Casual resistance: A longitudinal case study of video gaming's gendered construction and related audience perceptions

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Abstract: Many media are associated with masculinity or femininity and male or female audiences, which links them to broader power structures around gender. Media scholars thus must understand how gendered constructions develop and change, and what they mean for audiences. This article addresses these questions through longitudinal, in-depth interviews with female video gamers (2012-2018), conducted as the rise of casual video games potentially started redefining gaming's historical masculinization. Analysis shows that participants have negotiated relationships with casualness. While many celebrate casual games' potential for welcoming new audiences, others resist casual's influence to safeguard their self-identification as gamers. These results highlight how a medium's gendered construction may not be salient to consumers, who carefully navigate divides between their own and industrially-designed identities, but can simultaneously reaffirm existing power structures. Further, how participants' views change over time emphasizes communication's ongoing need for longitudinal audience studies that address questions of media, identity, and inclusion.

Keywords: Video games, gender, game studies, feminist media studies, hegemony, casual games, in-depth interviews, longitudinal audience studies

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From comic books to soap operas, many media are gendered, associated with masculinity or

femininity and with male or female audiences. Take computing, which society and culture orient

towards men more than women. Most programmers are men, popular representations of

computer programmers tend to show more men than women, and parents often see computing as

more acceptable for boy children than for girl children (e.g. Ensmenger, 2012; Gilmour, 1999;

Jenson and de Castell, 2011). However, it's important to recognize that these associations are

constructed, rather than natural, and can and do change over time. For example, early

computing—completing mathematical calculations by hand—was considered low-status clerical

work for women, especially women of color[i]. This changed with the introduction of electronic

computers and the prioritization of men's contributions to and use of the technology over

women's (Light, 1999). As computers became more common, further forces, from press

coverage to industry standards, helped construct computing as a masculine pursuit, despite

women's contributions to the field (Ensmenger, 2012).

Other technologies have also been associated with differently gendered positions over

time. Radio and television, for instance, were originally masculinized, seen as technologically

advanced media for men and boys to tinker and experiment with. As they moved into the

household and the patterns of everyday domestic life, this changed, with radio and TV—and

daytime radio and TV in particular—then constructed as feminized media (e.g. Douglas, 1987;

Spigel, 1992). These paths indicate how society is continually in the process of re-evaluating and

re-inventing media; their constructions are always under negotiation. The question for media

scholars then becomes: what is the significance of these changes, and how might they contribute to broader structures of power, gender, and meaning?

Researchers have, for instance, found that feminized media are often culturally dismissed in ways that are not true for masculinized media (e.g. Radway, 1984; McDonnell, 2014; Vanderhoef, 2013). At the same time, audiences can read pleasure and empowerment into media even when they are positioned as insignificant or non-serious. Shifting gender expectations around media can also offer new opportunities to previously ignored or underserved audiences. Thus, it is necessary to analyze media, their constructions, and their audience practices in depth to understand their cultural positioning and how real people navigate their uses and meanings.

This article addresses these questions through a longitudinal case study of video games conducted during a potentially pivotal moment in their gendered construction. Video games have long been defined as a masculine technology, focused on a young, straight, cisgender and primarily white male audience (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, Kiesler, Sproull & Eccles, 1985; Kirkpatrick, 2015; Kocurek, 2015; Newman 2017; Williams, 2006). In the mid-2000s, however, the rise of social, mobile, and casual games offered a possible redefinition. While at its most basic "casual" refers to games that are simple to learn, that can be picked up or put down easily without losing progress, and that are aimed at broad audiences, the term is normally contrasted with so-called "core" games, which focus on difficult mechanics, high level graphics, and adolescent male audiences (Chess & Paul, 2019). Casual has come to connote a location on a mobile, social, or family-friendly console platform, an older and female audience, and more. Because casual focuses on games, players, and playstyles that diverge from gaming's historic expectations, it is a potentially radical force in the medium's gendered construction.

While casual games have risen, however, gaming culture has also seen significant

resistance to diversification. One of the most virulent backlashes against change was 2014's

GamerGate movement. Spurred by (unfounded) accusations that game designer Zoë Quinn had

exchanged sexual favors for positive coverage of her game *Depression Quest*, this online Twitter

campaign supposedly advocated for better ethics in game journalism. In practice, it directed a

slew of harassment at female game developers, game studies scholars, journalists, players, and

allies. Many targeted by GamerGate had their home addresses published online (a practice

known as "doxxing"), faced rape and death threats, or were even "swatted", which occurs when

harassers call in a false crime report at a victim's location to send police who will frighten or

even injure them. While GamerGate's significance should not be exaggerated, as it can best be

understood as an example of ongoing issues with sexism in gaming spaces rather than a unique

incident (Cote, 2020), it is worth noting as evidence of a pushback against new game audiences[ii].

The question of casual games' potential for redefining gaming remains open-ended.

Drawing on in-depth interviews, conducted at two times with the same set of participants,

this article therefore investigates how self-identified women gamers interpret the rise of casual

games and if/how their views have changed over time. I chose to focus on women who defined

themselves as gamers because their experiences are firmly located at the nexus of conflicting

perspectives about casual and core games. As gamers, my interviewees have long histories of

play and extensive experience navigating masculinized gaming spaces, but as women, they are

part of casual games' expected audience. They have a unique viewpoint on how games are or

could be gendered. Using the same participants at both times accounted for those who may have

stopped gaming or who would otherwise be missed via cross-sectional research approaches. This

work therefore builds on existing media and gender research first by paying attention to

audiences navigating spaces that are not gendered "for" them at a potential moment of change

and second by adding a longitudinal perspective on how individuals' perceptions of media shift with both their own life circumstances and general cultural trends.

Overall, I found that my interviewees had varied and highly negotiated relationships with casual games. Many argued that casual games would serve as gateways through which new audiences could access gaming culture and communities. Others, however, felt that their position as female gamers had become more ambivalent due to the rise of casual games, as players now expected them to be casual rather than recognizing that they could play many styles of games in many ways. Still more interviewees felt that casual games did not necessarily "count" as real games, buying into the exclusionary idea that some games and players matter more than others (Consalvo & Paul, 2019; Paul, 2018). Interestingly, participants were more positive about casual games during our first interviews (2012-2013) than our second (2017-2018), suggesting that players' initial hopes—that casual games would democratize access to gaming spaces—have not panned out. This is likely due to both cultural backlashes against diversification and game culture's internal hierarchy which prioritizes core games over casual.

My results also revealed that gender was a less salient aspect of women's casual gaming experiences than originally anticipated. Rather than interpreting casual games as feminized, participants primarily interpreted them as casual. This suggests that individuals who are used to navigating a space that is not gendered "for" them may learn to prioritize different parts of their identity, such as their status as gamers, rather than their gender identity. Researchers will need to keep this in mind when drawing conclusions about when and how gender matters with regards to media. Finally, women's changing perspectives over time highlight media and communications' need for more longitudinal audience studies, particularly in moments of cultural change, to analyze and understand how more inclusive cultures and communities can be built.

Literature Review

Gendering Games

Although diverse players have always enjoyed video games, the video game industry and game culture have since at least the 1990s focused on and circulated around a young, straight, cisgender, and primarily white male audience (Williams, 2006). This is due to several factors, including games' development in male-dominated military-industrial spaces (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009), game culture's links to other areas of male youth culture (Kiesler, Sproull & Eccles, 1985; Kocurek, 2015), as well as elements like game press, advertising, and content (Kirkpatrick, 2015; Newman 2017). For instance, games and game advertising tend to prioritize male characters and underrepresent and/or oversexualize female characters, presenting them as rewards for a presumed male player (e. g. Beasley & Standley, 2002; Downs & Smith, 2010; Williams, Martins, Consalvo & Ivory, 2009). These factors have helped normalize gaming as a pursuit for men and boys, rather than girls and women.

It is important, of course, to recognize that this target market, which we tend to refer to as hardcore or "core", to contrast with "casual", represents only a small section of games' actual players and can be best understood as a "designed identity" rather than a truthful reflection of who plays games. Designed identity, a term developed by Shira Chess (2017), describes the idealized player identity that emerges from "industry conventions, textual constructs, and audience placements in the design and structure of video games" (p. 31). Although Chess uses this term primarily to describe the creation of a designed casual gamer identity (see below), the concept is similarly apt for describing the stereotypical identity of a traditional gamer.

The designed identity of core gamers as young, white, male, heterosexual, and more makes it easier for people who resemble that identity to access games spaces and communities,

while those who differ face more barriers (Paaßen, Morgenroth & Stratemeyer, 2017). For example, Adrienne Shaw (2012) interviewed 27 individuals who did not match typical gamer stereotypes and found "male interviewees were much more likely to identify as gamers than female, transgender or genderqueer interviewees were" (p. 34). Other studies have followed up on the question of gamer identity and show that, while there are some entry points where female players can see themselves represented as gamers, these tend to be in casual rather than core spaces, which remain male-dominated (e.g. Bergstrom, Fisher & Jenson, 2016; Chess, Evans & Baines, 2017; Eklund, 2016). Industrial constructions build audience expectations that can drive many players to disassociate from gamer identity as well as actual game spaces or communities.

Not everyone needs to identify as a gamer to play or enjoy games, but the limited stereotypes surrounding gamer identity have built an inherently unequal system of power in gaming spaces and beyond. For instance, players who do not fit the designed identity of a "gamer" face higher levels of harassment in game communities, as they are perceived as outsiders rather than regular players (Cote, 2017; Gray 2014; 2018; Massanari, 2015; Nakamura, 2012; Ortiz, 2019; Salter & Blodgett, 2012; 2017). Moreover, the rise of white supremacist politics, anti-feminist ideologies and the alt-right has been at least partially linked to discriminatory trends in gaming, such as GamerGate (Condis, 2019; Gray & Leonard, 2018; Lees, 2016). Intervening in games' ongoing hierarchy of power may be one small step towards building a more equitable and inclusive culture overall.

Casual Changes

Casual gaming provides one potential intervention. Casual games are not new; not only have they existed in analog form for decades or even centuries, but they have long been included on home computers in the form of *Solitaire*, *FreeCell*, *Minesweeper*, and more. The rise of the

Internet also meant the rise of browser-based casual games, like *Zuma* or *Bejeweled*. However, these games were largely tangential to the overall video game industry until the mid-2000s, when Nintendo helped centralize them through the introduction of the Nintendo DS and the Wii console, which prioritized casual games, easy controls, and broad audiences. This change was followed by the rise of social and mobile games, as social media sites and smartphone capabilities grew and spread. Therefore, the mid-2000s mark the first moment when casual games became significant to gaming culture overall (Chess & Paul, 2019).

As casual games have risen, many researchers, game developers, and players have seen them as potentially revolutionary because casual games violate longstanding expectations for game characteristics and player identities. Casual generally refers to games that are "easy to learn, simple to play and [offer] quick rewards with forgiving gameplay" (Kuittinen, Kultima, Niemelä & Paavilainen, 2007, p. 106). They typically possess non-violent content, positive themes, accessibility for players of different skill levels, easily interruptible game play, and lenient punishment for failures (Kultima, 2009; Juul 2010). These games are targeted towards broad audiences, and they diverge from some of core's potentially exclusionary trends; for instance, casual games possess many female characters who are not represented in sexualized ways (Wohn, 2011). As a result, casual games have become popular among older players, and at least half of casual players identify as female (Eklund, 2016; Kuittinen et al., 2007). Many casual game developers now target female audiences specifically.

This has led to a "designed identity" for casual gamers (Chess, 2017). Through interviews with game developers and an analysis of games and design texts, Chess finds that casual game producers tend to picture their audience as middle-aged, middle-class, female, maternal, white, able-bodied, and often from the Midwestern United States. Chess is careful to

point out that this industry construct is not representative of the people who *actually* play games,

just like the construction of "gamers" has never represented all players. But because the designed

identity for casual players differs dramatically from "gamer" stereotypes, it is potentially

progressive, inviting new types of players (i.e. female and older players) to have a seat at the

gaming table. This could potentially change "the conditions for game developers" (Juul, 2010, p.

7) by reconstructing their target audience and expectations along new lines.

At the same time, casual games are often dismissed as less important or less meaningful

than traditional "core" games, which simultaneously dismisses their audience members (Chess &

Paul, 2019; Consalvo & Paul, 2019; Eklund, 2016; Paaßen et al., 2017; Paul, 2018; Vanderhoef,

2013). The very term "casual" suggests that these games, players, and playstyles should not be

taken seriously. Further, gaming discourses have used the fact that many casual games are free-

to-play, but feature purchases players can use to speed up their progress, to imply that casual

games are pay-to-win, rewarding money over skill (Consalvo & Paul, 2019).

Casual games are also culturally dismissed due to their gendered status as feminine. As

John Vanderhoef (2013) states, "There has been a long history of linking mainstream or popular

culture with the feminine for the purpose of denigrating both." And developers and discourses

around casual gaming have emphasized the presence of female players (Chess, 2017; Kuittinen

et al., 2007), setting the foundation for this gendered dismissal. This does vary based on game;

casual games can best be understood as a continuum, where games that possess numerous

feminized characteristics—such as theme, social interaction, lush aesthetics, and opportunities

for creative expression—are more female-targeted than games with fewer of these characteristics

(Chess, 2017). For instance, while *Angry Birds* and *Candy Crush Saga* share many similarities,

Angry Birds' warlike theme, where birds attack the pigs who have stolen their eggs, shows it is

"meant to appeal to diverse audiences and is relatively gender-neutral" (p. 54). Both offerings are

casual, but not necessarily the same type of casual.

Despite this nuance, discourses around game cultures and communities often lump casual

and core according to a binary, then present this as more stable than it truly is. This perception

may play "a more immediate role than reality" (Chess, 2018, p. 109). Although the stereotypes

around casual games do not reflect players' real play habits (Consalvo, 2009; Consalvo and

Begy, 2015; Eklund, 2016; Juul, 2010), the discourses that circulate within game culture set

casual up as tangential to "real" core gaming, limiting its possible impacts.

The question thus remains: how have casual games affected the day-to-day experiences

of marginalized gamers? And how do these players understand casual vs. core games? Exploring

these questions is key to recognizing if and how gaming culture is becoming more equitable, as

well as what core and casual truly mean. Given that neither is fully reflective of actual players or

games, we must instead see them as discursive constructs that promote particular views of

gaming. And who gets promoted or ignored in gaming has broader cultural implications,

affecting who and what we value as a society and what types of behaviors are supported.

Methods

This study draws on in-depth interviews conducted for a larger project on women's lived

experiences as gamers. The first round of interviews (2012-2013) included thirty-seven

participants, who were interviewed for between forty minutes and two hours[iii]. At the end of

each interview, I asked if interviewees would be willing to complete future follow-ups and if I

could store their email address for this purpose. All agreed. In late 2017, I emailed everyone

requesting a second interview. Eleven women participated in this round (2017-2018). This

longitudinal data collection responds to Mia Consalvo and Jason Begy's (2015) argument that

"we need better, more refined studies of the life courses of players to more adequately capture [player's changing game] activity" (p. 94). Conducting two interviews with the same people, five years apart, shows if/how women's views of gaming change over time.

Interviewees were primarily recruited through online video game forums, with some added via snowball sampling, and interviews took place via online chat services, to make the process as easy as possible for participants. Following completion, text-based interviews were cleaned and audio files were transcribed. Participants selected their own pseudonyms for the study but were guided to choose a name that differed from any of their gaming identities for extra confidentiality. All procedures were approved in advance by the institutional review board and conducted in line with their regulations.

After transcription, I transferred interviews to NVivo, a qualitative analysis software package, and analyzed them using a grounded theory approach, where patterns and themes emerge from the data itself rather than *a priori* hypotheses (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This ensures that the conclusions of the work are based in participants' lived experiences and allows things that are significant to them, rather than the researcher, to rise to the forefront. For instance, as someone who plays both casual and core games myself, I did not anticipate the degree to which participants would struggle to reconcile these types of games. Taking a grounded theory approach to their interviews allowed me to recognize the contradictions they faced when gaming.

Participant Characteristics

By recruiting online, I hoped to speak with women from an array of backgrounds, to provide varied viewpoints on gaming's power structures and problems. In the end, participants came from a few different backgrounds, although many shared some commonalities. The full sample ranged in age from nineteen to forty-five but averaged just over twenty-five. Only five were

thirty or older (at time one). They were also primarily white and non-Hispanic, although two

identified as Arab, two as Mexican, and four as Korean, Chinese, or Asian-American. Most

participants were from the United States, but three were based in Canada, two in the UK and one

in Bahrain. Of the interviewees who participated in both rounds of interviews, seven identify as

heterosexual, two as bisexual, one as queer and one as asexual[iv]. Participants are largely college-

educated. In original interviews, two participants had completed "some college", and two

possessed associate's degrees. Nine were undergraduates, and the rest possessed at least a

bachelor's degree. Upon our second interviews, all participants had bachelor's degrees, and

many held or were pursuing master's degrees or PhDs.

Because I recruited them online, participants tended to be deeply involved in gaming, to

the point where they participated in online discussions about it. Consequently, my sample likely

leaves out women who have chosen to quit the gaming community, although reconnecting with

the same participants for updated interviews tries to account for this. As the recruitment post

asked for "female gamers", women who do not identify themselves as "gamers" may have opted

not to participate. This means that the sample is more likely to lack women who are gaming

minorities in several ways because the intersectionality of these characteristics further

disassociates them from a stereotypical gamer identity (Shaw, 2012).

Participants also tended to view and discuss gender in relatively normative ways. They

often, for instance, used female and woman interchangeably, to provide linguistic variety rather

than to specify different identifications. Further, most participants performed their gender

identity in line with traditionally feminine norms, although they also enjoyed subverting

expectations through their video game play and avatar designs (Cote, 2020). This sample is thus

useful for discussing certain perspectives—those of female gamers who define themselves

specifically as women and as gamers—but lacks information on others. Trans or nonbinary

gamers, for example, may have very different experiences than those addressed here. Future

projects should use offline recruitment techniques, more inclusive language, and/or more

specifically targeted forums to address the perspective of other gaming populations.

Results

Overall, the women I interviewed saw themselves as gamers and played many core games, from

shooters like *Call of Duty* to massively multiplayer online (MMO) games like *World of*

Warcraft. They also played many casual titles, from mobile games like *Angry Birds* or *Candy*

Crush Saga to handheld games like *Cooking Mama*. Their relation to casual games, however,

varied widely, with participants taking three main stances. Many felt that casual games could

break down stereotypes about gamer identity and broaden cultural conceptions about who could

or should play games. Others, however, felt that their position as female gamers had become

more ambivalent due to casual games' rise, as fellow players now often expected them to be

casual rather than core. This challenged their hard-won identification as gamers. Still more

interviewees felt that casual games did not necessarily "count" as real games, supporting a

hierarchy that prioritizes core games and players. Further, participants were more positive about

casual games' potential during our first interviews than our second. Although the number of

interviews I conducted is small, limiting the generalizability of these conclusions, this difference

suggests little has changed in terms of who has access to gaming culture and who does not.

Opening up Games

At our first round of interviews, most participants were positive about casual games' potential to

diversify game audiences. Like the researchers described above, participants recognized that

many forces worked to define games as a masculinized space and gamers as primarily men. This

complicated their identification as gamers, as people whose identities diverge from stereotypes about gamers have a harder time taking on this identity and having others view them accordingly (e.g. Paaßen et al., 2017, Shaw, 2012). Also in line with existing findings (e.g. Cote, 2017; Gray 2014; 2018; Massanari, 2015; Nakamura, 2012; Ortiz, 2019; Salter & Blodgett, 2012; 2017), my participants agreed that, as perceived outsiders to gaming spaces, they faced higher levels of harassment while playing. They had developed thoughtful strategies for navigating game spaces and culture with a joint female/gamer identity but recognized that the work these strategies required would likely put off numerous potential players, especially women. However, participants felt that the rise of casual games could make this process simpler.

Specifically, they argued that casual games' accessibility and prevalence made them easy to pick up; this helped normalize gaming as a hobby for diverse players. When I asked participant Taylor Ryan how important she felt games were, for instance, she responded,

> Extremely important! […] Where grandmothers are playing *Angry Birds*? Where social games on Facebook take over the main page sometimes with various *FarmVille* posts and whatnot? Everyone's playing! Even people who wouldn't have played in the past are now casual gamers, because gaming has become so accessible.

Note that I had asked how important Taylor Ryan felt *games* were—not casual games specifically. She made the leap to casual games herself, arguing that the number of people playing these, and the many ways and locations in which they were playing, helped make gaming in general more open. Other participants took similar perspectives (e.g. Sophie, Anna, Emily, Adrianna, and more). In perhaps the most humorous example of support for casual games, my participant Feather argued,

Angry Birds has done so much more for video games than any PS2 [PlayStation

2] game ever did […] Everybody plays *Angry Birds*, your grandma can play

Angry Birds, your three-year-old can play *Angry Birds*. Games like that are

revolutionizing video games and making them mainstream. They are going to

become like microwaves, you can live without them but why would you?

Because casual games can be played in short bursts and are available on many platforms,

including our ubiquitous smartphones, they require less commitment than core games, which can

be expensive and time-consuming. While core games simply do not fit into many people's

schedules, casual games can. This aligns with Jesper Juul's (2010) claim that casual games are

possibly revolutionary because they are "about video games becoming normal. […] Normal

because the games fit the social contexts in which people were already spending their time" (p.

1). Participants argued that casual games were becoming inescapable. Moreover, they felt this

mainstreaming was breaking down video games' longstanding stigma as "nerdy", associated

with young, antisocial boys who lived in their mom's basement (Kowert, Griffiths &

Oldmeadow, 2012). Interviewees lauded casual games for combatting these stereotypes.

Considering gender specifically, participants felt that casual games could dismantle

barriers inhibiting female players. While many were simply happy that women they knew were

playing games at all, some hoped that casual games would serve as a gateway to core gaming,

giving them more women with whom they could share their hobby. Anna, for instance, said,

getting more women into casual games will probably bring at least some of them

into other games. It helps remove the stigma of 'wasting time' playing games, so

they might be more open to playing other games in the future. It also helps get

them familiar with gaming controls without being stressful, which seems like a

barrier for a lot of women who are interested in games. […] I'd love to see more

women playing games, even if it's only Farmville or starts there.

Because female gamers often face higher levels of harassment and exclusion in game spaces, many of them hide their gender as a self-protective measure (Cote, 2017). Therefore, it is currently difficult for female gamers to meet and connect with one another; few female players know other women who game. However, because casual gaming has been constructed as a more feminized pursuit than core gaming, it offered players a potential point of introduction.

My interviewees acknowledged that casual games had limitations. For instance, Anna recognized that gaming culture had some resistance to casual games, setting them up as "not hardcore enough" and therefore insignificant. She was not alone in this recognition; not only have researchers like Vanderhoef (2013), Chess and Paul (2019), and Consalvo and Paul (2019) shown that video game discourses construct casual games as less "real" or legitimate than core games, due to their feminized status, their free-to-play pricing structures, and their platforms and mechanics, but interviewees like Emily and DoopDoop9000 also felt that traditional gamers were dismissive of casual games and that many casual players did not see what they were doing as gaming. Other participants, like Taylor Ryan, leveled complaints at casual games' mechanics. As a game developer herself, Taylor Ryan wished that casual designers would be open to "experimenting with narrative techniques, creative visual approaches, etc." rather than simply offering players match-three puzzles and word games. This critique is reflective of the context in which she was speaking; when we were conducting our first interview, the most prominent casual games were social media games like *FarmVille* or mobile puzzle games like *Candy Crush Saga*. These were lauded for opening gaming up to many types of players, but they were also dismissed as "addictive, mindless free-to-play games" (Polygon Staff, 2012).

Critiques of casual games' depth and meaning framed them as inherently less involved or important than core games, and as experienced gamers, my participants were steeped in this discourse. Despite this, most participants expected, when we first spoke, that casual games would serve as a powerful cultural force. Further, as many interviewees explicitly wanted games to become more inclusive—to decrease their own barriers to play and help them share their hobby with wider groups of friends and family—they felt casuals' influence would be positive.

Casual Ambivalence

This is not to say that female gamers' relationship with casual games was free of negativity or ambivalence. Even in our first interviews, interviewees related some downsides to casual's rise. Feather, for instance, found that the link between casual games and female players meant that others judged her gaming purchases and play habits. When she went into game stores, she often bought both core games, like shooters or role-playing games (RPGs), and casual titles such as *Cooking Mama*, a handheld game where players complete various kitchen tasks and assemble a meal. Feather felt that others in the store generally assumed the casual game was for her, while the core titles were for a friend or boyfriend. More significantly, she saw these assumptions as a form of boundary policing meant to mark her, as a female gamer and an assumed casual gamer, as less serious or significant than her male counterparts. In this way, casual was "used as a value judgment" (Chess and Paul, 2019) to dismiss Feather from gaming culture and communities.

This made her very self-conscious about her purchases, saying, "All these guys who I'm buying around think that I'm just this casual gamer that knows nothing about games, that's buying this game because it's cute. [...] No gamer takes me seriously." In other words, the industrially designed identities surrounding casual and core made it difficult for others to understand Feather's identity as both female and as a gamer who played an array of offerings.

This meant that she often felt the need to hide her enjoyment of casual titles or to overemphasize her skill and experience to protect her self-identification as a gamer. For instance, during our interview, she highlighted how she had started gaming on an Atari to show her core background. Other participants avoided games like *The Sims*, a life simulation game where the player builds characters and guides them through everyday scenarios. Although *The Sims* is wildly successful, it is "not a competitive game" (Laine, time one) and is therefore more casual than core. Participants often shunned it, to resist being seen as casual themselves.

This was likely related to my participants' identification as both women and as gamers. While researchers like Benjamin Paaßen, Thekla Morgenroth and Michelle Stratemeyer (2017) argue women "can only embrace *either* a gamer identity *or* a gender identity" (p. 424), my participants did not support such a strict divide. However, they did encounter many barriers to full equality in game spaces and many reminders that games and game culture were not "for" them. To deal with this, interviewees often cultivated high levels of gaming capital. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's definition of cultural capital as "a system of preferences and dispositions that ultimately served to classify groups by class" (Consalvo, 2007, p. 4), Mia Consalvo defines gaming capital as the knowledge, skill and experiences gamers develop and how these situate them within broader systems of play and power. For my participants, negotiating the divide between gender and gamer identities required a lot of gaming capital, to prove that they deserved to be taken seriously. Further, they cultivated this capital specifically in core game spaces, which were more highly valued. The fact that participants used gaming capital to defend their position supports meritocratic notions of gaming, which are themselves toxic in many ways (Paul, 2018). But the idea that they could prove (and had proven!) their gamer identity helped female gamers negotiate the industrially-designed identities around casual/core. When this ability was

threatened, as other gamers viewed them as casual, they were justifiably concerned.

Growing Ambivalence

Participants' ambivalence around being seen as casual stood out even more in my second round of interviews, both at the individual level and in terms of participants' overall perceptions of gaming. While a few participants (Taylor Ryan, Emily and Chianna) remained committed to the idea that casual games were accessible ways for many types of people to make gaming a part of their life, others found themselves qualifying their casual play. Take, for instance, Spinach and Adrianna. At our first interview, both were playing several casual games and were overall positive about these choices. Spinach was extremely busy with work and school and appreciated how casual gaming could fit into her schedule. Adrianna, as showcased above, felt that casual games were redefining gaming as generally more inclusive and mainstream.

When I asked them what they were playing at round two, however, they primarily listed more mainstream or core games, then asked "Do mobile games count?" (Adrianna, time 2) or qualified their contributions, as when Spinach finished a list of games she was playing then tangentially added, "Oh, I also play a lot of mobile games. I don't know if you're interested in that stuff at all." Despite their appreciation of and extensive play of casual games, both participants were unsure about how casual games "counted". Through these offhand asides, it became clear that they had been exposed to and adopted at least some discourses that mark social, mobile and casual games as less important than core games.

This was further highlighted in how both talked about specific casual games, describing them in ways that reveal both enjoyment and embarrassment. For example, once I confirmed that casual games did, in fact, count, Adrianna continued,

It's funny but I don't even really think of that as time spent gaming, just futzing

around on my phone you know? But thinking about it, I would say I play mobile

games fairly often […] I go through periods of obsession. I play *Tap Tap Fish* (I

think it used to be called Abyssrium), I was playing this silly game called *Merge*

Dragons for a while. There is a mobile *Katamari Damacy* game that is also

tapping-based that I was doing for a while. *Adventure Capitalist*! So stupid, but so

fun. You basically start with a lemonade stand making money, and then you can

buy more, and then you can buy the next level up like a newspaper delivery, and

eventually purchase managers, and the money just rolls in. It's so pointless! But I

was so addicted.

This quote showcases some of the contradictions in how participants discussed casual games.

Adrianna clearly enjoyed many different casual games, as the ones she described ranged from a

relaxing sensory game where the player collects fish to a fantasy-themed puzzle game. At the

same time, she tempered her pleasure in these games with terms like "silly", "stupid", and

"pointless", minimizing their significance. Spinach spoke of casual games similarly, describing

Adventure Academy as her "current problem" and "just one of those dumb like click and wait

games and pay the money if you don't want to wait so long" (Spinach, time two). In addition to

these two, participants like Emily, who remained positive about casual games across both

interviews, also described specific games as problematic, as when she forced herself to stop

playing *Candy Crush Saga* after level 500, fearing she was wasting too much time on it. As

longstanding gamers, these players at least partially internalized perceptions of casual games as

mindlessly addictive and as less "real" than core games, due to factors such as their genre,

mechanics, perceived difficulty, and free-to-play payment structures (Consalvo & Paul, 2019).

This minimizes the impact casual games can have on game culture overall.

One could argue that this ambivalence is a result of casual games themselves, which again tend to be seen as "bland or shallow" (Juul, 2010, p. 26), "stupid games" (Anderson, 2012); female gamers' divided reactions to casual games may be due to this simplicity. However, I contend that doesn't fully explain what's happening here; although participants recognized at both waves that casual games were often limited in their scope, drawing on basic mechanics (Taylor Ryan) or gendered stereotypes (Emily, Feather), participants were familiar with many styles of casual games, from *Candy Crush* to *Fire Emblem Mobile* and beyond. Simply looking at the array of games Adrianna and Spinach referenced shows that participants were more than capable of finding titles with depth and significance. Thus, their dismissal is unlikely to be fully rooted in the games themselves; rather, it reflects how gaming discourses treat casual and core as distinct halves of a binary, rather than remaining attentive to nuances in each, and then value core as more significant or serious (Chess, 2018). These trends dismiss the many ways in which casual games are already meaningful and encourage players to do the same.

Participants like Feather, who was anxious about being seen as casual at our first interview, displayed continued concerns. Like Spinach, Adrianna, and others, Feather played casual games regularly, fitting them into her commute, downtime at work, or relaxation before bed, but asked, "What is a game? Are hidden object games games? Are mobile puzzle games games? I don't know. I don't know what makes it a game anymore." In some ways, she was more accepting of her choice to play casual games during our second interview than our first, but she simultaneously questioned what counted as a game and if the types of games she had time for qualified. Feather said, "I play games all the time. But the question is like, what kind of games am I playing. As we get older, I don't have the time anymore to stay up all night and play a bunch of console games" (Feather, time 2). She appreciated how casual games fit into her life

and allowed her to keep playing as her responsibilities changed. However, Feather displayed a level of defensiveness about being casual or playing casual games.

Interestingly, Feather was the only player to link this defensiveness to casual games' feminization. Although she was generally open about both her core and casual play, she positioned otome games, or female-targeted story games in which the player guides their (usually female) character to develop romantic relationships with one of many (usually male) potential partners, differently from her other play. Feather said that she happily discussed otome games with her girlfriends, but she was hesitant to reveal she played these games to male friends or dates. Therefore, her ambivalence appeared to be partially based around otome games' perceived feminization and link to other, frequently dismissed female-oriented media like romance novels (Radway, 1984). Other participants, however, did not mention feminization as a reason for dismissing casual games. Further, they often reveled in mixing normatively feminine gender presentations with their skill and experience as gamers, to undermine the distinction between these identities. This provides a perspective on how players who have practice navigating the divides of female/gamer identities may read texts differently from a general audience, accepting some elements that others would dismiss (such as feminization) while expressing concerns about the "realness" of the games they play and how this reflects on their own status as real.

Female players' desire to avoid being seen as "casual" again speaks to game culture's tendency to prioritize certain types of games, play, and players over others. Because the designed identity of a "gamer" tends to be masculinized, female gamers must engage in detailed identity work to straddle the gap between their preferred identification and the industry constructions put in front of them. To do so, they invest significant amounts of time and energy into defending their position *as* gamers; that is, in building sufficient gaming capital to prove their belonging.

Female gamers may therefore be more resistant to casual games than those who do not define themselves as gamers, as they are loath to give up their hard-won identity. Preemptively dismissing their casual play as "silly" or "pointless"—and unrelated to their *real*, serious game play— could be a form of self-protection.

In addition to their individual changes, there was evidence that interviewees' growing ambivalence about casual games was related to their overall feelings towards games as well as some of the large cultural shifts that occurred between our first and second interviews. While participants remained mostly positive about games, enjoying and playing different styles, continuing to self-identify as gamers, and carving out time for play in busy schedules, they also displayed a level of exhaustion with the work involved in defending their position in gaming spaces. This was related to greater demands on their time, as they increased their life responsibilities through relationships, parenthood, and career advancement, as well as to movements like GamerGate and growing push-backs against progressive and feminist politics.

As described above, the GamerGate movement involved the intense harassment of many female game developers, academics, journalists, and more. As standard, everyday players rather than public-facing figures, my participants were not targeted for this level of persecution and even said that GamerGate was not a big deal for them; they considered it merely another instance of the "pretty classic cesspool of sexism" (Adrianna, interview 2) they already faced in gaming spaces. However, they did feel the movement reflected continued resistance to diversity in games and broader sociopolitical trends, such as the rise of the alt-right. For instance, Emily remained positive about casual games' potential throughout both interviews but found herself fighting less for change within gaming spaces. When asked why, she said, "I might be more tired. Tired overall because I think there's a lot of . . . You know, especially with how things have changed

since the election." Her political advocacy in other spaces, such as around health care and reproductive rights, decreased the energy and time she had to push for diversification within gaming. Other participants said they felt like people had become more polarized around political lines, making it harder to have meaningful discussions about gaming's future. In such circumstances, it is logical for individuals to move from advocating for high-level change and instead focus on self-protective measures; women's decreased enthusiasm about casual games at time two likely stems from a larger need to defend their own position as gamers.

Defending "Gamer" Status

This comes through most clearly with the few participants who seemed to embrace gaming's hierarchical nature, themselves policing what counted as a "real" game and who counted as a "real" gamer. This was, to be fair, a rare stance. Most of the women I spoke with wanted games and gamers to be defined as broadly as possible; they loved sharing their enjoyment of games with others and felt that higher numbers of players could only be good. A few, however, enjoyed games' restrictedness, prioritizing their ability to self-identify as a gamer over greater inclusivity.

Take, for instance, my participant Vickie, who did not even mention casual games in her first interview. Instead, she focused on core games like *World of Warcraft* and *Guild Wars 2*. These were reflective of the types of games she was playing. By our second interview, Vickie had become a mother and spent a lot of time caring for her newborn son. She still played MMOs, but she played fewer hours per week than when we first talked. Her playstyle had also changed; during our first interview, she turned to MMOs to socialize. At our second interview, she primarily played alone so she could leave the game as needed to tend to her son, stating, "I just sign on, mess around for a little bit. You know, nothing that has a time constraint or that I need to be there at a certain time or can't just step away at a moment's notice." In other words, Vickie

was playing games in a much more casual way.

However, she brought up casual games dismissively to position her own play as more significant or meaningful. While defending her continued self-definition as a gamer, for instance, she stated, "I hate when people who like, play *Candy Crush*, are like, 'Oh, I'm a gamer!'" Because she was still playing core games like *Guild Wars 2*, Vickie felt she qualified as a gamer more than players who only engaged with casual games, even if they did so in hardcore ways. When pushed for details, Vickie could not completely explain her stance, expanding,

> When you say 'I play video games', I don't think of things like *Candy Crush*. If
> that makes sense. I mean mobile games have gotten a lot better so there are ones
> that are a little more like... you know, you can play *Hearthstone* on your phone.
> That kind of stuff. And I don't know, I guess it would depend on the game you're
> playing. I guess it would be the same thing as if you sat on your PC and played
> *Bejeweled* all the time, would you really consider yourself a gamer? I don't think
> that counts.

In this quote, she references *Hearthstone*, a digital collectible card game introduced by Blizzard Entertainment as a part of their popular *Warcraft* series. This is an interesting inclusion because *Hearthstone* shares some key characteristics with less "real" games (Consalvo & Paul, 2019). For instance, it is free-to-play and can be played on a mobile platform, both traits associated with less serious games. However, because *Hearthstone* comes from known core developer Blizzard, because players view it as skill-based, and because it is a collectible card game (a "real" genre), *Hearthstone* is perceived as real while *Candy Crush* is not. Thus, Vickie ranks it more highly.

Again, an interesting aspect of this decision is that her dismissal of games like *Candy Crush* and *Bejeweled* is not explicitly related to gender. This may be a factor; in comparison to

Hearthstone, *Candy Crush* and *Bejeweled* possess more female-targeted characteristics, as defined by Chess (2017). However, they possess far fewer than games like *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood, FarmVille,* or *Diner Dash*, which were not mentioned or critiqued. Participants' objections to casual games were primarily based on their status as not-real, rather than gendered perceptions about them. Vickie had previously not concerned herself with casual games because her play was core enough to avoid confusion; now that her gaming capital and position as a gamer were more uncertain, she had to work harder to establish her play as real and appropriate.

Other participants, although they were less stringent in marking casual games as less important, expressed continued concerns about the amount of work they needed to put into being taken seriously in game spaces. For instance, even though Adrianna supported broad definitions of "gamer", arguing that her mother's *Words with Friends* play made her a gamer, she often assured me that she would get back into core gaming if a title interested her enough. She related how she had recently played many hours of *Dishonored 2* as evidence of this, showing her continued status as a gamer. These stances from many interviewees (e.g. Laine, Misty, Adrianna. Spinach, Feather) show an ongoing need for women to display their gaming capital to be identified as gamers. Therefore, they express resistance to being too casual, by defending their core play or policing the boundaries of what counts in ways that place them in the in-group.

Significance and Conclusions

From these results, we can see that some expectations about casual games are supported. For instance, the fact that they are easy to learn and interruptible does make them more accessible for players. Many of my participants mentioned how, as their life responsibilities increased, casual games fit into their schedules more effectively than core games. At the same time, women's ambivalence about, or outright rejection of, being seen as casual indicates how games are still

defined with very different levels of social and cultural value. As "stupid", "pointless", or "silly", casual games are, at least for women who see themselves as gamers, less meaningful or significant than core games. However, this dismissal did not necessarily follow expected patterns, whereby casual games are rejected due to their feminization (Eklund, 2016; Vanderhoef, 2013). Instead, participants discussed casual games collectively, rather than distinguishing between "pink" or feminized games, like *FarmVille*, and more gender-neutral casual games like *Angry Birds*. Further, their objections were primarily based on casual games' status as less real than core games, rather than any associations with gender.

This is likely an outcome of sample. Participants were well-practiced at navigating the divide between their gender identity and the industrially-designed identity of a gamer, flexibly prioritizing these aspects of themselves based on context. There were challenges in taking on this split identification, but participants had worked hard to build high levels of gaming capital, cultivating skill, experience, and broad-ranging knowledge of games to prove they belonged in gaming spaces. In doing so, they were exposed to and accepted many of the standards that define game culture around core games and players. Experienced gamers, regardless of gender, likely share hegemonic ideas about game quality and appropriate playstyles, ideas that minimize and dismiss casualness. This complicates our understanding of casual games and how they become part of an overall cultural hierarchy, as to state that this is due solely to gender is all too simple.

At the same time, the fact that at least some female gamers positioned certain games as inherently better than others may perpetuate unequal power structures in gaming. This is because, although participants' concerns about casual games were not explicitly related to gender, overall discourses *about* casual games still are. Casual games are heavily associated with female audiences, which helps protect the designed identity of "gamer" as meaning young,

white, male audiences. This "safeguards core gaming culture from change" (Eklund, 2016, p. 15). Even though female gamers may reject casual games due to their status as less real than core games, not their feminization, this rejection still supports a gendered hierarchy of power.

This is not to blame female gamers or argue that they should be solely responsible for embracing casual games and their associations with more diverse gaming audiences. Many of my participants identified as feminists and deliberately sought greater inclusivity in gaming, but there are clear benefits to be gained from being in a cultural in-group, especially if you have fought for that position. Women who have invested significant time and energy into developing gaming capital are justified in working to protect that. Further, the burden of solving marginalization should never be fully placed on the marginalized themselves.

Rather, I point out how inequality persists around casual games to highlight how hegemonic discourses, such as those that link gaming to masculinity, can be difficult to change. Although players were at first hopeful about casual games' ability to democratize gaming, these expectations were mostly gone by our second interviews; not only have deeply sexist incidents like GamerGate worked to keep women and other players out of gaming spaces, but discourses around social, mobile, and casual games have continued to define them as less meaningful than core games[v]. In the face of this resistance, it is logical that some players defend their own positions within gaming culture rather than focusing on systemic change. For instance, this may explain the #NotYourShield hashtag that emerged during GamerGate and was used by marginalized gamers, such as women or players of color, who resisted critiques that game culture was toxic. Because marginalized players must constantly protect their gamer status, #NotYourShield may have been a tool to highlight one's insider role and gaming capital to avoid being lumped in with critics (perceived outsiders). Moments like this protect individual gamers

but often at the cost of overall transformation.

Therefore, if gaming culture is to become more inclusive—as many argue it must to prevent this area of popular culture from contributing to broader inequalities (e.g. Gray and Leonard, 2018; Lees, 2016)—players should be encouraged to accept and embrace many styles of games and play. However, interested developers, academics, game journalists and more must also think critically about how we prioritize different games, players and designed identities. As evidenced by participants' struggles, designed identities affect more than content; they also deeply affect how individuals shape and perform their own identity and how they relate to others. Studying where designed identities matter and where individuals resist or redefine them can help us move us away from binaries like masculine/core vs. feminine/casual and develop more nuanced perspectives on how power operates through discourse.

Expanding beyond games alone, these findings build on the corpus of research that centralizes women's engagement with media, especially feminized media. For instance, Janice Radway's classic 1984 study, *Reading the Romance*, asked why women engage with romance novels, a feminized medium that was widely culturally disparaged. Rather than finding that romance readers were mere dupes of the publishing industry, Radway found that they were active audience members who carefully selected books to meet their psychological and affective needs. Similarly, this study addressed how female gamers, chiefly those who were used to navigating masculinized core spaces, engaged with the more feminized medium of casual games. Through its finding that casual games' gendered nature was less salient to players than their stance *as* casual, this work suggests that individuals who are used to navigating a divide between their media consumer identity and their gender identity may react uniquely to feminized subject positions. Having worked to gain in-group capital, they may resist challenges to that position or

even police boundaries themselves, unintentionally reinforcing gendered hierarchies. Future studies regarding women's engagement in sports, online communities, the tech industry, or other masculinized fields should be attentive to when, how, and why gender matters (or doesn't) to participants and what consequences of this may be.

Further, the change in women's perspectives over time reveals an ongoing need for longitudinal studies of media audiences. Continued challenges to women's optimism around casual games made this position less tenable. Some participants expressed overall exhaustion as activists; given the rise of alt-right and anti-feminist politics, many who were fighting to define games more inclusively at our first interview were less inclined to do so at our second. They attributed this to deeper involvement in other political efforts, to feeling like others' perspectives were too deeply rooted to be changed, and to concerns about backlash. Extrapolating this more broadly, how we discuss and understand #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, #GamerGate, or other movements may change dramatically over time due to advancements, backlashes, and everything in between. We must remain attentive to how ongoing negotiations can affect media audiences, their everyday experiences, and their relation to power.

Gaming is one location in which broad cultural struggles over gender, identity and inclusion are taking place, and many of these center around the casual/core divide. This research, focusing on female gamers' navigation of this divide, has shown that players' reasons for prioritizing one form of gaming over another are more complicated than anticipated. However, this does not necessarily affect the overall outcome; rejecting casual, regardless of the motive, still supports longstanding gendered hierarchies. Therefore, we must keep considering how we and the industry discuss, prioritize, and centralize certain experiences over others to find new locations for intervention.

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[i] As demonstrated in the popular book and film *Hidden Figures*.
[ii] Because GamerGate has been discussed extensively elsewhere (e.g. Braithwaite, 2016; Condis, 2019; Lees 2016; Massanari, 2015), I will not fully explore it here. Interested readers can find further details at these and other sources.
[iii] Thirty-seven reached theoretical saturation, the point at which continued interviews revealed no new information.
[iv] The first round of interviews failed to ask participants about their sexual orientation, so this data is lacking for the full sample.
[v] See, for instance, the backlash core developer Blizzard faced when they announced a mobile Diablo game rather than a PC one (Horti, 2018)