VIDEOGAMES IN RELATIONSHIP CONFLICTS

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Extended Abstract

This paper contributes to feminist games studies, media studies, and internet studies, presenting findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with seven self-identified women who played videogames with their romantic partners. It seeks to develop a more multifaceted understanding of women's gaming 'lifeworlds' (cf. Jackson, 2013) and their struggles to participate and 'stay in' the male-dominant public (Harvey, 2021). Specifically, this study observes how relationship dynamics and romantic ties between couples can play an important role in shaping women's gaming practices. In doing so, this argument challenges the assumption that women's play can be given as simply 'a free choice' as Kelly Bergstrom has similarly critiqued (2019).

The medium of videogames is historically constructed around a default hypermasculine 'gamer' identity that views girls and women as 'Other' and 'outsiders' (Shaw, 2011; Vossen, 2018). In games research, popular approaches to amending gaming's gender divide frequently advocate for the creation of new entry points. However, various scholars have critiqued the common pitfalls and limitations of this interventionist literature for severely overlooking the many girls and women who already play (Taylor, 2006, pp. 93-99; Bergstrom, 2019; Harvey, 2021). Problematically, these gender essentialist approaches often treat 'females' inherent 'lack of interest' in videogames as the main problem to overcome (Taylor, 2006, pp. 93-99). However, many girls and women continue to play – as they always have – despite barriers (Ibid., 123).

During gameplay, despite women's deployment of various coping strategies afforded by technological affordances (Cote, 2017), the foreboding sense of 'environmental threat' (cf. Massumi, 2015) imposed by a hostile hypermasculine 'new gaming public' (Salter & Blodgett, 2012) continues to impact women's gaming lifeworlds as they are reconfigured towards a sense of harm as simply inevitable. In their attempts to navigate an increasingly hostile environment, women must carefully manage their own sense of safety as scholars such as Emma A. Jane (2017), Amanda C. Cote (2017), and Alison Harvey (2021) have carefully and extensively documented. Many women remain in a

state of hypervigilance while facing the amplified visibility of popular misogyny online (Jane, 2017; Humphreys, 2017). This hostility impacts how women 'choose' to play or not play certain videogames, what videogames they 'choose' to play or not play, and how women will play those videogames. Here, the unfair onus placed on women to develop more intricate coping strategies in order to keep gaming, reflects wider societal structures facilitating 'rape cultures' that shift the burden of safety onto victims rather than holding perpetrators accountable (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994).

In this study's findings, interviewees tended to describe their relationship to gaming in ways that reflect wider 'feminine resilience' discourses of 'leaning in' and 'leaning out'. In the last decade, popular neoliberalist feminist-inspired discourses have encouraged women to either 'lean in' (Sanberg, 2013, cited in McRobbie, 2020) or 'lean out' (Shevinsky, 2015) of male-dominated workplaces. Here, I take inspiration from Angela McRobbie's critiques of the politics of resilience observed in 'leadership feminism' and 'perfect-imperfect-resilience' (shortened to '*p-i-r*') that both evoke the image of the 'perfect' woman (2020). Drawing from McRobbie, I propose that the affective structures of 'leaning in' and 'leaning out' can also highlight the limited affordances of women's participation in gaming and that these gender narratives continue to shape their everyday 'private' lives and leisure practices outside of the workplace. In thinking about these two commonplace pieces of advice given, especially to young women, I argue that 'lean in' and 'lean out' problematically reduce these situations to a false binary choice.

Exploring conflicts between couples relative to their gaming habits, as I examine, demonstrates how the accounts of women's evolving (dis)engagement to gaming cannot sufficiently be captured within a scope that is often limited to discussions about women's barriers to entry (Bergstrom, 2019). Cote's research on women's coping strategies suggests that women's participation is further obfuscated because some tactics camouflage their gender in order to avoid unwanted attention (2017, p. 145) and, as such, can make it difficult to witness and see them fully represented in the public eye (cf. Taylor 2006, p. 123). Speaking with women about how they negotiate gaming with romantic partners thus helps to paint a more complex and complicated picture of their lives, gaming practices, and gaming lifeworlds. When exploring how gaming can contribute to bonding with a significant other as well as discords in intimate relationships, we can also provide a better account of the differing, complicated, and sometimes conflicting ways that women might sometimes lean towards and/or away from certain aspects and assemblages of games (Taylor, 2009). In doing so, this research emphasizes that the role of intersubjectivity – such as romantic ties – can also significantly impact women's shifting (dis)engagement in gaming.

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