Gamers, Gender, and Cruel Optimism: The Limits of Social Identity Constructs in *The Guild*

Amanda C. Cote[a]* and Cody Mejeur[b]

[a]Communication Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA; [b]English, Michigan State University, Lansing, MI, USA

Amanda Cote
Corresponding Author
University of Michigan
Dept. of Communication Studies
5370 North Quad
105 South State Street
Ann Arbor, MI 48109
accote@umich.edu
Twitter: @accote

Cody Mejeur
Michigan State University
Department of English
Wells Hall C614
619 Red Cedar Road
East Lansing, MI 48824
269-929-2545
mejeurco@msu.edu
cmejeur@gmail.com
Twitter: @cmejeur

Abstract

Video game culture has a long, ongoing history of problems with representation and inclusivity, as a wide variety of forces have constructed video games and gaming as masculine. Against this background, the popular gamer-oriented web series *The Guild* (2007-2013) appears to offer a unique counterperspective, presenting a gender-diverse cast and focusing primarily on female protagonist Cyd "Codex" Sherman. As such, the show could potentially diversify popular conceptions of gamers. Through a close reading of *The Guild*, however, we demonstrate that it fails to do so. More specifically, the show's portrayal of gamer identity serves as a form of cruel optimism, presenting it as an ideal that promises game players a consistent subculture and a sense of belonging, but ultimately traps them in narrow roles and identity constructs. Furthermore, the show's gamer ideal also reproduces particular forms of gendered inequalities that posit aggressive, competitive masculinity as superior to both more passive masculinities and all forms of femininity. Overall, this leads *The Guild* to reinforce gaming culture's existing problems with sexism and regressive stereotypes. Because of this, the show presents a relation of cruel optimism, assuming the appearance of positive change while failing to deliver on it.

Keywords: Gender, Identity, Video Games, Webseries, Television

Introduction

Video gaming and "gamer" culture have a long, ongoing history of problems with representation and inclusivity. From a persistent overrepresentation of men in games (Williams et al. 2009) to the use of objectified women as a marketing tactic (Scharrer 2004) and beyond, a variety of forces have worked to construct video games and gaming as masculine. Cultural stereotypes assume that gamers are male and that games are primarily for male audiences. Against this background, the popular gamer-oriented web series *The Guild* (2007-2013) appears to offer a unique counterperspective. Created by actress/author/gamer Felicia Day, *The Guild* presents a gender-diverse cast of equal numbers of female and male main characters, and focuses primarily on female protagonist Cyd "Codex" Sherman and her struggle to balance social awkwardness, gaming addiction, and the needs of real life.

This diversity, among other factors, helped make *The Guild* a successful webseries and TV show. Although specific viewership numbers are hard to acquire given the show's online nature, the first season has over two million views on YouTube alone, and subsequent seasons all possess hundreds of thousands of views. On top of this, *The Guild* has received numerous awards, including YouTube Video Awards, a South by Southwest Greenlight Award, and over a dozen Streamy awards, which celebrate online video projects ("The Guild", 2017). Overall, the show clearly resonates with audiences despite its non-traditional format.

Beyond its popularity, *The Guild* merits analysis due to its claims of authenticity. As the show's website declares, "Created by (gamer herself) Felicia Day, the show is an authentic inside look at the world of online gaming" ("The Guild", 2017). It is, in its own words, a representation and celebration of the people and communities it portrays. Furthermore, it is one of the few

media offerings that centralizes gamer identity; most shows about video games focus on news, reviews, or reality-style competitions. Although at least one other narrative webseries about gamers, *Video Game High School*, exists, such texts are still rare, and none have achieved the success of *The Guild*. *The Guild* thus provides a unique opportunity to reflect on persistent issues in gaming culture at large, particularly in a post-GamerGate world where arguments over representation and identity politics are strangely ever-present but never welcome[1]. The series points us to why this is: gamer identity manifests as a cruel optimism, presenting itself as an ideal that everyone relates to differently but no one can attain. It draws game players in, promising a consistent subculture and a sense of belonging, but ultimately trapping them in narrow roles and identity constructs.

Furthermore, *The Guild* fails in many ways to live up to its appearance of diversity. Despite its equitable gender divide, the show's representations of masculinity and femininity perpetuate problematic notions about "girl gamers" and about male gamer masculinity. Overall, this leads *The Guild* to reinforce gaming culture's existing problems with sexism and regressive stereotypes. Because of this, the show presents another aspect of cruel optimism by assuming the appearance of positive change while failing to deliver on it.

Representation, Identity, & Cruel Optimism

Over the course of video game studies' history, numerous researchers have pointed out how games have been constructed as a masculine space. This process was the result of "a constellation of factors" (Kocurek, 2015, p.xiii), including the social construction of both masculinity and technology. For instance, Dyer-Witheford and dePeuter (2009) have discussed how games arose out of the masculine Cold War military-industrial complex, while researchers like Kiesler, Sproull and Eccles (1985) have shown how the overlap of early video game arcades and pool-hall culture helped link gaming and masculinity. Kerr (2006), Huntemann (2010), and Blodgett and Salter (2014) have assessed how continued industrial trends, like extended working hours or gender-biased industry events, have made game development a more attractive career choice for men than for women, largely limiting the types of people who create games.

Others have focused on "gamer" identities and how media and game environments construct these. Cote (2015) and Kirkpatrick (2012, 2015) analyzed the content of gaming magazines in both the US and the UK, finding that they represented men and boys as "gamers" far more frequently than women. These magazines also tended to be dominated by masculine discourses and "'laddish'" humor (Kirkpatrick 2012). Finally, researchers including Consalvo (2012), Nakamura (2012), Salter and Blodgett (2012), and Cote (2017) have explored gaming spaces and found them rife with racism, sexism, and homophobia. In other words, games' history, press, industry, and players have all helped created a strong "in-group" of straight, white, male, cisgendered players while excluding players who lack these characteristics.

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[1] GamerGate has ostensibly been a social media movement advocating ethics in games journalism, but in effect has been a campaign of harassment against women, marginalized peoples, and so-called "social justice warriors."

Games themselves contribute to this diversity problem by underrepresenting women and minorities[2]. For example, content analyses of video games conducted between 2002 and 2010 all found that male characters outnumber female characters in games, at a ratio of approximately three to one (Beasley and Standley 2002; Scharrer 2004; Ivory 2006; Burgess et al. 2007; Dill and Thill 2007; Miller and Summers 2007; Downs and Smith 2010). When represented, female characters tend to be sexualized, designed in a way that draws attention to their bodies and placed in roles where they serve as rewards or motivation for the male protagonist rather than taking action on their own (ibid.). Despite their lower numbers, female characters are also represented as victims of violence more frequently than male characters (Dietz 1998). This underrepresentation is significant because it has kept women and girls from entering the masculinized space of gaming by providing limited opportunities for representation and identification.

Limited representations matter because representation and reality are mutually constitutive (Hall 1996). That is, although reality affects the construction of representations, representation in turn affects how we view and interpret the world around us. This means that representations are an inherent part of existing systems of power and privilege, and how a person can envision and define themselves is at least partially related to how they see people like themselves represented both in media and in cultural associations with media. As Shaw writes, "Media representation makes certain identities possible, plausible, and livable" (2014, 67). Because video games serve to make straight, cisgendered, white male identities more plausible than most alternatives, they leave this popular, widespread medium as a bastion of masculine privilege and power.

With this background in mind, *The Guild* at first appears to be an improvement over games' traditional representations. The cast is evenly split in terms of gender, and it also centralizes characters of color. Upon deeper analysis, however, it becomes clear that the show's portrayal of gamer identity serves as a form of cruel optimism. As Berlant argues, "A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing... They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (2011, 1). In other words, the nominal diversification present in *The Guild* actively impedes the redefinition of "gamer" away from its limited, stereotypical roots. The characters in the show buy into, and encourage audiences to buy into, cliched tropes about gamers, marking them as anti-social, awkward, and incapable of functioning in the "real world". The show also perpetuates sexist and homophobic discourses. Through these limiting and exclusionary themes, *The Guild* demonstrates how individuals can internalize social identity constructions and develop "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility" (24). The cruel optimism of gamer identity reproduces marginalization by convincing players to

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[2] This is likely related to the many factors that prioritize men over women in gaming spaces, as an industry dominated by men with a specific, limited conception of "gamers" will produce heavily gendered games.

assume identity markers that reject all others as outsiders, simultaneously engendering a gamer culture that views itself as outside and against society.

Background and Methods

The Guild follows the adventures of six main characters, three male (Bladezz, Zaboo, Vork) and three female (Codex, Clara, Tink), who are members of an online gaming guild, The Knights of Good. Together, they play a massively-multiplayer online role-playing game similar to *World of Warcraft*, called simply "The Game". *The Guild* is presented as a series of video confessionals from its main character, Cyd Sherman--or Codex, her in-game name. It intersperses clips of her discussing events in her life with video of those events happening. The first season revolves around Zaboo's unwanted obsession with her, the intervention of overbearing relatives, and the social dramas of using a game to avoid dealing with "real life" issues. Later seasons showcase the characters' battle with an opposing guild, their attendance at a large gaming convention, and finally working at the company that makes The Game.

To evaluate *The Guild*'s representations and claims regarding gamer identity, we engaged in inductive thematic analysis, a form of qualitative textual analysis based on careful attention to patterns. We focused on these patterns because they reveal the show's dominant messages about gender, identity, and community, and because they allowed us to look beyond its status as a comedy and take seriously the representations it put forth. As others have pointed out, comedy can reinforce existing stereotypes and hierarchies of difference, or it can challenge them by offering new representations (Gray 1986; Park et al. 2006; Neville 2009). Comedies are always doing significant cultural work, and must be analyzed for the social commentary resting behind the jokes.

We addressed these commentaries using inductive rather than deductive thematic analysis, allowing themes to develop from within the data, rather than through an external framework. This helped minimize our preconceptions and potential personal biases as we approached the material, instead understanding the show on its own terms and viewing it as a typical consumer might. It is true, of course, that entirely removing oneself from one's research is an impossibility, but we strove to focus primarily on the data. Each author viewed the show separately, individually categorizing implicit and explicit ideas about gender, power, and gamer identity in the characters' personalities, appearances, relationships, and language. We also tracked character development (or lack thereof). Finally, we compared our separate coding notes, developing collective themes regarding how gender, gamer identity, and stereotypes emerge and change throughout the show.

Our analysis draws on the entire series, but focuses particularly on the first and last seasons to demonstrate the trajectory of the show and its characters. This highlights how little the characters have changed throughout the show, and how the show foregrounds limited, stereotypical representations in its early episodes, maintains them throughout its seasons, and leaves viewers with them at the finale. It is crucial to note that there are moments throughout the series when individual characters defy stereotypes and gender roles, such as when Codex defeats

a supposedly better male player in the game at the end of Season 3. However, these moments of resistance are never developed, and the potential for change is foreclosed upon as the characters quickly fall back into their same routines. In this sense, the trajectory of the show highlighted by the first and last seasons is representative of the other seasons as well, and provides a useful framework for considering the show as a whole in the limited space of a single article.

Gendered Stereotypes
Female Characters in The Guild

Many fans, and even some researchers, have lauded *The Guild* and its three female stars for presenting gaming culture in new, more diverse ways. For instance, Esther MacCallum-Stewart (2009) writes, "it positions the player away from traditional male vs. female portrayals" (231). She continues, "Codex's role as player is accepted in a non-gendered manner, as is her lead role within the series. There are no references, for example, to female players being weaker" (231). However, even the first few episodes demonstrate that this is not the case. Further, while the portrayal of gender intersects the portrayal of race in ways that could have been transformative, these intersections are played off as jokes that exaggerate and reinforce gender stereotypes.

Codex

Codex is in many ways a caricature both of female gamers and of femininity. She is neurotic, antisocial, and incapable of asserting herself in meaningful ways, acting as an extreme example of women's socialization towards passivity. At the start of the show, Codex is in therapy for a recent breakup as well as her online gaming addiction. Her improvement is so poor that her therapist breaks up with her, citing her disinterest in the real world. As this occurs, Codex becomes distracted by her guild being attacked in The Game, demonstrating the very addiction her therapist highlights. This presents her as a hopeless case, one beyond even trained, professional help. She regularly overreacts to daily life: for example, when meeting her guildmates in person, she panics because she and Zaboo are not early, explaining, "I always get everywhere a half hour early and just, you know, sit in the car waiting, mostly." ("Cheesybeards" 2007). Even Zaboo, who has many unusual habits of his own, suggests this is neurotic, sensational behavior. Codex is also deeply anti-social, not because she wants to be, but because she does not know how to interact with others outside of her computer. In the first episode ("Wake-Up Call" 2007), for instance, she reveals that she has not left the house for a week.

Finally, Codex's passivity makes her easily manipulable, as when Zaboo shows up on her doorstep and she is unable to get rid of him. She tries to take a stand, but immediately reneges her position when it hurts his feelings, even though he is invading her home. When Codex does assert herself, she often oversteps. For example, her therapy sessions were mandated after her ex-boyfriend, a fellow orchestral musician, cheated on her and she lit his instrument on fire in retaliation ("Total Wipe" 2008). Although perhaps an understandable reaction, this response cost her her job as well as requiring her to see a therapist. In another instance, when Zaboo tries to

seduce her by stripping down to his underwear, she states, "I was quick to establish parameters! I started crying hysterically and then he put his pants back on" ("Cheesybeards" 2007). Rather than stating her disinterest, she relies on emotional overreaction to solve the problem.

Codex consistently struggles with the demands of day-to-day life and never completely feels up to its challenges. To manage this, she turns to video games, stating, "I've never really felt like I had any control over my life. I think that's why I like video games. It is so much easier to measure life in experience points" ("Boss Fight" 2008). At first glance this seems beneficial, as it is still rare to see women represented as gamers. However, Codex's turn to video games to escape her lack of control simply reinscribes it--she has no control over her gaming addiction or the situations she encounters in The Game. She relies on her gamer identity to help boost her self-esteem, but she also sees that challenged regularly, such as when she becomes guild leader and the guild almost disbands under her leadership. She shows that women can be gamers, but only within certain confines of anxiety, antisocial behavior, and passivity. As such, Codex represents a retrograde view of women and gamers, despite her progressive status as the show's protagonist.

Clara

While Codex represents neurotic gamers and passive women, Clara is a caricature of the dumb blonde stereotype. She frequently does not understand what is happening in the guild's conversations, and she displays an infantile sense of humor, such as when she makes a joke about "cutting the cheese" and laughs hysterically at her own statement. She also represents concerns about video game addiction, as she is a terrible parent who regularly sacrifices her family for The Game. In season one alone, Clara locks her children in the kitchen to keep them out of her way while she's gaming, leaves them in her car while she meets with her guildmates (proclaiming, "What?! I cracked the windows!"), doesn't realize that her nanny quit for over a week, and lets her children run around a restaurant unsupervised.

Tying her bad parenting and her gaming together more closely, she even lets Tink and Vork decide who will babysit via an in-game duel, allowing the winner to watch the children rather than discerning who would care for them more effectively. When Tink wins, she locks the children into a dog crate to keep them from interfering with her gaming, refuses to change their diapers, and handles them with oven mitts, due to her strong distaste for children. None of this fazes Clara, who needed a babysitter in the first place so that she could attend a pole-dancing class. Her identity as a gamer takes precedence over her role as a parent, suggesting that they are conflicting interests that Clara manages irresponsibly.

As the pole-dancing reference suggests, Clara is represented as overly sexual, like many female characters in games. She happily accepts awkward comments about her breasts, such as when Bladezz refers to her breastfeeding as "hot" ("Wake-Up Call" 2007) or when Zaboo tells her that her breasts are "very pillowy" ("Cheesybeards" 2007). She is married throughout the show, but she often flirts with other characters and lies to her husband about it. In Season 2, she avoids a family event by telling her husband (falsely) that her brother-in-law touched her breast.

Subsequently, Clara kisses Codex's neighbor and love interest, Wade, at a party. At first glance, Clara's portrayal could be seen as sexually liberating and subversive of traditional gender roles in heteronormative relationships. However, they also encourage the stereotype that "girl gamers" only play games to get attention from men, and that they are willing to be treated as available sexual objects by male players. Although she is a skilled member of the guild, her stereotypical representation overshadows this fact.

Tinkerballa (Tink)

Tink is intelligent and capable: she overcomes Codex's problems with passivity, and breaks many media stereotypes about women in the process. However, she also represents a "girl gamer" stereotype like Clara's, using her gender to get both in-game and real-life gifts from the men around her. When she in not manipulating her sexuality, she often foregoes any aspect of femininity to get what she wants. In effect, this posits that women who game are either doing it for attention or are not "really" women.

Women in gaming spaces frequently face the assumption that they are there to meet men, and that they are good at games specifically because men have helped them (Cote, 2017). Although Tink is a good player in her own right, she consistently uses the men around her to get things, feeding into the stereotype. For example, throughout the series, Tink convinces Bladezz to buy her in-game prizes and out-of-game fashion accessories, despite the fact that he is a high school student with little money. As a result, he lands in trouble with his mother and needs to take on a part-time job to make up for the amount of money he has spent on Tink. She also convinces him to do her homework for her, even though she is in college and Bladezz is not. In other circumstances, Tink manipulates men into changing her oil, letting her use their pool, and much more. She deliberately deploys her femininity as a commodity to accomplish her goals, rather than challenging her objectification.

When Tink is not using her gender to manipulate people, she is extremely caustic and domineering in traditionally masculine ways. She swears at and undercuts her guildmates, and she has, as Codex states, "the maternal instincts of a woodchipper" ("Total Wipe" 2008). While it is refreshing to see a female character who is not shackled by social demands to be respectable and maternal, Tink's exaggeration of masculine traits implies that in order to game well, or to be a "real gamer", one cannot also be feminine. Tink's aggressive personality and manipulative tendencies also feed into the racialized gender stereotype of the Dragon Lady in popular culture: the powerful, mysterious, exotic Asian woman often used as a villain for white male protagonists to subdue and overcome[3]. The intersection of race and gender represented by Tink's character demonstrates how the show uses racial stereotypes similarly to gender stereotypes—in essence, for comedy that never amounts to critique, and leaves characters trapped in exaggerated, typified

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[3] Both Tink and Zaboo, who are Asian-American characters, are doubly bound by gender roles and racial stereotypes. Although we lack the space here to address this intersectionality fully, the overlapping structures of marginalization in both media and reality further limit persons of color in gaming culture.

identity constructs. For Tink, the presence of both racial and gendered stereotypes means she is doubly bound along two axes that exaggerate and reinforce one another.

Overall, the women of The Guild manage to be both gamers and women simultaneously, which is a feat in and of itself. However, their specific portrayals of femininity and gamer identity consistently perpetuate problematic ideals and stereotypes. They are allowed to be gamers only in specific ways: by emphasizing their sexuality, sacrificing their femininity, or being unable to cope with life outside of the game. These portrayals undermine their surface-level diversity, contradicting the show's claims to progress.

Male Characters in The Guild

The male members of the cast, on the other hand, are able to fully embrace their gamer identity without having to sacrifice any of their masculinity to do so. In fact, each tends to use The Game to make up for masculine failures. The characters do not achieve what gender theory calls hegemonic masculinity, or society's most accepted ways of enacting masculinity. This is a flexible concept, changing with societal and cultural shifts, but it generally expects that hegemonic men are powerful and achieve dominance over women and other, lesser men. As Beynon points out, "Whereas middle class, professional men are more likely to exert power via emails and memos, men in manual, semi-skilled and skilled occupations are more likely to express power physically." (2002, p. 16). However, both are exerting power over others as a means for expressing their masculinity.

In contrast, the male members of *The Guild* often fail to exert power over others, including the women around them. But they also do little to challenge the hierarchy of masculinity, and often strive for the very characteristics that exclude them. Because of this, they embody complicit masculinity, as "men who received the benefit of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). Through gaming, each finds they can present some aspects of the hegemonically masculine persona they lack. However, this opportunity also traps them in the ideals of that persona, instituting its own limitations on what they can do and who they can be.

Bladezz

Bladezz, for instance, is frequently emasculated in his day-to-day life. Tink uses him to buy her things, and his mother and sister dominate his home life. His mother forced him into modeling to help pay for college, putting him in a position where he was the laughingstock of his school. His sister Deena, despite being younger than him, consistently pushes him around, even using physical violence to cow him into obeying her. The fact that Bladezz is controlled by women prevents him from obtaining a hegemonic masculinity.

Within The Game, however, Bladezz is able to gain power. He performs well as a player, and uses gaming culture's objectification of women to present himself as confident and in control. Bladezz continually hits on the female members of the guild, as well as most other women he encounters. He buys Tink the gifts she requests under the assumption that she will

have sex with him, and he seeks vengeance on her when she refuses by deleting her in-game character, thus using The Game as a means for controlling Tink. Furthermore, his constant references to sex, and the other gamers' acceptance of these as normal, reaffirm hegemonic masculinity, specifically the idea that men should be dominant over women, who are around to be a "life support system for a vagina!" ("Grouping Up" 2009). It also reinforces the idea that women who do not provide sex, especially when they have been given attention or gifts, deserve to be punished. This is a persistent trope of both toxic masculinity and rape culture, and one *The Guild* portrays as a joke.

Zaboo

Zaboo also struggles with his masculinity and his pursuit of women. He is frequently emasculated through his relationship with his controlling mother, whose babying makes him codependent but also desire independence. When he shows up unexpectedly on Codex's doorstep, his mother rapidly follows him using a microchip she had him implanted with. She attacks Codex for trying to steal him, and then reveals that she does all his cooking, helps bathe him, and generally runs his life. Although Zaboo tries to break free of her, he also assumes that Codex will take on the work his mother has been doing for him, as he is incapable of taking care of himself. Through this, Zaboo embodies hegemonic masculinity's expectations that women should serve as caretakers, but it also demonstrates how Zaboo cannot take action on his own. At the end of season one, for example, it takes the entire guild to convince Zaboo's mother that he does not want to live with her and can take care of himself.

Zaboo also holds deeply problematic views of romance and relationships, and is frequently inappropriate as a result. Specifically, he enacts romantic-comedy-style "grand gestures" and exaggerated shows of affection that violate many social norms. Upon (temporarily) moving into Codex's apartment, he reveals that he has looked up her floorplans, researched her DMV records, and that he even knows her Xanax prescription. These are obsessive behaviors that amount to stalking, reducing Codex to prey. However, he sees them as part of a normal relationship and does not understand why they upset Codex. While Codex shows her discomfort with Zaboo's actions, he is never penalized for them. Rather, they are treated as a strange but adorable character trait that others must accept. This perpetuates common rape culture tropes, such as the idea that women who decline a date are just playing hard-to-get, which dismisses women's ability to say no to men and choose their own relationships. It further romanticizes behaviors that are, frankly, criminal.

Similarly to Tink's character, Zaboo's portrayal feeds into a racialized gender stereotype that demonstrates how gender operates alongside other identities in the show. Specifically, Zaboo's emasculation by both his mother's controlling parenting and his own ineptitude with romantic relationships is deeply imbricated with the emasculation of Asian men in broader heteropatriarchal, white supremacist culture. Compared to the other men in the show, Zaboo's racial identity further others him from masculine gender norms.

Vork

Vork is the most unusual character. Living illegally on his dead grandfather's Social Security checks and internet and electricity he steals from his neighbor, he is obsessed with saving money and avoiding real-world responsibility. In part, this stems from his severe inability to interact with others. In season two, for instance, he simply states, "Women. Can't live with them...They will not go out with me" ("Socializing Sucks" 2009). As guild leader of the Knights of Good, however, Vork can dictate how others behave, to mediate disputes and distribute loot, and to set and enforce rules. Like the other male characters, he is empowered by the game and gaming culture, rather than limited by it.

The fact that the male characters of *The Guild* embody non-hegemonic masculinities may look like a positive break from media's popular depictions of traditionally attractive, heteronormative men. And in some ways, the show is successfully bringing more diverse masculinities to the forefront of popular imagination. At the same time, the show continually ridicules Bladezz, Zaboo, and Vork for their fringe masculinities, scoffing at Bladezz's fear of his little sister, Zaboo's codependence, and Vork's discomfort with society. By presenting them as "lacking" and showing how they use The Game to obtain some aspects of hegemonic masculinity, the show is encouraging men to conform more closely to traditional ideals, and validating aggression and gender-dominance as a way to do this. In turn, this sets up a particular kind of self-supporting, aggressive, and sexually confident masculinity as the goal to strive for.

Cruel Optimism: The Gamer Ideal

Each character demonstrates an inability to navigate 'real life,' and a reliance on games as an escape mechanism that allows them to avoid dealing with their problems (whether that be relationships, parenting, finances, etc.). It is the belonging they find in their guild and the fantasies of online space that sustains them. In other words, they depend on being gamers: more than just those who play games, those who commit their lives, resources, and identities to the cultures and communities around games. Yet it is this same commitment that renders them unable to grow; they are always bound to the ideals of gamer culture that demand conformity and mock or exclude difference.

This situation becomes a form of cruel optimism attached to gamer culture and identity. As Berlant states, "All attachments are optimistic. When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us" (2011, 23). In terms of *The Guild*, the show offers the possibility of imagining gaming as inclusive and accepting of diversity through the equitable division of the main cast among men and women and the central role of female characters. It also represents gaming as a solution to personal problems—a place to find a community who will stand by you, no matter what. Upon closer analysis, however, this vision becomes cruel in that aspiring to it requires compromising more positive ways of being: "optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the

very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation" (2).

The Guild and gamer culture first offer a compromised approach to transformation through the strong connection between gamer identity and competition. Arguably the central tenet of the gamer ideal is skill in playing games; The Game, as many games do, pits players against either each other or computer-generated opponents, with the goal being to exert dominance over them. However, this call to mastery is cruel in that the drive to be the best establishes a hierarchy that is ultimately unsustainable: players are under constant pressure to perform better than others, and any time they do not, they are discarded for failing to meet the ideal.

This is seen most clearly in the Knights of Good's conflict with Axis of Anarchy in Season 3, where the central plot for the season is the guild's anxiety and despair over being beaten by seemingly more skilled, elite players. The guild's gamer identity is thrown into crisis as it appears that they will be defeated and "owned" by others, something the gaming ideal cannot tolerate. The very thing that unites them now threatens to dissolve them, and it is only a miraculous victory provided by Codex in the season finale that prevents that from happening. It is further telling that the Axis of Anarchy splits up after their defeat—having become the losers, they lose their purpose and are excluded from the ideals that sustained them. As The Guild demonstrates, gamer identity traps players in a precarious cycle of cruel optimism where they identify with and through games, but are always in danger of losing them.

This focus on competition is significant due to its explicit connections to power, especially in its construction of a gendered hierarchy prioritizing masculinity over femininity. In the show, competition and power are notably (and even exclusively) coded in masculine language. In the first episode Codex accidentally allows her guildmates to die in game, leading them to accuse her of letting them be "raped by goblins" as she stands there with her "staff up [her] ass" ("Wake-Up Call" 2007). The phallic language of rape and penetration is used as an expression of dominance, one that perpetuates the perception of the (masculine) penetrator as possessing skill and mastery, while the (feminine) penetrated is lesser or lacking. Those without skill are "owned", as in the episode "Owning Bladezz," meaning they are defeated and are therefore subservient to the better players that beat them. This cultural narrative amongst gamers is overtly sexist, and establishes gaming ideals in terms of masculine domination and feminine submission.

Although all the characters in the show, both male and female, compete to be the best and can work to achieve respect through their success, this does not solve the underlying problems of gendered inequality. As Nakamura (2017) states in discussing her students,

> They agree that the best strategy for creating social justice—the freedom not to be harassed while playing games—is for stigmatized players to create habitable spaces for themselves by displays of superior skill, by proving their worth by dominating other players, in other words by using procedural meritocracy. They believe that rights accrue

to those who can leverage the mechanics of the game to create a win-condition for themselves and by implication for their gender, race, and sexuality.

As Nakamura goes on to explain, however, such a perspective is "the cruelest kind of optimism", positing respect as something that must be earned rather than something that should be given. Being *good enough* to earn respect might solve individual problems with harassment or negativity, but it does nothing to change structural inequalities, such as the gender hierarchy perpetuated by *The Guild*. Rather, it perpetuates an unlevel playing field in which privileged members receive respect automatically while all others must fight for it.

Inequality also persists through the characters' access to identifying as gamers. The male characters of *The Guild* are accepted without question as gamers and are always assumed to be capable of competing and proving themselves. For men, The Game is a means for attaining power and establishing heteronormative masculine traits they may not perform outside gaming spaces. The female characters, by stark contrast, are repeatedly questioned throughout the series regarding their ability to compete and belong in gamer communities. Codex's neuroticism and doubt concerning her abilities, Tink's reliance on manipulating men, and Clara's motherhood that distracts her from the Game each call the characters' ability to compete and belong in gamer communities into question. Even when Codex succeeds at performing the ideals of mastery and skill over others, the highest praise she receives is "for a girl, you're not a bad player" ("Hero" 2009).

While one might expect these experiences to unite Codex, Clara, and Tink against the social values that exclude them, instead they often buy into those values and perform them themselves, such as when Tink bemoans how the Knights of Good are all about "feelings" and "holding each other's vaginas" ("Strange Allies" 2010). Rather than striving to transform gaming culture to include them, they instead transform themselves. While this offers an illusion of belonging, it plays into gaming's cruel optimism. No matter how closely female players fit gaming ideals, they will always be relegated to secondary status. Furthermore, engaging in this cruel optimism forecloses on any possibility for changing the status quo because it locks its willing participants into a cycle of perpetual return to the same ideal that limits them in the first place. It is a closed system, and any hope of transforming it must come from reaching outside for more inclusive ideals.

Male characters and players have a different relationship with the gamer ideal, but it still functions as a cruel optimism for them. The glorification of masculine dominance puts immense pressure on men to perform these traits in and outside of games. Each of the men of *The Guild* demonstrates this in various ways. Vork, for example, prides himself on his mastery of free market principles, and even his laughably extreme frugality is an expression of control through financial means. Clara's betrayal of him in Season 2 is devastating because it challenges his mastery of the game and materials in it (Clara's rebellion is revenge for him not giving her an in-game item), and Vork interprets this challenge in terms of gendered ownership, as seen in his response: "Now I know how King Arthur felt when Lancelot caressed his wife's genitalia"

("Fight" 2009). Clara's actions undermine Vork's sense of masculinity to such an extent that they launch him into an existential crisis that demands a soul-searching road trip in Season 3.

Where male players are most pressured to conform, however, is in their performance of normative heterosocial relations with female players. Vork, Bladezz, and Zaboo all seek to adhere to traditional masculine gender roles of protectors, providers, and masters of the women in their lives, and the pressure to act as such often renders them naive, emotionally stunted, and socially awkward. Zaboo is a clear example of this in his clumsy attempts to obtain a girlfriend, a quest that he believes hinges on prescribed roles and activities that demonstrate masculinity and attract women. Zaboo's personal narrative is defined and constrained by social expectations, a point that he is aware of even if he is uncritical of it—such as when he is weightlifting and remarks, "the internet is telling me everything I need to know about becoming a man" ("Sacking Up" 2008). Yet even after seasons of conforming to these expectations, Zaboo is still no closer to finding the love that they promise. In the final season, he is hopelessly in love with a mermaid character, an idealized representation of a mythical creature constructed entirely out of code. His cruel optimism of conforming to masculine gaming ideals has brought him nothing but the fantasy of a relationship, yet he still clings to it as a core part of his identity.

The easy solution to Zaboo's situation would be to reject the masculine ideals of gamer culture and seek alternatives, but even that is not so simple. Male players who do not demonstrate the adequate amount of bravado and dominance are called "fags," and while the show does not forefront any LGBTQ characters (except to joke about a possibly closeted male Axis of Anarchy player who plays using female avatars) the message to them is clear: to belong to the gaming culture, they must conform ("The Macro Problem" 2007). In this way, the cruel optimism of gamer identity functions similarly to the cruel optimism of the closet for LGBTQ folk. If one remains silent and hidden, one is welcome, but this promise of claiming gamer identity also means denying other identities that would allow one to flourish. While each of these situations reveals how the cruel optimism of gamer identity operates in different ways for different people, together they demonstrate how harmful and constraining it is in every case. The fact that this happens along gender lines demonstrates how the gamer ideal acts as a type of masculine gatekeeper that excludes many.

The cruel optimism found in *The Guild* draws from the gaming culture that inspires it, and this gives it added significance beyond the analysis of a single webseries. The show's claim to represent "authentic" gamer culture moves its representations away from the status of simple comedy and into the realm of cultural construction. In other words, the show is performing significant ideological work, defining who gamers are and what they look like. Thus, the cruel optimism it portrays is meaningful to gaming culture more broadly, especially as few other shows exist to offer competing representations.

Trapped in Cruel Optimism

The limited representations of male and female characters in the series do little to develop over its six-season run, and many (if not all) of the issues at play in the early seasons are still present by the series finale. Codex's insecurities provide a prime example of this. In the first

episodes of the series, Codex confesses in her video monologues that she doesn't "cope well with anything," and bemoans how she "can't log off from [her] own life," ("The Macro Problem" 2007) statements that become representative of her continuing self-doubt as the series progresses. Even when Codex is placed in a position to assert herself and be the hero of her situation, as when she saves the Knights of Good in their final showdown with Axis of Anarchy, she compares herself to small woodland creatures and exclaims, "I don't want to ever be the key to anything!" ("Hero" 2009). In the final season, Codex describes herself as a "neurotic girl that got plopped into a world way out of her comfort zone" ("Tipping Points" 2012). Each of these moments is an opportunity for Codex to grow and develop as a character, but none of them are fulfilled. Instead, Codex continually returns to her neurotic state until the next crisis comes along. Codex is not alone in her lack of development either—every other member of the guild joins her, as each remains trapped in various character flaws at the series finale.

Perhaps the dearth of change in these characters is simply an indication of individual identity and choice. For example, Codex remains neurotic and self-doubting throughout the series because that is who she is, or rather how she performs her identity. Yet the fact that each character often desires change and improvement indicates that there is some other common factor that is structuring their situations. All of them want to grow in their own ways, but all are held back. These are not just *their* situations either—these characters represent popular stereotypes of gamers, so their portrayals and the problems they face are relatable to the gaming communities that are the show's audience.

Another possible explanation for the lack of character growth could be genre conventions. As a comedy series, *The Guild* follows the traditional comedy arch of upending, but finally reestablishing, the status quo (Frye [1957] 2000, 164-165). Despite the many challenges the Knights of Good face, the guild never fundamentally changes, and its members seek to keep it that way. With this view, development and progress are never goals for the series, so it is hardly surprising that it does not meet them. The constant return to the same tropes within the gaming community serves as the reliable joke fodder that keeps the series entertaining, but also comfortable in the knowledge that none of the norms will be transgressed. Of course, comedy *can* be progressive (Neville 2009), but *The Guild* does not seize on any opportunities to be so.

Yet neither individual choice and identity nor the series' comedic elements adequately explain why *The Guild*'s characters seem unable to change, despite every opportunity to do so. Rather, the lack of growth is symptomatic of the trap of cruel optimism. Cruel optimism permeates *The Guild* and the gaming communities it represents, holding out the promises of identity and belonging while simultaneously foreclosing on them by idealizing inequality, competition, and domination. As long as cruel optimism holds, there can be no progress or change, except toward an unobtainable and untenable ideal. Every challenge leads toward the illusion of mastery and belonging, but these are built on competition that always generates new challenges and leaves a trail of excluded losers in its wake. In this sense, the gamer ideal is inherently self-defeating. Or as Berlant writes, "the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (Berlant 2011, 1).

As the final season, in many ways Season 6 is the ultimate expression of the gamer ideal–working for a game company, getting special access to game assets, and helping shape a game's future. However, the ideal is far from what it seems, and Codex spends the entire season fighting figurative fires caused by magnified versions of the anxiety, tensions, and faulty relationships present throughout the series. These problems ultimately manifest in the form of an angry gamer mob, and are only resolved by a deus ex machina when Codex exclaims, "can't we just get along and love the game?" ("End Game" 2013). This miraculously calms the mob because it brings everyone back to the thing at the center of the gamer ideal: games. It only does so, however, by ignoring the host of issues that gamer culture has created for the very people it seems to sustain. Instead, gamers perpetually return to the same ideals that limit them, uncritical of the cycle and unable to reach for better alternatives.

The message of *The Guild*, then, is an optimistic one: games will save. Yet it is also cruelly optimistic in that the saving grace of games works only if they go unquestioned and unchanged, and if a simple love of games as they are subsumes all problems. Of course, this solution does not work for anyone except those closest to the gamer ideals of straightness, whiteness, and maleness, but even the suggestion that that ideal should shift often triggers immense backlash from gamers who feel attached to the status quo. Rather than embracing and enacting change, gaming culture wholeheartedly runs into "cruel optimism's double bind: even with an image of a better good life available to sustain your optimism, it is awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is already not working" (Berlant 2011, 263). This tension is at the root of events such as #GamerGate, which has couched fierce and violent resistance to critiques of gamer culture in proclaimed concern for "ethics in games journalism" and keeping "political correctness" out of games.

GamerGate demonstrates that the cruel optimism of gaming culture and *The Guild* has become much more than what Berlant calls "ambient citizenship," a politics of diffuse affect and noise that characterized President Obama's first term when *Cruel Optimism* was published (230). Gaming's cruel optimism is no longer merely an ambient phenomenon in gaming culture, a pernicious promise of belonging built on 'harmless' stereotypes and the celebration of existing games. Instead, its attachment to the toxic, compromised status quo manifests as an open and dangerous animus for exclusionary activism that rejects critique using online harassment, rape and death threats, and virtual and physical violence. Cruel optimism has been militarized, and fighting it requires activism as well as awareness.

Returning to *The Guild* now does not solve the many issues raised by GamerGate and the mobilization of gaming's cruel optimism, but it can help guide the response to them by revealing how cruel optimism operates in gamer identity. While remaining attached to gaming's existing norms may be comforting, the limitations of *The Guild* show us that we must actively challenge our current, "authentic" gamer culture in order to move forward. Critical attention to how the very structures of games and gaming cultures perpetuate hierarchy, domination, and exclusion must balance the love of games. This is not to say that games are essentially negative or pernicious, but that idealizing power, competition, and opposition (to "real life" and the rest of

society) through games can create the dangerous feedback loop of cruel optimism. It is only through critical reflection and the work of envisioning and enacting alternatives, however difficult that might be, that gaming culture can seize its sustaining and even transformative possibilities.

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<u>Author Biographies</u>

Cody Mejeur is a PhD candidate in the Department of English at Michigan State University. He specializes in new media, narrative theory, cognitive studies, and digital humanities. His work proposes new ways of theorizing the interaction of narrative and play in video games, and he has published on pedagogy with games and queer representation in *BioShock*. He is a graduate lab lead in the Digital Humanities and Literary Cognition Lab and adjunct faculty at Ivy Tech Community College.

Amanda Cote completed her Ph.D. in Communication Studies at the University of Michigan, where she currently serves as the Howard R. Marsh Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow. Her work focuses on the industry and culture of video games, with a particular emphasis on gender, representation, and issues of technological access. More specifically, Cote draws on critical explorations of industry texts and practices, as well as interviews with female gamers, to explore gaming's conflicting trends towards both greater diversity and greater discrimination.