or "casual" due in large part to the mainstreaming of independent films by companies like Miramax. While the relationship between independent films and mainstream media was complicated long before Miramax or Sundance, the rapid acceleration of the process due to historical context and industrial imperatives has only made the term "indie" that much more ambiguous.   The terminology surrounding digital games parallels this shift, offering a valuable site of investigation which could lead to further insights into how subcultural media interact with mainstream culture across specific contextual boundaries.

While differences among audience members, genres, and gameplay patterns certainly do exist, collapsing these differences into two broad categories not only elides specific points of departure, but these terms in particular actually regress into previously established perceptions of the medium rather than acknowledging the changing role of digital games in today's world. The term "hardcore" reinscribes the centrality of the established gamer, preserving the status quo and

legitimating an inordinate amount of cultural and industrial attention to the stereotyped

adolescent male audience. This association excludes new entrants who may be experiencing the

medium for the first time, establishing a subcultural hierarchy with the emotionally and

economically invested few at the top. By continuing to conceptualize the "core" consumers of

digital games in this regressive fashion, the industry remains stubbornly resistant to the cultural

shifts redefining digital games in the twenty-first century.

       To combat this lack of historical specificity, many segments of the games industry have

begun aggressively promoting the rise of the "casual" gamer. This term succeeds in welcoming

the previously excluded majority of the population to this new entertainment medium by

providing an easy, noncommittal point of access. People who would never have thought of

themselves as "gamers" are encouraged to test out the waters in a manner far removed from the

stigmas and/or preconceptions associated with the "hardcore." However, this move inserts these

new gamers into the lowest possible position in the subcultural hierarchy, further naturalizing the

link between the "hardcore" audience and "real" games while othering the mainstream

newcomers. These terms, then, do very little to actually encourage intermixing and

experimentation, working instead to deepen perceived differences and reinscribe established

divisions.

       Perhaps even more troubling are the demographic implications contained within these

two terms. Age, gender, and class distinctions play primary roles in nearly all definitions of both

"casual" and "hardcore." The "hardcore" gamer is stereotyped as a young man who has the

necessary disposable income to keep up to date with all the newest games and gadgets, a

requirement which provides a major barrier to entry not only for those lacking interest in the

medium, but also for those lacking the requisite funds. "Casual" gamers, on the other hand, are

most frequently described as "soccer moms" who have the free time to sit around and play easy to learn games like "Bejeweled," linking female gamers to increased age and decreased gaming aptitude. Despite suggestions by the industry that "casual" gamers transcend age and gender, these categories are routinely suggested as the basis for categorization[1].

Assumptions like these further reinforce the segmented perception of gaming audiences, actively discouraging cross-category identification while reinforcing the established cultural hierarchy. Any subtle (or perhaps clearly significant) relationships between gamers or groups of gamers is lost in this homogenized terminology, subjugating all audience members to a particularly limited gender and age specific framework within which many real people simply don't fit. While in this way working to elide intra-categorical difference, these distinctions simultaneously emphasize some supposedly fundamental inter-categorical difference between the "hardcore" and the "casual" despite marked similarities with regard to all three defining criteria (blurred audience categories, contradictory genre distinctions, and indistinguishable gameplay patterns). Thus, rather than serving as a viable means of conceptualizing digital games, this dichotomy obfuscates potentially valuable sites of comparison in favor of an artificially manufactured separation.

Furthermore, these discursive categories lack historicity, neglecting the significance of the explosion of interest in digital games by society at large by simply re-erecting existing audience boundaries under the guise of new terminology. Even a company like Nintendo that has aggressively encouraged this cultural shift in terms of product development and targeted

---

[1] The other major demographic characteristic which the industry notably does not invoke is that of race. The implicit assumption in both terms is that of a white gamer, be it a suburban mom or an angsty teen, but this is never explicitly outlined, particularly with regards to the terminology in question. A topic that warrants an entire study of its own, I do not concentrate on issues of race here for reasons of scope, but wish to suggest that race is omnipresent in both "casual" and "hardcore" definitions, even if it not as readily invoked as factors of age and gender.

advertising continues to rely on this terminology in key circumstances, such as in response to the "hardcore" backlash to their "casual" focused press conference at the 2008 Electronic Entertainment Expo (see Franco, 2008, and Ingham, 2008). These terms then continue to exist outside of historical relevance, based on misconceptions from a previous era of gaming history, not yet adequately able to reflect the major changes at hand in the digital games landscape (see fig. 1 for a timeline of some of the major events affecting this landscape). With such rapidly expanding cultural significance, the digital games medium desperately requires a revised discursive framework for describing new developments in terms of audiences, genres, and gameplay that acknowledges the interplay between different cultural forces and moves beyond the limited conceptions of the medium from previous eras.

In working towards this new discursive framework, I draw upon a number of theoretical backgrounds, specifically game studies, genre theory, and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. Together, these distinct modes of thought provide a starting point for an analysis of the ways in which "hardcore" and "casual" function both within the gaming subculture and throughout society as a whole to alter conceptions of the medium in this period of historical change.

Game Studies

The field of game studies exhibits a number of parallels to the shift from film studies to television studies, the latter of which more centrally involves audience and industry (though there certainly is fantastic scholarship devoted to these aspects of the cinematic medium, film studies has and continues to be much more textually based than television studies). Game studies expands upon this shift even further, not only emphasizing audience and industry, but also closely integrating discussion of game design and production to a degree of detail not

1993: *Doom* is released, revolutionizing shareware and multiplayer first-person shooters.

1990: Windows 3.0 released. Includes *Solitaire*.

1996: Microsoft launches the Internet Gaming Zone, a popular online gaming portal.

1994: Sega overtakes Nintendo's number one slot using edgy, teen-focused advertising.

2001: *Bejeweled* released. Becomes one of the highest-selling casual games of all time.

1999: Hardcore gaming hub TEN becomes casual-focused Pogo.

2006: Nintendo Wii launches, quickly becomes a cultural phenomenon.

Nov. 2008: *Gears of War 2* sells over 2 million copies in its first weekend.

July 2008: iPhone app store launches, revolutionizing mobile games.

1990   1995   2000   2005   2009

Figure 1. A timeline of casual/hardcore gaming highlights.

typically found in television studies, often in a focus on the "rules" of a game or the development process itself (see Juul, "Half-Real" 2005, and Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). Due to the specificity of the medium in requiring user input, digital game audiences also hold an even more significant place in the field, not only in terms of demographic makeup, but in user experience and interaction with the medium (see Boellstorff, 2006 and Sotamaa, 2007).

Even with this broad range of focus, with regard to game studies I have yet to find any major similar investigation into the discursive significance of the terms "casual" and "hardcore." The relevant scholarship usually either completely ignores this terminology, focusing instead on more general issues of demographic makeup and/or gender distinctions (see Williams, Yee, and Caplan, 2008), or appropriates the terms unquestioned, reinscribing usage rather than critiquing it (see Ip and Jacobs, 2005).

Despite this lack of explicitly applicable scholarship, there is no shortage of related material that informs this discussion. As stated previously, audiences play a major role in game studies and in definitions of "hardcore" and "casual," and as such there are a number of particularly useful studies investigating gaming audience demographics, users' experiences with the medium, and the cultural significance of these features. In particular, the medium's stigma as being male-oriented has led to several significant examinations of gender and gaming.

Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins' collection <u>From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games</u> (2000), provides an interesting approach to the topic that incorporates both academic and industrial figures to probe questions of gendered gaming. One especially complex issue often invoked in such studies is that of "natural" gender distinctions, postulating that girls simply engage with digital media differently than boys due to innate differences. While the authors don't refute the existence of differences in how girls and boys interact with the medium,

they largely attribute these differences to cultural factors like historical exclusion and industrial pressure. For Cassell and Jenkins, "the problem is not one of inherent interest or ability but of access" (12) that is only exacerbated by the "gatekeeping functions played by chain toystores" (15) which continually prioritize male-oriented digital media.

Numerous other studies also look at how female gamers engage with digital games in a unique way, some acknowledging cultural influences like Cassell and Jenkins while others actively encourage biological distinctions. Similarly, studies investigating the motivations of male gamers, often in conjunction with violence and aggression, can be split between those prioritizing cultural influences versus biological influences, but frequently focus on what would be considered "hardcore" games. The gender assumptions at play in the terms "hardcore" and "casual" in many ways correspond to these studies. While my specific intention is in breaking down these culturally gendered assignments, both strains of scholarship relating to games and gender provide the foundation for this examination of the cultural impact of this gendered terminology.

My approach also draws upon the long legacy of games studies scholarship that emphasizes the unique interplay between industry and audience. While other media forms certainly involve user engagement and cultural production, digital games are explicitly reliant on user input. The field has long encouraged a multiperspectival approach to digital games drawing on a wide range of theoretical backgrounds, but significantly acknowledging the subjectivity of both the audience and the critic in the gaming experience. Because of the requisite user investment, critical distance is not as fiercely mandated as in other fields, replaced instead with an active engagement with the experience. This more general collapsing of industry and audience within the entertainment experience is not wholly unique to digital games, but is

certainly more pronounced to the point that in many ways, users are just as important in governing the cultural experience of a text as the industry that initially produced it.

Thus, studies like Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter's <u>Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing</u> (2003) draw heavily on the advances made by cultural studies in emphasizing actives audiences and reciprocal interaction in the construction of cultural texts. The authors here propose a system called the "three circuits of interactivity" that adapts the "circuit of culture" to digital games in order to examine the current state of the medium. Technology, culture, and marketing are "mutually constitutive" and cannot be isolated, providing a multidimensional approach to studying the medium (58-59). At the same time, the authors ground this idea in a historical moment, positioning it as a snapshot of a medium in the grips of a contested post-Fordism reflecting the desires for a virtual escape from commodity culture that paradoxically reinscribes these values (65-66). In this way, the authors exact a multi-tiered approach to digital games that emphasizes the linkage between audiences and industry while historicizing this cultural shift.

Along these lines, I draw out the interconnectedness of game audiences and the games industry as seen in the historical moment that produced the terms "hardcore" and "casual." Neither the audiences nor the industry can claim full credit for the creation or the dissemination of this terminology, as the interaction between the two parties through cultural forums is a two-way negotiable process. However, both sectors are subject to the historical specificity of the moment within which these negotiations take place, with the adoption of "hardcore" and "casual" reflecting the changing cultural moment just as much, if not more than, the motivations underlying either emotionally and/or economically invested side.

Genre Studies

The second major portion of this examination of "casual" and "hardcore" deals with their use as broad generic categories. Serving as larger genre headers governing the depiction of a number of interconnected subgenres, these terms provide a way to examine the relationship between industrial production and audience consumption as it revolves around the media text itself. However, this approach to the terms as genres is in no way limited to textual analysis, which is only one aspect with which to question how these generic categories attain cultural meaning.

The initial portion of this section follows previous studies of media genres, particularly those related to film, in order to provide a foundation for conceptualizing "casual" and "hardcore" in terms of genre. Rick Altman (1999) suggests ten primary features traditionally associated with film genres that, while at times problematic, form a general sketch of how scholars typically understand genre (13-29). With the first of these features, Altman suggests that genre is a multidimensional term, serving as a "blueprint" for industry decision-making, a "structure" governing formal construction of the media text, a "label" simplifying distribution and exhibition, and a "contract" influencing audience expectations (14). As such, Altman's conception of genre incorporates textual analysis through the "structure" label, but only as one component in determining how genre functions. In addition to influencing formal elements, genre designations indicate industrial imperatives, circulation patterns, and audience involvement in a manner that presumes conflict. While Altman sees the incorporation of the multiple aspects of industrial genres in film studies as a significant improvement over literary genre studies, he laments the tendency to use genre to align these forces without critically examining the contradictions and ambiguous implications of many generic definitions (15).

Genre therefore can be a dangerous tool precisely because of this mutability, opening the door for brute force homogenization and allowing for an analysis that always reaches predetermined conclusions.

Altman frames the other features of genre in a similarly critical fashion in order to reach a more fluid notion of genre. As such, the author rejects several major tenets of past genre theory which portray genres as stable, self-contained categories transcending historical specificity, evolving predictably, and emerging without significant audience input. This type of unified conception of genre, for Altman, does not hold up when examining the messy reality of genre history. However, acknowledging the influence of these assumptions held by traditional genre theory allows for a critical examination of how genre functions in a historically informed analysis.

As such, my evaluation of "casual" and "hardcore" examines the complications inherent in using these terms as unambiguous genre labels. Rather than either blindly accepting traditional theories of genre or bluntly rejecting them, I investigate the ways in which genre is still invoked according to these traditions while critically engaging the numerous inconsistencies unaccounted for by this type of conception. Much of this analysis, therefore, involves areas of overlap and ambiguity. Retro games, for example, fit neatly into formal definitions of "casual" games, but the industry promotes them as "hardcore" product and audience expectations are similarly "hardcore," conforming to Altman's insistence that the multiple functions of genre do not always link up. Furthermore, the term "casual" has only come into popular usage in the past few years, indicating that historical context is absolutely crucial in developing any useful conception of game genres. Thus, Altman's critique of genre theory serves as a starting point for

a critical evaluation of the assumptions at work in using "casual" and "hardcore" as generic indicators.

Expanding on this dispersed view of genres, I draw from Jason Mittell's (2004) conception of genres as "cultural categories" (in his case, looking at television) that hold significant value to audience members and that work in ways far exceeding formal characteristics. For Mittell, genre is much more than a way to differentiate products or explain industrial relationships, but a nexus of projected cultural desires that offer a potential framework for conceptualizing media audiences. As the author suggests, textual analysis is a valuable component of genre analysis, but in no way should form the origin of a study or exist in isolation. Instead, a genre analysis must begin outside of the text, examining how specific audiences negotiate generic meanings, in the process giving priority to cultural significance (5).

Furthermore, contrary to traditional views of genres, Mittell contends that texts are not necessarily linked together into genres based on any formal or textual means of comparison, instead serving as "discursive clusters" that conjoin texts culturally and may shift and mutate between different groups of people or over the course of time, ultimately holding no inherent meaning independent of that produced by discourse (17). As such, no genre analysis can claim generalizability outside of specific historically contextual conditions, though certainly connections and parallels exist between time periods, but they are in no way inherent to any single genre.

For my purposes, I fully acknowledge and embrace the historical specificity of the "casual" and "hardcore" dichotomy. While I examine the historical background leading up to the usage of these two terms, my analysis revolves around the rapid changes that have begun occurring in gaming audiences during the past few years. This analysis emerges out of this

specific cultural moment of vast change, suggesting that this terminology exists as a means for audiences and industrial forces to attempt to make sense of this specific cultural circumstance. The designation of a game as part of either the "hardcore" or "casual" genre, therefore, is in no way a natural distinction, but a part of this larger cultural shift, placing the focus of my analysis outside of any specific formal endeavor and conceptualizing genre as a means of negotiating this wider cultural moment.

In this vein, rather than simply defining the two genres of "casual" games and "hardcore" games, I suggest that they serve Mittell's type of cultural categorization function, providing audiences with an indication of game content but also transcending stylistic conventions to provide contextual information. Therefore, my analysis of game content and generic conventions instills these terms with increased cultural force, suggesting that they hold a great deal of power within wider discourse, while providing a means of examining the broader cultural shift motivating their use in the first place.

Bourdieu and Cultural Capital

The other major governing mode of thought for this analysis revolves around Pierre Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital, particularly as outlined in <u>Distinction</u> (1984). In this work, Bourdieu suggests that cultural tastes have much to do with socioeconomic status as framed within a hierarchical cultural economy. This general idea, along with many of Bourdieu's more specific claims, has frequently been used to examine the place of popular culture within hierarchies of taste. This framework is particularly useful when examining popular culture because it eliminates any perceived natural superiority of high culture, implicitly legitimating serious consideration of the cultural impact of supposedly low culture.

John Fiske's (1992) appropriation of Bourdieu's ideas for a discussion of fan cultures builds on the strengths of the idea of cultural capital while adapting it to focus on subcultures rather than what he terms "official" culture. While Bourdieu provides a complex view into official culture, his treatment of popular culture is, according to Fiske, severely lacking in depth. Fiske also highlights Bourdieu's neglect of other significant variables like gender, race, and age in establishing taste hierarchies that, while not necessarily more influential than economic status, are intertwined with notions of class and cultural legitimacy (32). By incorporating Bourdieu's idea of the habitus, which "encompasses our position within social space, the ways of living that go with it and what Bourdieu calls the associated 'dispositions' of mind, cultural tastes and ways of thinking and feeling," Fiske is able to develop the idea of "popular cultural capital" to describe the subcultural economy within a system of fans (32-33). In many ways this hierarchical structure parallels that which governs official culture, yet Fiske outlines several key departures specific to fan culture in order to complicate Bourdieu's homogeneous view of popular culture, emphasizing the internal conflicts and ambiguities at work even within a single subculture.

In terms of digital game audiences, this type of approach is absolutely necessary when dealing with the internal battle over the gamer hierarchy, at the center of which sits the "hardcore" and "casual" divide. An attempt to judge this popular medium's relationship to cultural capital starting from perspective of official culture would offer little insight, as digital games as a whole still sit squarely in the "low culture" realm and offer few chances for convertibility into economic capital. Such an approach would completely gloss over the variety of specific relationships of those who interact with the medium and would largely miss the entire

project at hand, which focuses on investigating the conflicts and negotiations over this medium's specific popular cultural capital between members of this subcultural audience.

Sarah Thornton's (1997) application of Bourdieu's concepts to club culture introduces the idea of "subcultural capital" to address many of the same concerns voiced by Fiske. The author suggests that Bourdieu's neglect of popular media forms was not necessarily intentional, but a byproduct of Bourdieu's own habitus dominated by intellectual pursuits and high cultural capital ("The Social Logic" 202). Subcultural capital, Thornton argues, has its own distinct features to distinguish it from official culture, with one especially prominent difference being the subcultural emphasis on popular media like television and, I would suggest, digital games, giving a privileged position to analysis of these modes of information circulation (203). Furthermore, subcultural capital is not necessarily as dependent on class as official culture, with age and gender playing much more prominent roles in the alignment of subcultural capital with audience members (203-204). Thus, as Thornton argues, subcultural media forms certainly benefit from Bourdieu's conception of cultural capital, but popular culture necessitates an adjusted approach in order to fully acknowledge its departures from official culture.

Despite the increasing visibility of digital games, the medium still exists primarily as a popular media form informed by the logic of subcultural capital. While I would argue that class does play a particularly significant role in definitions of gaming audience, exacerbated by the high cost of entry to the medium in comparison to cheaper entertainments like television or film (a symptom of the digital divide), age and gender are perhaps the most commonly invoked indicators of subcultural capital within digital games. Both "casual" and "hardcore" have specific age and gender associations which impact the subcultural capital endowed to each category as well as containing more subtle class-based implications. However, an examination

of the terms that did not actively focus on age and gender would be nonsensical, as these features, which play a minor role for Bourdieu, lie at the very heart of the terminology in question and its related subcultural capital.

Furthermore, Thornton promotes the concepts of "hipness" and the "mainstream" as primary motivators in governing subcultural capital within club culture. The signifier "hip" is, in typical poststructuralist fashion, unstable and lacking any inherent meaning, varying greatly between audience groups even within a single subculture (204). Thus, what is "hip" and confers subcultural capital within one segment of club culture may provoke scorn from another segment of the subculture, thus inviting a lower status in the subcultural hierarchy for that specific group. This idea of "hipness," Thornton argues, is like other aspects of subcultural capital influenced by age and gender, in the case of club culture often resulting in a feminization of the "unhip" (205). As this indicates, the crucial aspect of "hipness" is that which it is not, the "mainstream," which serves as an "imagined 'other'" that ultimately speaks more about the classifier than the classified (205). Conceptions of the "mainstream" provided by members of the subculture thus work to reinscribe the cultural hierarchy, empowering the subculture in opposition to official culture and reinforcing the importance of subculturally specific capital.

Like club culture, the audience for digital games thrives on a version of "hipness." The medium has a tumultuous relationship with the "mainstream," simultaneously striving for cultural legitimacy by reaching out to society at large while denigrating newcomers. The dichotomy of "hardcore" and "casual" is closely aligned with this division, with the former generally attributed to the most visible subsection of the subculture that is even more discriminating about definitions of "hipness" than most other gamers while the latter is often a stand-in term for the "mainstream" audience that has just stumbled across the medium. Thus,

casual gamers rest at the extreme bottom of the subcultural hierarchy, othered in much the same way as the disparaged clubbers described by Thornton. This terminological othering occurs along the typical lines of age and gender, but is also historically specific, emerging at a time when "mainstream" interest in digital games has become widespread. Thus, an examination of the perceived relationship between the subculture and the "mainstream" is central to definitions of "hardcore" and "casual."

Clearly, though Bourdieu's initial project may have neglected popular culture, his ideas provide the starting point for a deep investigation of the cultural hierarchies at work both within a subculture like that surrounding digital games and between the subculture and society at large. This type of hierarchical function of terminology governs nearly all usage of the terms "casual" and "hardcore," with Bourdieu's conception of cultural capital enabling a nuanced vision of how these terms function for a variety of people with specific groups while taking into consideration issues of gender, age, and class.

Method

The governing approach for this project largely emerges out of the dispersed view of cultural artifacts emphasized by cultural studies scholars. This critical tradition encourages contextualizing a media object within a "circuit of culture," which includes aspects of production, representation, identity, consumption, and regulation. By shifting the focus of critical analysis off of a rigidly constrained view of a cultural object, the "circuit of culture" encourages a broader examination that emphasizes the wide breadth of an object's influences and potential effects. As such, a cultural studies approach lends itself towards multifaceted research methods in order to obtain this broad vision.

In this case, a large portion of the research involved can most appropriately be categorized as discourse analysis. The topic itself revolves around two specific terms and how they circulate through a variety of discursive venues, including those of the media industries, media consumers and fans, and the more general population. Primary source material, most specifically regarding the industry, that is gleaned from press releases, interviews, industry reports, and advertising, among other locations, serves as the central node out of which much of this discourse emerges. I am especially interested in providing as unfiltered a view of the industry's conceptions of these audiences as possible, which is why primary sources composed of direct industry discourse play a fundamental role.

While I suggest that the games industry holds a primary position in circulating these terms, thus legitimating my focus on industry discourse, terminology here is unstable, with competing definitions and connotations coming into conflict where these discursive streams intersect. Despite this relative ambiguity, "hardcore" and "casual" are terms which hold a significant amount of discursive power, defining market segments that dictate corporate decisions, indicating generic categories for consumer shorthand, and providing sites of identification for game players. Each of these aspects suggests the breadth of the larger goal of this project, which is an examination of the changing face of gaming audiences as perceived by industry, audiences, and society at large. Thus, while an analysis of the discourses of gaming is a significant portion of this project, it is only one component in determining the cultural significance of this far-reaching shift.

As such, my discussion of these two terms is not solely limited to discourse analysis. A critical textual analysis of "hardcore" and "casual" games draws on theories of genre in order to determine how and why these games are categorized in these specific ways. Beyond simply

determining the significant defining features of each term as it applies to genre, I focus my attention on how these features tie back to questions of audience and industry. In particular, I question the validity of explicitly linking demographic groups to specific genres when well documented crossover exists and suggest potential reasons concerning why this connection may be beneficial and to whom.

Finally, drawing on game studies and game design scholarship, I investigate the impact of the two terms in question on design and gameplay. Beyond doing a formal analysis of the features of "casual" and "hardcore" gameplay styles, I document my personal gaming experiences in relation to these terms, drawing on auto-ethnographic traditions to attempt to get at the experience contained in "casual" gameplay and how it compares to playing a game in a "hardcore" fashion. While this approach is unavoidably influenced by my own individual gaming preferences and motivations, this type of "bias" is at work in any attempt to evaluate a media experience, with the only possible solution to acknowledge these influences to attempt to see what lies beyond them. Moreover, introducing my own experiences with games provides a number of benefits, including the ability to examine the gaming experience as affected by "hardcore" and "casual" assumptions, but also to offset the heavy industrial focus of the rest of this project. I use audience sources when both possible and appropriate, but due to scope and focus, most of my attention is directed towards industry discourse, which threatens to imply a top-down imposition of terminology. Including personal experience helps complicate this process and suggest what reciprocal responses may occur on the audience level. Though these findings may not be especially generalizable, they should introduce a number of unique ideas concerning gameplay as well as an opportunity for readers to investigate their own experience with the medium.

My approach to "casual" and "hardcore" is thus as varied as possible without reaching too far into complexity, taking into consideration usage of the terms within an array of discursive venues, their impact on game genres and the formal aesthetics associated with these genres, and finally their role in structuring the gameplay experience. Each one of these approaches is inextricably linked to the other (for example, gameplay style is undeniably affected by genre and reliant on the characteristics of the person playing the game), which hopefully will result in a broad yet focused vision of the impact of these two terms in gaming today.

Chapter Outline

Through my chapter distinctions, I intend to look individually at the three most frequently suggested components of the terms "casual" and "hardcore" as proposed by industrial figures. These terms are generally defined with regard to audience, genre, or gameplay style, with obvious overlap between categories. While these distinctions may at first glace seem merely semantic, isolating each of these guidelines for categorization exposes the unnecessary and unnatural conflations invoked by so many of those using these terms. However, my discussion of each section takes these conflations into consideration to question popular perceptions and assumptions.

The opening chapter provides an evaluation of the ways in which industry discourse categorizes audiences, introducing the widely used definitions as a starting point for discussion and critique. This section is primarily a discourse analysis of industry documents, looking at the hegemonic underpinnings of these distinctions as promoted by industry sources. As such, this section expands upon basic terminology sketches, focusing on the definitions of "hardcore" and "casual" gamers with regard to gender, age, and class within an industrial framework. At the same time, this section moves beyond industrial analysis to examine the possible reasons why

these terms would be appealing to audience members, taking a historical approach to the transition from "nerd" stereotypes to the potentially more empowering "hardcore" label and looking at the mediating role of the "casual" label for new gamers who are uncomfortable with the established subculture. Thus, the bulk of this section interrogates new developments in gaming audiences through terminology, querying the adoption and use of "casual" and "hardcore" by the industry as a means to segment audiences and by the audiences themselves as a way to mitigate the stresses of a transitioning gaming landscape.

The next major section looks at "casual" and "hardcore" in terms of game genres, design, and hardware. Beginning with a more traditional formal approach to genres, I identify the characteristics generally associated with "casual" games and "hardcore" games not to actively segment these genres, but to provide a starting point to distinguish audience perceptions of game types. To emphasize ambiguities embedded in these perceptions, I provide textual analysis and genre analysis of several borderline cases which blur the lines between "casual" and "hardcore" and seem to transgress the boundaries established in the previous segment by industrial discourse. For example, analysis of design decisions in such divergent games as *Peggle* and *Counter-Strike* provide a glimpse into how issues like reward and feedback are impacted by conceptions of "casual" and "hardcore."

I then tie this textual analysis back to audiences by means of Jason Mittell's conception of genres as "cultural categories." Drawing on his research, I contend that genres do far more than simply connect games with similar formal characteristics, but serve a variety of purposes for audience members. By expanding the scope of my genre analysis, this section explicitly links aesthetics and mechanics to audiences, a move that will be continued in the following section and which serves to build upon the previous discussion on conceptions of gaming audiences.

Thus, genre is not left in isolation, but as a motivated method of categorization which both contributes to and complicates "casual" and "hardcore" gaming audiences. I close this section with a close look at the progression of casual game juggernaut PopCap Games to suggest that what once may have been considered a quintessentially "casual" company has steadily targeted the hardcore in increasingly visible ways, in the process highlighting the terms' historical specificity as cultural categories.

The third major section consists of an examination of "casual" and "hardcore" gameplay. In this section, I question how it possible to play a single game in either a "casual" or "hardcore" fashion, and what this change of gameplay style entails. One major thread involves suggestions of difficulty/simplicity, referencing claims of the "dumbing down" of gameplay to appeal to a more "casual" audience. As such, I examine how the alteration of difficulty settings affects overall gaming experience, focusing primarily on the game *Gears of War 2*. This game fits squarely into conceptions of the hardcore genre and uses the terms "casual" and "hardcore" to denote different difficulty levels, the selection of which I suggest alters gameplay in significant ways. Furthermore, the complexity of input methods and the technological barriers to entry are examined to determine why certain play styles may appeal to different demographics while being incorporated into certain game genres. Taking Bourdieu's ideas of the popular aesthetic versus the bourgeois aesthetic, I examine various control schemes which are aligned with either the "hardcore" or "casual" markets in terms of relative complexity. I close this section by investigating industrial conceptions of why different people play games, ultimately suggesting that this is merely a gender argument in disguise, reverting back to stereotyped arguments and missing a chance to learn from this potentially insightful feature of gamers.

Finally, I connect these three major sections (audiences, genres, and gameplay) in an attempt to break down these rigid distinctions and provide a possible alternative schematic. While I argue that "hardcore" and "casual" serve, to some extent, the interests of both industry and audience, they simultaneously perpetuate long-held stereotypes, merely in newly coated guises. This is supported by a brief look at some other suggested terms which have not succeeded in altering the discourse of digital games. In order to break free of these restraints, I propose a new framework which takes into consideration the complexity of the current gaming landscape by dynamically incorporating historical specificity, user motivation, and personal investment.

Chapter 2

Playing with Discourse: The Construction of Digital Game Markets

While digital games have quickly become one of the most popular and profitable entertainment media in both the American and global marketplace, conceptions of who actually plays these games has remained remarkably limited. The two most common terms used to describe gaming audiences are "hardcore" and "casual," ambiguous signifiers imbued with a variety of contradictory connotations but lacking any distinct referents. In terms of industrial discourse, these terms are largely used as a way of demarcating target audiences and describing market demographics.[2] This benefits game producers and distributors, who can develop and target products at specific demographic groups, as well as advertisers of products marketed for specific gender or age brackets. Internal industrial usage of the terms, as well as that directed towards advertisers, thus constructs game players as economic subjects, placing them into the categories of "hardcore" or "casual" as defined by their choice of game products, purchasing habits, and brand associations in a purely manufactured way.

However, due to the wide reach of the industry's discourse and their power to legitimize terminology by inscribing into official channels, these terms reach far beyond the games industry to become common audience descriptors in a variety of arenas. The discursive forces affected by the industry, specifically audience members, have far more at stake than simple economic imperatives, receiving these terms through a negotiated process which provides both producers and consumers with incentives for adoption, yet without wholly satisfying either group. Cultural

---

[2] Figures and statistics informing and cited in this section come primarily from the Casual Games Association's 2007 Market Report, information distributed by the Entertainment Software Association including its 2008 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry report, the International Game Developers Assocation's 2006 Casual Games White Paper, Nielsen's The State of the Video Gamer reports, advertising and demographic profiles provided by specific companies, and information provided by industry figures in published interviews.

uses of "hardcore" and "casual," however, remain couched in the economic framework promoted by the industry's discursive hegemony, ultimately leading to a disconnect between industrially constructed conceptions of game audiences and individual subjectivity, particularly with regard to age and gender.

Constructing Markets

In post-Fordist, postmodern America, multinational corporations exert a significant amount of socio-economic influence on subject formation. With the disintegrating presence of religion, family, education, and other traditional systems of influence, multinational corporations have quickly assumed a dominant position within the Althusserian spectrum of Ideological State Apparatuses. Richard Wolff (2005) sums up the role of the ISA in today's capitalist societies, stating:

> Modern capitalism presses its ISAs to interpellate and thus to subjectivize/identify individuals in those particular ways that will provide the ideological conditions of existence for capitalist exploitation. ISAs serve capitalism insofar as they effectively interpellate subjects within meaning systems (including definitions of their own and others' identities) that make them at least accept and at best celebrate capitalist exploitation. (226)

As such, these corporations, particularly those involved in the mass-media sector and often part of a much larger conglomerate, use their ubiquitous presence and popular appeal to disseminate capitalist ideology with the intent to reproduce the "relations of production" encouraged by Althusser's Repressive State Apparatus.

Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter position digital games as the "ideal commodity" that embodies the tenets of post-Fordism, emerging directly out of the digital age but which

unlike the Internet became a commercial venture very shortly after its inception. The games industry, "with its youthful workforce of digital artisans and netslaves, typifies the new forms of post-Fordist enterprise and labour" while the products themselves "can be seen as a sort of low-level domestic socialization for high-tech work pratices" (74-76). McKenzie Wark (2007) echoes this sentiment, claiming that today, "Play is no longer a counter to work. Play becomes work; work becomes play," caused primarily by efforts by the "military entertainment complex" to "expand the game to the whole world, containing play forever within it" (16). While this may appear to be a highly structured and efficient system, Kline et al. instead see the games industry as part of a post-Fordism defined by "'riding chaos' – a constant attempt to strategize responses to a highly unstable, fluid, crisis-ridden conjunction in which managing markets, workers, consumers, and commodities proceeds by incessant improvisation, and where today's solution becomes, overnight, part of tomorrow's problem" (77). As such, industrial discourse in this post-Fordist period funnels its terminology through an economic framework, but always in an attempt to react to the most immediate context, often unwittingly compounding the problems ahead.

The industry uses the specific terms "casual" and "hardcore" in this fashion, interpellating subjects with the intent of inscribing them into post-Fordist economy to maximize consumption. This inscription embeds the gaming subject into capitalist ideology, suggesting that his/her purchasing decisions, gaming behavior, and individual attitudes towards games all correspond to a particular market imperative. Instead of defining gamers based on any of the number of complex characteristics which contribute to an individual's identity with relation to games, these nuances are collapsed into an easily identifiable subjectivity that spans genres and playing styles with the only distinction being his/her position in the marketplace. This approach

also carefully glosses over implications of age, gender, and class to ultimately prioritize market value. By subordinating all possible individual differences under an economically based mode of discourse, the terms "casual" and "hardcore" facilitate the construction of capitalist subjects in line with the dominant American consumer ideology.

Identifying how actual people should be sorted into these categories is a complicated task however, one which obviously cannot accommodate the wide variety of individual differences between game players. As stated previously, the games industry's approach to this problem is threefold: defining each category by its largest, and therefore most potentially profitable, demographic segment (frequently determined by market research), attempting to segment the market based on preferred product type (creating the categories of "casual games" and "hardcore games"), and delineating gamers based on their style of gameplay and interaction with game products. Clearly, these three methods of categorization do not always align, leading to terms fraught with contradictions.

This complicated system of categorization can be seen in the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) Special Interest Group on Casual Games' attempt to provide a comprehensive examination of this specific industry subset in a white paper written by prominent industry figures and intended for others working within the casual game space. Near the beginning of the document, the contributors provide brief descriptions of these market demographics as determined by the three approaches suggested above. The hardcore market is comprised of "Gamers who typically play high-action, extremely competitive games that require a greater degree of involvement or dexterity in order to progress" and who are generally "male and aged eighteen to thirty-four." The casual audience, on the other hand, is described as "Gamers who play games for enjoyment and relaxation rather than games with steep learning

curves or requiring high levels of commitment or involvement" who are primarily "women aged

thirty-five to fifty" (Robbins and Wallace 9-10, 2006).[3] These definitions are the largely

standard demographic sketches found throughout industry discourse.

At the same time, the casual games industry vigorously asserts that the casual gaming

market is much larger than just women over age thirty-five, becoming a utopian demographic

that transcends gender and age boundaries. Despite the suggested definitions above, the

introduction to the IGDA whitepaper claims that casual games are played by "virtually all

demographic sectors" and that "even hard core game players take a break every now and then to

play free online poker games and online pool" (8). However, the construction of this dichotomy

relies on a system of inclusion and exclusion, with casual gamers defined against hardcore

gamers regardless of this stated overlap. Despite this utopian rhetoric concerning the all-

encompassing nature of casual games, the IGDA contributors revert to a system of hard

distinctions later on in the paper, stating bluntly that "The casual gamer is simply a different user

group than the hardcore gamer," betraying the industry's inability to resist defining these terms

through the genders and ages of specific groups of gamers (61).

Similarly, in its survey on the industry, the Casual Games Association, despite claiming

that "casual gaming is about more than a consumer demographic," includes a chart on the

distinctions between hardcore and casual gamers that correspond to the previously described

definitions. Hardcore gamers are depicted as the limited demographic of "18-35 year old males,

<15% of population" while the idealized casual market encompasses "all ages, male and female,

---

[3] The IGDA Casual Games SIG includes a third category of gamers, termed "core" gamers, a type of middle ground defined as "Gamers who typically play games with a steeper learning curve or games that require some level of deeper involvement or complex tactical challenges." I would suggest that, in practice, "core" is generally synonymous with "hardcore" and used merely as an abbreviated form of the latter term. Wider industrial and journalistic use of "core" is largely indistinguishable from the use of "hardcore." As such, in this paper, instances of this term are treated as referring to "hardcore" unless a discrepancy is apparent.

100% of population".[4] Provided charts on casual game consumers support this argument at least in terms of gender, which is nearly equivalent at 51% female and 49% male, though age is significantly skewed older than thirty-five ("Casual Games Market Report 2007 – Summary", 2007). Why then are casual games continually associated with female gamers?

The answer to this question comes in a second provided chart which shows the breakdown of *paying* casual game consumers. A comparison between non-paying and paying casual game consumers shows a significant increase in age, but more importantly, a drastic shift in gender, with paying women now claiming 74% of the market. Therefore, it is not in the casual games industry's interest to depict casual gamers as transcending gender if one gender is doing most of the purchasing, at least not with regard to market segmentation for targeting products or constructing demographics for advertisers. This suggests an internal industrial conflict between uses of "casual" and "hardcore," on the one hand attempting to promote the casual demographic as potentially unlimited to garner interest in the medium while reversing this position to acknowledge the necessities of segmentation for product development and advertising. Ultimately, despite empirical data showing a multiplicity of gamers playing casual games and the industry's acknowledgement of this range, the realization that one specific group is paying for most of this content becomes the dominant factor for economically driven companies. Casual gamers are subsequently constructed as female due to economic imperatives, with market research obliterating the nuances of audience research.

---

[4] Oddly enough, this chart includes a category labeled "Hollywood Equivalent" suggesting that hardcore gamers are fans of "Horror, Silence of [the] Lambs, Reservoir Dogs, [and] Aliens" while casual gamers are more inclined towards "Sex and the City, Friends, [and] ER." The inclusion of Sex and the City betrays the gendered categorization underlying this purportedly gender-neutral conception of casual gamers, as the television show does not line up with several of the other categories supposedly defining casual games (themes are said to be defined by "family friendly scenarios" which obviously does not correspond to the risqué content that defines the show, and the pricing and availability is generally cheap or "advertising supported" often with "free trials" which conflicts with the premium pay aspect of HBO that sets it apart from otherwise free television). Gender, therefore, seems to lie beneath the conversation, even when industrial discourse attempts to downplay it.

These gendered constructions of hardcore and casual gamers which arise out of market research are put into action in order to maximize profits either from software or advertising sales. Branding oneself a "casual games portal" provides a type of shorthand for advertisers to know exactly what audience they will most likely reach and third-party game developers to identify which types of games will most likely succeed in this venue. For example, Microsoft's vertically integrated Casual Games division provides over 120 million people worldwide with casual games each month through MSN Games and Windows LIVE Messenger, relying on accurate demographic information to maximize both advertising revenue and software sales dollars ("Microsoft Casual Games," 2008). The profile provided for potential advertisers on the MSN Games portal drives home these connections between casual games and this specific paying demographic, positioning the majority of these casual gamers as a "mature audience…in the 24-54 age group" made up of "influential women," many of whom (63.7 percent) "have purchased online in the past 30 days." These users also visit the games portal on a regular basis, with 82 percent visiting the site five times per week and 66 percent visiting everyday, providing advertisers with a constant, reliable number of eyeballs exposed to their advertisements ("Microsoft Advertising," 2008). This suggests that advertisers have little use for the rhetoric of a limitless "casual" demographic, with the industry instead relying entirely upon a notion of casual gamers that explicitly links age, gender, and purchasing power.

Similarly, the advertising profile for (now-defunct) *Electronic Gaming Monthly* magazine ties hardcore gamers directly to high volume purchases, spotlighting a pie chart showing that the amount spent on games per year is much higher for hardcore gamers than for casual gamers, with core gamers spending $5.9 billion versus the casual's paltry $2.4 billion ("Gaming Enthusiasts," 2008). The magazine's specific readership is unabashedly described as 93% male in the "17 to

26-year-old" range, explicitly conforming to these and numerous other standard hardcore characteristics simply because this consumer group spends a lot of money on games and is therefore lucrative to advertisers. As the profile states, "*EGM*'s reader buys 71% more games a year [than readers of competing magazines]… More games being bought by every reader means you will sell more games with every ad. You want to fish where the fish are biting." Moreover, these consumers don't just purchase game products themselves, but encourage others to do so as well, providing an average of 7 recommendations a month that expand the market and potentially lead to even greater sales figures ("EGM," 2008). Here, just as with the casual game portals, the gendered construction of hardcore gamers is encouraged in order to promote sales. Dominant purchasing demographics overshadow minority gaming populations, reifying a conception of hardcore and casual gamers based on age and gender regardless of real world applicability.

The result of these gendered conceptions is more than simply ignoring certain groups; it actually discourages potential consumers from entering into these gaming spaces and alienates some of those who already have. One gamer on the Big Fish Games forums, DonnyDJ, while expressing his dissatisfaction with the dominant types of games on the service, provides a clear example of this type of alienation, stating:

> I also feel that Big Fish is not reaching out to all of the demographics. The majority of casual game players are middle aged women, but there are also males like myself in my 30s who feel somewhat abandoned. The Xbox, and PS3 are too hardcore and are geared towards the male 8-21 crowd and most of these casual games on the Internet are geared toward the 40+ female crowd. What about us Guys in our late 20s and 30s? ("Bigfish should change")

As stated elsewhere in the thread, Big Fish's attempts to cater to women with female-oriented Hidden Object games led directly to Donny's refusal to buy new games even though he was already a subscriber to the service. This case suggests that the gender associations that run through the casual gaming world often work to exclude men, helping to cultivate a majority female audience that then conforms to the definition constructed by the industry. Thus, while the casual and hardcore terminology does not actually define a material audience, it may influence the audience that does exist towards conforming to these stereotypes.

A much more common occurrence, however, is the systematic exclusion of women from digital games, evident since the medium's birth. Justine Cassell's and Henry Jenkins' (2000) survey of the research on games and gender suggests that starting from childhood, women have less access to computer technology and, at least initially for the medium, this meant that men made up the vast majority of game players (10-13). This starting point meant that the industry primarily developed and marketed games for this male demographic to the exclusion of women, making the medium increasingly less permeable for women curious about games.

Ultimately though, the reasons for this exclusion are economically motivated. Sega spokesperson Lee McEnany Caraher, states this clearly: "Maybe we should spend time marketing to girls. We just haven't chosen to, because the bigger part of the market is boys. The girls are secondary. They come after." Furthermore, marketing to girls doesn't make sense because "girls are taught very early on to be a lot more discerning in our purchases [than boys]." Interestingly, McEnany Caraher does not dispel the possibility of female "hardcore" gamers, but continues to see this distinction in terms of gendered economics, claiming "The true core-girl-gamer probably does not play as much as the true core-male-player… We would take the position that we have to expose more women and girls to the market" in order to make the same

impact as male-focused advertising. Certainly the sales of "Crystal's Pony Tale," a game that Sega did market towards girls, did little to convince the company otherwise, as sixty percent of the purchases were by made by men (Glos and Goldin 197-199). Thus Sega's corporate strategy of developing and marketing games as either for men or as gender neutral certainly makes short-term economic sense for the company, but does little to encourage new female entrants into the medium.

While a variety of factors began to change women's attachment to the medium in the late-1990s, including the expansive penetration of computer technology into homes and schools across the country over time, the saturation of the male games market, and the rise of "entrepreneurial feminism" in the technology sector leading to games developed specifically for women (Cassell and Jenkins 14-16), ultimately the medium has retained much of this established perception as a male-oriented sphere. Thus, the gender connotations of "hardcore" and "casual" continue to reify this longstanding marketing decision by pulling men towards the center while continuing to leave the women on the periphery.

Negotiating Nerddom

If industrial discourse downplays actual gamer composition in favor of purchasing power in the construction of hardcore and casual gamers, the definitive meanings of these terms outside of their economic roots are much less clear. While the terms' discursive power originate and propagate through industry discourse, cultural use of both "casual" and "hardcore" display the continuous struggle over the power these terms hold. Rather than simply being imposed on subjects by the electronic entertainment ISA, social definitions of the terms come out of a system of Gramscian negotiations, "sustained only through the continual winning of consent" (Turner 67). The subjected gamers play a significant role in defining "casual" and "hardcore," adopting

these terms for their own use and revising industrially imposed definitions in the process. This undermines traditional Marxist conceptions of the base-superstructure relationship, as the multinational corporations of the base are no longer able to contain socio-cultural use of the two terms once they enter into wider discourse.

However, this does not mean that gamers are able to bend these terms in whatever way they wish; they are still constrained within the framework established by the ISA. In fact, the adoption of these terms as self-descriptors by game players and the subsequent acceptance of the capitalist logic behind them leads towards their positioning as what Gramsci terms "common sense," where subjects no longer question the validity of this ideology and accept dominant discursive forces (Turner 212). Thus, while the socio-cultural definitions of "casual" and "hardcore" are negotiated through superstructural discourse, they remain bound within a framework constituted by the base "in the last instance," as Althusser would say (Althusser 135).

Ultimately, these terms serve to delineate the power dynamics at play in the societal discourse surrounding the new gaming medium. Traditional conceptions of the audience associated with the digital game medium have been focused on either youth or "geek" stereotypes, explicitly establishing a mainstream discourse of gaming culture that is primarily pejorative in nature and withholds cultural capital. Over the past few decades, the immensely profitable industry that has sprung up around this newly popularized medium has, in an effort to reach a broader audience, sought to counter this discourse by establishing a new set of terms founded in economic discourse. The resulting terms, "hardcore" and "casual," serve to capitalize on this newly defined market by either encouraging or downplaying specific forms of identification, exhibiting the complex power dynamics at work in this discourse. The digital

games ISA supports the use of these terms as they encourage market activity and identification, promoting sales and the creation of commodified subjects.

However, power is not simply imposed by the base, constructing a helpless subject that is "subservient to his adversary – the absolute power of capitalism" (Horkheimer and Adorno 120). Rather, it comes "from below," bringing with it a resistance that is "never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault 94-95). While the games ISA plays a primary role in the interpellation of gaming subjects as economic entities, this process recognizes that the desires of these subjects play a significant role in their consumer behavior. Furthermore, as the industry expands its reach to new audience segments and, more broadly, as the position of the medium within culture changes, new terminology is a proficient means of facilitating new entrants into the market and reflecting evolving attitudes towards the medium. Hence, the industry's use of "casual" and "hardcore" serves specific socio-cultural needs and assuages anxieties in those undergoing subjugation.

The general characteristics of "hardcore" gamers largely line up with conceptions of traditional "nerds" or "geeks," but this new term reframes these previously pejorative connotations to promote identification. Nerds have long been associated with technology, be it science in general, computers, or digital games specifically, with Ron Eglash (2002) even linking the term to radio hobbyists in the 1920s (50-51). Eglash cites Sherry Turkle as positioning this "technological mastery" as a compensatory response to a presumed social and sexual inadequacy, which could apply to some individuals who readily identify with the nerd label (49). However, Lori Kendall (1999) more effectively engages with why this term has been endowed with negative connotations in her own analysis of Turkle, locating its marginalized status in

society's anxieties concerning new technologies which have been particularly exacerbated by the mainstreaming of the personal computer. Invoking Haraway's cyborg, Kendall suggests:

> The stereotype of the nerd polices the boundary dividing the human from the not-human. Like most liminal figures, the nerd threatens the very boundary he protects, through his ongoing demonstration of the close relationship possible between the human and the not-human. Despite continuing negative aspects, the figure of the nerd also entices through the promise of power arising from the control of computers. (263)

As more and more people integrate computers and associated technology into their everyday lives as well as into their very identity, most recently exemplified by social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace which encourage users to create virtual selves, traditional pejorative conceptions of "nerds" require revision.

The nerd in digital game culture has its own unique nuances, most notably by emphasizing the "incompletely adult" aspect of the stereotype which suggests both social and sexual immaturity (263). The medium's unique relationship with the toy industry plays a major role in this association, particularly once games moved from arcades into the home. The company responsible for the industry's resurgence after the collapses of the late 70s and early 80s, Nintendo, aggressively focused on young consumers in the U.S., advertising the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) to children aged 8-15 and their parents, while Atari targeted an even younger 5-12 year old demographic with its Atari 2600 console (Moran 4). This strategy continued through the American release of the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) in 1991, as Nintendo specifically sold the console as a family-friendly device and censored content to be appropriate for young audiences (Fitzgerald, "Family Fun" 8). The ubiquity of statements

like "Kids know the difference" (8) coming from industry figures indicate just who was valued as the primary consumer of digital game products.

However, challenger Sega quickly overtook Nintendo's position of industry dominance by targeting a slightly older audience of teens and young adults with edgy advertisements and, notably, advanced technology like CD-ROM units (Fitzgerald, "Nintendo's Task" 3). Nintendo responded with the "Play it Loud" campaign which mimicked Sega's attempts "to talk to that 15- or 16-year-old in a way they can totally relate to" (Elliot, 1994). By this point in the early 1990s, the terms "core" and "hardcore" had become associated with this older teen audience, with the title of Elliot's *New York Times* article referencing Nintendo's "Core Market: Teen-age Males." Similarly, Steve Harris, the founder of the magazine *Electronic Gaming Monthly* (in which Sega routinely advertised during its rise to power and to which Nintendo turned following its demotion), explicitly describes his 12 to 20 year old male digital game playing readership as "hard-core" (Fitzgerald, "Videogame Magazine" 12).

This configuration of "hardcore" gamers as teen or young adult males places this demographic as the central component responsible for industry dominance, as determined by Sega's rise to power and Nintendo's subsequent acceptance of this logic. The term itself incorporates the "nerd" connection with sophisticated technology to promote a sense of satisfaction and superiority over those outside of the discourse, attaching a type of technical prowess to the dedicated game player and providing differentiation from the less skilled child audience originally targeted by companies like Nintendo and Atari. Furthermore, it distances these gamers from the pre-sexual youth audiences by labeling them with an overtly sexualized term borrowed in part from pornography which by definition connotes male virility via penetration, a shift which goes even further towards revising the asexual "nerd" stereotype.

However, the way this shift is often expressed in terms of "hardcore" gamers is as adolescent and distinctly immature, drawing on new stereotypes derived from this young male demographic. For example, one of Sega's European advertisements for its Saturn system simply planted the phrase "Aural Sex" over the console's logo, while the company's European marketing director described a cinema advertisement as containing a lot of "sex and cars in it, which are the two major pastimes of most of the guys we spoke to." The expressed goal of this marketing strategy was "aiming at the 18-25 category…hoping that the 14-to-18-year-olds will aspire to understand that category," (Siler I3) with Sega relying on an immature sexuality formulated as teen males' idealized, yet limited, fantasy of adult sexuality. This version of "hardcore" gamer sexuality therefore revises previous connections to "nerd" and child asexuality to promote identification by a wider, more profitable audience, but only by replacing these stereotypes with a new, similarly limiting one.

Furthermore, this aspiration towards crossover between age groups suggests that the industry may not be solely focuses on targeting specific age brackets, but anyone who identifies with a particularly profitable group. In the case of the Saturn ads, Sega hoped to lure in younger men by exploiting their identifications with a more sexually mature group. This approach can also work in the reverse situation, particularly as the average age of gamers rises, with the industry drawing on gamers' past experience with the medium and previous identification with the hardcore community to push such products as retro games or games with more mature content. Thus, while a shooter like *Gears of War 2* may appear targeted towards the hardcore teen age group, it simultaneously reaches older gamers who continue to identify with this established category despite growing out of this demographic years earlier. This overlap complicates notions of "hardcore" and "casual" by blurring the suggested lines between

demographic categories and proposing a system defined by identification rather than strict demographic characteristics.

The adoption of the term "hardcore" by gamers, then, calms anxieties brought on by negative mainstream discursive forces, revising the marginalized "nerd" stereotype to provide a more approachable site of identification which, while overcompensating with excessive and immature sexual connotations, retains the defining "nerd" characteristic of technical proficiency and its male-gendered focus. This type of subject position reflects the increasing integration of technology into the lives of people who previously would have resisted identification with the "nerd" label, while simultaneously legitimating the lifestyle and gaming habits adopted by those who would have previously been known as "nerds." Thus, as societal anxieties about technology change, so too do the markets for game products and the terminology necessary to reach them.

For the digital games ISA, this attempt to develop more appealing subject positions for gaming audiences, while acknowledging the power held by gamers, is primarily economically motivated. The construction of the "hardcore" category naturalizes heavy purchasing of game products by promoting technical expertise reliant upon the newest hardware and software. "Hardcore" gamers are encouraged to purchase the more expensive consoles (today, the PlayStation 3 and the Xbox 360) or high-end PCs, while the industry makes sure "casual" games generally run on low-end PCs, mobile devices like cell phones, or the less expensive (and less graphically sophisticated) Nintendo Wii console[5]. The emphasis on technical mastery also translates to ancillary products such as strategy guides (which basically do not exist for "casual"

---

[5] As of September 2008, Microsoft's Xbox 360 actually became the cheapest of the home consoles with its $199 Xbox 360 Arcade edition, which is a full $50 less than the Nintendo Wii. While this may seem to complicate issues of "hardcore" vs. "casual" platforms, Microsoft advertised this price cut as an attempt to reach a more family-oriented audience and, more telling, this version of the console is stripped of nearly all of the technological bells and whistles found on their other, more expensive versions of the Xbox 360.

games) along with constant visits to industry websites for game information which provide a steady stream of advertising revenue. Simply put, the more invested gamers are in the "hardcore" label, the more products they will buy in the endless march towards a fantasized complete technological prowess. Therefore, while the industrial construction of subjects as "hardcore" gamers acknowledges gamers' desires for increased status in a changing technological landscape, the hegemonic forces at work do so in a way that encourages this profitable market segment to buy as many of their products as possible.

Expanding the Market

The industry's adoption of the term "hardcore" can be seen largely as a means of establishing a new subject position which acknowledged the changing roles of technology and digital games in society with the express purpose of promoting audience identification with this new term. In contrast, the term "casual," while functioning in a similar way to calm technological anxieties, generally provokes the opposite audience response, that of explicitly resisting identification.

As digital games become more and more ubiquitous in the media landscape, an increasing number of people who had previously not been exposed to games, or had been unwilling to try them out, have come into contact with the medium in some form. The rapid proliferation of the personal computer into homes around the world, while not necessarily adopted specifically for the purpose of game playing, has conveniently brought the necessary hardware for gaming directly into the hands of the general public (though this obviously introduces questions of class and access, as the personal computer still remains a luxury item for many people both in this country and around the world due to the digital divide). Microsoft's inclusion of Solitaire and other similar games along with its Windows operating systems since

the early 1990s even directly distributed "casual" games to unsuspecting consumers still adjusting to this new device.

As increasing numbers of people found themselves surrounded by digital games, the growing games industry took notice of society's increasing acceptance of the medium. A recent survey by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) revealed that 65 percent of American households play digital games, leading ESA President Michael Gallagher to boldly proclaim that the medium has become "a mainstream entertainment form, which captures the imagination of every segment of our society" ("ESA Talks," 2008). The recognition of this expansion of the market beyond the hardcore niche is nothing new, as companies like Nintendo have been marketing to multiple audiences since their entrance into the medium, but this rapid penetration of digital gaming hardware into the mass market has exponentially increased the potential profitability of this previously marginalized segment of the population.

As such, the games industry has begun directly targeting new gamer demographics that previously would have been overlooked. The most visible success of this strategy is that of the Nintendo Wii, which by directly appealing to a broader, more mainstream audience has heftily retaken industry dominance from the leaders of the previous console generation, Sony. Some figures show Nintendo leading the pack as of November 2008 with a U.S. install base of 13.4 million units compared to the Xbox 360's 11.6 million (even with a year's headstart) and Sony's mere 5.7 million (Brightman, 2008). One advertisement for the system exemplifies this address by showing an entire family, including the grandfather, enjoying the console ("Wii Would Like"). In a move that would have been unthinkable a decade ago, Nintendo even promoted the system at the American Association of Retired People's Life @ 50+ Expo, clearly moving towards an audience outside of any previous definition of the "hardcore" (Crecente, 2008).

Other game companies are taking note, with Microsoft's Shane Kim (paraphrased in an interview) saying that "he loved Nintendo because it's broadening the audience and is showing Microsoft what it needs to accomplish" (Takahashi, 2008). Microsoft's launch of the Xbox 360 Arcade Console, a stripped down version of the system, was accompanied by advertisements with the slogan "Play the games everyone wants to play" and showed male-female pairs playing the system in a mock-living room set up in the street surrounded by ordinary onlookers. These ads are clearly an attempt to break out of the hardcore stereotypes and yet, I would argue, do not go nearly as far as Nintendo's advertisements (which frequently show grandparents, parents, and extremely young children playing the Wii) in order to avoid too deeply compromising their established fanbase. [6]

Regardless of the actual composition of this mass market demographic, it is always defined in opposition to the "hardcore" niche. As industry figures suggest, the "hardcore" has always been particularly important to game developers and publishers because of its composition of "early adopters" who influence further purchases by wider audiences down the line (Kuo, 2006). However, as mainstream society continues to latch onto digital games and become an increasingly profitable market in itself, the industry has shifted its focus towards the broader market. The term adopted by the industry in the past few years to describe this new mass audience is "casual," stamping this term onto online game portals, industry reports, and entire corporate divisions.

To much of the industry, this recently discovered, previously untapped market is imbued with utopian dreams of a limitless market spanning all possible categories to interpellate every person as a gamer. As mentioned earlier, industry reports portray the "casual" market in this

---

[6] Two of Microsoft's advertisements, "Fall Games" and "Parking Lot" can be found on GameTrailers.com as of this writing, along with several of the "Wii Would Like to Play" television advertisements, including "Family Fun".

way, with one games investment banker going so far as to place blockbuster "casual" titles *Maple Story* and *Habbo Hotel* at the center of what he called the "holy grail" for investors (Alexander, 2007). It's no surprise that the industry sees reaching this enormous potential audience as the ultimate goal given the huge success Nintendo has had with the Wii in comparison to the seemingly constrained bounds of the "hardcore" audience. However, "casual" gamers occupy a contradictory position, as they are simultaneously a "holy grail" representing the boundless expansion of the games market beyond the "hardcore" as well as an embarrassing betrayal that signals "selling out" and abandoning the more complex gameplay associated with the "hardcore" in favor of more "dumbed down" fare marketed to the stereotyped "casual" gamers.

As used by members of the gaming community who identify as "hardcore," the term "casual" closely corresponds to Sarah Thornton's (1996) observations of the term "mainstream" as used within club culture. Thornton develops the concept of "subcultural capital," drawing from Pierre Bourdieu to suggest that subcultural activity is governed by very similar structures as broader culture, with knowledge and social savvy ("hipness" for Thornton) working within an economic framework just like material capital, which may or may not translate into future material gain ("Club Cultures" 10-12). With regard to the roles of people within these systems, "subcultural capital is the linchpin of an alternative hierarchy" in which most members of the subculture "distinguish themselves against the mainstream," (105) positioning those who have the most accumulated subcultural capital in a position of superiority in relation to newcomers. In terms of games, those traditionally labeled as "hardcore" gamers would thus have a wealth of accumulated capital within the subculture as opposed to the literally uninvested "casual"

newcomers, providing the general structure of the hierarchical system at work within the digital game space.

Thus, despite Nintendo's wild success with the Wii due to its ability to appeal to the mass market, it is largely disparaged by the "hardcore" community and the enthusiast press (see commentary on sites like Joystiq and 1Up.com) who see Nintendo as appealing to the lowest common denominator of the pejorative "mainstream" rather than truly innovating (though what constitutes innovation is debatable, as Nintendo has arguably redefined the user input device for games). While this has not affected sales of the Wii one bit due to the continued mainstream frenzy over the system, Nintendo is still very concerned about the "hardcore," likely due in large part to the historical economic significance of these early adopters. This issue came to a head at the 2008 Electronic Entertainment Expo, at which Nintendo only showed what were viewed as "casual" games, resulting in "hardcore" backlash. Gaming website 1Up.com's Live Blog of the event, for example, elicited around one hundred user comments within twenty-four hours of the event, many from disgruntled gamers crying foul over Nintendo's "casual" focus. User "KEL_OMEGA" summed up a common reaction, stating, "Where are the games for the hardcore videogame players like myself? The whole line up was this casual gaming bullshit" (Kollar 2008). Even though Nintendo could easily have defended this strategy by emphasizing all the new people they have brought to the world of digital games, the company's CEO, Satoru Iwata, issued a formal apology to the specifically mentioned "core" audience, distancing the company from this casual market (Morris, "A Wii Bit"). As this incident indicates, the industry's relationship with the casual market is one of contradiction, playing a balancing act between reaching as many new potential gamers as possible without offending the loyal hardcore.

As such, the industry's adoption of the term "casual" to identify this new expanding market segment allows for a disavowal of any sort of serious commitment. The word "casual" itself implies this lack of dedication, giving the industry only a tacit link with the potentially offensive market while retaining the "hardcore" at the center of the industry's attention. This labeling works to the industry's advantage, allowing it to avoid directly alienating the hardcore, but with the side effect of in turn marginalizing this new audience instead of cultivating a close relationship.

However, this marginalization is exactly what the mainstream requires. While hardcore gamers were eager to distance themselves from earlier gamer stereotypes linked to "nerds" through new terminology, so too are many new arrivals to gaming culture resistant to identification with this previously marginalized subject position. Former Pogo producer and designer David Rohrl even defines casual gamers as "players who would never list 'playing games' as one of their primary interests" (Tinney, 2005). The medium itself has so long been associated with this core audience that new gaming audiences require a safe distance from which to approach digital games, which the industry provides with this distinctly non-committal term. By promoting this term, the industry encourages curious soon-to-be-gamers to engage with the medium without having to identify with an established subject position. Thus, while "hardcore" gamers readily identify with their label, few who "only play Bejeweled" feel any need to consider themselves gamers at all because their activities are constructed as "casual" play, merely brushing up against the medium while retaining a position of exteriority.

The term "casual" therefore plays a parallel role for both the industry and this newly emerging gaming audience by disavowing that any relationship exists whatsoever. The industry benefits by retaining its credibility with the established early adopters who continue to make up a

large portion of the overall market while alleviating the anxieties held by curious potential

consumers. Similarly, the term allows wary members of society at large to enter into the gaming

economy through a comfortable subject position without fear of negative associations. While the

term then clearly serves the interests of the ISA, as subjects constructed as "casual" would feel

more comfortable increasing spending on game products, power does not rest solely with the

corporations. Rather, it is dispersed among contradictory elements whose desires lie in

competing realms and only interact in an interconnected fashion through discourse.

Conclusion

The association of discursive terminology with the desires of both subject and industry as

outlined above corresponds to Ken McAllister's (2004) conception of games as "mass culture," a

type of "voluntary experience" that "shapes habitual audiences, around common needs or

interests, and it is made for profit" (Ohmann qtd. in McAllister 11). As such, the use of "casual"

and "hardcore" would figure directly as the "shaping" mechanisms to encourage gaming subjects

to return to industrial products and stimulate profits. However, as McAllister elaborates, this

conception of games envisions audiences as the "cultural dupes" postulated by Adorno and

Horkheimer, taking power away from audience members and placing it in the hands of the

industry. As described earlier though, these terms actually fulfill some audience desires,

specifically in creating a revised, somewhat more empowered nerd stereotype and developing a

modest access point for those who had previously been mostly excluded from the medium. In

this way, the emergence of the terms "casual" and "hardcore" do not simply appear out of thin

air as a means to garner new audiences, but as a reciprocal reaction by both industry and society

to major cultural shifts (the changing makeup of gaming audiences and the increasing

penetration of the medium into mainstream consciousness) which demand new terminology.

The rise of the terms "casual" and "hardcore" therefore depend not only on industrial imperatives, but on the complex interplay of discursive forces surrounding the medium. While economic forces may have facilitated the use of these terms, which function within a hegemonic framework and ultimately reinscribe an ideology of consumption, they would not have been appropriated by the constructed subjects without a desire for the development of a new discourse on games that reflects the medium's changing societal status. For the gaming audience, these new terms provide welcome adjustments to previous stereotypes and opportunities for new sites of identification (or dis-identification) that, while capitulating to the economic desires of the industry and merely replacing old stereotypes with new ones, broadly legitimate two rapidly evolving types of relationships between people and digital games. However, "hardcore" and "casual" ultimately erect new barriers between audience segments by encouraging industrial strategies that construct exclusionary audiences, deepening the perceived differences between demographics while disavowing those differences at work within each individual category.

Chapter 3

Discursive Design – "Casual" and "Hardcore" as Generic Descriptors

While the terms "casual" and "hardcore" have a variety of interconnected uses in gaming discourse, both audiences and industrial figures frequently apply them to games themselves. This process carefully delineates "casual" games from "hardcore" games, with each segment including a range of games that fit into more specific game genres and categories. As such, these two terms serve as generic descriptors, functioning as supergenres to organize and segregate the individual subgenres associated with each term. However, definitions of what counts as a "casual" game versus what is a "hardcore" game are ambiguous at best. Conceptions of these terms as generic labels or as applied to games themselves often resort to the two other major elements of the terms: audience and gameplay. Thus, isolating what makes a "casual" game casual in terms of genre, while obviously intertwined with these other methods of definition, becomes as ambiguous as the terms themselves. Despite this complexity, an examination of the generic qualities of both "casual" and "hardcore" emphasizes the intersections between audience, gameplay, and game content while explicitly linking text to culture to emphasize the social meaning-making inherent in all generic definitions. Such an approach not only clarifies several oft-cited distinctions between the two types of games, but provides a critical view onto the many evident overlaps between such supposedly distinct genres.

Much of the discussion on "casual" and "hardcore" games revolves around game design, attempting to identify the distinguishing features of each type of "text" from the other (see Portnow, 2009, Partridge, 2007). This manner of textual analysis, while in some specific ways illuminating, often obscures other elements which may impact overall design and related formal elements, ultimately working to naturalize these stylistic differences. Furthermore, this is

complicated by the distinction between game mechanics and game "flavor," or between specific design choices that affect how a game works and those that impact its aesthetic design. With this in mind, I do consider the formal elements of these texts on their own merits to determine where potential sites of difference may lie, but rather than stop at this point, I then move further and attempt to uncover why these differences exist in the fashion they do. A solitary focus on textual differences ignores the discursive role these genre identifiers play for both industry and audience. What could these terms signify to audiences and industrial forces, in what ways are they used by each group, and what do they expose about the historical context within which their use has dramatically risen? Rather than take the distinction of "casual" versus "hardcore" games at face value, it is much more productive to investigate what these terms represent when observed in a broader discursive context.

Satisfying Styles – "Casual" and "Hardcore" Game Design

Most usage of the terms "casual" and "hardcore" as genre identifiers occur within the framework of what I am calling here traditional genre theory. This type of approach is largely text centered, making sure to take the industry and audience into consideration to some degree, but primarily focused on the creation and propagation of texts. The industry creates texts and audiences consume them, but the impact of both is largely reduced to mechanisms for future textual production rather than focusing on what genre means to these diverse groups. Genre is thus often turned to specifically for this reason, that it incorporates industrial and audience-based elements in a flexible system that can be exploited in a variety of ways to make texts line up next to each other neatly.

Film scholar Rick Altman outlines a number of primary ways in which genre is understood as it has been adapted to that medium from literature, and which has since been

appropriated once again in digital games. Altman's first major suggestion is that genres

traditionally are seen to serve four major functions: as an industrial "blueprint," a formal

"structure," a "label" necessary for decision-making, and a "contract" governing audience

expectations. This taxonomy incorporates a wide range of factors that reach far beyond just the

text (which Altman considers an improvement over literary genre theory). However, the author

suggests that this makes genre criticism especially dangerous, as it can quickly become a

"critical panacea" within which all of these elements are too often assumed to align without

complication, resulting in a naturalizing effect (14-15).

　　　　This type of approach defines much of the usage of "casual" and "hardcore" in regards to

games themselves, with Allen Partridge's Creating Casual Games For Profit and Fun (2007)

defining "casual" games in much this way. Partridge, an academic as well as game developer,

hits all four of Altman's four categories, with a focus on the industrial "blueprint" and formal

"structure" conceptions of the term by means of providing actual computer code to aid in game

design and production. His primary definition of the genre is that these games are, to use an oft-

cited phrase, "easy to learn, tough to master," offering an industrial strategy focused on

providing games using "a model of constant enticement and reward with an increasingly

complicated puzzle or problem" that is "based on simple, universally understandable

conventions" (6). This book very literally provides a blueprint for constructing a casual game in

the form of code samples which, if used, would actually construct what the author believes is an

example of a prototypical "casual" game. Furthermore, Partridge provides strategies for creating

a casual game based on a structural conception of genre, from identifying workflow and

programming methods to suggesting what type of stylistic choices are appropriate (assumed here

to have "broad appeal and inoffensive content") (7).

The other two major components of Altman's framework, genre used as a "label" and a "contract," show up as well in a discussion of what audiences presumably want from a casual game and where/how they procure these games. However, the focus still is on developing a "blueprint" for use by other developers. Understanding common distribution methods is seen as important in that emphasizes the manner in which audiences purchase games, what Partridge labels as "impulse purchases" (8) primarily from web-based game portals. Developers must address this aspect of game distribution by designing a game that will "hook" the audience within the first five minutes of play, thus funneling a feature of distribution into a concise game-design decision (20-21). Similarly, understanding the audience is framed in terms of "anticipating frustration" since casual game players are "known to be easily put off" and then building a response to this into the game by providing such things as "instant gratification" and "constant, consistent, and clear feedback" (25-30). Thus, while contextual factors are significant to his definition of the casual game genre, Partridge ultimately condenses everything down to design, suggesting that in the end, the product itself is what defines the genre categories.

Simplicity and Convention

So what then are the defining design features that distinguish "casual" games from "hardcore" games? The following chart outlines some of the commonly suggested formal distinctions between casual and hardcore game design (see table 1).

Certainly, the "easy to learn, tough to master" mantra is one of the most commonly invoked. Among other places, the Casual Games Association and the IGDA both use the phrase "easy to learn" in their definitions of the genre ("Casual Games Market Report 2007 - Summary", Robbins and Wallace 9). The IGDA takes this a step further, suggesting that the rules in casual games must be "transparent" so that "players' actions…elicit clear and

Table 1. Perceived design distinctions between casual and hardcore games.

Perceived Design Distinctions	
Casual	**Hardcore**
Simplicity	Complexity
Easy to learn, tough to master	Tough to learn, tough to master
Few rules	Many rules
Required skills are universal	Requires specific skills
Moderate innovation / reliance on conventions	Significant innovation
Family friendly, non-violent	Non-family friendly, violent
Instant gratification	Delayed gratification (or frustration)
Clear feedback	Complex feedback
Positive reinforcement	Negative reinforcement

understandable responses," allowing users to easily grasp the impact their actions are having on the game (Robbins and Wallace 44). A similar phrase is "pick up and play," which incorporates ease of learning into a discursive naturalization, suggesting that anybody can literally pick up a controller and immediately know what to do. Greg Canessa, former VP of Videogame Platforms at casual game company PopCap Games and General Manager of Microsoft's Xbox Live Arcade digital distribution service, uses this phrase in his description of Popcap's games, stating: "By definition, our games are more casual, pick-up-and-play experiences" (Denning, 2009).

This focus on ease of entrance into a game impacts game design in a number of significant ways. First, it means a simplification or streamlining of the rules of the game, making it immediately transparent for the user what he/she is supposed to be doing by tapping

into "universally understandable conventions" (Partridge 6). While this serves to immediately indicate to users whether or not they have the skillset necessary to play a particular game, it is also an economic necessity when combined with what Partridge calls the "Five-Minute Window," that brief period of time a game has to "hook" a player and convince them to purchase the full version (20-21). Thus design is predicated upon distribution and marketing strategies, reciprocally reifying formal structures in order to disavow economic imperatives.

This need for immediate comprehension leads many casual games to iterate on previous designs, meaning that they thrive on "moderate innovation" and are often "near clones of an existing game with new graphics… [so] that innovation happens in small incremental steps" (Juul, "Swap Adjacent"). Allen Partridge's suggestion for developers is to "stick to the genre" so that a game's conventions are easily identifiable by distributors, advertisers, and consumers, increasing general marketability. Furthermore, he states that a "breakthrough idea in gameplay is as big a curse as it is a blessing" because innovative game mechanics often make it much more difficult to find distribution, while merely adjusting the visual design or flavor of an existing game mechanic can be much more effective (255-256). Thus, the maintenance of the casual game status quo is here attributed in large part to industrial labeling concerns, encouraging developers to retread tested ground rather than risk creating a game that cannot be marketed, which is certainly not inherent to the formal aspects of a game's design.

However, while casual games are supposedly defined by this reliance on recognizable conventions, most hardcore game genres rely on conventions just as much as any casual game. For example, the recently released *Street Fighter 4* differs only in a limited sense from *Street Fighter 2* which was released in 1991. The third main title in the series, *Street Fighter 3,* did attempt to make some more dramatic changes to fighting conventions, but these were largely

dismissed by fans and the fourth game reverted back to the previous style. A remake of a version of the second game, lengthily entitled *Super Street Fighter 2 Turbo HD Remix*, proves the success of comfortable conventions in that it changed very little from the source material in terms of mechanics, merely updating the aesthetics, yet went on to record-breaking sales numbers for a digitally distributed title, surpassing 250,000 units sold in under a month, with the developers attributing this in large part to "the hard core Street Fighter community" (Diamonon 2008). Even other series that have taken a more progressive approach to technology, such as 3-D fighting franchise *SoulCalibur*, still retain most of the traditional fighting mechanics established by 2-D fighters nearly two decades ago, meaning someone familiar with *Street Fighter 2* would likely have very little problem understanding how to play *SoulCalibur*.

This reliance on conventions applies to far more than simply fighting games, of course. In many ways, the basics of the first-person shooter established back with games like *Wolfenstein 3-D* and *Doom* are still recognizable in modern titles like the *Call of Duty* franchise. Similarly, someone who had played the original *Age of Empires* back in 1997 would have no problem recognizing the gameplay mechanics at work in recent titles like *Command and Conquer: Red Alert 3*. Certainly innovation occurs all the time and new sub-genres with their own traditions spring up to break old rules and write new ones, but for a large number of the most popular hardcore genres, the rules have remained fairly untouched for years. Thus, if both casual and hardcore games rely heavily on convention, this cannot possibly be a defining feature of either genre category.

Complexity and Depth

Unlike the open promotion of convention with regard to casual games, in terms of hardcore games the reliance on longstanding genre traditions is generally downplayed in favor of

the trope of "complexity," which is used, for example, in the IGDA white paper's definition of hardcore games (Robbins and Wallace 6). For fans of hardcore games, complexity is the gateway to strategic gameplay, allowing a multiplicity of options and avenues of investigation to encourage carefully planned strategies. One of the most iconic visualizations of hardcore game complexity is the "tech tree" (see fig. 2) that accompanies nearly every real-time strategy game and has begun cropping up in other genres (like the action/shooter *Too Human* or the rhythm-action *Patapon 2*).

Figure 2. Screenshot from *Sins of a Solar Empire*, Ironclad Games, 2008, showing the real-time strategy game's Civilian tech trees. Boxes in color represent available upgrades, units, and powers that have been researched, while those grayed out still require researching (not pictured but indicated on the left is the existence of a similar Military tech tree system).

Tech trees link together all of the upgrades available within the game and the path a player needs to take in order to reach a specific upgrade, allowing dedicated users to plot their overall game strategy in visual form. Meant to be a helpful guide to navigating the complexity built into many hardcore games, even the tech tree is only one aspect of a real-time strategy game, with the player simultaneously concentrating on maneuvering troops, gathering and budgeting resources, and a variety of other tasks. This level of complexity in hardcore games provides a wide range of activities for a single user to focus his/her attention on, allowing for advanced strategies but also necessitating unwavering attention to details and a sense of the overall picture, which is certainly daunting for many gamers.

While complexity may be a touchstone of hardcore games, casual game developers generally reject this notion in favor of a simplistic approach. John Vechey, co-founder of PopCap Games, feels that "most of the games on the Xbox and PC aimed at hardcore gaming add complexity but they don't actually have depth," introducing of the concept of depth to complicate notions of what constitutes an interesting and strategic game mechanic. PopCap's games tend to use very few mechanics, but aim to allow users to experiment with them in a variety of situations unobstructed by an abundance of options in order to focus on engaging with a specific mechanic to its fullest degree. Vechey's conception of depth then suggests that complexity often actually does exactly the opposite of its intended effect (to add options) by overwhelming or confusing gamers to the extent that they either cannot understand complicated strategies or simply settle into the most familiar ones (Hicks).

Scott Lanz, lead designer for Tiny Hero Game Studios, echoes Vechey on complexity and depth, stating:

The complexity of hard-core games is often perceived as a blessing -- after all, a game with that much content and complexity offers seemingly endless opportunity for exploring the game. However, such complexity also comes with costs: if a game is too big for a player to know all of the rules and elements in play, how can a player make properly educated decisions? And if the game rewards players that have simply played (or studied) the game more than other players, then the game starts being less about skill and dynamic problem solving, and more about memorization and study. I'm a big believer in the idea that game should reward the *best* player, not just the player with the most experience playing it. (Lantz)

For Lanz, complexity fundamentally alters the way people play games, changing the experience from one of experimentation and calculated decision-making into an exercise in dedication which verges on becoming work. In this view, complexity does little to open up new modes of gameplay, instead reducing game decisions to rote memorization.

Russell Carroll of casual games company Reflexive Entertainment objects to complexity for different reasons, explicitly distancing his company's products from any notion of complexity on economic grounds by stating: "You can see, at least within the downloadable sector, a strong correlation between less complexity and higher sales." As evidence, he cites the recent popularity of the Hidden Object Game subgenre, calling it "perhaps the least complex type of game play ever found in a game. At the base level, all you have to do is see an object and click on it. There is no real interaction at all" (Kumar 2). For Carroll, as for many other casual game developers, the rejection of complexity has less to do with players' in-game decision making ability, and more to do with the decisions they make in the online marketplace.

Regardless, all of these conceptions of complexity rely on more than just issues of mechanics, as a game with streamlined aesthetic flavor could potentially make navigating a hardcore game's complexity unobtrusive and thus avoid the pitfalls described by these casual game developers. Furthermore, each of these definitions implicitly invokes conceptions of gameplay styles and audiences, making assumptions about who will be playing (or buying) a specific title and how much time and energy he/she is willing to invest in order to understand a mechanic. Thus, these distinctions, while potentially useful when viewed in combination with other factors, do not stand up on their own.

Positive and Negative Feedback

Casual games are also typically portrayed as containing an overabundance of encouragement or positive feedback in order to keep players motivated and avoid frustration. Allen Partridge suggests that casual games should "provide constant, consistent, and clear feedback" to improve the "players' sense of satisfaction when the feedback confirms their belief that they are incrementally solving the puzzle." Alternatively, this can be used to indicate that their "strategy for solving a puzzle or overcoming an obstacle is failing," citing on-screen indicators like arrows and pop-ups to convey this information and help players easily identify their problems so that they can correct them before the experience becomes unpleasant (30-31). Furthermore, "casual games often increase the impact and value of the rewards over the whole game experience," contributing to this sense of accomplishment while keeping players from getting bored (32). This should contribute to a sense of "instant gratification" that provides "psychological pleasure" making it "fun and satisfying to win a game" (29-30).

A study on the mood-lifting effects of casual games, for example, singles out PopCap's *Peggle* as an especially fulfilling game, noting that of the games tested, "Peggle had the greatest

effect on overall mood, given the game's over-the-top celebration of players' success each time they complete a level" ("PopCap Games Research"). In terms of the game's design, this sense of "celebration" is built into the game in a number of ways that correspond to Partridge's design scheme. First, the game awards points for doing nearly anything and steadily increases point values as the player progresses, providing reinforcement on a mechanical level. Furthermore, every time a peg is hit scoring points, a pleasing audio cue occurs with each successive hit moving up the musical scale, resulting in a constant sense of elevation and progression through aesthetic design. There are also a large number of special cases which award bonus points, which are indicated by pop-ups showing the extra points and, occasionally, the appearance of one of the game's characters in the lower corner of the screen with a speech bubble containing a word like "Excellent" accompanied by an approving guitar riff. This auditory aesthetic is combined with visual cues when a player finishes a level, which rewards the player by shooting off fireworks, splashing a rainbow across the screen emblazoned with the words "Extreme Fever," and playing Ode to Joy to provide maximum exaltation. Thus, the steady crescendo of encouragement throughout each level makes a player feel that he/she is constantly accomplishing the goal, with the over-the-top climax at the end confirming the completion of this task. In this way, a game like *Peggle* exemplifies the coordination between mechanics and flavor typical of casual games, with constant gameplay rewards aligning with continual visual and auditory encouragement.

In contrast, hardcore games are very often portrayed as thriving on negative feedback, generally in terms of game-ending "failure" (i.e. the "Game Over" screen) or player death. A game like *Counter-Strike* is a prime example of this, as it takes the traditions of the first-person shooter online deathmatch mode and makes it even more punishing by giving each player only

one life per round instead of the typically instant return to action. This means that unlike

ordinary deathmatch, once the player dies it can be several minutes before returning to action,

spent passively watching other players duke it out until one team wins the round. This makes for

a much more high-stress gaming environment, placing more value on staying alive (in the form

of continued playtime) by providing a substantial negative feedback system. This can certainly

lead to exactly the type of frustration which casual game designers work so hard to avoid.

Despite the high frequency of negative feedback systems in this vein, most hardcore

games are developed with the exact same goals in mind as casual games: to provide constant

guidance/feedback, steadily increase rewards, and culminate in a satisfying experience. Though

the mechanics in *Counter-Strike* seem harsh, there are just as many examples of developers

implementing mechanics that make sure gamers are oriented and reassured that they are doing

the right thing. Many hardcore games include specific mechanics designed to simplify

navigating the world, a necessity given the large, complex worlds in which many hardcore games

take place. A game like EA's *Mirror's Edge* acknowledges this by using "runner vision" to

highlight the direction a player should be running and reassurance that he/she is going the right

way, with the red highlights pleasingly contrasting with the rest of the game's overexposed

aesthetic, but primarily serving as "helpful hints and tips to the user as they play the game"

(Remo 2). Here, as with *Peggle*, mechanics and flavor work in tandem, orienting the gamer

while defining the game's look. Similarly, both *Dead Space* and *Prince of Persia (2008)* include

in-game mechanics that show the player where to go at the press of a button and are integrated

into the game world and its visual aesthetic. Conventions like the "mini-map" have been

standards in real-time strategy and some first-person shooters for years, generally displayed as a

small overlay that helps users keep track of complex battlefields without seeming overwhelmed

or getting in the way. Blizzard's Mark Kern, speaking about *World of Warcraft*, puts it simply: "the things we do for casual gamers are also of benefit to the hardcore. Nobody wants to have an interface that is cryptic or gets in your way as you play the game" (Aihoshi 1).

Furthermore, developers reward players of hardcore games for small accomplishments throughout the experience just like in casual games. When playing *Resistance 2* online, for example, players are awarded points simply for hitting enemies, whereas in other games they may not be rewarded unless they killed them. This allows users to "immediately get positive feedback" (Buffa 2008) even without accomplishing a major goal, a strategy also used in games like *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* and *Team Fortress 2* which both award assist points. Furthermore, both of these games use the methods outlined above with regard to *Peggle* in order to convey accomplishment to players. *Call of Duty 4* incessantly relies upon pop-ups, displaying a large +10 in the middle of the screen whenever a player kills an enemy. *Team Fortress 2* is a little more tongue-in-cheek in fitting with the game's aesthetic, providing a pop-up upon death that consoles the player, with the words "On the bright side…" followed by a positive statistic, such as "You tied your record for kills as a Soldier this round," that functions similarly to pop-ups in casual games.

Hardcore games also use visual and audio cues to indicate accomplishment via flavor in a similar way to casual games, with shooters like *Call of Duty 4* providing a satisfying "thud" noise to differentiate a shot that hits an enemy from one that misses, yet without breaking the game's aesthetic design. While a sudden burst of "Ode to Joy" might take a user out of the experience of an intense battle in *Call of Duty 4*, thus requiring a more subdued approach, the audio cues in *Unreal Tournament* rival the absurdity of *Peggle*. Successive kills provide increasingly congratulatory soundbytes ranging from "Ultrakill" to "M-M-M-M-M-

MONSTERKILL" along with the corresponding text emblazoned across the screen. Here, the flavor is on par with *Peggle,* but the difference comes in the mechanics, which still hold the potential to be frustrating if instead of getting "Ultrakills" a player is being repeatedly "Ultrakilled."

Yet another way hardcore games keep players motivated is by providing in-game rewards, such as the "loot" typical of role-playing games, in the form of new weapons, armor, or items that become increasingly powerful as the game progresses. Loot is obtained primarily by defeating enemies throughout the game, with bosses providing a more substantial amount than minor foes, but all serving as a means of constant reward. Nearly every first-person shooter follows this system of escalating rewards, doling out bigger and better weapons every few levels so that a player feels like he/she is making progress while alleviating any anxiety about the escalating difficulty he/she encounters when getting close to the end of the game. Just like with the pathfinding mechanics described earlier, this type of system fits into the game's aesthetic design but in many ways is an acknowledgement by the games' designers of the realities of complexity in hardcore games. As in casual games, the goal is still to encourage the player to continue playing the game without becoming overly frustrated, whether accomplished through mechanics or flavor.

Furthermore, acquired loot or weapons are often displayed visually, with a particularly shiny piece of armor apparent on the character's body after a player finds and equips it, reinforcing the sense of accomplishment of a small battle by making its rewards something that the player visually carries with them for the remainder of the game. In Massively-Multiplayer-Online-Role-Playing-Games (MMORPGs), these visual cues also establish a sense of status that reaches beyond one's individual self-esteem and can became a marker for other players to see.

For example, having a particularly impressive sword not only shows other players that you have fought tough enemies and emerged victorious, but can influence whether or not other characters choose to attack or retreat. Thus, this visual representation both provides a continual sense of progression and may actually impact gameplay and affect community interactions.

This social aspect of accomplishment is something which hardcore games have embraced to a much greater extent than casual games. Nearly all the major platforms on which hardcore games are played, including the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and Valve's Steam PC distribution system, have taken continual positive reinforcement to the next level by providing "Achievements" or "Trophies" triggered by specific in-game actions. For example, *Gears of War 2* provides achievements at the end of each individual level, doling out rewards at a regular pace to motivate the player as he/she progresses through the game, as well as containing achievements for a variety of other more specific tasks like killing 30 enemies with the mortar weapon. These achievements (and trophies in the PS3's case) are displayed on the player's public profile for all fellow friends and competitors to see. Thus, while it may be instantly satisfying to hear "Ode to Joy" at the end of a round of *Peggle*, that feeling is much more fleeting than the sense of accomplishment gained by having a permanent record of one's achievements on display for the rest of the world. Ultimately, hardcore games seem to have a greater potential for frustration but also for satisfaction in that the rewards may take longer to achieve, but also stay around longer and function on multiple levels.

In both casual and hardcore games, however, the actual gaming accomplishment may not match the level of satisfaction a player feels he/she deserves at the end of a game. In *Peggle*, the game inflates accomplishment, launching an over-the-top extravaganza when a player fulfills a fairly simple task of hitting all of the orange pegs onscreen. Conversely, in *Counter-Strike* a

player may use strategic teamwork, careful weapon selection, instinctual reflexes, and extensive knowledge of the game's maps and other conventions only to be rewarded with the stock monotone "Terrorists Win" soundbyte, not even directly acknowledging the individual in this underwhelming "congratulations." In both cases, flavor and mechanics don't seem to match up in the end.

For PopCap and other casual game developers, this is exactly the point. Users should feel good about every single action they make, with these constant rewards really the essence of the game rather than any sort of end goal. For a game like *Counter-Strike,* on the other hand, which strives more towards realism, this type of ecstatic jubilation would be completely out of place with regard to its flavor, and thus requires a displacement of accomplishment into different forms. The game provides scoreboards accessible to all players at the press of a button, which list a player's number of kills and deaths, as well as the number of wins for each team. These stats are frequently automatically compiled onto community websites, allowing players to extend the life of their accomplishments beyond a single round, projecting it into the game's community to give a player accumulated status amongst his/her peers. For players invested in the community, this can be a much more material, though less immediate, sense of accomplishment that works very similarly to the achievements/trophies system described above.

Gratification may not need to be delayed to this degree though, with even *Counter-Strike* working short-term motivation into its mechanics. In terms of immediate gratification, game designer Robert Hale suggests that "failure" and "punishment" are not the same thing, offering instead the idea that failure can be a useful tool contributing towards learning. He argues that games encourage users to develop "mental models" dependent on both successes and failures in order to determine the best way to approach a situation. Offering the example of racing games,

Hale notes that a player will drive faster and faster until he/she loses control (a "failure"), testing the limits in this way before adjusting his/her mental model to maximize success. Furthermore, he contends that "failure or a sudden change in circumstance is often a trigger for improvisation. When your plan fails you have to call on that mental model of the game again and respond… A perfectly executed plan has it's[sic] own rewards but success in the face of failure can be even more rewarding." Thus, the goal for hardcore games is not to eliminate failure, but to "turn dying from something that was relatively punishing into something that was beneficial" (Hale 2009).

Game developer Valve has attempted to address this problem directly with their game *Team Fortress 2,* viewing death as "one of the great feedback mechanisms we have in the game, helping you evaluate your own skill versus that of your opponents, and the viability of the tactics being employed by each of you." Through extensive playtesting, Valve adjusted in-game content to provide players with more information about why they died and balanced the game so that users were usually in combat with the person who killed them, reducing the chances of players dying from an unavoidable force which would make learning seem irrelevant. To cover the first of these issues, they introduced the "freezecam," which immediately zooms in on the player who just killed you, showing you exactly who killed you and with what weapon, providing the user with the information necessary to understand why he/she died via a specific mechanic. Unlike other games where it is not uncommon to die and think "Who just shot me?" *Team Fortress 2*'s freezecam exposes the sniper hiding in the corner so that the player will know to avoid him as soon as he/she returns to the action. In order to remedy the latter issue, that of random or distant deaths, Valve removed grenades from the game, which were often the cause of arbitrary deaths, and introduced a new sniper weapon to reduce the distance between attackers in

many situations, again altering mechanics to encourage learning and reduce frustration (Walker, 2009).

Whether or not these tactics are successful, Valve clearly designs their games with Hale's conception of failure in mind: that it is not a punishment or an endpoint, but a learning tool necessary for players to adjust their strategies and fully enjoy the experience. Similarly then, in a game like *Counter-Strike* dying is not a strict punishment, but a chance to observe the other players as the round concludes, studying their patterns and adjusting your mental model appropriately. This leads to an increased sense of accomplishment when this revised strategy succeeds in the following round mere minutes away, which is not quite as immediate as *Peggle*'s rewards, but still occurs quickly enough to keep gamers motivated. This complicates notions of accomplishment in casual and hardcore games, with both genres providing a sense of satisfaction, albeit through somewhat different means.

Ultimately then, nearly all of the major characteristics invoked to distinguish casual games from hardcore games are actually shared by each genre, merely with a different flavor, or are linked to aspects of the game's context rather than to features inherent in game design. This substantially undermines the entire distinction between the two categories, suggesting that any differences between these categories must emerge from something other than design alone.

Retro Games

This categorical overlapping is further evidenced by the large number of games that cannot be easily sorted into one of these two genres, highlighting the blurred places where contradictions exceed similarities. One such subgenre is that of "retro" games, or games that are either directly linked to classic game titles in the form of a remake or new edition of a game

(such as *Space Invaders Extreme)*, or that draw upon classic game traditions and aesthetics (like

Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved 2 or *Mega Man 9*).

In many ways, retro games seem to correspond to the formal design foundations of casual

games. They are generally "pick-up-and-play" titles with very few rules, all of which are

generally easily understood and by definition they are retreading comfortable ground,

emphasizing the conventions and traditions upon which the game is based, in this case in the

form of nostalgia. The graphical style of most of these titles is generally pretty simplistic so as

to evoke a time past, rarely taking advantage of recent advances in graphics technology or

containing anything resembling objectionable content. *Mega Man 9*, for example, looks, feels,

and plays almost exactly the same as *Mega Man 2* even though nearly 20 years separate the

titles.

Why, then, is *Mega Man 9* "as hardcore as it gets?" (Scullion). The most common

response is that the game is unflinchingly hard, beating players into submission and forcing

repeated playthroughs. Is this single mechanical issue enough, though, to warrant the hardcore

label? If, as people like Jesper Juul (2007) suggest, the "casual" and "hardcore" distinction is

one made based on a number of interconnected criteria, then is it logical to label a game

"hardcore" based on one (or a select few) features? In the case of *Mega Man 9*, it appears that

mechanics outweigh flavor with regard to categorization, with the game's negative feedback

system overwhelming all other similarities it may have to other casual games.

A game like *Punch-Out!!* for the Wii seems to bridge the casual-hardcore divide,

providing a very simple boxing-puzzle mechanic that draws in casual gamers with its simplicity

and hardcore gamers through nostalgia. As noted by games journalist John Davison, "What

Punch Out has, I think, exposed is that it's not just casual gamers that crave familiarity from

videogames, hardcore gamers do as well," emphasizing the fact that hardcore games rely on standard conventions and traditions just as much as casual games (Lee, "Listen UP - 05/22/2009"). Despite the game's formal similarities to many casual games and widespread appeal to a variety of demographic groups, for Nintendo, at least as circulated within the enthusiast press discourse, *Punch-Out!!* is "absolutely a core gamer's game" (Hsu, 2009). In this case, it seems like the game's nostalgic flavor overshadows its mechanics, suggesting the opposite outcome as that of *Mega Man 9*.

The complications in classifying retro games as either hardcore or casual emphasize the fact that, in terms of design, many games segregated to different genres are actually extremely similar. If one game is hardcore solely because of its mechanics while another is hardcore solely because of its flavor, then do those two games really have much in common and belong under the same label? As such, considering design a primary element in governing the definitions of "casual" and "hardcore" games appears limited, suggesting that defining games as either casual or hardcore requires an understanding of more than simply the textual elements of a game.

Distribution Methods and Hardware Associations

While for Partridge and others, design is the primary descriptor governing generic conceptions of "casual" and "hardcore" games, two other interconnected elements play major roles in these definitions: distribution methods and hardware/platform. Jesper Juul, another academic and game designer, similarly focuses on design in his essay on the history of match-three games, but in defining casual games, also mentions these other two factors. As he states, casual games are typically framed as downloadable titles of small size, generally available on casual game portals that frequently promote free demos in a "try-before-you-buy model" that tries to hook users quickly and then get them to pay. Furthermore, casual games are heavily

aligned with the P.C., particularly "low-end and old machines" meaning that any old household computer which a person may have for other reasons is generally capable of playing a casual game (Juul, "Swap Adjacent"). This platform preference has expanded recently, with the Nintendo Wii becoming the generally accepted "casual" console, while the trend towards netbooks, or cheap, stripped down ultra-portable laptops designed only for basic computing (like reading e-mail), has also been linked with casual games (Parfitt, "Netbook Boom" 2008). Futhermore, the IGDA White Paper suggests that casual games are heavily dependent on the Internet, with casual game players viewing "the Internet as a primary entertainment medium" and casual games providing the "main staple of the entertainment value on the Internet" (Robbins and Wallace 11).

While these two issues may seem to be on the periphery of design concerns, they impact game design and the definitions of "hardcore" and "casual" in a number of prominent ways. First, and most obviously, are the implications of the "limitations" at work here. Games designed for play on extremely dated systems certainly cannot take advantage of many recent hardware advances, and thus generally have to scale back the design of the game in one way or another, either by using low-resolution graphics or limiting the complexity of the game's processing requirements. At the same time, investment in an expensive console or P.C. graphics brings with it the expectation that the games a person will be playing on it will take advantage of this hardware. This has an immediate impact on the formal aspects of a game, governing its look as well as the allotted complexity for many of the primary gameplay mechanics.

Furthermore, the indication that the Internet is crucial to casual game distribution highlights the importance of historical specificity. Rick Altman is particularly wary of "transhistorical" conceptions of genre that avoid historical context in preference for a

"synchronic approach" that "strips away historical differences" in the vein of structural anthropology. This approach aligns genre with myth, lending prestige and credibility by "transmuting what might have been a hollow commercial formula into a culturally functional category," yet at the cost of "forego[ing] serious historical considerations" which may be crucial to a fully realized understanding of genre (Altman 19-20).

As such, it is imperative to consider the influence of historically specific factors in developing conceptions of "casual" and "hardcore" games, particularly with regards to technology and the Internet. The hotly argued "digital divide" becomes an issue once more, as those without access to broadband Internet or home computers are excluded from both hardcore and casual gaming in this framework. Casual games, however, seem to line up more with those who have managed to barely cross over the divide, gaining access to outdated technology and potentially slower Internet connections (thus the small download size that a dial-up connection can handle). These gamers, however, do not have nearly the access that the "hardcore" gamers have, with these games generally having steep system requirements and often necessitating a stable broadband connection for extended multiplayer gaming. Thus it is no surprise that netbooks, generally less expensive laptops, and the Nintendo Wii (initially the least expensive home console) are more closely aligned with casual games.

Personal investment could impact hardware choices as well, as people who play games on these cheaper or more convenient platforms do so because they are not willing to invest a lot of money into a hobby which they do not heavily identify with. This bolsters the connection between casual games and the middle-class "soccer mom" demographic which implicitly has enough money to purchase upgrades for their home PC or get a slightly more expensive console, but chooses not to in order to avoid close alignment with the medium. However, this ignores the

fact that huge potential markets are being actively excluded from this picture because of economic limitations and does not explain why people who do have access to high-end equipment also choose to play casual games.

Regardless, the historical specificity of this argument is telling with regard to the extent to which games of exactly this type and with the same system requirements existed years ago, but are now aligned with the "hardcore" genre. The "hardcore" game *Half-Life*, released in 1998, can be played on a computer running Windows 95 with a 133 MHz processor, 24 MB RAM, a 2X CD-ROM drive, 640x480 display resolution, and 400 MB of free disk space according to the owner's manual that accompanies the game. In comparison, *Bejeweled 2*, a "casual" game released in 2004, requires a computer running at least Windows 2000 with 256 MB RAM, a 700 MHz processor, and that is compatible with DirectX 8.0, but only needs 11.8 MB of free disc space ("Bejeweled 2 Official Site").

In terms of system requirements then, *Half-Life* most likely works on far more computers than *Bejeweled 2* does, and in most cases, with standard hard drive sizes today nearly always reaching over 100 GB, the disk space requirement is for most people a non-issue. Similarly, few text adventure games, such as *Zork*, would be considered "casual" games, even though it would be difficult today to find a computer that these games would not play on. Furthermore, both *Zork* and *Half-Life* can be played without any Internet connection, while a large number of casual games are only available online which introduces an extra system requirement that these older games do not have. Thus, system requirements obviously cannot completely account for the distinction between "casual" and "hardcore" games, instead emphasizing the fact that they are grounded in the immediate historical context within which they are used.

Online Gaming Portals

With regard to distribution methods, the evolution of online gaming portals definitely continues this emphasis on historical specificity. While in many ways, the portals of the past few years have been dominated by "casual" games, this has not been the case for online game portals in the past or for those that have begun emerging recently. Most casual game portals today specifically target this audience as identified by industry research, with sites like EA's Pogo.com only providing what the company has deemed to be "casual" games because the site has been constructed around the industrial definition of "casual," not the other way around. Before the industry had begun embracing the concept of "casual," online game portals often mixed what would be considered "casual" and "hardcore" games on the same service.

One of the largest of these online gaming services, Mplayer, offered a large number of games for free while a yearly subscription brought gamers access to extra features. Mplayer V.P. of Network Programming Tom Garland positioned the service's strength as providing "something for everyone on Mplayer – from action games to classic board games" along with a variety of social interaction features such as voice chat ("World's Leading" 1997). While the service itself was structured much like today's casual gaming services, the actual content skewed more towards the hardcore end, including games like *Quake*, *Command and Conquer: Red Alert*, and *Total Annihilation*.

However, while card games could be played directly through the service, a key distinction to make is that nearly all of the hardcore titles were not actually distributed through Mplayer, but rather the service provided a system to link up gamers looking for a multiplayer match who had already purchased the game at a retail store. This can largely be attributed to slow Internet speeds which would make downloading an entire retail release incredibly time

consuming. However, Mplayer did provide shareware or demo versions of games in the "Mplayer Start-up Kit" available through download, by mail, or packed in with other retail games ("Mplayer Launches"). While this technological limitation did mean that actual distribution of hardcore and casual games differed during this period of time, the regular positioning of them side by side in online game services clearly indicates that the market was not considered fully segmented yet.

Another similar service, Microsoft's MSN Gaming Zone, was an incredibly popular online games service in the late 1990s that worked in the same fashion as Mplayer, boasting "8 million registered members and 45,000 concurrent users during peak times." In a press release announcing a site redesign and the steadily increasing user rates, product unit manager Adam Waalkes links the service's success directly towards a dual appeal, stating: "Responding to the needs of our diverse audience of casual and hard-core gamers is the key to building on the amazing success that has resulted in membership of the Zone doubling from 4 million to 8 million in less than six months" ("Microsoft Unveils"). This is yet another example of a major online games service positioning casual and hardcore products side by side, actively encouraging and relying upon this dual approach for success.

However, services like these that placed casual and hardcore games side by side were drastically changing shape by the end of the 1990s. In 2000, Mplayer was purchased by GameSpy and merged with GameSpy Arcade, an online server matching system primarily for "hardcore" games which still exists today (Gaudiosi 2001). The exception to this is a small number of "parlor games" including backgammon and spades, continuing Mplayer's legacy of housing casual games next to hardcore ones ("GameSpy Arcade – Features").

Similarly, by 2002, Microsoft's rhetoric concerning the MSN Zone had changed drastically, now hardly mentioning hardcore games and instead stressing that "the majority of online gamers are casual players." A press release touting the success of *Bejeweled Deluxe* on the service does not mention the word "hardcore" at all, yet uses the word "casual" ten times, clearly indicating a shift in focus ("'Bejeweled Deluxe' Success"). By 2006, Microsoft had "retired" their CD-ROM matchmaking services for hardcore games like *Age of Empires* and *Rainbow Six* in favor of "such groundbreaking titles as Sudoku Too" ("Beyond the Zone"). The service today is housed entirely within the Microsoft Casual Games division and only provides games that are readily identified with the "casual" genre.

Why this sudden shift in approach? Perhaps the most telling case is that of TEN (Total Entertainment Network) which when launched in 1996 was, according to game designer Greg Costikyan, the "online game service for the hardest of hardcore gamers" (Costikyan 1999) in that it exclusively provided games that fall under the "hardcore" genre umbrella (see "Games on TEN" for the service's offerings as of June 1997). In 1999 the service suddenly morphed into Pogo.com, a casual focused site that has since been purchased by EA to become one of the largest providers of casual games on the web. As Costikyan recounts, this shift had little to do with the potential for hardcore games on online portals, but was an effect of a shifting business model for online gaming. As more and more games began to include online matchmaking within the games themselves and companies started creating their own services, like Blizzard's Battle.net, for-pay sites like TEN and Mplayer became largely irrelevant in comparison to these free services.

Costikyan frames this as a consequence of the shift towards advertising-supported online game portals which "must cater to the lowest common denominator. Small revenues per

customer means you must attract the widest possible customer base. That means games like

Hearts, and Bingo, and Jeopardy Online. It doesn't mean Quake. If you want a mass audience,

you must be accessible to the masses" (Costikyan, 1999). However, advertising generally only

pays for a portion of the games on sites like Pogo. Instead, many games only offer an initially

free demo along, with recent years seeing a marked increase in "premium" or "deluxe" versions

of games which often fetch around $20 from the user. Thus either the phase of fully advertising

supported gaming portals was incredibly fleeting, perhaps emphasized by the previously

mentioned Microsoft press release focusing on their expanding focus on "deluxe" versions of

games like Bejeweled as early as 2002 ("'Bejeweled Deluxe' Success"), or this approach was yet

another business model which was just as flawed as that of the original TEN. Today, nearly all

the large casual games portals have some sort of varied economic model, often providing some

basic games for free online, downloadable titles that vary in price usually ranging up to $20, or

subscription services (like the Big Fish Game Club) that provide a certain number of games

(usually one) for a monthly fee (in this case, $6.99).

Furthermore, several companies have begun bringing the advertising-supported browser-

based gaming model to the hardcore genre. For example, *Quake Live* is a completely free, ad-

supported version of *Quake 3 Arena* that can be played entirely through an Internet browser.

The launch of the open beta brought unprecedented demand, with the queue to download the

initial plug-in by some accounts reaching over 46,000, with the service racking up over 113,000

accounts within the first six hours of release (Graft, 2009). This type of demand clearly indicates

that hardcore games have a place in an online-only space that has become associated with casual

games and that viable advertising models for these types of titles are emerging. Similarly,

InstantAction, a web portal that focuses on games for "hardcore gamers who find the games

more accessible than expensive console games, international gamers who don't have access to

consoles, and former core gamers who have careers or families and no longer have as much time

to pour into the gigantic game experiences they used to" ("About InstantAction") drew in a

million gamers in the first nine months after its launch (Wauters 2008). The success of this type

of approach to hardcore games in ad- or microtransaction-supported browser format is now even

being adopted by major game publishers like Electronic Arts, who is currently in the beta-phase

of the upcoming Battlefield Heroes, an online-only free version of a popular hardcore first-

person shooter franchise.

These accounts suggest that online portals have not always been casual only, but rather

have mixed hardcore and casual products together to varying degrees at different points in time.

This emphasizes the historically contingent nature of the "casual"-"hardcore" dichotomy, further

undermining suggestions that the proposed definitions of casual and hardcore are anything but

transitory.

"Try Before You Buy" – Shareware and Digital Distribution

Taking this a step further, the suggestion that online distribution somehow differentiates

casual games from hardcore games is undercut by the blossoming of hardcore online distribution

services like Impulse, Direct2Drive, and most notably Steam over the past few years. While all

three of these services offer casual games, in the case of both Impulse and Steam they are

carefully identified under the "casual" genre marker and make up only a tiny fraction of the

games offered for sale. Furthermore, both of these services are linked with specific game

developers, Stardock in the case of Impulse and Valve for Steam, who are renowned for their

hardcore franchises. Valve is beloved by hardcore fans for their first-person shooters, most

notably the *Half-Life* series, while Stardock makes incredibly deep real-time strategy games like

Sins of a Solar Empire and *Demigod*. These services have become an extremely viable option for distribution of games in the "hardcore" genres, offering games for download from both major publishers and independent developers to huge audiences, with Steam claiming over 15 million registered users as of February 2008 (Whiting 2008).

The popularity of these types of digital distribution services, as well as the increasing visibility of browser-based shooters or other "hardcore" genre titles, seems to counteract the IGDA's definition of hardcore games as "games developed for and delivered on a dedicated game console (set-top or handheld) as well as a CD-ROM or DVD." Furthermore, as services like Steam and Impulse take over larger portions of the hardcore PC gaming market, the IGDA's caveat that "downloadable games" do not include "PC traditional large-format game titles that are primarily sold at retail" becomes increasingly questionable (Robbins and Wallace 6).

Complicating these distinctions even further is the fact that services like Steam have begun routinely using many of the marketing strategies that are frequently touted as definitive of casual games. One of the most commonly referenced marketing strategies for casual games is the "try-before-you-buy" model, wherein users either have unlimited access to a "restricted feature set" or else "offer the entire feature set but only for an hour or less of trial play" (Robbins and Wallace 13). This differs only superficially from the long-established "demo" approach common in hardcore games, where usually one or two levels of a game are offered for download to users in order to influence their purchasing decisions, and which are available for nearly every major release today. However, Valve has taken this a step further and started instituting frequent "Free Weekends" when multiplayer games are available for full download and play for all users, encouraging them to buy the full product (often at a discounted price) before the weekend is over. The company has used this tactic with their own products, notably *Team Fortress 2* and

Left 4 Dead, along with third-party titles like Epic's *Unreal Tournament 3*. The "Free Weekend" promotion for *Unreal Tournament 3* was so successful, in fact, that Valve provided an "encore" the following weekend after the game rocketed to the top of the bestseller list, proving that this model is effective for hardcore games ("Unreal Tournament 3 Steam").

This type of "try-before-you-buy" approach can be traced even further back to what is known as "shareware," a popular method of game distribution in the early-to-mid 1990s. Shareware is generally a trial version of a game that offers the first few levels for free before requiring users to register or send off for the full version of the game. Early on, shareware circulated in the form of diskettes or via download through bulletin board systems (BBS), which later transitioned into Internet distribution, with users encouraged to copy these trial versions for their friends in order to reach the widest possible audience. Allen Partridge considers casual game distribution as the "logical descendent of conventional shareware" in that it "involved selling individual titles for a reasonable price via Internet download" (275).

However, what Partridge fails to mention is that perhaps the most iconic shareware games in digital game history are *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom*, first person shooters that most definitely are associated with hardcore gaming. *Doom*'s developer, id Software, claims the title had "tens of millions of downloads as shareware" which led to the title's incredible economic success and wide recognition ("id History"). Journalists at the time like Rusel DeMaria suggested that these titles "revolutionized the shareware game scene" and managed to make shareware "a legitimate way for developers to distribute products." While this marketing strategy did work for smaller games similar to today's casual titles, the length of hardcore games actually made them much more suited for the "trilogy approach" described by *Wolfenstein 3D* creator Scott Miller, where the first third of a game would be offered as shareware and the final

two-thirds for pay, meaning only a portion of the total file size needed to be arduously transmitted over the Internet or through a BBS. Similarly, much of the success of *Doom* can be chalked up to its inclusion of networked multiplayer, an aspect notably missing from most casual games (DeMaria, 1995). Thus this type of digital distribution system is largely indebted to hardcore genres, which paradoxically became less and less suited for this approach due to expanding game size outpacing data transmission speeds. However, with broadband penetration and speed picking up, game size is finally becoming less of an issue, meaning more full sized games can be distributed in this way on services like Steam or streamed through the web a la *Quake Live*, bringing digital distribution full circle.

This digital distribution model can also be seen in services like Xbox Live Arcade (XBLA), the PlayStation Network (PSN), and WiiWare (as well as Virtual Console, both for the Wii) which have made digital distribution on home consoles not only a reality, but a thriving business model. This has further expanded onto handheld devices, with PSN providing content for the PlayStation Portable, Nintendo including DSiWare functionality for the new Nintendo DSi, and even Apple's iPhone App store becoming a flourishing game delivery service in its own right.

Xbox Live Arcade is explicitly targeted at both casual and hardcore gamers, providing such hardcore niche titles as cult-classic rhythm-shooter *Rez* or retro-styled dual-stick shooter *Geometry Wars* alongside standard card games like *Uno* or casual staples like *Bejeweled 2*. Greg Canessa, who at the time of interview was group manager for XBLA, states that Xbox uses the service to "attract both the hardcore and casual gamer," with games targeted to both type of audience doing exceptionally well. He claims that "*Uno* is our fastest selling Arcade game in history and it has actually, last week, passed *Geometry Wars* as our best-selling title. They're

both now neck and neck for number one," suggesting that the space carved out for digital distribution on the consoles is not aligned with either casual games or hardcore games exclusively ("Joystiq Interviews"). XBLA also requires all developers to provide a free demo version of the game, which gives users a simple way to "try-before-you-buy," a staple of casual game distribution that here applies to all games, not just those that easily fit into the casual genre.

Finally, XBLA and the Xbox Live Marketplace more generally have proven that not only can both types of games be digitally distributed alongside each other on consoles, but that they can both be incredibly profitable. An expansionary downloadable content pack for hit game *Grand Theft Auto 4* entitled *The Lost and the Damned* reportedly sold over a million copies in the first two months of its release, which at $20 apiece is a huge financial success for an add-on to a retail game (Morris, "Why It's Increasingly"). Similarly, as discussed earlier, *Super Street Fighter 2 Turbo HD Remix* proved the profitability of hardcore dedicated digital titles on services like XBLA and PSN. Casual companies like PopCap Games are also now distributing their titles on both XBLA and PSN, with Greg Canessa even calling XBLA the "perfect platform" for *Peggle* ("PopCap Launches Peggle"). Thus, services like XBLA show the increasingly blurred lines between the two genres of games, rejecting nearly all of the traditionally proposed distinguishing factors including hardware/platform, game size, and distribution method.

Ultimately, what all of this suggests is that today's casual game distribution and marketing methods are far from unique, and even further from being distinguishing features of the genre. Instead, this type of digital distribution emerged long before "casual" games had even become a discrete category and was actually proven to be effective by the hardcore games which casual proponents now define the genre against. Furthermore, virtually every major defining

feature of casual game distribution also applies to hardcore game distribution today, while hardware associations will continue to become less significant as increases in technology bring the faster download speeds necessary for acquiring the much larger hardcore games and browsers become more capable of handling advanced video rendering. Thus, distribution and hardware are yet two more supposedly defining features of casual games which fail to show any appreciable distinguishing characteristics when viewed closely.

Genres as Cultural Categories

The difficulties in resolving the apparent incompatibility of the common definitions of "casual" and "hardcore" games with the realities of their often overlapping game design principles, hardware associations, and distribution methods does not necessarily mean that these terms are useless, but that this type of text-centered approach is not able to handle the complexities inherent in the construction of these two terms. Instead, it is much more productive to conceptualize these terms through Jason Mittell's approach to genres as cultural categories, focusing primarily on contextual factors to understand "what a genre means *for specific groups in a particular cultural instance*" (5). In this paradigm, genres are not natural descriptors for a text and do not "create, define, or constitute the category itself" but rather "link a number of discreet elements together under a label for cultural convenience" (7). It is easy to mistake these two uses, as "genres are not bound by their categorized attributes, but they culturally function *as if* they emerged from intrinsic textual features, seemingly flowing from that which they categorize" (10). This type of naturalization function makes generic terms incredibly powerful, but often misleading as it downplays contextual factors in favor of textual ones. As such, Mittell suggests that genres serve primarily as "discursive clusters" that are "contingent and transitory, shifting over time and taking on new definitions, meanings, and values within differing

contexts," (17) drawing on Foucault's investigations of discursive formations as a means of understanding how discourse is "culturally operative" (12-13). Thus, "hardcore" and "casual" are in no way useless terms despite questionable common definitions, but instead are a means of understanding how specific groups of people are engaging with the digital games medium in this time of great transition.

This approach to genre is much more flexible than a text-centered one and allows for the discrepancies noted previously to be more insightful than conclusive. As indicated in the first chapter, both longtime enthusiasts and newcomers to the medium have reasons for adopting the use of "casual" and "hardcore," all of which are predicated on an understanding of the specific historical context within which this shift is occurring. Furthermore, as described earlier in this chapter, definitions of the genres as linked to distribution methods and hardware are embedded in historically specific circumstances, while game design is similarly reliant on contextual elements. To conclude this section, I look in depth at one company, PopCap Games, to see how the usage of the terms "casual" and "hardcore" surrounding the developer reflects this notion of genre as cultural category.

PopCap Games: Casual Games with a Hardcore Center

Very few game companies have such a revealing relationship with the terms "casual" and "hardcore" as does PopCap Games, one of the most readily identifiable names in the casual game space. Their first major hit, *Bejeweled* (originally titled *Diamond Mine)*, was released in 2000, becoming the go-to title in the most definitive casual game subgenre, the match-three puzzle game. PopCap quickly became a major name in casual games, with the *Bejeweled* series selling over 25 million units as of August 2008, with over 350 million copies downloaded in trial form

("PopCap's Bejeweled"). Initially, then, PopCap was a definitive "casual" game company, working within the accepted schema of casual game production, distribution, and design genres.

However, unlike many other casual game companies, PopCap has openly proclaimed their understanding of hardcore genres and the crossover success of their products. For one thing, despite initially starting with the typical casual game digital distribution routes, putting *Bejeweled* onto sites like MSN Zone and Shockwave, the game can now be found on nearly any electronic device imaginable, including the iPhone, XBLA, a retail package for the PlayStation 2 and Xbox 360, and through other "hardcore" digital distribution services like Steam. Now, the game is even available as a mini-game within popular MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, due to the fact that "lots of PopCap employees are also hardcore WOW players, who alt-tab during long flights or queues to kill time with Bejeweled," a strategy which the company also extended to a later hit, *Peggle* ("Play Bejeweled").

This assertion that people who play "hardcore" games are also interested in "casual" games is one that PopCap quickly began trumpeting rather than pigeonholing themselves as solely a casual game producer/distributor. Greg Canessa states: "We, at PopCap, know that everyone is a potential player of casual games. We make games that appeal to everyone and anyone - from mothers to their renowned nemesis', hardcore gamers." Not only did PopCap continue expanding their reach beyond traditional casual audiences, but beyond casual modes of distribution. Canessa himself claims that, while working for Microsoft, he was "early advocate of bringing casual games like PopCap's to the Xbox Live Arcade service on the original Xbox and Xbox 360 consoles" and that part of the success of *Peggle* is that "both hardcore and casual fans have embraced the game on PC, Mac, DS, iPod and mobile phone" as well as on XBLA, PSN, and the iPhone (Denning, 2009).

The incredible success of *Peggle* serves as a major turning point for the company, in that it became a game that was acceptable for hardcore gamers to admit enjoying. Enthusiast gaming news site 1UP.com gave the game its 2007 "PC Casual Game of the Year" award and the game's 2009 release on the Nintendo DS received an 'A' from reviewer David Ellis. However, this success with the hardcore was not immediate, as 1UP's 2007 acknowledgement is definitely an outlier among the gaming press. As noted in an article by Stephen Totillo, hardly any enthusiast press sites bothered to review *Peggle* when it was first released, 1UP included, despite being downloaded 10 million times in its first year of release and garnering positive reviews from mainstream outlets like *USA Today* and *The Wall Street Journal*. While many outlets may have just missed the release because they weren't paying attention to casual gaming portals, Jeff Gerstmann, formerly of enthusiast site Gamespot, actively decided not to review the game, noting that this type of game isn't typically targeted towards Gamespot's audience and that *Peggle* was "below their radar for a long time as well" (Totillo, 2008). Thus, initially *Peggle* was stuck in the casual game space regardless of its attempts to break into the hardcore crowd.

This limitation and the inevitable breakthrough, as noted by Greg Canessa, both have little to do with the game itself, with other factors governing the game's initial reception. He cites the fact that hardcore gamers typically get games information from enthusiast news sites like Gamespot or 1UP that tend to focus more on console gaming than PC games (and when they do, they certainly don't cover games released on casual game portals), meaning that as *Peggle* began to see release on other platforms, culminating in the XBLA release, the hardcore crowd had a much greater chance at encountering the game. Furthermore, these sites struggle when reviewing small downloadable titles or simply don't cover them, with Canessa using the example: "how could I give a 9.5 to 'Peggle' when I gave '**Halo 3**' a 9.0 – that isn't fair!" which

he contrasts to the film industry's equal reviewing treatment of blockbusters and "the smallest indie film." Certainly this brings up issues of reviewing conventions, as major film reviewers almost always cover big blockbuster releases but can easily pass over an independent film, creating a similar sort of censorship by omission. Canessa's point, however, seems more directed at the similarities between products since both a blockbuster and an indie film are hour and a half experiences that you watch in a theater, which is not the case when comparing the bite-sized *Peggle* with the multi-hour narrative of *Halo 3*.

Ultimately though, this exposes the lack of status held by casual games at the time within the hardcore community, as many game reviewers don't judge casual games on the same level as blockbuster titles or just assume (in some cases correctly) that their readership is not interested. Finally, Canessa notes that casual games simply don't advertise, due in part to the fact that budgets are typically low, but also to the typical mode of distribution, wherein most casual portals offer subscription services encouraging users to buy at least one game every month and simply "feature" a game on the service to promote sales (Totillo, 2008). Therefore, very little of the lack of initial hardcore success can be attributed directly to *Peggle*'s formal design, underscored by its eventual success once these factors were mitigated.

However, the design itself has been a source of controversy, exposing the lingering disdain for casual titles held by many in hardcore circles. David Ellis of 1UP.com has been a champion of the game's physics, in his review calling it a "make-or-break feature" in its impact on the primary gameplay mechanic (Ellis, 2009). This sentiment is echoed in Clive Thompson's article on the game's dual gameplay focus, with hardcore gamers looking at the game and seeing "the Euclidean geometry that governs how the ball falls and pings around" while casual gamers chalk the seemingly unpredictable path of the ball up to luck (Thompson, 2009). David Ellis

brought up the topic of *Peggle*'s physics on an episode of 1UP's popular Listen UP Podcast only to be mocked by host Garnett Lee who greeted the topic with "oh God, oh God, oh God, *sigh*" before joking "obviously they need Havok engine for the next Peggle to take it to the next level" (Havok being an advanced physics system used in many first-person shooters like *Half-Life 2*).

Lee clearly has trouble taking *Peggle* as seriously as the "hardcore" games he has no problem discussing in depth elsewhere on the Podcast, asking "is it wrong that I kinda want to laugh that we're having such an esoteric conversation about Peggle?" before clarifying, "I love Peggle, I've told you I've played it a ton on my iPod… I think that it's kinda getting a little over thought, it's a fun game…" (Lee, "Listen UP – 02/27/2009"). Thus, for many hardcore games *Peggle* is nothing but a "fun" game, not taken seriously because of its mechanical simplicity. This strengthens its associations with the casual gaming genre, particularly at the time of its initial release, which along with the game's other "casual" aesthetic trappings, plays a major role in this type of hardcore hesitation. Even so, this hesitation was still a significant step forward from the perception of *Bejeweled*.

The release of *Peggle* on XBLA changed many hardcore gamer's conceptions of the game, both introducing gamers to the title in a comfortable console environment while adding in features targeted towards this audience, such as competitive multiplayer modes. The other major indication that *Peggle* had begun to significantly crossover with the hardcore was the release of *Peggle Extreme*, a modified version of the game that came bundled with Valve's *Orange Box* exclusively on Steam, placing the game in a package alongside hardcore titles *Half-Life 2*, *Team Fortress 2*, and *Portal*. Furthermore, the modifications to the game are all tongue-in-cheek integrations of *Half-Life* staples in specially themed levels which would be instantly recognizable to fans of the hardcore series (see fig. 3). Even the game's mascot, a unicorn named Bjorn, was

Figure 3. Screenshot from *Peggle Extreme*, PopCap Games, 2007, juxtaposing a (now) gun-wielding Bjorn the unicorn against the "Heavy" character from Valve's *Team Fortress 2*.

taken over by the *Half-Life* aesthetic, appearing on the title screen with a headcrab covering his face in a nod to one of the most recognizable enemies from *Half-Life*. This mash-up not only adjusted formal elements to appeal to hardcore gamers, but in being distributed along with the rest of the *Orange Box*, provided an easy entrance into *Peggle* for gamers who may not have encountered it before. In both cases, *Peggle Extreme* and the XBLA release of *Peggle*, distribution and design adjustments helped spread the game beyond the casual space through appeals to the hardcore audience.

The release of the newest PopCap game, *Plants vs. Zombies,* truly indicates a great advance towards full acceptance of PopCap's titles into the hardcore gaming world. The game showed up immediately on hardcore gaming news sites, unlike the delayed *Peggle* reaction, with even Listen UP's Garnett Lee, who previously had difficulty taking *Peggle* seriously, going in depth into the strategy of the game. In the same conversation, John Davison attempts to redress hardcore assumptions, saying "Can we all acknowledge, once and for all, that PopCap are fucking awesome, and hold them in the regard that they deserve to be held" (Lee, "Listen UP – 05/15/2009").

PopCap's Garth Chouteau confirms this hardcore adoption, stating: "There's certainly a larger contingent of 'hardcore' gamers purchasing [*Plants vs. Zombies*] than most of our other titles… At the moment, we'd estimate that at least half of all buyers of PvZ would fall into the 'hardcore' category." And this approach has certainly been fruitful for PopCap, as it has apparently become the fastest-selling game in the company's history, proving that not only is this type of crossover title possible, but that it can also be potentially more profitable than exclusively targeting one demographic (Kraft 2009).

In terms of content, the lead designer, George Fan, claims that from the beginning, "we wanted to create a zombie game that would appeal to both casual and hardcore gamers alike," making sure to include "both casual and hardcore gamers in our beta test group" ("PopCap Launches Plants"). From the outset, then, PopCap kept conceptions of "casual" and "hardcore" genres and gamers in mind in order to develop a game that would have a good chance finding crossover success. The company also had a significant amount of time to work out the details, breaking casual game development convention by taking over three years to reach the final product.

Formally, the game combines the "family friendly" aesthetic associated with casual games against the violent zombie craze sweeping hardcore gaming (including Valve's *Left 4 Dead*, Capcom's *Resident Evil 5*, and the Nazi zombie mode in Activision's *Call of Duty: World at War*, all of which are shooters from the past year that sold incredibly well). However, the plants aren't "too cute" to turn off particularly sensitive hardcore gamers and the zombies are dismembered tastefully without blood or gore to limit offending those used to typical casual fare. Furthermore, the zombies themselves aren't styled to be particularly menacing, and instead are often kitschy and funny, such as the Michael Jackson Thriller-inspired zombies or swimming zombies who wear inflatable rubber ducky inner-tubes. The game also draws upon current hot trends in casual gaming, including the "gardening" and "tower defense" subgenres, to make the game comfortable in terms of aesthetics and mechanics for gamers familiar with casual gaming portals.

However, content is only one small reason why *Plants vs. Zombies* has been able to break out of the casual market and find a home with hardcore gamers. Chouteau claims that hardcore gamers generally move from trial to full purchase much quicker than traditional casual gamers (Kraft 2009), providing some support for the rapid proliferation of the game in hardcore circles, which then spread via word of mouth and the rapid expanse of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. When PopCap first released *Peggle*, Twitter was still getting started, whereas today it is the fastest-growing social networking service, with some reports claiming that its usage increased from 475,000 unique visitors in February 2008 to over 7 million in February 2009 (McGiboney, 2009). A quick search of the service shows a flurry of tweets about the game shortly after its release, including tweets from PopCap's official Twitter feed, indicating one potential avenue for spreading word of mouth that would not have been available

for *Peggle* on its initial release. Chouteau also notes that the game was immediately available on Steam, featured as a new release, and at a discount, which provided hardcore gamers with easy access to the game and at a price point that would make it a particularly appealing purchase (Kraft 2009). These changes from the initial marketing of *Peggle* to *Plants vs. Zombies* indicate the absolute necessity of acknowledging historical specificity when examining any cultural object.

All of these factors have combined to result in a product that is not clearly either casual or hardcore in terms of who is playing the game, how they purchased it, or what game genre it lines up. Instead, *Plants vs. Zombies* is merely the most recent indication of the shifting discursive conception of these two terms. PopCap's history, at least as seen through the three major titles discussed here, shows a clear sense of change in how the two terms have been understood by developers, audiences, and critics. Thus, rather than providing clear definitions, "casual" and "hardcore" serve as discursive tools, providing all of these groups with a means of discussing the changes in gaming occurring today in a flexible system where neither term has a stable set of assumptions. However, the connotations carried along with these terms from early conceptions of "hardcore" and "casual" have still not been fully shed, and may never be.

With this specific terminology in mind, the final game discussed here, *Plants vs. Zombies*, is so ambiguous and exceeds the traditional definitions of these two terms so fully that they are nearly useless in discussing the game other than to point out the faults in such a dichotomy. If, as Mittell argues, generic terms are predicated on historical specificity, then perhaps the waning usefulness of the terms "casual" and "hardcore" indicate that we are moving into a new moment in history, one that requires a new set of terms to properly address current changes in the medium.

Chapter 4

"You Play Like a Girl": Conceptions of "Casual" and "Hardcore" Gameplay

> "Casual gaming is about more than a consumer demographic or a
> genre of games, casual games are defined by gameplay behavior."
> – Casual Games Association ("Casual Games Market
> Report 2007 Summary")

> "All games are meant to be beat and won by most players so don't
> be a loser."
> – Ben Sawyer's Second Commandment for becoming a
> hardcore gamer (16)

When making media specificity arguments about digital games, one of the most

commonly invoked concepts is that of "interactivity." Unlike film, television, or literature,

which are (too) often casually dismissed as passive media forms, digital games require some type

of user input for the experience to exist; before a user presses the "start" button, a game is only

dormant code. While this type of argument is highly problematic, as media scholars have shown

time and again (are not audience expectations built into media development across the board?

Could television exist in its current form without consumer interaction?), its logical façade

allows it to pervade much discourse on digital games. With regard to conceptions of gaming

audiences, this term surfaces in the guise of discussions of user interaction with the medium,

suggesting that the different ways people engage with digital games should hold a position of

prominence in definitions of these gamers.

As it becomes increasingly apparent that these demographic distinctions embodied within

the terms "casual" and "hardcore" fail to hold up when compared to actual audience

composition, along with the industry's realization that the perceived sexism overtly central to

these definitions may actually constrain potential sales, a new factor has begun to overtake either

demographics or genres as the focus of industry discourse on this terminology. This

characteristic, as implied earlier in the epigraphs and invocation of the concept of "interactivity," is that of gameplay, with many in the industry suggesting that the terms "casual" and "hardcore" transcend audience composition and game types to describe different approaches to and interactions with the medium.

This use of the terms certainly appears to be a step in the right direction, as it is an acknowledgement by the industry that demographic-based definitions reliant on gender and age stereotypes are wholly inadequate to describe actual gamers. However, this approach again works within the hegemonic framework established by the industry to maximize profits, in this case creating categories that are more demographically flexible, but with an emphasis on appealing to advertisers. The rise of the casual market is thus idealized as infinite in size and potential profitability, containing people of "all ages, male and female, 100% of population" in comparison to the finite hardcore market made up of "18-35 year old males, <15% of population" ("Casual Games Market Report 2007 – Summary"). Similarly, the forward to the IGDA's 2006 Casual Games White Paper stresses the boundless depth of casual wallets, claiming that "Unlike the traditional 'core' game space, our market is practically limitless, and we have only begun to scratch the surface." The entire existence of this collaborative document is in fact attributed to the casual games industry's lack of internal competition because "Everybody realizes the market is big enough" for all to find success, constructing a casual market that stretches beyond gender and age boundaries to reach every living human being (2).

While this construction of the casual market certainly makes it the most appealing market possible to advertisers and producers, the hardcore market is similarly situated as especially profitable. Despite being limited in scope, "hardcore" as described in terms of gameplay suggests a population of gamers ravenous for new product, intensely focusing on each title but

always ready for the next. *Electronic Gaming Monthly* magazine, which explicitly sold its audience to advertisers as "hardcore gamers," pushes this (distinctly male) audience as defined by the "early adopter, multi-platform gamer that spends the most on his gaming habit," in this case suggesting the trope of addiction to describe hardcore gaming patterns ("Ziff Davis Media: EGM", 2008). Just as with the casual market, hardcore gamers are continually defined by purchasing power even when framed in terms of gameplay.

What all of this ultimately brings to the forefront is the question of how to distinguish casual gameplay from hardcore gameplay. If these terms are not dependent on who is playing the game or what type of game they are playing, then what are the determining factors in labeling a gameplay style either casual or hardcore? With this in mind, I focus on three of the main factors proposed by industry discourse: difficulty, context, and personal investment. As I hope to make clear, discrete segmentation of these characteristics is entirely artificial, existing in practice as interlocking variables which feed off of one another. Nor can analysis negate the confounding influence of industrial reliance on gendered (and age-dependent) conceptions of gameplay despite claims to the contrary. However, examining each of these suggested means of determining gameplay categorization provides a way of exposing the faults of this method of argumentation which betray the industry's reliance on established stereotypes, regardless of incremental cultural advances.

Difficulty

Perhaps the most common manifestation of the terms "casual" and "hardcore" in relationship to gameplay appears as a pejorative assessment of gamer skill. This condescending tone directed especially towards casual gameplay is linked to the expanding audience demographic, with casual gameplay rationalized as being easier or simplified because this new

mass-market audience does not have the same built-up skill set as the established hardcore consumers. However, this condescension works both ways, with mainstream and "casual" gamers using the term to distance themselves from a group so dedicated to a subcultural media form.

This use of terminology with regard to gameplay fits squarely within Pierre Bourdieu's conception of cultural capital, as described in earlier chapters, wherein "cultural hierarchies correspond to social ones and people's tastes are first and foremost a marker of class"(Thornton, "Club Cultures" 202). This system is fluid, allowing both individuals and entire groups to shift positions within "social space" and thus the hierarchy itself by either losing or gaining cultural capital (Fiske 33). Both Thornton and Fiske are primarily interested in what amounts to "subcultural capital," looking at the intersections between dominant culture and specific subcultures through the lens of Bourdieu's system of tastes. Conceptions of "hardcore" and "casual" difficulty suggest that this approach is an especially valuable one with regard to the medium of digital games.

In this case in particular, the dichotomy largely lines up with Thornton's discussion of the "mainstream" as opposed to club culture. For Thornton, the "mainstream" does not necessarily "reflect empirical social groups" but rather "exhibit[s] the burlesque exaggerations of an imagined 'other'" as perceived by the club culture (205). This links back, as she suggests, to Bourdieu's argument that "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (Bourdieu 6). I would suggest that this "othering" works both ways, with the mainstream snubbing the subculture, in the process stripping it of much official cultural capital, resulting in a reactionary denigration when the mainstream then encroaches on the subculture, giving subcultural members the chance to deny them subcultural capital and force these newcomers into a lowly position in the

subcultural hierarchy. Thus, this system is basically the same in both cases, just with different groups in charge of the distribution of capital (be it cultural or subcultural). These overlapping spheres work in opposition, with an action that may endow a person with subcultural capital (like deep emotional investment in gaming) resulting in an opposite response from the broader society and a devaluation of dominant cultural capital (perhaps discursively through the "nerd" label). The same occurs in reverse, with actions that retain dominant cultural capital (for example, the removed "casual" label) making it even more difficult to obtain subcultural capital once a person becomes interested in games (such as the condescending "n00b" epithet).

Specifically, gameplay is constructed as "casual" in three interconnected ways, each in opposition to definitions of "hardcore" gameplay: it is fundamentally easier and less capable of dealing with challenges than hardcore gameplay, it is simplified to the point of universal comprehension requiring little or no previous knowledge, and it privileges certain types of skills over others. Each of these conceptions work within the guidelines of cultural capital, either conferring it upon a gamer or excluding them from it, but in each case dependent on the sphere of culture within which the transaction is occurring (and often working in both at the same time).

Tiers of Difficulty

One of the most explicit acknowledgements of the first aspect of this argument comes from the hierarchy of difficulty options in the third-person shooter, *Gears of War 2*. When starting the game, where a gamer would typically choose to play either on the "easy, normal, or hard" difficulty setting, these categories have now been replaced by the labels "casual, normal, hardcore, and intense," immediately sorting players into a discrete hierarchical system that is much less flexible than Bourdieu's. The gamer's choice does not result in any modification to game content or style of control, it simply makes the game easier or harder for the player by

dynamically adjusting weapon damage and player/enemy health to affect how easily a player will die and how easily a player can kill enemies. Lead developer Cliff Bleszinski ties this choice directly to a need to appeal to the new "casual gamers" which Microsoft is increasingly targeting. His stated goal is to "make sure that Casual [difficulty] is truly, truly easy" in order to accommodate these new gamers (Minkley, 2008), suggesting that casual gameplay is less able to deal with challenging situations and is generally less proficient than hardcore gameplay. This hierarchical system privileges gaming skill to construct definitions of the terms "casual" and "hardcore" which work as synonyms for "easy" and "hard" or "unskilled" and "skilled." In the case of *Gears of War 2* then, a single game can be played in either a hardcore or a casual manner simply by adjusting how difficult the game is for the player, a construction of these terms which presupposes an unskilled casual demographic in contrast to the extremely skilled hardcore audience.

The question then is what effect this has on the game experience and what exactly this suggests about casual or hardcore gameplay. In my personal experience, I found that playing *Gears of War 2* on the "Hardcore" or "Insane" difficulty levels was definitely challenging, even to someone well-attuned to the control mechanisms and gameplay conventions of a typical third-person shooter. The game required a solid understanding of what gun to use when, how to impulsively react to waves of incoming enemies, and a knowledge of what was about to appear around the next corner. It is the last of these that, especially on the "Insane" difficulty level, became more a factor, with the game almost requiring constant repetition. Certain segments were incredibly frustrating, as the game seemed to expect near perfection from the user in terms of aiming and shooting at a specific body part of an enemy as soon as it appeared, with very little room for error or hesitation. To its credit, *Gears of War 2* still expects a decent amount of

comprehension on the "Casual" difficulty level, but it certainly does not expect the same level of replay. Sections in which a user must shoot a specific enemy body part still have this requirement on "Casual," but the decreased enemy damage and health means that the user has more time to figure this out and does not need to shoot that specific spot for as long, streamlining the entire process while allowing room for users to figure out what the game expects.

However, the change in difficulty, at least for me, certainly affected the gameplay mechanics in a significant fashion. One of the game's main selling points is a "cover" mechanic that allows a character to shield him/herself behind environmental objects like walls or cars as the primary gameplay mechanism, encouraging users to fluidly move from one cover location to the next. On the harder difficulty levels ("Hardcore" and "Insane"), this is an absolute necessity, as remaining out in the open for too long means certain death. On "Casual" however, I was able to avoid this mechanic almost completely, passing through large sections of the game, even many of the more difficult moments near the end of the game, without ever using the cover system. Certainly newcomers could use this mechanic, as it is introduced in the training section at the beginning of the game, yet it appears not to necessarily be a requirement. If "casual" users are thus able to subvert the main gameplay attraction for most "hardcore" gamers, then does this appreciably affect the ultimate experience of the game?

Perhaps, but this comes down more on the side of what users expect from the game. *Gears of War 2* is akin to a big-budget Hollywood blockbuster action film: full of blood, adrenaline, exaggerated drama, and special effects. Most attendees at, say, the *Transformers* film would hardly call it a "challenging" experience, but rather are just along for the ride, soaking in the narrative and spectacle. While many reviews for *Gears of War 2* suggest that the storyline is a weak point (this could be argued of most action films as well), both the narrative

and the spectacle are on full display for the user who plays on the "Casual" difficulty level. In fact, these gamers may get a more coherent picture of the narrative, as the repetition required for a "Hardcore" playthrough means that narrative elements may more easily be forgotten. Thus *Gears of War 2* allows users to choose what is more important to them: gameplay or spectacle/narrative.

These two elements of any game, however, do not generally exist in isolation, with gameplay mechanics working in conjunction with narrative and aesthetic design. For *Gears of War 2*, the experience of playing without using the cover system is similar to embodying an indestructible action movie hero who can charge into any room full of enemies without worrying about the consequences. This feeling of being able to kill any enemy in a few shots while no number of incoming shots can take you down is reinforced by the "Casual" difficulty level's increased player health and decreased enemy health, allowing any player to feel like an action star. The gaming experience then is one of domination over one's surroundings, with the player always firmly positioned at the center of the game world.

This changes radically once a player starts using the cover system, no longer charging out into crowds of enemies and instead hiding behind objects and carefully lining up shots. Feelings of superiority and immortality gained by charging into battle are now replaced by a focus on caution and anxiety. The player is no longer an indestructible force, but rather is extremely fragile and susceptible to incoming fire, with the cover system emphasizing the fact that without the help of a sturdy object behind which to hide, he/she would surely die. Again, this is reinforced by the harder difficulty levels which make it much easier for the player to die while making the enemies even more resilient. This shifts the power dynamic away from the player

character and onto the menacing elements in the game, suggesting that just around every corner may lurk a cruel and grisly death.

The *Gears of War 2* narrative includes elements of both of these experiences, but a player's specific gameplay style could dramatically affect the way he/she engages with it. If a player views the protagonist, Marcus Fenix, as the typical action movie hero and plays the game as such, then he/she would see the narrative as a string of events which never truly put Marcus in danger, but just provide new and exciting monsters for him to destroy. So when Marcus discovers a giant worm, it would come as no surprise that he decides not just to kill it, but to do so by entering the beast and using the game's assault rifle-mounted chainsaw on its heart. Here the story exaggerates Marcus' ability to stay alive in extremely dangerous situations in order to provide an over-the-top action sequence which encourages the player to feel like an invincible hero.

This experience in no way requires attention to the worm's narrative purpose, which is not merely to be a big distraction. Narratively, the worm serves as a tool used the enemies, the Locust, to destroy entire human cities. In many ways, the game is about humans' desperate final attempts to save humanity before Locust forces wipe them out, with the city of Jericho portrayed as the last bastion of hope. By the end of the game, this desperation has reached such great heights that the humans intentionally destroy Jericho in order to stop the intruders in the process, with this sacrifice underscoring the extreme peril brought by the Locust and the inability of the humans to simply take charge and unequivocally "win."

Thus, while rejecting the cover system and embracing the "Casual" difficulty level promotes a focus on the narrative by limiting forced replays of frustrating sections, the resultant experience emphasizes the action heroism elements of the plot. Similarly, use of the cover

system works in conjunction with the narrative's sense of anxiety and vulnerability, potentially distancing the player from specific plot points, but nonetheless developing a unified experience across narrative and gameplay. The narrative itself combines both of these elements, but the player's choice of gameplay style, which here is distinctly linked to difficulty, has a significant impact on what features appear dominant.

Along the same lines, while the term "casual" is often invoked condescendingly to imply that gameplay has been made too easy, usage of the term "hardcore" is generally aligned with gameplay that involves complex strategies, simultaneously encouraging hardcore aspirations towards mastery while again withholding subcultural capital from the uninitiated casual crowd. In an interview concerning the new expansion to popular crossover success *World of Warcraft*, lead designer Jeff Kaplan links the terms "casual" and "hardcore" explicitly to player skill, arguing that the team didn't want "to make it so that all raiding was super-casual and everybody could do it. We wanted to preserve some of that hardcore raiding" as an "exclusive" attraction later in the game for gamers possessing extensive skill (Welsh, 2008). In this case, the terms are used again to describe a structuring system of difficulty built into the game's progression which excludes unskilled casual gamers from even encountering the challenging gameplay reserved for hardcore players.

Other games that include "Hardcore" labeled multiplayer modes, like *Call of Duty 4* and *Far Cry 2* again exclude newcomers with their specific gameplay adjustments. *Call of Duty 4*, for example, makes the game more "hardcore" by lowering each player's hit points, resulting in a much more complex system of gameplay. Based on my personal experience, in the normal multiplayer modes, the pace of play is extremely quick, with people running around in the open shooting, allowing newcomers to hop into a game and immediately see enemies and engage in

combat. In "Hardcore" mode, however, the pace slows nearly to a halt. Because of the

heightened risk of getting shot when stepping out into the open, it is not uncommon to spend

minutes in one spot, staring through a scoped rifle at a building until an enemy appears in a

window for a brief second. This privileges users who have an extensive knowledge of the game,

as an understanding of map layout as well as specific stakeout locations is absolutely critical for

success. Moreover, "Hardcore" mode strips off most of the HUD (Heads Up Display) elements

which aid newcomers, like the map of the level which shows teammates and enemies who are

currently firing their weapons, as well as indicators that provide the player with important

information such as how many bullets they have remaining. While some elements of the game

remain intact (narrative, input method, etc.), these adjustments significantly affect how users

engage with the game by promoting certain skills or styles over others. And like *Gears of War 2*,

these changes drastically alter the resulting experience of playing the game, with "Hardcore"

mode placing gamers in an exaggeratedly hostile, volatile, and anxiety-ridden world where the

user is inclined to feel much more vulnerable than heroic.

In all of these cases, the usage of the terms "hardcore" and "casual" to describe gameplay

allows for a single game to be played in different ways without any changes to input mechanisms

or game content. By doing so, the result is a process of naturalization, wherein these two terms

become depicted as common sense due to the fact that they are being defined primarily by user

skill level, not by any adjustments made by the industry itself.

Skills

The industry also naturalizes the prioritization of certain skills over others, as only certain

"experts" are associated with "hardcore" mastery while others are merely adept at "casual"

games. Returning to *Gears of War 2*, when a player is choosing a difficulty level, the game

brings up a sentence of description to guide the player's choice, which are revealing in their assumptions. The "Casual" difficulty is labeled: "You've never played a shooter before." This suggests that the primary reason a person would choose this level is lack of familiarity with the genre, linking together the term "casual" with assumptions based in game genres (as described in the previous chapter), difficulty with regard to skill, and newcomers who have never encountered this type of game (as emphasized by the "You" leading off the sentence). "Normal" continues along the same lines ("You enjoy playing the occasional shooter."), but adds pleasure to familiarity. The big shift occurs with the "Hardcore" definition as "You know how to pull off a headshot." Familiarity and difficulty are now framed in terms of a particular skill specific to the genre which a person would not have without past exposure to the genre. "Insane" takes this a step further, suggesting that if you play on this level, "You are a master of the headshot," now adding a layer of prestige to this knowledge.

This logic applies to nearly all hardcore skills, as most are obtainable only through extensive experience with the medium. The ability to micro-manage an entire battlefield full of individual units in a real-time strategy game like *Starcraft* requires the user to have a deep knowledge of all the available units, resource management, tactical strategies (to Zerg-rush or not to Zerg-rush?), and in multiplayer scenarios, an understanding of typical opponent strategies and how to combat them. Similarly, in a first-person shooter game like *Counter-Strike*, the gamer's "hardcore" skill set involves an understanding of the particular map on which the game is being played, which weapon to use and its handling specifics, and the conditioned reflexes necessary to shoot an enemy quicker than they can shoot you. All of these types of skills require repeated exposure to the specific game and/or medium (i.e. familiarity with the first-person shooter genre may provide a shortcut for another game within the genre), privileging those who

already exist within the "hardcore" realm while erecting an imposing barrier to entry for any

potential newcomers. Thus, these skills say much less about a player's innate ability or general

aptitude and more about his/her length of exposure to the medium.

In turn, "casual" gameplay skills tend to draw much more heavily from skills obtainable

from outside the medium or, in many cases, those privileged in dominant cultural capital. One of

the most common skills required for casual games is object matching, which is absolutely

essential to a game like *Bejeweled* that requires users to quickly identify similar groups of jewels,

but which is something that most people do on a regular basis in their everyday lives. Another

skill often tapped in casual games is time and/or resource management (to a much less extreme

degree than in a real-time strategy game), typically replicating skills easily comprehensible to

middle-class Americans. A game like *Diner Dash* combines these two skills, requiring users to

manage time and resources in a restaurant when dealing with customers, but also encouraging

users to quickly identify objects to optimize productivity with regard to seating customers and

delivering food to them in the most efficient manner possible. A third major skill set that is

fundamental to many casual games yet frequently disavowed in hardcore games is word or

language proficiency. Games like *Bookworm* or the follow-up *Bookworm Adventures* reward

players who come to the game with an established vocabulary (while leaving room to improve

language skills in an educational manner for those who require it), thus drawing in outside users

who can bring their skills established in dominant cultural institutions (like the education system)

into the gaming sphere.

Thus, while hardcore gameplay is generally characterized as being more skill-oriented

than casual gameplay, this clearly depends on what one considers to be a skill. Furthermore, this

distinction emphasizes the exclusionary politics at work in conceptions of "casual" and

"hardcore" gameplay, with the skills required for one type of play deemed more relevant than the other in order to provide more subcultural capital to those already highly established within the subcultural hierarchy, marginalizing those new to the medium regardless of actual cognitive investment.

Control Schemes

The games industry further extends this naturalizing logic into the realm of game development by appealing to this skill-based distinction via specific gameplay mechanics and control schemes. One of the most frequently cited characteristics of casual games is their ease of accessibility and "pick up and play" nature. As described by the Casual Games Association, casual gameplay should be "easy to learn, and require no previous special video game skills… [or] expertise" ("Casual Games Market Report 2007 – Summary"). This translates directly into control schemes, with many casual games opting for very simple user interfaces, with most PC titles typically only requiring the use of the mouse (see fig. 4)

Games played on the same system but labeled as "hardcore" generally involve both keyboard and mouse controls (for example, the typical shooter uses "WASD" controls for movement plus the mouse for aiming, while foldout keyboard assignment guides frequently accompany real-time strategy games likes Command and Conquer which outline a multitude of "hotkeys"). Even on home consoles like the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 which provide a comparably simpler control scheme than the PC due to a more limited number of buttons, controls for the majority of games linked with "hardcore" genres are still far more complex than that of the typical "casual" game (see fig. 5).

On consoles, the Nintendo Wii has attempted to redefine the traditional user interface by simplifying the controls for console games, frequently using only one or two buttons along with

Figure 4. "Controls" screen from the game *Peggle* by PopCap Games, 2007. Windows PC.

their trademark gestural controls which aspire towards transparency. This is in contrast to the

increasingly complex controllers typical of the hardcore gaming console, with the Xbox 360

controller for example, containing two directional sticks, a directional pad, two triggers, and

eight buttons, all of which may perform different actions during a game and frequently vary from

game to game even within a single genre. As such, the Wii is generally acknowledged as the

casual console due in large part to its accessible control scheme, while Microsoft and Sony

struggle to expand beyond the hardcore label.

Bourdieu's conceptions of popular and bourgeois (or "pure") aesthetics bring up some of

the complications inherent in these divergent systems of control. "Hardcore" control schemes,

while definitely complex, are merely revisions of previous control schemes with very little

difference from the controllers of the previous generation of consoles (for example, Sony's
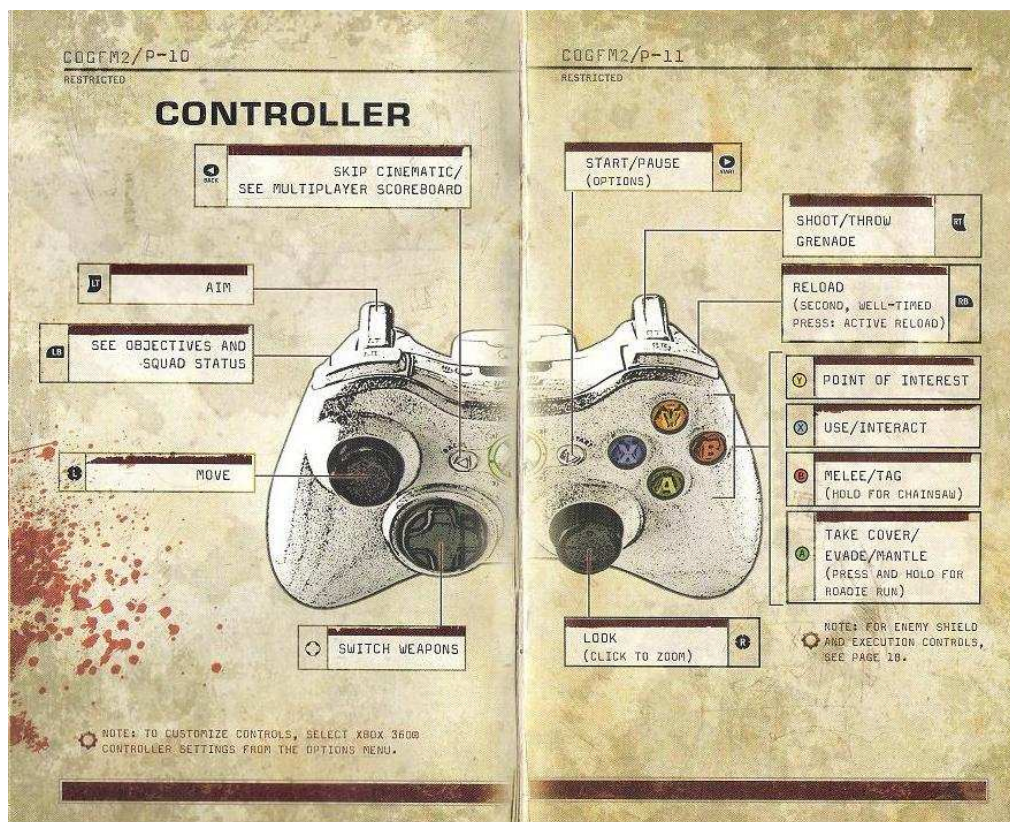
Figure 5. Controller layout from the instruction booklet for *Gears of War 2*, Epic Games, 2008. Xbox 360.

current PlayStation 3 controller, the Dualshock 3, is nearly identical to the Dualshock 1 for the original PlayStation). Thus, "hardcore" control methods are familiar to the audience, ingrained in their knowledge of previous experience with the medium. This lines up with Bourdieu's "popular aesthetic" in that it a rejection of formal experimentation in favor of the routine (32), and a general "subordination of form to function" (4). For this particular subculture, it doesn't necessarily matter how inelegant or complex a game controller is as long as it provides enough inputs for all the necessary actions shown on screen.

In contrast, the Wii's controls are a rejection of this attitude, linking up with the "pure" or "bourgeois aesthetic" in that it "asserts the *absolute primacy of form over function*" and focuses on elegance and simplicity rather than robustness. In terms of gaming history, the Wii remote is

definitely a formal experiment, reimagining the relationship between gamer and console and effectively throwing out all of the previous advances in console controls. However, this is complicated by the fact that this experiment relies upon an increased emphasis on the human body, acknowledging far more than an individual's fingers in its requirement of full arm motion. Furthermore, the associated cultural phenomenon of *Wii Fit*, an exercise-based device that comes with a "balance board" on which the user stands, embraces the possibility of full-body input by registering shifting weight between feet and encouraging users to mimic such full-body actions as yoga poses while on the board. This aspect of the Wii's control scheme, in contrast to the "bourgeois" primacy of form, engages the "demand for participation" implicit in the "popular aesthetic." This clear coordination of motion of the game player's body and its simultaneous representation by a character onscreen provides an "affirmation of continuity between art and life" and fulfills the user's "desire to enter into the game, identifying with the character's joys and sufferings," whether it be a digital game or, as Bourdieu is using the term, the "game" inherent in engaging with any work of art (32-33).

How is then possible to reconcile these two seeming contradictions between the major aspects of the Wii's controls with regard to Bourdieu's aesthetics? Ien Ang sees the popular aesthetic's involvement as a "recognition of pleasure" in opposition to high culture's conception of pleasure as "irrelevant and illegitimate" (274). In the case of the Wii though, it is precisely this acknowledgement of pleasure through the Wii remote that has effectively drawn in the mass audience which had otherwise been alienated by complex control mechanisms of "hardcore" game consoles. While ordinarily pleasure may be taboo within bourgeois taste cultures, the fact that here it is occurring within an already subcultural space, safely segregated from bourgeois culture, allows for a disavowal in line with the "casual" flirtation with the medium. Furthermore,

by wrapping this pleasure device within the scheme of formal experimentation overdetermines

the Wii's "casual" associations, thus primarily functioning in terms of the "bourgeois aesthetic."

A clear example of the differing approaches to casual and hardcore gameplay mechanics

and control schemes is Electronic Arts' approach to console sports games. As one of the largest

game publishers in the industry, EA holds the licenses to most major sports leagues and exploits

these licenses on an annual basis across all potential gaming platforms, a strategy which

traditionally meant simply developing a game and then optimizing it for each platform with little

variation between versions (so for example, *FIFA 07* would be nearly identical whether played

on the PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC, or any other similar system). This strategy continues today, but

with a notable exception. EA Sports titles for the Wii now bear the subtitle "All-Play" and

contain specially tailored controls and alternative modes of play. These changes are specifically

directed at the casual gamer with the motto "Everyone Can Play!" opening the game up to a

mass-market audience.

The control changes, while certainly intended to effectively take advantage of the Wii's

unique input mechanism, are primarily described by EA in terms of simplification and ease.

Each of the three listed changes for the *NCAA Football 09 All-Play* title revolve around

simplification – "straightforward Wii remote-based controls," a "simplified playbook," and

"action icons [that] tell you when to tackle, defend, pass, and more" ("All-Play Sports", 2008) –

with the last of these definitively taking gameplay control away from the gamer and lowering the

skill requirements for success. Quotes framed as user testimonials on the company's website

confirm this focus on the mass-market gamer, with "Daphne" in particular bordering on

offensive with her stereotypical recommendation for *NBA Live 09 All-Play*: "NBA Academy -

now that's what I'm talking about! Teaches me the rules and all the right moves. It's the leg up I

need to challenge my 10-year-old to NBA LIVE 09. Even though I'm just learning, he still has fun playing against ol Mom in All-Play mode" ("All-Play Sports," 2008). This quote in particular connects industrial depictions of the older female casual demographic directly to simplified gameplay mechanics, in the process undermining any attempt to downplay the influence of stereotyped conceptions of the casual gamer by directing discourse towards gameplay. This reliance on stereotypical conceptions of gaming audiences (specifically invoking the images of the clueless middle-aged woman in contrast to the skilled male youth) suggests that the industrial focus on gameplay has not actually changed perceptions about the casual and hardcore audiences in any significant way.

Even further, when responding to concerns that EA was dumbing down the gameplay in the All-Play series at the expense of the hardcore sports game fan, Reg Hamlett, EA Sports senior director of brand marketing, only confirms these suspicions by stating, "I think our hardcore fans will recognize that we didn't take anything away from the PS3 and Xbox 360 versions of our games," thus aligning hardcore gamers with these platforms while acknowledging the casual focus of the All-Play series and the Wii more broadly (Klepek, 2008). Similarly, EA's website for FIFA 09 on the Wii touts the simplified All-Play controls, mentioning twice in the span of two sentences that the user only has to do basic actions while the game "controls the rest." At the same time, the next bullet point on the site does promote the option of "Advanced Controls" so that "more experienced gamers" can choose to use the "precision passing system." However, as part of these "Advanced Controls," EA suggests that these users drop the Wii Remote in favor of a Classic Controller or Gamecube Controller, in the process continuing to link the typical Wii interface with a more casual audience and the more hardcore users with a more complex control system which they would like be familiar with from

previous console iterations ("FIFA 09," 2008). This construction of casual and hardcore

gameplay therefore reverts back to pejorative notions of skill and prior knowledge rather than

anything inherent in these game mechanics and becomes little more than a discursive red herring.

Definitions of "hardcore" and "casual" gameplay based on difficulty then beg one major

question: does being "bad" at a game automatically classify a person as a "casual" gamer? If this

is the case, then industrial discourse shows very little divergence from Ben Sawyer's quote at the

start of this chapter which connects hardcore gaming with winning. Would the games industry

parrot Sawyer's suggestion that "If you play games a lot and you don't get better, you probably

suck and you should find another hobby like bowling or darts" (14) if this wide contingent of

gamers that "suck" were not so incredibly profitable? Personally, I know that my experiences

with the game *Starcraft* continually confirm the fact that I am not particularly good at the game,

despite deeply ingrained knowledge of the control system and general proficiency in similar

games within the genre. The game's mechanical design is simply not especially enjoyable or

"fun" for me, and thus I don't see any motivation to aspire to mastery, but making the game

"easier" would certainly not solve this problem as the mechanics would remain the same.

Regardless of whether or not the industry intends to define these terms in such a

condescending fashion, delineating audiences based on established skills alone hardly seems an

adequate means of segmenting markets. This approach merely reinforces the status quo by

rewarding those who have built up skills within the medium while excluding those who have

equally adept skill sets which could be encouraged through games, but which simply aren't due

to industrial imperatives. Even more fundamentally, this approach to audience description

continues to rely on the same stereotypes as demographic-based conceptions of "casual" and

"hardcore" gamers, thus becoming yet another broad stereotype couched in terms of gender and age.

Context

Another of the major arguments made by the games industry is that casual gamers play games differently than hardcore gamers due to a difference in gaming context. With this argument, style of play is linked directly to patterns of game playing and the setting in which these games are played, an approach that downplays the possible influence of game content or genre by prioritizing these contextual factors. The underlying logic in this case successfully contributes to the industry's focus on gameplay as the defining factor of the casual-hardcore divide in that it suggests genre emerges out of gameplay, not the reverse. This allows the industry to continue to speak of casual and hardcore genres as a secondary characteristic that is now motivated by a more fundamental difference.

However, while this approach convincingly mediates contention over generic definitions of the terminology by subjugating game content within gameplay context, issues of demographic composition remain problematic. Industrially naturalized assumptions that people play games differently simply due to the personal preference ignore issues of class, race, gender, and age which influence gaming patterns. It isn't particularly radical to suggest that someone who works a nine-to-five job everyday would engage with the medium differently than someone who works from home in a flexible post-Fordist capacity that may result in long stretches of unoccupied time. This example only cracks the surface of the wide range of realized differences determined by a vast array of competing variables inherent in audience demographics. The fact that the industry glosses over these variations in its focus on gameplay suggests that the result is primarily a reversion to the stereotypes inherent in the other conceptions of the terms "casual"

and "hardcore," in this case merely invoking this transcendent gamer category while simultaneously relying on traditional conceptions of gamers. Examining each of the two major industry suggestions of gameplay distinction between hardcore and casual games, gameplay patterns and gaming context, provides a means for understanding the industrial impetus behind this prioritizing of gameplay.

The games industry describes hardcore and casual gameplay patterns largely based on two interconnected criteria concerning play sessions: the length of each session and session frequency. The consensus on casual gamers seems to be that they play games in brief segments but at high frequency. As the IGDA White Paper suggests, casual gamers' "average play time is much lower than hardcore gamers' title play commitment near release, but is much higher than the mass-market retail gamers' average play time" (10).

To some degree, this pattern of game sessions can be tied to game type, as supposed casual games usually contain levels that can be completed in "1-10 minutes" versus the "20 min - 2 hours" of a hardcore game ("Casual Games Market Report 2007 – Summary"). Along the same lines, the genres usually associated with casual games, like puzzle, word, or card games, are easily and logically broken into small chunks, while a narrative-driven game like those of the Final Fantasy series require significant time investment for each play session in order to perceive story and character progression. Furthermore, as David Sirlin (2008) points out, many games in hardcore genres include regulatory save systems which may predispose a gamer to playing longer than he/she intended simply to avoid replaying the same area over again, or if the game is being played online in a multiplayer setting in most cases saving one's progress is impossible.

This focus on save systems further complicates questions of whether gameplay patterns have more to do with people's behaviors or with game design decisions (such as save systems,

level length, and genre format). A story on *Newsweek*'s Level Up blog describes the plight of a

"hardcasual" father who claims that "gamers like myself don't want casual games, we want that

hardcore gaming experience redesigned to reflect the way we live." His complaints largely

concern the save systems and game length for most "hardcore" games, suggesting that he is still

interested in those games labeled "hardcore," but his lifestyle is not conducive to this type of

play (Croal, 2007). This argument extends beyond fathers to include anyone constrained by

everyday commitments and obligations, including families and jobs.

While games were once commonly associated with children, who generally have a great

deal of leisure time, survey data now uniformly indicates that most gamers are of working and

child-rearing age. The Entertainment Software Association claims that in 2008, the age of the

average gamer was 35, with a full 49% of game players between the ages of 18-49 and another

26% aged 50 and above ("2008 Essential Facts"). With this in mind, the association of casual

gamers with games that can be both learned and played quickly may simply suggest that gamers

gravitate towards games with a design that fits into their lifestyle, regardless of what type of

product or experience is actually desired. Furthermore, the association of hardcore play patterns

and genres with males in their teens or early twenties would simply indicate that this

demographic has more time to devote to gaming, to the exclusion of people who can't set aside

such a large chunk of time.

In order to accommodate these "hardcasual" gamers, many successful games today allow

for a variety of play styles through different gameplay devices. *Gears of War 2* is a good

example, as it does this in a few ways. Specifically, the game includes checkpoints throughout,

automatically saving your progress so that the next time the game is loaded up, you don't have to

retread much ground that you had previously covered and thus not penalizing a father who has to

stop suddenly to change a diaper. When played cooperatively with another player, the game

allows users to "drop in/drop out" at will, meaning that a gamer is free to leave a cooperative

game at any time knowing that it will not affect the other player's experience (an AI character

takes over when a player leaves). Furthermore, each user may pick their own difficulty level

within a single co-op game, therefore avoiding the typical problem of forcing one player to

sacrifice and either make the game too easy or too challenging. These difficulty levels, while

discussed earlier in terms of "dumbing down" or affecting gameplay, may in fact simply

facilitate the quick completion of the game by people without the time to engage in long, drawn

out firefights or repeatedly play a difficult section in order to progress. While it may result in the

game being "easier," this may not be the primary motivator for a time-constrained gamer, but

rather a mechanism for speeding up the whole process. None of these features will necessarily

impact the gamer looking for a challenging experience; they merely open the door to other

alternative play styles.

As such, the industry's prioritizing of gameplay when describing "hardcore" and "casual"

downplays the influence of genre, the specifics of game design, and contextual factors

influencing gameplay patterns. This effectively reverts back to a notion of the terms as defined

by genre, with gameplay patterns only an effect of this distinction rather than a cause. Thus, the

suggestion that gameplay is the primary component in the definitions of "hardcore" and "casual"

is misleading in its disavowal of these other confounding factors.

However, these are mere technicalities when the industrial argument is extended, noting

that while casual gamers play in small chunks, "it's common for people to play one game after

another for many hours" ("Casual Games Market Report 2007 – Summary"), with surveys

suggesting that anywhere from 43% to 66% of casual gamers set aside dedicated time to play for

at least one hour per session (Holland 27, 2008) with almost half of women over 40 years of age doing so on a daily basis ("Research Reveals", 2008). Following this description, the gameplay patterns of many casual gamers are completely indistinguishable from hardcore gamers when genre or game design does not interfere. For example, *Counter-Strike*, an online first-person shooter which corresponds to the typical definition of a hardcore game, is played as a series of discrete successive "rounds" each lasting only a few minutes, as are many other competitive online shooters. No over-arching story or plot-progression encourages players to remain in the game for an extended period of time, so players are free to join for a few rounds before leaving to either find a new game or return to their non-gaming lives. If casual gamers do in fact sit and play a single game for hours on end, regardless of whether or not the game itself chooses to break this session up into discrete chunks independent of the player, then this form of gameplay is no different than that undertaken by those labeled as "hardcore." As such, any industrial suggestion of categorization based on gameplay patterns falls short of providing clear distinctions between those labeled casual and hardcore.

This puts more pressure on the other aspect of gamer context promoted by the industry, which is the broader setting within which audiences interact with digital games. Gaming context specifically incorporates issues of leisure time and access to technology, which in turn are both heavily dependent on class. The industrial suggestion that "Many play casual games at work" ("Casual Games Market Report 2007 – Summary") presupposes a gamer whose job involves a computer, automatically excluding a large segment of the American (and global) population of lower-class workers without computer access. Similarly, the centrality of the Internet for casual game distribution (and in many cases, play, most prominently evidenced by the rise of the Casual MMO or Massively Multiplayer Online Game such as *Habbo Hotel*) again only includes

audience members with reliable Internet connectivity. Casual games are then presented as a medium exclusively of the privileged in the so-called "digital divide," reliant not only on the initial computer purchase, but also repeated investment towards Internet access, either directly by the consumer or through a white-collar employer.

Along the same lines, the confinement of hardcore gamers to the home, in contrast to the "Home, work, airplane, transit stop" ("Casual Games Market Report 2007 – Summary") which houses casual gameplay, implicitly invokes questions of technology. In the same chart, the Casual Games Association suggests that casual gamers primarily play on "PC, Mac, [or] Inexpensive Console," none of which easily translate to gaming at a bus stop, obscuring casual adoption of cheap handheld devices like the Nintendo DS or the virtually cost-free conversion of mobile telephones into game platforms. While this is framed in terms of choice, for many the choice to spend \$400 on a dedicated gaming device is obscene given the family budget, automatically limiting consoles like the PlayStation 3 to either those with means or those who take gaming very seriously. If the reasoning is the former, then this turn towards casual gameplay is merely a façade to obscure issues of technological access, segmenting the market based on ease of purchase as tied to class. If instead it is the latter, then this whole question of gaming context is a moot point, blurring and conflating with issues of personal (non-economic) investment in the medium.

Regardless, the issue of gaming context becomes largely irrelevant for industrial conceptions of the casual and hardcore markets, as it either serves as a means to revert back to segmentation by demographics or as a subset of audience motivations for playing games, but in either case it is not an independently substantial category.

Personal Investment

Much of the specific way in which a person plays a game eventually comes back to the reasons why he/she began playing the game in the first place. Motivation and investment in the medium therefore constitute a primary aspect of gameplay, and hence are central to conceptions of the terms "casual" and "hardcore" as defined by gameplay.

Beyond demographic stereotypes, perhaps the most oft-cited difference between casual and hardcore gameplay are the related ideas of competition and mastery. These aspects of gaming are often depicted as the primary motivators for hardcore gamers, leading to associated conceptions of professional gaming, gaming clans or guilds, and gaming addiction. This corresponds to that focus on winning pushed by Ben Sawyer, likening hardcore gamers to athletes who must temper their minds and bodies in order to emerge victorious (16). In contrast, the industry generally suggests that the casual audience approaches games as a "stress reliever" played for "fun, relaxation, [and] escape" ("Casual Games Market Report 2007 – Summary"). However, as the IGDA admits, "there is nothing 'casual' about the level of loyalty, commitment, and enjoyment displayed by many avid casual game players," (Robbins and Wallace, 9) describing casual gamers' personal investment in the medium using a number of terms not commonly invoked when describing casual gamers. If this is in fact the case, why then does the broader industrial construction of these terms generally posit a dedicated hardcore gamer in opposition to the more detached, less-invested casual gamer?

One significant possibility is a reliance on gender assumptions which underlie these conceptions of the two gamer categories. While the industry attempts to reformulate its definitions of casual and hardcore gamers using criteria beyond the stereotypical gendered demographics, in this case focusing on gameplay and personal investment instead, the new

portrayals fall back on the very criteria it intends to downplay. The parallels between gender stereotypes and industrial distinctions of gameplay investment become evident when one looks at depictions of gamers that specifically invoke gender. With regard to male gamers, scientific studies continually crop up that suggest that digital games are a "male" medium because "Playing, and particularly winning, most high-tech games activates part of the male brain which are linked to the primitive desire to conquest" ("Why Men Have To Conquer", 2008). These studies attempt to naturalize gendered distinctions in much the same way as the industry does, with the industry merely transposing these notions of innate drives for conquest into the more gender neutral label of "competition."

Similarly, many conceptions of how women engage with the medium largely correspond to industrial portrayals of casual gaming trends. Martinson, Schwartz, and Vaughan's (2002) study on women's leisure time, for example, reiterates previous suggestions that this time is generally fragmented, broken up into short discrete segments which could very easily lead towards an engagement with short-form casual games as opposed to hardcore games which typically require longer play sessions. Furthermore, as suggested by Cassell and Jenkins (2000), historically women have been systematically excluded from interacting with computers and other new technologies (though this has rapidly changed over the past few years) which results in lower general computer skills and less proficiency with associated input mechanisms (10-14), criteria which constitute the foundations of conceptions of casual games focusing on difficulty. With this in mind, it is no surprise that casual game provider Real Network's research on casual gamer motivations, focusing on suggestions that gamers play to "unwind and relax" or for "stress relief," was primarily conducted by a "women's lifestyle expert" ("Research Reveals", 2008).

The fundamental issue then is not to combat questions of whether or not men and women engage with the medium in different ways, but to show that gender is the underlying factor guiding industrial construction of the "casual" and "hardcore" categories. Despite the industry's attempt to deflect this fact by shifting focus away from demographics and onto gameplay, the resultant conceptions of gameplay continue to be heavily reliant on gender distinctions.

Therefore, while I am arguing that conceptions of hardcore and casual gamers which prioritize gameplay over demographic makeup obscure the real-world distinctions between gamers that affect these modes of interaction with the medium, this does not imply that a return to the stereotyped conceptions of hardcore and casual gamers as previously promoted by the industry is a more useful distinction. Rather, I simply hope to suggest that by using these terms as gameplay descriptors, the industry has merely developed a coded way of reproducing the same dichotomy with the same fundamental flaws. Instead of realizing that this type of strict binary cannot possibly encompass the wide variety of gameplay styles which necessarily acknowledge, but are not defined by, the spectrum of audience composition, the industry merely continues to use "hardcore" and "casual" in the same limited fashion to segment markets based on potential profitability.

This critique then becomes one addressing the broader capitalist lens which can only envision audience members as consumers, stretching far beyond the industry associated with any specific entertainment medium. Digital games merely provide a more transparent structuring system due to the industry's current stated goal of widening appeal to a mass audience. The shift away from demographics and towards definitions based on gameplay behavior, while structured as an acknowledgement of the shortcomings of the former method of market segmentation, is actually not a shift at all. Rather, it is a discursive slight-of-hand which reinscribes the primacy

of market activity focusing on dominant demographic subgroups which continue to be defined in

terms of gender and age.

Chapter 5

Conclusion: Towards a New Digital Games Discourse

Up to this point, I have focused mainly on addressing the ambiguities, contradictions, and implications which structure the terms "hardcore" and "casual." In the first chapter, I looked at how stereotypes of gender, age, and class are built into conceptions of "hardcore" and "casual" audiences, with industrial discourse failing to address changes in audience composition in favor of outdated models. Furthermore, this discourse is funneled through a framework of profitability, with descriptors of markets obscuring the actual audience members to whom these terms are applied. The following chapter extends this into the realm of genre, looking at game design, hardware, and distribution in order to emphasize areas of overlap and the discursive neglect of historical specificity. Finally, my third chapter on gameplay suggests that despite industrial emphasis on how people play games, the actual evidence for this argument reverts back to the previously discussed factors of gender, age, and class, ultimately avoiding any potentially enlightening features of different gameplay styles. Together, these sections provide a three-pronged view of the terminology in question, attempting to pin down the common definitions of the two terms while emphasizing the problematic assumptions contained within them.

While this all may lead a reader to assume that industrial discourse surrounding "hardcore" and "casual" is unified in its definitions, this is simply not the case. Audiences, journalists, and industry figures alike frequently vocalize their dissatisfaction with the terms for a variety of reasons. Rockstar Games president Sam Houser, in charge of the blockbuster *Grand Theft Auto 4*, says, for example, that the division between hardcore and casual just "doesn't make sense" (French, 2008) while games idol Shigeru Miyamoto of Nintendo actively attacks the

terminology, stating: "I wonder if there really is such a distinction. There are many hardcore gamers playing with casual games and I believe casual gamers do get into hardcore Nintendo games too. I think one of Nintendo's missions is to destroy the barrier between the two" (Valay, 2008).   Other industry figures express irritation with the commonly accepted definitions, with XBLA/PopCap's Greg Canessa offering a revision proposing that "hardcore gamers are a superset of casual gamers" ("Joystiq Interviews…") while Nintendo execs Denise Kaigler and Reggie Fils-Aime just don't seem to understand complaints that they are ignoring the hardcore given the games they are releasing, suggesting that even industry figures may not understand these definitions as clearly as may be assumed (Garratt, 2008 and Hsu, 2009).

Far more common, however, is the usage of the terms "casual" and "hardcore" by *Battlefield 1943* producer Gordon Van Dyke, who begins an interview on the new game in this "hardcore" shooter franchise by defensively proclaiming "it's not a casual game, you're not going to feel like you're playing a casual game" before backtracking to: "and casual's too cliché, casual, hardcore, I don't know, I don't like to put people into those categories" and proposing the terms "accessible" and "passionate" instead (Sanchez, 2009). Despite misgivings about the connotations inherent in these terms, the vast majority of people who use these terms continue to do so because they are known and understood, serving as a simple shorthand for getting a point across. Thus, when *Battlefield* developer DICE's producer Patrick Liu exclaims "we are not going casual," fans immediately know what is being discussed and what is at stake (Yin-Poole 2009). Regardless of how an individual feels about them, the simple truth is that nearly everybody engaged with games discourse knows them and can respond to them. This usage perpetuates the terminology even by people who do not necessarily agree with it simply because it holds a position of ubiquity within this discursive space.

With such dissatisfaction, then, it seems even more apparent that a new system of terminology is needed. The purpose of this concluding section, then, is twofold: to look at some proposed alternative frameworks and to provide my own input as to what might be done about this discursive dilemma. Overwhelmingly, I feel that "hardcore" and "casual" should be replaced in some fashion if for no other reason than because they have become so saturated with coded stereotypes that the only way to break free of them is to develop entirely new terminology. This will certainly be difficult given the industrial reliance on these terms and their ubiquity within games discourse, but at this specific moment in time, when more and more people are coming into contact with the medium, digital distribution is redefining how people get games and what types of games can be distributed this way, and devices like the iPhone are providing millions of people across demographic lines with games via their "App Store," it seems like the perfect opportunity to leave these stereotyped terms behind. As mentioned earlier, the rumblings of discontent about the terms from key industry figures further suggests that a window of opportunity may be opening in which this transition may not only be possible, but could potentially find support from the industry itself. With this in mind, I close my discussion of these terms by looking at three cases of alternative terminology: the "GamerchiX" and "Game Grrlz" approach to women in gaming, the combination of the two terms in question into "hardcasual," and journalist Mitch Krpata's motivation-focused framework for categorizing gamers.

"We Can Do It!": Gender and Games

Over a decade ago, Henry Jenkins chose to conclude his and Justine Cassell's book on gender and games by looking at the "game grrlz" movement. If "hardcore" had been traditionally associated with men, this was an attempt to prove that women deserve a space

within this term too. Jenkins characterizes these women as "demanding to be taken seriously by the game industry, questioning the gender stereotypes at the roots of existing games, and insisting that their younger sisters have access to the computer" by "asserting their own pleasures in playing fighting games like 'Quake'" (328). Here, female gamers maintain the "hardcore" and "casual" split in terms of game genre, locating political power in game choice because apparently it is only possible to prove one's gamer credibility by playing first-person shooters, not puzzle games. Thus, while these women certainly worked to redefine demographic stereotypes, this movement simultaneously reinforced the hardcore-casual dichotomy in other ways.

This is not necessarily something to find fault with, particularly when viewed in relation to the push for "girls' games" happening at the same time, which tried to focus on how to develop games that would specifically appeal to girls. "Game grrlz" is not just a response to women's established exclusion from the "hardcore" scene, but also a reaction against developers who agreed that this space was decidedly male and that the way to get girls into games was to create games developed specifically for them. While the difficulties in figuring out what types of games should be made for girls is extremely complicated, as discussed in the rest of Jenkins' and Cassell's book, not every female gamer at the time felt that this was necessary.

Nikki Douglas, creator of GrrlGamer.com, takes a distinctly feminist approach to the "game grrlz" movement, calling suggestions that women bring other skills like "community and collaboration" to gaming "so 1950s, so retro, so family and hearth and Donna Reed" (Jenkins 332). Douglas continues: "Maybe it's a problem… that little girls DON'T like to play games that slaughter entire planets. Maybe that's why we are still underpaid, still struggling, still fighting for our rights. Maybe if we had the mettle to take on an entire planet, we could fight

some of the smaller battles we face everyday" (334). Others, like Stephanie Bergman of now defunct GameGirlz.com, objects to the idea that there even should be games specifically for girls, arguing that by doing so, "we're teaching these girls to see things based on their gender. Which is exactly what we're trying to avoid. People are people, right? Then why is it suddenly so acceptable to split little children up based on gender alone when it comes to games?" (331). For these women, the "game grrlz" movement is very much wrapped up in the "games for girls" debate, with "hardcore" games one of the most viable ways to remedy the problem.

Vangie "Aurora" Beal, also formerly of GameGirlz.com, is less concerned with this distinction and more interested in increasing the visibility of girls who choose to play "hardcore" games, allowing gamers to connect with each other, regardless of gender, and providing information to girls interested in gaming but who have been systematically excluded from an understanding of the "hardcore" world (336). Part of this approach was the creation of the PMS clan (Pandora's Mighty Soldiers), now the "world's largest multi-platform online female gaming group" with the goal of nurturing a "fun, positive, and competitive online gaming experience to other female gamers in an effort to recruit and retain females in the online gaming environment" ("About Us", 2009) which sprung out of GameGirlz.com. The clan's FAQ makes it very clear that "We are hard-core gamers," reserving the "casual" label for lapsed members who do not meet the four hours of required practice per week. ("FAQ: New User", 2009). This usage reinforces the terminology in question with regard to genre and gameplay while subverting its demographic assumptions.

While PMS claims to have over 2000 members including their male division, H2O, ("About Us", 2009), this type of community dedicated to hardcore female gamers is less common than the approach taken by the Xbox GamerchiX, a collective of female gamers who

make clear that they are not a clan, but a social group whose only requirement for entry is "two

X chromosomes." While this Microsoft-endorsed group (one of the founders is a Microsoft

employee) incorporates feminist imagery (see fig. 6), they are much less concerned with the

"hardcore" and "casual" distinction, stating in their "Manifesta": "If you play games, you're a

gamer chick. Whether you're an Xbox *Halo 2* champ, play RPGs on the PC, or *Mah Jong Tiles*

on MSN Games, you're a gamer chick" ("Xbox GamerchiX Home"). This removal of the

stereotypes of casual and hardcore gamers has evidently been successful, with the group

surpassing 5,000 members within two years of creation and attracting women who "range in age

from just a few weeks old to the upper range of the double digits" ("Five Thousand").

Figure 6. A modern day Rosie the Riveter prominently displayed on the Xbox GamerchiX
homepage.

Though this may seem like a clear step forward in revising conceptions of casual and

hardcore gamers, in part by choosing not to actively engage those terms and uniting female

gamers across game genres, a statement made by Microsoft's own Jeff Bell, Corporate VP of

Global Marketing, Interactive Entertainment Business, to commemorate the addition of the

1,000th GamerchiX member, suggests that this has done little to affect industrial conceptions of hardcore, casual, and female gamers. He states: "The rapid growth of Xbox GamerchiX is a testament to Xbox 360's appeal to more than just the hardcore gamer. It shows the Xbox Community is not just a boys[sic] club. Women are social by nature, and the wide range of content available, plus a five million member community, makes Xbox 360 THE social game console" ("Xbox GamerchiX: Over"). This single statement, which appears on the GamerchiX website and is presumably thus accepted by at least those in charge of the group, undermines much of the progress made by the GamerchiX, at least in terms of altering the definitions of "hardcore" and "casual." While Bell does suggest that a console like the Xbox360, which was previously linked only with "hardcore" gamers, has become home to a wider audience, his argument that the success of the GamerchiX proves that the system is for "more than just the hardcore gamer" and "not just a boys[sic] club" implies that none of the GamerchiX are hardcore gamers and that this term is reserved for men conforming to the established definition. While Bell doesn't come out and label these female gamers as "casual," he revives the hardcore label specifically to describe what these women are not, thus continuing to reinforce the term's male associations. Furthermore, his blanket statement that "women are social by nature" returns right back to what made Nikki Douglas so upset years earlier, suggesting that not much has changed in the past decade.

Ultimately, groups like the Xbox GamerchiX and the PMS clan are helping to redefine gender's role in the digital game space, in the process emphasizing and subverting the problematic gender assumptions at work in both "casual" and "hardcore" definitions. This valuable work, however, often reinforces other aspects of the dichotomy and, even more troubling, may not actually change industrial perceptions at all. Therefore, this progress in terms

of gender may not be enough to upset the casual-hardcore dichotomy by itself, but nonetheless plays an important role in the process.

A Juxtaposition of Sorts: "Hardcasual"

 If groups like the GamerchiX address issues inherent in the gendered conceptions of "casual" and "hardcore," the emergence of another term, "hardcasual," focuses more on the different ways people fit digital games into their lives. As mentioned in the previous chapter, N'Gai Croal's 2007 article about a gaming dad trying to find time to fit hardcore games into his hectic life seems to be one of, if not the first, times this term was used (Croal, "A Gaming Dad's"). Croal's combination of the two terms is significant for a number of reasons.

First, "hardcore" and "casual" traditionally have been thought to describe distinct categories of people, games, and playing styles. By combining them into a single descriptor, "hardcasual" subverts this bifurcation in order to point out that these categories are not natural. The dad in Croal's story fits into neither of the original categories, not by his own choosing, but because of factors not directly involved with gaming, like becoming a father and having a full-time job. This combination thus works towards breaking down the artificial barriers between these two categories.

Furthermore, as promoted by Croal, this term takes into consideration factors of age, gender, and class without resorting to the stereotypes inherent in conceptions of "casual" and "hardcore." Darren Pai, the "hardcasual" gamer in question, is a man struggling with parenthood, reversing the "soccer mom" linkage of women with domesticity by showing a dad in charge of the household. Pai's email also includes the demands of work in conceptualizing who can find time for a hardcore lifestyle, implying that those with more strenuous and time-consuming jobs, or people of lower-economic status who may work longer hours or multiple

jobs, are automatically less likely to be capable of becoming a hardcore gamer. Croal's term also incorporates issues of historical specificity, suggesting that these factors have become magnified as gamers today are getting older and older, thus running into more of these barriers to hardcore gaming.

Finally, Croal's discussion takes all of these factors and links them to game design choices, coming full circle to address all three of the major ways "hardcore" and "casual" are generally used. Not only does a hardcore lifestyle require more time to scour forums or read gaming news, but games targeted to this audience are actually built to necessitate long play sessions and a substantial overall game length. Pai cites save systems, level design, and game length among the factors that are strong barriers to entry for someone without a lot of time (Croal, "A Gaming Dad's"). This continues into the follow-up story focusing on other gamers' comments and emails on the subject, mostly with regard to how current game design does not accommodate these needs and how games could be changed to do so (Croal, "It Came"). Thus, Croal on the surface seems to address all of the major issues with the "casual" and "hardcore" dichotomy in his combination of the two terms.

However, on closer inspection this new term ultimately paves little ground, merely serving to carve out another slot in an already problematic system. Croal's labeling in no way argues that hardcore and casual gamers don't exist, it actually reaffirms this notion. Pai's original email underscores this, stating: "Gamers like myself don't want casual games, we want that hardcore gaming experience redesigned to reflect the way we live" (Croal, "A Gaming Dad's"). The implication is that without any real world constraints, Pai would in fact be a hardcore gamer, either promoting the category to the level of myth or simply reserving it for those without serious familial or career obligations, which is basically the teenage stereotype

upon which the term is founded. Furthermore, while the domestic figure in the story is male,

moving away from the "soccer mom" aspect of casual gamers, he is clearly aligned with

hardcore gaming, strengthening this gendered association despite weakening the other. Finally,

nearly all of the game design suggestions in both stories are targeted solely at games typically

classified as hardcore. Neither Croal nor any of the commenters bring up a game like *Puzzle*

Quest, which provides short match-three puzzle game sessions, but frames them within the

trappings of a role-playing game. The closest suggestion is for a return to "arcade" fundamentals

which offer bite-sized gaming with nearly limitless replayability, which a commenter sees

Nintendo fulfilling with games like *Wii Sports*, but which is still framed in terms of the hardcore

discourse of "arcade" design instead of "casual" design (Croal, "It Came"). Thus, while Croal's

initial discussion of the "hardcasual" gamer addresses all of the major complaints concerning the

"hardcore" and "casual" division to some degree, it ultimately reinscribes the existence of

different gamer types associated with these categories, not attempting to replace these terms, but

rather to supplement them.

　　If Croal's creation of the term "hardcasual" is somewhat unsuccessful in rethinking the

casual-hardcore dichotomy, the continued use of the term in the past year and a half has not

progressed in any significant way.   HardCasualGamer.com, for example, continues along many

of the same lines as Croal in its description of what exactly constitutes a "hard casual" gamer.

The site starts in exactly the same fashion, stating that "It is someone who loves games, but also

has a life and a job and most likely a family," removing gender from the equation while

maintaining a focus on time management and adult obligations. However, the last descriptor,

that a hard casual gamer "wants more than 'match three colors in a row,' but less than a 70-hour

romp through Liberty City" follows Croal's lead in arguing for "hardcasual" as another separate

category, not a replacement ("About the Site"). This statement uses the typical conceptions of

casual and hardcore genres to focus on what hardcasual is not, leaving room for both of those

categories to continue functioning as established, with the hardcasual crowd simply filling in a

gap.

Games journalist Amanda Ochsner appropriates the term for a different purpose, to

suggest that "Hardcore. Casual. It's all the same." While Ochsner doesn't focus on what the

term itself represents, she uses "hardcasual" as a jumping off point to note the incongruities

between perceptions of gamers as either casual or hardcore as evidenced by overlaps in

economic, temporal, and emotional investment similar to that discussed in the previous three

chapters (Ochsner, 2009). A step in the right direction, this usage of the term doesn't necessarily

push the term as far in specific directions as Croal, but avoids the pitfall of legitimating these

supposedly distinct categories.

Ultimately, though, "hardcasual" seems less useful than an entirely new set of terms

simply because of its recognizable incorporation of "hardcore" and "casual." While the

combination of the two suggests a blurring of the two categories, it also reinforces the idea that,

at least to some degree, these terms do have real world applicability. Dominant uses of

"hardcasual" which simply stake out a new category to sit alongside "casual" and "hardcore"

actually do less to break down barriers and instead reinscribe these terms into games discourse.

"A New Taxonomy of Gamers"

If groups like the GamerchiX are helping redefine gender and games, but without an

immediate significant impact on the "hardcore" and "casual" dichotomy, and the term

"hardcasual" introduces a new category of gamers, but only by reifying the established terms, it

seems clear that an entirely new framework of talking about gamers, games, and gameplay styles

is necessary. Two significant attempts to address these issues have sprung up in the past two

years from Big Fish Games' Paul Thelen and journalist Mitch Krpata.

Paul Thelen, founder of popular casual games portal Big Fish Games, delivered a

presentation at the Casual Connect Seattle Conference in 2008 that argued not necessarily for an

elimination of the terms "casual" and "hardcore," but for a recognition of their internal

complexity. Thelen outlines fourteen categories of gamers and games, with ten fitting under the

"casual" heading while "four" are subsets of the "core" label, in what amounts to a

psychographic approach to media audiences. William Wells' discussion of this technique

suggests that its strengths lie in the shift towards "something more than demographics" alone, yet

in a quantitative format allowing for statistical analysis (197). The appeal for the games industry

is in the interplay between these two features of psychographics, as they potentially provide a

deeper understanding of audience purchasing motivations while maintaining discrete consumer

groups which the industry can then sell to advertisers and distributors. This system, then,

downplays the significance of demographic features, circumventing many of the issues involved

with the casual and hardcore dichotomy, while remaining functional for the industry's economic

purposes, suggesting one possible solution to the problem at hand.

Along these lines, Thelen spends a significant amount of his presentation arguing that the

established definitions of "casual" and "hardcore" just don't make sense, for example by

highlighting the fact that "Nancy Drews" and "Heavy Action" gamers, presumed to be polar

opposites by the traditional terminology, actually play the games of the opposing group on a

regular basis (with a "surprising 56%" of Heavy Action gamers, the "manly man gamer that

plays for conquest and adrenaline" also playing games associated with the "Nancy Drews" who

are generally dominated by "older female gamers that play alone and like to think, relax, and

rejuvenate") (Thelen, 2008). However, Thelen continues to use the terms "casual" and "core" to make broad differentiations between audience segments, simultaneously undermining the established definitions of the terms while reinforcing them.

While Thelen obviously does not do what I indicated at the beginning of this section, develop entirely new terminology, what is useful about Thelen's suggested framework is that it provides a much more complex view of "casual" and "hardcore" that, while not completely overthrowing the terms, attempts to redefine them in some significant ways. His primary suggestion is that "the US games market is diverging, it's not converging, in terms of demographics, business models, and platforms," thus implicitly promoting a more flexible and fragmented view of games markets, genres, and gameplay styles than what can possibly be encapsulated by the dichotomy of "hardcore" and "casual." Despite this, and his suggestion that "for the purpose of this presentation, and really identifying the opportunities, get rid of the word casual and core for a little bit," like many others before him, he acknowledges that "you'll see me say those words about a dozen times before this speech is over." Thus, regardless of how passionately Thelen disagrees with the usage of "hardcore" and "casual" to describe the digital games market, he himself is unable to resist using them because they are so commonly invoked and readily understood by his audience of industry peers.

Ultimately then, the established definitions of "casual" and "hardcore" are too firmly entrenched to allow this type of revisionary stance to make a substantial impact. Even so, Thelen's suggestion that "casual" and "hardcore" are incapable of describing the entire landscape of game players and game types, instead each being made up of a number of unique subsections, is valuable. Regardless of this approach's failure to leave behind the comfortable established

terminology, Thelen is on the right track in emphasizing the inability of any two terms to alone describe such a complicated system.

While Thelen's framework certainly provides a much more complex view of the "casual" and "hardcore" split, journalist Mitch Krpata dispenses with the terms completely in his 2008 blog series, "A New Taxonomy of Gamers." Krpata sees genre, design, and gameplay styles as emerging out of gamer types, specifically focusing on the motivations driving players towards certain games and quickly dismissing the terms "casual" and "hardcore" in his second post by noting the apparent contradictions in attempting to define them in this way.

He then identifies "two fundamental reasons people play games," labeling the gamers with either motivation as "Skill Players" or "Tourists," with Skill Players focusing on challenge and achievement while Tourists simply want to experience the game's world or narrative (Krpata 3). Skills Players are then further subdivided into "Completists" and "Perfectionists," with the former focusing on doing everything possible in a game while the latter is akin to the "classic high-score freak" who thrives on honing his/her skills to surpass any competitors (5). This framework completely removes issues of gender, age, and class from the picture, instead focusing on why a person would choose to play a game and, therefore, to what types of game experiences he/she responds.

Krpata does, however, bring in issues of class with his focus on game "value" as related to game content and length, suggesting that economics also play a major role in motivating players to choose one game over another. He again introduces a duo of terms, "Wholesale Players" and "Premium Players" on the premise that "your idea of value depends on the worth you ascribe to your own time" (8). Wholesale Players want more bang for their buck, gravitating towards games that offer substantial gaming experiences for a modest price, which is linked to

people who have a lot of available time to spend playing games. Premium Players, on the other hand, have extremely limited time to game and will spend more money per gameplay hour since their own personal time is more valuable, and thus focus on games which can be completed in a short period of time (8). This framework thus incorporates the "hardcasual" suggestion that many people today don't have time to devote to long games, but positions this as merely one part of a larger system that takes into consideration how people value their own time regardless of their gaming preferences.

Furthermore, I would suggest that this also takes into account how much an individual values the medium in comparison to other entertainment media, such as films and television, and thus how much time a person is willing to commit to gaming amongst all these other factors vying for his/her time, attention, and money. Someone with ample free time (and therefore not a "Hardcasual" gamer) but who prefers surfing the Internet or watching television to gaming would still be considered a Premium Gamer in that he/she still prefers a small, self-contained game experience that does not interfere with other obligations or leisure activities. Thus, the idea of Premium and Wholesale Gamers extends beyond pure economics to become a dynamic system capable of addressing how people today divvy up their time between career, familial, and entertainment obligations and options that is flexible enough to accommodate changes over time and the broader historical context.

The strength of Krpata's system is that "both of these taxonomies [motivational and economic] suggest a way to talk about games that's based on a common understanding, and not the subjective nature of game characteristics like genre, storyline, or presentation" (10). This framework then links game design to game players and gameplay styles only in so far as these factors relate to one another, with for example Wholesale Players more likely to enjoy a

multiplayer game due to its limitless replayability but in no way suggesting that Premium Players

can't enjoy the same game if, like *Counter-Strike* or (Krpata's example) *Team Fortress 2*, it is

designed to allow for individual discrete rounds of gameplay that can be completed in a few

minutes. Thus, no game or game type is inherently attached to any specific gamer type, with

most games in fact openly courting a variety of play styles. Genres like the RPG, which can

frequently span over eighty hours, certainly attract more Wholesale Players than Premium

Players, but as Krpata states, this relationship is not inherent to the genre, but an effect of gamer

preference which similarly applies to other genres containing the features which attract

Wholesale Players. Game design, then, is not the "cause" in this equation, but an "effect" of the

existence of gamers who desire, in this case, long, intricate narratives (2). Thus, Krpata's

framework incorporates game design and genre, but without naturalizing distinctions between

genres to instead focus on the motivations driving gamers' interactions with the medium.

However, Krpata's framework privileges certain motivational factors over others, limited

perhaps because of scope, but without regard for the wide variety of reasons people play games.

Certainly not everybody plays games to be a completist, perfectionist, or tourist. One aspect of

gamer motivation that Krpata does not specifically address is sociality. While Krpata uses a

quote by Tycho of webcomic *Penny Arcade* that distinguishes between "people who play games

in order to excel at them, and those who play games as a conduit to fantasy" as an inspiration for

the distinction between Skill Players and Tourists, he fails to address the major example Tycho

provides in his original blog post. Tycho's support for this distinction comes in the form of

one's choice of rhythm game guitars, with the noisy *Guitar Hero* controller privileging

"precision" while the quieter *Rock Band* guitar sacrifices some sliver of precision in favor of an

experience more attuned to real guitar playing. The effect of this choice on both games' reward

systems, stars, is that the *Guitar Hero* controller seems to make it easier to achieve these end goals. However, as Tycho states: "I only care about stars in *co-operative* multiplayer, where I see them as an index of our indomitable band spirit. I want a measurement of our *unity*. I'm playing the same game for an entirely different purpose" than someone who aspires to five-star mastery in the single-player game (Holkins, 2007). This suggests that, at least for some gamers, social interaction may be the primary draw for playing a game, regardless of its "economic" potential or an individual's personal attachment to the game's mechanics. In fact, even Krpata's definition of a Perfectionist as someone who "see[s] success as relative to the performance of others" incorporates the idea of a community of gamers, in this case competing against each other, but who could also be interacting with each other in a myriad of other ways (5). Certainly these features intersect, as someone who is primarily a Premium Player yet motivated by socializing would be less likely to sign up for *World of Warcraft* and invest hundreds of hours in order to chat with a friend in the game world, but social interaction definitely provides another major component to bolster Krpata's taxonomy.

Tycho's initial quote, that gamers either try to "excel" at games or use them as a "conduit to fantasy" provides another possible complicating factor to Krpata's system in the form of "role-playing." Krpata's conception of the Tourist gamer suggests that these people only try to hit all of the major bullet points in a game and aren't generally interested in an especially deep experience while Skill Players focus solely on becoming an "expert" (2). Krpata's third post on *Guitar Hero* sees the difference between these two categories as that between trying to perfect a track by hitting all the right notes versus simply making the game produce rock music naturally. However, Krpata misses the possibility that someone would want to play this game not just to make rock music or become good at the game, but to simulate the experience of being a rock

star. The fact that these games eschew traditional controllers in favor of large faux guitars that replicate the motion of playing a real guitar and (for most people) necessitate that the gamer stand up as if on stage, as well as providing a constant buzz of crowd noise and cheering, makes anyone playing the game get some sense of what it is like to be onstage wowing a room full of fans. The character creation features in *Rock Band* reinforce this idea, encouraging gamers to become a part of the game and allow a player to replicate an experience most people would never be able to attain on their own.

This is to say nothing of the RPG genre which, despite attracting Wholesale Gamers due to the long narratives, draws in gamers primarily because it provides an arena in which a person can immerse him/herself into a character and over the course of sixty or more hours, feel a deeper connection to the character and the plotline than is possible in a four to ten hour game. Similarly, for many people, the attraction of online Massively Multiplayer games is the chance to create an avatar through which he/she can live vicariously in a fantasy world, regardless of the specific gameplay mechanics or aesthetics. This type of simulation effect is the primary reason a great number of people play games, which is grossly undervalued in Krpata's taxonomy.

Social interaction and role-playing are only two of the multitude of motivations which bring people to digital games that Krpata does not address in his framework. It is impossible to think that everyone can be categorized as either a Skill Player or a Tourist, which I don't think Krpata would argue, and as such, his taxonomy is best viewed as a starting point for a terminology of gamers, games, and gameplay that incorporates a wide range of gamers' complex motivations for playing, something that is more often than not either neglected or homogenized in the "hardcore" and "casual" dichotomy.

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of Krpata's taxonomy is that his system is not one of discrete groups, but rather that his categories "aren't necessarily in separate groups as much as they are points along a continuum" (part 11). This flexibility is absolutely necessary for any framework applied to games, gamers, and gameplay styles, as it opens the door for variability for any individual gamer as well as changes in historical context over time. Furthermore, the different axes influencing gaming behavior (which I would suggest include variables of gamer motivation as well as investment, of time, money, and emotional energy, as linked to contextual factors) are often in competition with each other, with certain features winning out for specific gamers as linked to specific games on an individual basis. Thus, a single person may find that they are easily immersed in the *World of Warcraft* universe, which satisfies their role-playing needs while loot-collecting within guild raids, but that a game like *Peggle* is the most economical way to pass time at work while discrete single-player experiences like *Dead Space* provide quick, action packed gameplay in unique settings that is over before he/she gets bored but which take advantage of a large home entertainment system. Thus, this hypothetical person embodies aspects of the Wholesale, Premium, Tourist, and Completist aspects of Krpata's framework while also incorporating my suggestions of social and role-playing motivators, but all to differing degrees based on what game is being played or what specific motivation brings the player to a game on a given day (i.e. When I log onto *World of Warcraft* today, do I want to socialize with my friends in my guild, or do I want to grind for loot and experience on my own?).

The weakness of Krpata's taxonomy, however, is that he provides an extremely limited view of the options for each axis of influence (Skill vs. Tourist, Wholesale vs. Premium) without explicitly indicating that these are merely smaller parts of a larger system. To combat this issue, I have provided my own potential framework for conceptualizing games, gamers, and gameplay

styles that takes into consideration user investment, motivation, and historical specificity (see fig. 6). This model is extremely open-ended and malleable, molding to each individual user as well as each individual gameplay experience for that user, as I contend that every person comes to each and every game each and every time with a different set of determining factors which may impact why he/she chooses that specific game, the way in which he/she plays that game, and what experience he/she hopes to achieve through the game. It is perfectly logical for a person to approach a game as both a Tourist and a Skill Player at the same time, hoping to experience a game world while simultaneously getting some achievement points. Most importantly, this schematic is meant to be flexible, with double sided arrows indicating the reciprocal nature of every category.

The two diagonal axes, labeled "Personal Investment" and "User Motivation" draw from Krpata's suggestions on what people bring with them to digital games. "User Motivation" is an infinitely expandable category which takes into consideration why a particular player begins playing a game at a particular time. On the diagram, I list those motivations discussed earlier in the text as examples, but I acknowledge the multiplicity of reasons which inspire people to play games. Furthermore, there is no reason why an individual user cannot have multiple intersecting motivations guiding a single play session, as people almost always play games for multiple reasons (for example, to relax after a hard day of work, socialize with friends, and earn some achievement points, all at the same time).

Similarly, the "Personal Investment" axis is structured not by the specific reason why a person plays a game, but their intensity in doing so as influenced by a variety of factors. The listed factors (emotional, economic, and temporal investment among other possibilities) affect the quality of a person's game experience while structuring his/her engagement in a specific
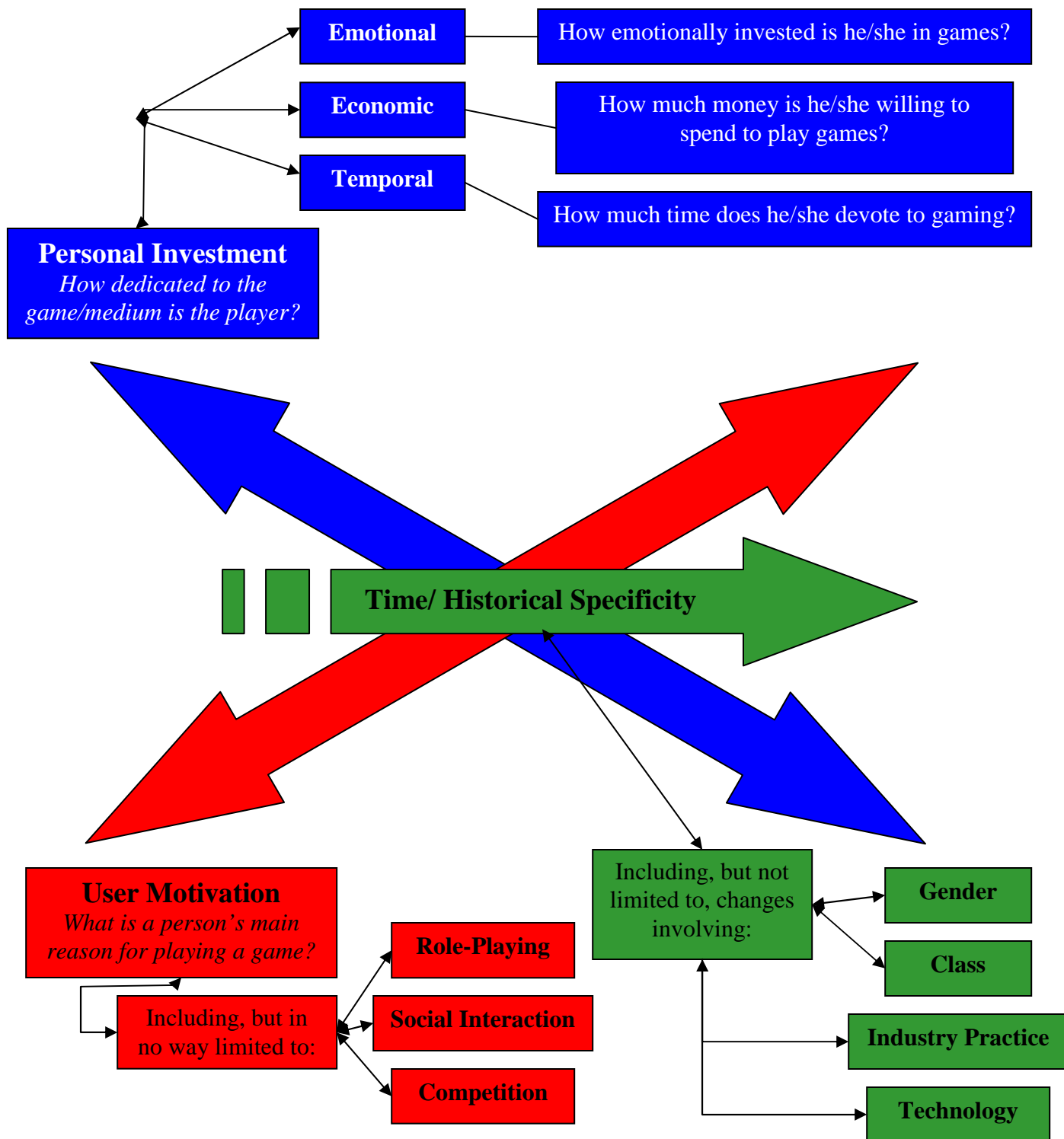
Figure 7. A potential framework for conceptualizing games, gamers, and gameplay styles.

session. These factors influence what types of games a person may buy, how often he/she chooses to play each game, and the style of connection the player feels with the game and/or the in-game character he/she is playing. If the first axis, "User Motivation," answers the question of "why" a person plays a game, then "Personal Investment" fills in the "how," "what," "when," and "where."

My prioritization of motivation may ironically suggest a solution in the vein of the uses and gratification approach to media, which is generally at odds with the cultural studies foundation underlying this entire study. One of the common criticisms of the uses and gratification approach is that it is overly behaviorist, framing consumer behavior as "determined and instrumental" rather than "an end in itself," with this social scientific framework rigidly categorizing behaviors that should be viewed qualitatively (McQuail 182)

However, I would argue that my specific usage of audience motivations ctually returns back to the central concept of uses and gratification which is not that far removed from that of cultural studies. Denis McQuail argues that this framework is, at its core, a privileging of the audience, but that the audience cannot be removed from "aspects of the context in which the experience [of receiving a media text] takes place" (183). While many uses and gratification studies may focus solely on the audience, McQuail's framing of the tradition suggests that this is a mistake, as context must be taken into consideration as well. Thus, McQuail's contextually-informed version of uses and gratification works in tandem with the cultural studies embracing of the audience as part of a larger circuit of culture that encompasses the range of historical and social context.

For my purposes, despite singling out motivation and investment, the crux of this whole framework is the third axis, that of "Time / Historical Specificity." This aspect of digital games

accounts for any factors which may structure or impact the other two axes beyond an individual's conscious choices. For example, as broadband technology becomes cheaper and penetrates the majority of American households, digital distribution may become a more viable game purchasing option for someone who may previous had not really been very engaged with the medium due to issues of temporal investment (i.e. He/she works long hours, doesn't have time to go to the store to buy games, but if they can appear instantly on the computer screen, then he/she would definitely enjoy playing them). This framework also takes into consideration issues of gender, with, for example, the increasing number of women comfortable with computers and finding jobs in previously male-held positions of power in game companies dramatically altering both how these individuals personally engage with the medium in terms of investment and motivation, but also how this affects these two factors for other gamers, both male and female, who may encounter this change further down the line.

The advantage of this approach over the dichotomized "hardcore" versus "casual" framework is that it incorporates issues embedded in these terms, like gender, class, and age, but without forcing them to conform to specific categories. Furthermore, it allows for changes over time, implicitly assuming that any generalizations derived from this model are dynamic and subject to alteration based on a variety of factors, in opposition to the static rigidity of "casual" and "hardcore." While in many ways this model may seem especially broad, it is at the same time extremely specific, open to a wide range of variables and changes, but linking them to individual gamers at individual moments in time. This framework is flexible enough to accommodate large scale cultural and historical shifts, yet can also translate these changes down to their impact on individual people, or vice versa. Ultimately, it simply seems much more

useful to interrogate a broad system that allows for countless inputs and interpretations than to settle for a terminology that is so limited that it cannot account for major cultural changes.

It isn't difficult to see why the "casual" and "hardcore" dichotomy has become dominant in games discourse. It is much simpler and easier to apply than the above model which incorporates gamer investment, motivation, and historical context in a way that cannot be summed up in two succinct terms. However, this is precisely why the "hardcore"-"casual" split does not work. Given the huge diversity of reasons why people play games, what kinds of experiences they have, and what they get out of games, it seems ludicrous to expect to be able to condense this all into two terms. While my proposed model is assuredly more complex, it corresponds to the complexity that defines digital games today. The fact that people gain satisfaction out of shooting people in the head in *Team Fortress 2* and then turn around and giggle at *Peggle*'s unicorn, compounded by the juxtaposition of these two into a single game (*Peggle Extreme*), suggests that no easy answers exist. Instead, we need to accept that the digital games medium is an extremely complex space, rife with overlap and contradiction that simply defies the terminology of past eras. "Hardcore" and "casual" now do more to hold back the medium with their weighty connotations than they help by providing shorthand assistance. Even though the majority of people within games discourse seem to know and understand these terms, it is time to move beyond this dichotomy and embrace a new approach to gamers, games, and gameplay that not only acknowledges contradictions, but embraces them.

WORKS CITED

"2008 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry." Entertainment Software

    Association. July 2008. <http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2008.pdf>.

"About the Site." HardCasualGamer.com. 1 June 2009.

    <http://www.hardcasualgamer.com/about/>.

"About Us." PMSClan.com. 1 June 2009.

    <http://www.pmsclan.com/page.php?page=About%20Us>.

Aihoshi, Rick. "World of Warcraft Interview #2." IGN. 8 Aug. 2003.

    <http://rpgvault.ign.com/articles/432/432771p1.html>.

Alexander, Leigh. "Casual Connect: Avista's Heydon on an Investor's 'Holy Grail'." 23 July

    2007. Gamasutra. 4 December 2008 <http://www.gamasutra.com/php-

    bin/news_index.php?story=14796>.

"All-Play Sports Games for Wii – EA Sports." Electronic Arts. 4 Dec. 2008

    <http://www.easports.com/eaallplay/>.

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an

    Investigation)." Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays. Trans. Ben Brewster. New

    York, NY: Monthly Review, 2002.

Altman, Rick. Film/Genre. London: BFI, 1999.

Ang, Ien. "*Dallas* and the Ideology of Mass Culture." Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A

    Reader. 2nd ed. Ed. John Storey. U of Georgia P, 1998. 265-274.

"Bejeweled 2 Official Site." PopCap Games.

    <http://www.popcap.com/games/bejeweled2?mid=bejeweled2_pc_en_full>.

"'Bejeweled Deluxe' Success Triggers Zone.com Expansion." 30 July 2002.

    <http://www.microsoft.com/presspass/press/2002/jul02/07-30zoneexpansionpr.mspx>.

"Beyond the Zone – MSN Games Look To The Future." 2006.

    <http://zone.msn.com/en/general/article/genbeyondthezone.htm>.

"Bigfish should change it's name! LOL [sic]." Forum Post. Big Fish Games. 1 March 2009.

    <http://forums.bigfishgames.com/posts/list/20/20657.page#522098>.

Boellstorff, Tom. "A Ludicrous Discipline? Ethnography and Game Studies." Games and

    Culture 1.1 (2006) 29-35.

Bourdieu, Pierre. Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste. Tran. Richard Nice.

    Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984.

Brightman, James. "Wii U.S. Installed Base Now Leads Xbox 360 By Almost 2 Million." 14

    Nov. 2008. GameDaily. 4 Dec. 2008 <http://www.gamedaily.com/articles/news/wii-us-

    installed-base-now-leads-xbox-360-by-almost-2-million/?biz=1>.

Cassell, Justine and Henry Jenkins. "Chess for Girls? Feminism and Computer Games." From

    Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games. Ed. Justine Cassell and Henry

    Jenkins. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000. 2-45.

"Casual Games Market Report 2007 – Key Findings." Casual Games Association. 30

    November 2008 <http://www.casualconnect.org/newscontent/11-

    2007/CasualGamesMarketReport2007_KeyFindings.pdf>.

"Casual Games Market Report 2007 – Summary." Casual Games Association. 30 November

    2008 <http://www.casualconnect.org/newscontent/11-

    2007/CasualGamesMarketReport2007_Summary.pdf>.

Costikyan, Greg. "TEN Becomes Pogo.com: Bingo Beats Quake." <u>Wall Street Journal</u>

 <u>Interactive</u>. Oct. 1999. <http://www.costik.com/pogo.html>.

Crecente, Brian. "Wii: Nintendo Gets Down with AARP." 6 Sept. 2008. Kotaku. 4 December

 2008. <http://kotaku.com/5046267/nintendo-gets-down-with-aarp>.

Croal, N'Gai. "It Came From the Comments: Responses to Our Guest Post On the Plight of the

 'Hardcasual' Gamer." Newsweek.com. 14 Nov. 2007.

 <http://blog.newsweek.com/blogs/levelup/archive/2007/11/14/it-came-from-the-

 comments-responses-to-the-plight-of-the-hardcasual-gamer.aspx>.

---. "Level Up: A Gaming Dad's Lament: Will No One Make AAA Videogames With the

 'Hardcasual' Player In Mind?" Newsweek.com. 5 Nov. 2007.

 <http://blog.newsweek.com/blogs/levelup/archive/2007/11/05/why-no-aaa-games-for-

 the-hardcasual-player.aspx>.

DeMaria, Rusel. "Shareware finally comes of age; downloadable games acquire professional

 polish." <u>Computer Life</u> 2.1 (1 Jan 1995), 161.

Denning, Alex. "XBLA Week: Peggle Interview." Nometet.com. 7 Apr. 2009.

 <http://www.nometet.com/interviews/xbla-week-peggle-interview/>.

Diamonon, John. "Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix Achieves Record Breaking Sales!"

 18 Dec. 2008. <http://www.capcom-

 unity.com/johndmoney/blog/2008/12/18/super_street_

 fighter_ii_turbo_hd_remix_achieves_record_breaking_sales>.

Eglash, Ron. "Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters." <u>Social</u>

 <u>Text</u> 20.2 (2002): 49-64.

"EGM." Ziff Davis Media. 30 November 2008 <http://www.ziffdavis.com/products/print/egm>.

Elliott, Stuart. "The Media Business: Advertising; Nintendo Turns Up the Volume in a

    Provocative Appeal to Its Core Market: Teen-age Males." <u>New York Times</u> 1 July 1994.

    3 May 2008 <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A07E5DC1739F932A357

    54C0A962958260>.

Ellis, David. "Peggle Dual Shot Review for the Nintendo DS." 1UP.com. 4 March 2009.

    <http://www.1up.com/do/reviewPage?cId=3173058&p=39>.

"ESA Talks State of Biz, Reveals 40% of Gamers Are Women." 17 July 2008. Gamasutra. 4

    December 2008 <http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=19454>.

"ESRB Rating Information – Women's Murder Club: A Darker Shade of Grey." Entertainment

    Software Ratings Board. <http://www.esrb.org/ratings/synopsis.jsp?Certificate=26593>.

"FAQ: New User Questions." PMSClan.com. 1 June 2009.

    <http://www.pmsclan.com/forum/faq.php?faq=nu1#faq_nu5>.

"FIFA 09." Electronic Arts. 2008. <http://fifa09.ea.com/us/gameinfo/dynpid/11665>.

Fiske, John. "The Cultural Economy of Fandom." <u>The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and</u>

    <u>Popular Media</u>. Ed. Lisa A. Lewis. New York: Routledge, 1992. 30-49.

Fitzgerald, Kate. "Family Fun vs. High Tech: Nintendo, Sega Face Off." <u>Advertising Age</u> 16

    Aug. 1993: 8.

---. "Nintendo's Task for Burnett: Image Overhaul." <u>Advertising Age</u> 28 Feb. 1994: 3.

---. "Videogame Magazine Publisher Is Blasting Into New Ventures." <u>Advertising Age</u> 30 Aug.

    1993: 12.

"Five Thousand GamerchiX Strong!" 23 April 2008. Xbox.com. <http://www.xbox.com/en-

    US/community/gamerchix/fivethousand.htm>.

Foucault, Michel. The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction. Trans. Robert Hurley.

New York, NY: Vintage, 1990.

Franco, Gabriel. "Gabriel Franco Interviews Cammie Dunaway on Latin America, VGC,

Piracy." VG Chartz. 19 Aug. 2008.

<http://news.vgchartz.com/news.php?id=1706?gr_i_ni>.

French, Michael. "Grand Theft Auteur – Part 2." Develop. 15 Aug. 2008.

<http://www.developmag.com/interviews/248/Grand-Theft-Auteur-Part-2>.

 "GameSpy Arcade – Features." IGN.com. <http://www.gamespyarcade.com/features/>.

"Games on TEN." Ten.net. <http://www.ten.net/199706/html/games_on_ten.html>.

"Gaming Enthusiasts." Ziff Davis Media. 30 Nov. 2008

<http://www.ziffdavis.com/audiences/gamers>.

Garratt, Patrick. "Keighley Hammers Reggie on Lack of E3 Nintendo Hardcore." VG247. 22

July 2008. <http://www.vg247.com/2008/07/22/keighley-hammers-reggie-on-lack-of-

e3-nintendo-hardcore/>.

Gaudiosi, John. "GameSpy Buys Mplayer." Video Business. 21 Dec. 2000.

<http://www.videobusiness.com/article/CA620376.html>.

Glos, Jennifer and Shari Goldin. "An Interview With Lee McEnany Caraher (Sega)." From

Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games. Ed. Justine Cassell and Henry

Jenkins. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000. 192-213.

Graft, Kris. "Quake Live Open Beta Overloaded." Edge Online. 25 Feb. 2009.

<http://www.edge-online.com/news/quake-live-open-beta-overloaded>.

Hale, Rob. "Failure and Learning." A Games Design Blog. 31 March 2009.

<http://agamesdesignblog.com/2009/03/26/failure-and-learning/>.

Hicks, Chris. "Peggle Developer Interview." ComputerAndVideoGames.com. 14 Feb. 2008.

    <http://www.computerandvideogames.com/article.php?id=182177>.

Holland, Craig. "Survey Says! Using Survey Data to Build Better Games." <u>Casual Connect</u>

    <u>Magazine</u>. Winter 2007: 26-27. 4 Dec. 2008

    <http://mag.casualconnect.org/winter2007/CasualConnect_Winter_2007.pdf>.

Holkins, Jerry (Tycho). "Old School." <u>Penny-Arcade</u>. 3 Dec. 2007. <http://www.penny-

    arcade.com/2007/12/03/>.

Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. <u>Dialectic of Enlightenment</u>. Trans. John Cumming.

    New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1972.

Horton, Cleveland. "Nintendo, Sega Boost Ad Pace." <u>Advertising Age</u> 25 Jan. 1993: 16.

Hsu, Dan. "The Full Interview: Nintendo's Denise Kaigler." Bitmob. 12 May 2009.

    <http://bitmob.com/index.php/mobfeed/The-Full-Interview-Nintendos-Denise-

    Kaigler.html>.

"id History." idsoftware.com. <http://www.idsoftware.com/business/history/>.

Ingham, Tim. "Nintendo: 'We've Never Neglected Core Gamers.'" <u>MCV.</u> 29 Oct. 2008.

    <http://www.mcvuk.com/news/32153/Nintendo-Weve-never-neglected-core-gamers>.

Ip, Barry and Gabriel Jacobs. "Segmentation of the Games Market Using Multivariate

    Analysis." <u>Journal of Targeting, Measure, and Analysis for Marketing</u> 13.3 (2005): 275-

    287.

Jenkins, Henry. "Voices from the Combat Zone: Game Grrlz Talk Back." <u>From Barbie to</u>

    <u>Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games</u>. Ed. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins.

    Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000. 328-341.

"Jolt Announces Playboy Manager." Jolt Online Gaming. 6 May 2009.

    <http://www.joltonline.com/news/10_jolt_announces_playboy_manager>.

"Joystiq interviews Greg Canessa of XBLA." Joystiq. 20 July 2006.

    <http://www.joystiq.com/2006/07/20/joystiq-interviews-greg-canessa-of-xbla/>.

Juul, Jesper. <u>Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds</u>. Cambridge,

    MA: MIT Press, 2005.

---. "Swap Adjacent Gems to Make Sets of Three: A History of Matching Tile Games." <u>Artifact</u>

    2 (2007). 30 Nov. 2008 <http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/swapadjacent/>.

Kendall, Lori. "Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in US Popular Culture." <u>International Journal of</u>

    <u>Cultural Studies</u> 2.2 (1999): 260-283.

Klepek, Patrick. "EA Sports: Hardcore Fans Shouldn't Fear Our New Casual Sports Approach."

    22 May 2008. MTV Multiplayer. 4 Dec. 2008

    <http://multiplayerblog.mtv.com/2008/05/22/hardcore_fans_shouldnt_fear/>.

Kline, Stephen, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter. <u>Digital Play: The Interaction of</u>

    <u>Technology, Culture, and Marketing</u>. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003.

Kollar, Philip. "E3 2008: Nintendo Press Conference Live Blog." 1UP.com. 15 July 2008.

    <http://www.1up.com/do/newsStory?cId=3168728>.

Kraft, Kris. "Analysis: The Universal (Brain-Eating) Appeal Of *Plants Vs. Zombies*."

    Gamasutra. 20 May 2009. <http://www.gamasutra.com/php-

    bin/news_index.php?story=23678>.

Krpata, Mitch. "A New Taxonomy of Gamers: Table of Contents." <u>Insult Swordfighting</u>. Blog

    Entry. 21 Jan 2008. <http://insultswordfighting.blogspot.com/2008/01/new-taxonomy-

    of-gamers-table-of.html>.

Kuchera, Ben. "Popcap: Inside Our 'Casual' Games Is a Hardcore Center." Ars Technica. 23

    April 2009. <http://arstechnica.com/gaming/news/2009/04/popcap-inside-our-casual-

    games-is-a-hardcore-center.ars>.

Kumar, Mathew. "The State of the Casual Games Industry in 2008." Gamasutra. 12 Aug 2008.

    <http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3757/the_state_of_the_casual_games_.php>.

Kuo, Li. C. "Do 'Hardcore Gamers' Still Matter?" Gamespy. 14 April 2006.

    <http://www.gamespy.com/articles/701/701787p1.html>.

Lantz, Scott. "Casual Strategy vs Hard-Core Strategy." Shrapnel Games. 28 April 2005.

    <http://forum.shrapnelgames.com/blog.php?b=34>.

Lee, Garnett. "1UP.com - Listen UP – 02/27/2009." 27 Feb. 2009. Podcast. "Listen UP."

    1UP.com. <http://www.1up.com/do/minisite?cId=3172882>.

---. "1UP.com - Listen UP - 05/15/2009." 15 May 2009. Podcast. "Listen UP." 1UP.com.

    <http://www.1up.com/do/minisite?cId=3172882>.

---. "1UP.com - Listen UP - 05/22/2009." 22 May 2009. Podcast. "Listen UP." 1UP.com.

    <http://www.1up.com/do/minisite?cId=3172882>.

Martinson, Anna M., Nancy Schwartz, and Misha Walker Vaughan. "Women's Experiences of

    Leisure." New Media & Society 4.1 (2002): 29-49.

McAllister, Ken S. Game Work: Language, Power, and Computer Game Culture. Tuscaloosa,

    AL: U of Alabama P, 2004.

McGiboney, Michelle. "Twitter's Tweet Smell Of Success." Nielson Wire. 18 March 2009.

    <http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/twitters-tweet-smell-of-success/>.

McQuail, Denis. "With the Benefit of Hindsight: Reflections on Uses and Gratification."

    Critical Studies in Mass Communication Research 1.2 (1984): 177-193.

"Microsoft Advertising." Microsoft Corporation. 30 Nov. 2008

        <http://advertising.microsoft.com/games?tab=overview>.

"Microsoft Casual Games." Microsoft Corporation. 30 Nov. 2008

        <http://zone.msn.com/en/microsoftcasualgames>.

"Microsoft Unveils a More User-Friendly MSN Gaming Zone." 31 Aug. 1999.

        <http://www.microsoft.com/presspass/press/1999/aug99/unveilpr.mspx>.

Minkley, Johnny. "Bleszinski: 'We don't feel threatened by casual gamers'." 29 Sept. 2008.

        GamesIndustry.biz. 4 Dec. 2008. <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/bleszinski-we-

        don-t-feel-threatened-by-casual-gamers>.

Mittell, Jason. Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture. New

        York, NY: Routledge, 2004.

Moran, Brian. "New Home Video Games Poised For Comeback." Advertising Age 9 June

        1986: 4.

Morris, Chris. "Why It's Increasingly Significant That There's No DLC in NPD." Variety –

        The Cut Scene. 13 April 2009.

        <http://weblogs.variety.com/the_cut_scene/2009/04/why-its-increasingly-important-that-

        theres-no-dlc-in-npd.html>.

---. "A Wii Bit Short of Supplies." 22 July 2008. Forbes.com. 4 Dec. 2008

        <http://www.forbes.com/technology/2008/07/21/nintendo-wii-shortage-tech-personal-

        cx_cm_0722nintendo.html>.

"Mplayer Launches FREE ZONE; Mpath Interactive Makes Industry-Leading Internet Game

        Service Available to Gamers at No Charge." Business Wire. 13 Feb. 1997.

Nielsen Company, The. The State of the Video Gamer: PC Game and Video Game Console

    Usage – Fourth Quarter 2008. 7 April 2009. <http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/wp-

    content/uploads/2009/04/stateofvgamer_040909_fnl.pdf>.

Parfitt, Ben. "Netbook Boom Bodes Well For Casual Gaming." 26 Nov. 2009.

    Casualgaming.biz. <http://www.casualgaming.biz/news/27962/Netbook-boom-bodes-

    well-for-casual-gaming>.

Partridge, Allen. Creating Casual Games For Profit and Fun. Boston, MA: Charles River

    Media, 2007.

"Play Bejeweled and Peggle in WoW." PopCap Games.

    <http://www.popcap.com/promos/wow/>.

"PopCap's Bejeweled® Franchise Hits 25 Million Units Sold Mark." PopCap Games. 19 Aug.

    2008. <http://www.popcap.com/press/release.php?pid=428>.

"PopCap Games Resarch." GamesIndustry.biz. 28 April 2008.

    <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/popcap-games-research-casual-games-relieve-

    stress-and-increase--vigor---claim-boffins-from-east-carolina-university>.

"PopCap Launches Peggle™ Game on Xbox LIVE® Arcade." PopCap Games. 9 March 2009.

    <http://www.popcap.com/press/release.php?pid=511>.

"PopCap Launches Plants vs. Zombies™ Game for PC and Mac." PopCap Games. 5 May 2009.

    <http://www.popcap.com/press/release.php?pid=521>.

Portnow, James. "Opinion: Redefining Casual for the Hardcore." Gamasutra.com. 28 April

    2009 <http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=23249>.

Remo, Chris. "The Philosophy of Faith: A Mirror's Edge Interview." Gamasutra. 7 Nov. 2008.

    <http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3843/the_philosophy_of_faith_a_.php>.

Remo, Chris and Jen Steele. "Big Fish CSO: 'Casual' And 'Hardcore' Insufficient To Define

    Market." 24 July 2008. <http://www.gamasutra.com/php-

    bin/news_index.php?story=19554>.

"Research Reveals Casual Games Provide Mental Balance, Stress Relief and Relaxation."

    RealNetworks. 4 December 2008

    <http://www.realnetworks.com/company/press/releases/2006/casgames_research.html>.

Robbins, Brian and Margaret Wallace, eds. 2006 Casual Games White Paper. International

    Game Developers Association. 30 Nov. 2008

    <http://www.igda.org/casual/IGDA_CasualGames_Whitepaper_2006.pdf>.

Sanchez, Tina. "1UP.com – Good Grief - 04/06/2009." 6 March 2009. Podcast. "Good Grief."

    1UP.com. <http://www.1up.com/do/minisite?cId=3172958>.

Salen, Katie and Eric Zimmerman. Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals. MIT, 2004.

Sawyer, Ben. Monster Gaming: The Complete How-To Guide for Becoming a Hardcore Gamer.

    Scottsdale, AZ: Paraglyph, 2003.

Scullion, Chris. "Okay 'Hardcore Gamers', It's Over to You – Review of Mega Man 9."

    Nintendo: The Official Magazine.   21 May 2009.

    <http://www.officialnintendomagazine.co.uk/article.php?id=8718>.

Sheffield, Brandon. "DICE 09: NPD – Six Million New Gamers in Last Year." 20 Feb. 2009.

    Gamasutra. 20 Feb. 2009 <http://www.gamasutra.com/php-

    bin/news_index.php?story=22415>.

Siler, Charles. "Video Giants Wage Marketing Kombat; Sony Enters the Fray With Rivals Sega,

    Nintendo." Advertising Age (International) 17 July 1995: I3.

Sirlin, David. "Saving the Day: Save Systems in Games." Gamasutra.com. 1 Sept. 2008. <http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/1935/saving_the_day_save_systems_in_.php>.

Sotamaa, Olli. "Perceptions of Player in Game Design Literature." Situated Play. Tokyo: U of Tokyo, 2007. 456-465. <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/07311.59383.pdf>.

Storey, John. Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction. 4th ed. U of Georgia P, 2006.

Takahashi, Dean. "Microsoft's Shane Kim Loves Nintendo, Talks Up New Xbox Experience As Social Network." 16 Nov. 2008. VentureBeat. 4 Dec. 2008 <http://venturebeat.com/2008/11/16/microsofts-shane-kim-loves-nintendo-talks-up-new-xbox-experience-as-social-network/>.

Thelen, Paul. "Disaggregating the Casual Games Industry." July 2008. Casual Connect Seattle Conference. <http://www.casualconnect.org/content/Seattle/2008/thelensea08.html>.

Thompson, Clive. "Getting Lucky: Hard-Core Gamers Penetrate Peggle's Physics." Wired. 9 March 2009. <http://www.wired.com/gaming/gamingreviews/commentary/games/2009/03/gamesfrontiers_0309>.

Thornton, Sarah. Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital. Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1996.

---. "The Social Logic of Subcultural Capital." The Subcultures Reader. Ed Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton. London: Routledge, 1997. 200-209.

Tinney, Wade. "Understanding the Casual Gamer." IGDA Online Games Quarterly 1.2 (2005). < http://www.igda.org/online/quarterly/1_2/casual.php>.

Totillo, Stephen. "Millions Play 'Peggle,' But Few Review It – Problem?" MTV Multiplayer. 28 May 2008. <http://multiplayerblog.mtv.com/2008/05/28/peggle/>.

Turner, Graeme. British Cultural Studies: An Introduction. New York, NY: Routledge, 1992.

"Unreal Tournament 3 Steam Sale Extended." 10 March 2009. Valve. 11 March 2009 <http://store.steampowered.com/news/2334/>.

Valay. "Miyamoto: Casual Gamers Will Graduate and Become Hardcore." 20 Nov. 2008. Nintendo Everything. <http://www.nintendoeverything.com/?p=6532>.

Walker, Robin. "You Better Hold Onto Your Head, Mate." Team Fortress 2 Official Blog. 5 May 2009. <http://www.teamfortress.com/post.php?id=2477>.

Wark, McKenzie. Gamer Theory. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP. 2007.

Wauters, Robin. "Gaming Site InstantAction On a Roll." TechCrunch.com. 19 Dec. 2008. <http://www.techcrunch.com/2008/12/19/gaming-site-instantaction-on-a-roll/>.

Wells, William D. "Psychographics: A Critical Review." Journal of Marketing Research 12.2 (1975): 196-213.

Welsh, Oli. "World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King – Interview." 16 May 2008. Eurogamer. 4 Dec. 2008. <http://www.eurogamer.net/article.php?article_id=140861>.

Whiting, Mark. "Steam Surpasses 15 Million Users." 1Up.com. 8 Feb. 2008. <http://www.1up.com/do/newsStory?cId=3166044>.

"Why Men Have To Conquer the Xbox." 27 May 2008. Mail Online. 4 Dec. 2008 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1022062/Why-men-conquer-Xbox.html>.

"Wii Would Like to Play: Family Fun." 9 March 2007. GameTrailers.com. 18 April 2008 <http://www.gametrailers.com/player/17678.html>.

Williams, Dmitri, Nick Yee, and Scott E. Caplan. "Who Plays, How Much, and Why? Debunking the Stereotypical Gamer Profile." <u>Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication</u> 13 (2008): 993-1018.

Wolff, Richard D. "Ideological State Apparatuses, Consumerism, and U.S. Capitalism: Lessons for the Left." <u>Rethinking Marxism</u> 17.2 (2005). 223-235.

"World's Leading Game Publishers Choose Mplayer; Mplayer Takes Off With the Largest, Best and Broadest Range of Games on the 'Net." <u>Business Wire.</u> 13 Oct. 1997.

"Xbox GamerchiX Home." Xbox.com. <http://www.xbox.com/en-US/community/gamerchix/>.

"Xbox GamerchiX: Over 1,000 Women Strong!" Xbox.com. <http://www.xbox.com/en-US/community/gamerchix/20070116-onethousand.htm>.

Yin-Poole, Wesley. "DICE: We are not going casual." VideoGamer.com. 10 Feb. 2009. <http://www.videogamer.com/news/dice_we_are_not_going_casual.html?/>.

"Ziff Davis Media: EGM." Ziff Davis Media. 30 November 2008 <http://www.ziffdavis.com/products/print/egm>.