

## ISSUE NO. 2

## On Not Becoming Gamers: Moving Beyond the Constructed Audience

**Adrienne Shaw**

To borrow a turn of phrase from Simone de Beauvoir (1989 [1949]): one is not born a gamer, one becomes one. [T.L. Taylor makes a similar twist of the classic phrase in *Play Between Worlds* when she says “One is not born an *Everquest* player, one becomes one” (2006, p. 32).] This is perhaps even truer of being a gamer than it is of women in Beauvoir’s original formulation. As an identity defined by consumption, identifying as a gamer is more clearly a choice than are identities more directly written on the body, defined by kinship structures, and/or dictated by legislation. It is not, however, a consequence-free choice as the interviews described below indicate. Like other forms of identity, being a gamer is defined in relation to dominant discourses about who plays games, the deployment of subcultural capital, the context in which players find themselves, and who are the subjects of game texts.

We might relate the experience of gamer identity to the notion of interpellation. In his canonical text, “The Ideological State Apparatus,” Louis Althusser uses the metaphor of being hailed by a police officer and asserts that it is in the turning that a person realizes she/he is the “you” being called on, and thus becomes interpellated by, or a subject of, the state apparatus (1998 [1971], p. 185). This article seeks to understand the intersections of investment in a medium, audience construction, and diversity of identities represented in game texts. In it, I explore how and if people who play video games turn to the hail “hey gamer,” and the implications this has for diversity of in-game representation if they do not believe that they are the ones being hailed. Moreover, I question how useful “gamer” as a term is to the broader goals of feminist game studies. Rather than expanding who might be included in “gamer” identity, how might we argue for greater representation in games in a way that works outside the market logic of the term itself?

As games became a niche consumer product during the late 1980s and 1990s, following the U.S. game market crash (Kent, 2001), the content of both games and the construction of the audience were profoundly homogenized (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & De Peuter, 2003). Over time and through a focus on core gamers as the primary market, gamer as an identity category has become an invested position describing more than just a person who plays digital games.<sup>[1]</sup> It requires investment, both social and economic, in the medium. Calls for more diversity in games have in many ways focused on proving that gamers as a group are more diverse than previously thought (Shaw, 2012a). Indeed many feminist game scholars have analyzed the limited ways in which gamers have been constructed and the impact this has had on how women in particular are represented in games (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun, 2008; Taylor, 2006). More and more researchers are also looking beyond the console and PC to see how casual and mobile gaming complicate prevailing notions of how, when, and by whom games are played (Consalvo, 2009; Hjorth & Richardson, 2010; Juul, 2009).

Building on their insights, I want to make sense of how players who fall outside the constructed norm of “hardcore,” white, heterosexual, cisgendered male players within the U.S. context relate to this medium and how this might reform arguments for representation in the medium. Drawing upon the insights of feminist media scholars like Ien Ang (1991), Janice Radway (1988), Julie D’Acci (2004), and Liz Bird (2003), I make this argument by working outside the limits of the constructed audience, looking at the way game play fits within players’ everyday lives, and rethinking representation outside normative identity categories.

In previous work I have described the way gamer identity intersects with gendered, racial, and sexual identity categories (Shaw, 2012a). In that article I found that how people related to gamer identity seemed closely tied to whether and how they had been marketed to as specific niche game audiences. Branching out of that work, this article offers insights into how gamer identity is performed, particularly in relation to subcultural capital, social contexts, and the impact individual players’ relationship to the medium has on demands for representation. I use the insight offered by critical theories of identity, primarily from a feminist and queer political critique of identity categories, to disentangle the mechanisms by which gamer identity is formed. I do this not toward the end of reforming the category, but to point out that demands for representation in this medium can be made outside of inclusion in marketing discourse. I also discuss the way interviewees distance themselves from game play, describing the games as “silly” and thus not to be taken seriously, as an issue game scholars must take much more (paradoxically) seriously. In part our efforts must be directed towards changing audiences relationship to the medium more than redressing the limited ways in which various gaming audiences are constructed.

### **Critical Identity Theories**

Identity as a gamer, like all identities, exists as a conversation between the individual and social, structural discourses. Critical identity theory that build on post-structuralism are particularly useful in parsing how and when gamer identity is adopted by those that play video games. Indeed, the institutional construction of identities is a prevalent theme in both media representation and social theory. Many contemporary theorists have argued that identity exists between rather than within individuals (see for example Appiah, 2005; Gilroy, 2004; Hall, 1996). There is empirical evidence, moreover, that identities are experienced at the nexus of the individual and the social (for two recent examples see Gray, 2009; Valentine, 2007). We are not, as earlier structuralist theorists argued, wholly shaped by external forces; that everything we do is inherently social, does not mean that social structures determine our actions.

In many ways identification is a more useful way of understanding identity formation than identity per se, as Hall (1966) describes. Identities and subjects are made in specific moments, via the process of identification.

*The notion that an effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position requires not only that the subject is 'hailed,' but that the subject invests in the position, means that suturing has to be thought of as an articulation, rather than a one-sided process, and that in turn places identification, if not identities, firmly on the theoretical agenda. (p. 6)*

Hall argues that a focus on identification is more politically useful than a focus on identity, as it allows for the self-definition of the individual rather than on defining them from the outside. In this article I focus on how people *identify as* gamers, rather than gamers as a fan group or industry construction. Identification does not entail audiences creating their own "identities," but rather working within a context in which particular identities are being articulated. That is not to say that identity is wholly self-defined, but rather researchers can look at how structures shape identities through individuals' reflexive articulations of their identities.

In this project I use how interviewees' identifications as gamers are articulated through Judith Butler's twinned notions of performance and precarity. According to Butler, identities are performed in ways that make categories like genders seem natural: "[P]erformativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effect through its naturalization in the context of a body understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (2006, p. xv). Performativity here is not akin to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical self, as she explains in her response to Benhabib in the edited volume *Feminist Contentions* (Butler, 1995). People are not simply playing parts in different social contexts. Rather, for Butler the performance of gender is like much more like a speech act (Austin, 1962). The performance of gender is what constitutes gender. These performances must draw on a broader system of meaning which helps render those utterances, those performances, intelligible. As I discuss below, we can think of gamer identity to as something that is actively performed by those that claim it.

However, it is not the case that anyone who wishes can perform gamer identity. Indeed, central to this analysis is the ways in which gamer identity as a construction and performance is closed off for some players and in particular contexts. It is in this sense that I use Butler's discussion of precarity. Butler (2009) has proposed that precarity works hand in hand with performativity. Precarity refers to the ways in which one must perform identities in an intelligible way, in a way that can be read by others, in order to be recognized. One might perform in a variety of transgressive ways in order to destabilize categories, but "to be a subject at all requires first complying with certain norms that govern recognition – that make a person recognizable. And so, non-compliance calls into question the viability of one's life, the ontological conditions of one's persistence" (p. xi). Although she is discussing this at the level of the nation-state and citizenship, in particular the way marginalized populations are at the mercy of neoliberalism and the violence of nationalism. I argue, however, that her articulation is useful in the realm of consumer culture specifically because such a term allows us to argue for a politics of representation that comes precisely from the edge rather than reimagining the center. Butler writes, "Performativity has everything to do with 'who' can become produced as a recognizable subject [...] Precarious life characterizes such

lives who do not qualify as recognizable” (p. xii). In using this charged term to refer to the sphere of consumer culture I do not mean to diminish precarity’s ties to life and death. Rather, I think drawing on it helps charge feminist game studies to make an argument for representation that does not only reinforce the importance of those who are already marketable as audiences. What can our demands for representation look like when we move beyond just broadening out who counts as a gamer?

### **Method**

The broader study from which this paper is drawn focused on why, when and how media representation is important to individuals who are members of groups which have traditionally been marginalized in mainstream U.S. media, focusing on the intersections of sexuality, gender and race. This was a three-stage study. First, I used a general survey, administered online, to locate potential interviewees.<sup>[2]</sup> A group of interviewees<sup>[3]</sup> who identified as non-heterosexual, non-cisgendered male, and/or not solely white<sup>[4]</sup> were then selected from the completed surveys. Additionally, I was interested in people who play video games, rather than “gamers” *per se*, so I sampled across the types of games, platforms, and amount of time they play. In addition, I had the opportunity to speak with two heterosexual, white male partners of two of those interviewees, and the non-gaming, queer white female partner of one other participant. I conducted two separate interviews. During the first interview I focused on their general backgrounds, thoughts on media representation and how and if they identify with fictional characters. The second interview was a “gaming interview,” as described in Schott and Horrell (p. xi), during which interviewees played a game they were familiar with while I watched (or played with them depending on their preference) and asked questions.

The goal in this project was to see how and if representation of various identities became important to these players, as well as whether or not they identified as gamers. This was done in part because much of the discussion of representation in games tends to focus on self-identified gamers, but I argue that an even more compelling case for representation can be made by looking at the edges of game play. Indeed, as T.L. Taylor (2003) has shown, female gamers play despite their under- or mis-representation. I wanted to investigate those who play but do not necessarily identify as gamers to see what they thought about representation in video games.

### **Performing subcultural capital**

Whether or not individuals identify as gamers is done in the context of certain social constructions of gamer, though there is not necessarily a static standard of gaming to which people might compare themselves. Certainly “gamers” in the popular imagination are presented as particularly gendered and raced bodies who engage in certain types of play and for a pathologized amount of time (discussed in Shaw, 2010). Yet, as Bourdieu describes, culture is a representative practice, a symbol, more than it is an objective reality (1977, p. 2). The narrow construction of gamer as an identity has

been heavily critiqued for some time, as I have discussed previously (Shaw, 2012a). What I am arguing for here, however, is that rather than try to disprove these assertions and articulate a new definition of gamer identity, I will demonstrate how players understand their relationship to video games as a medium through this construction of “gamer.” In particular I look at the way interviewees do or do not perform the consumption of games in relation to what they think of as gamer subcultural capital (drawing on the terminology of Bourdieu, 1997; Consalvo, 2007a; Thornton, 1996).

We can see the many intersections of the ways gamer identity is constructed and performed in the first interview I conducted with Devon. When he arrived for the interview on a rainy October day, Devon sported an orange t-shirt with a picture of a 1980s-era Nintendo controller and the word “Gamer” printed across the chest. When I first asked him to tell me a little about himself in the interview the first thing he said was that he was a gamer. Specifically, he defined this identity in terms of various types of consumption:

*Devon: It's my main hobby. [...] I like to play games, board games, video games, it doesn't matter. I also play WoW<sup>[5]</sup> [...] I played Everquest when that was out. Oh my gosh, wasted so much time on those games [...] I think a lot of people that identify as gamers have similar personality types even if — you know outside of the fact that we all like video games — if we weren't talking about video games we could also talk about similar things.*

First, being a gamer is tied to a particular level of time commitment (“it’s my main hobby”), but also an economic investment in clothing, types of games, and in subscription-based PC games that demand time, money, and expertise to navigate. It is also defined in terms of affect, as he likes to play all types of games and feels that the social connections made by identifying as a gamer encompass more than just playing games. He went on to describe a love of anime and comics as central to his gamer identity as well, demonstrating the intersecting consumption practices that are tied to “geek” subculture generally (Tocci, 2009). Gamer identity, as described by Devon, is performed through a myriad of consumption practices as well as in particular social alignments.

While gaming as an activity has become more and more ubiquitous in recent years, as games have undergone what Jespur Juul (2009) describes as a “casual revolution,” “gamer” as a category (according to my interviewees) still maintains an aura that ties it to particular forms of subcultural capital. Consumption, the spending of resources (time, money, energy) on selected texts and objects, has long been described as a way of displaying identity or group belonging (Bourdieu, 1984; Hebdige, 1979; Simmel, 1957; Thornton, 1996; Veblen, 1965). This is particularly true of studies of fan cultures (Hebdige, 1979; Thornton, 1996). Moving past leisurely play, T.L. Taylor (2012) has described the high levels of commitment involved in professional gaming, from purchasing the material objects required to participate in e-sports as well as the time to practice. Although game scholars have demonstrated that gaming is becoming more

and more popular across audiences (Consalvo, 2007b; Juul, 2009), many of my interviewees still stressed that games are different than other media. They thought this not because they thought only particular kinds of people play games, but rather because playing games and being a gamer were distinct in their minds. Indeed only about half of my interviewees identified as gamers.

Consumption in terms of the purchase of material objects of play, whether new computers, consoles, or regular game purchases, was identified throughout my interviews as directly tied to gamer identity. Connie, for instance, stated: "I think of gamers as folks who play video games very often, owning not just older game systems but also new systems and games." Economic investment is articulated here as continuous. Indeed, Tanner and Rusty both identified as gamers, at least at times, and pointed to the collection of old consoles in their basement as evidence of that identity. Ownership of particular types of products are more associated with gamers than others as Klara pointed out: "a gamer by today's definition is either someone who either plays *WoW* or *Halo*, and like a PS3 or Xbox. I mean I have a Nintendo 64 and a Wii and those aren't usually associated with gamers." Klara went on to define gamer identity as something that was specifically masculine and indirectly associated her own Nintendo platforms with femininity. Particular types of consumption were noted throughout interviews as signs of gamer or non-gamer identity.

Certain types of games and amounts of play also constituted gaming subcultural capital. Sometimes interviewees said they were not gamers because they did not play certain types of games such as games with deep narratives or games focused on killing. Amy might play a game "on the caliber of *World of Warcraft*" once every few years, but as for the puzzle games she plays on a more regular basis she said: "I don't really consider them video games as much." Certain types of games were often deemed outside gamer subcultural capital. Ephram described his sister as a casual gamer because she only plays *Dance Dance Revolution* and *Rockband*. Similarly, just playing a certain type of games for a certain amount of time does not a gamer make, but neither can one really be a gamer without engaging in video game play in some particular ways.

Not identifying as a gamer was articulated, in every instance, by a lack of what interviewees considered to be adequate consumption. "I don't play enough" was a sentiment echoed by seven out of eight interviewees who said they were not gamers. Their inability to play 'enough' was often tied to other demands on their time, like work or school, or because it was just one of many leisure activities for them. Sasha, the final non-gamer, still tied that fact to consumption: "I don't think I would spend my last dollar on a game. I wouldn't pay to go to a video game show." Unlike the other non-gamers, Sasha played often, and was quite adept and well versed in the games she did play (*Madden NFL* games and *Capcom vs. Marvel* in particular). She was not willing to go out of her way to learn more about gaming in general, however, nor was she going to make a monetary commitment beyond purchasing the games she sought out. It is also worth pointing out that her boyfriend had professionally competed in gaming

tournaments and thus, though she did not say this, her claim to gamer identity was inflected with gendered discourses about who gets to be called a gamer.

In addition to consumption, interviewees described gamer identity as a general approach to games often tied to a willingness to sacrifice one's time for a form of consumption (under capitalism, time is money after all). Elaborating on this theme, Bryan has many friends that play video games of various types, but he doesn't consider any of them gamers. He identified as one, however, because if he had nothing else he had to do, his first choice would be playing a video game. This is because for him, "gamer" signified not just one's playing habits, but one's attachment to the medium. Hatshepsut, for example, identified as a gamer even though she doesn't currently own a game system. Her old console was stolen and upon moving to Philadelphia from California she was still in search of work at the time of the interview: "But once I find a job I'm going to go out and buy video games [laughs]. It'll be my first priority after that." Both Pouncy and Christine did not consider themselves gamers yet both keep up with video games to some extent by following reviews and new releases. Instead of gamers, Pouncy identified as a nerd and Christine a casual gamer.

It is not as simple as playing games or not, or being in possession of the cultural capital symbolic of gaming culture (a murkily defined concept at best). Rather it is using these as part of one's performance of gamer identity. Tala, for example, identified as a gamer because, as she put it, "I'm not ashamed to admit that I play video games and I truly enjoy them and that I don't feel that an evening is necessarily wasted by playing a video game." This also requires, she stressed, a willingness and ability to be critical of games, a reflexive distance cultivated by true consumers but not casual dilettantes. Chuck described getting "in jokes" and knowing developers' names as part of why he identifies as a gamer. In turn, lack of gaming knowledge was another major reason people gave for not identifying as a gamer. Julia did not think of herself as a gamer because "I don't think I know enough about games to you know to go into a game store and start throwing stuff around like I know what I'm talking about. I don't know what I'm talking about!" Her partner Elise, however, countered "but you get into it with the guy, [to me] there's a guy in GameStop over in a strip mall by us, and like you [to Julia], to me it seems like you know what you are talking about." Julia went on to explain that this was only in the context of the specific game she was discussing. Julia did not feel she could perform gamer identity outside of a very narrow expertise. It is not just purchasing power or being part of the constructed audience, but instead how people are invested (or not) in this medium that is important here. Knowledge of gaming beyond the texts themselves was discussed throughout interviews as indicative of gamer capital, and in turn felt as a pre-requisite to identifying as a gamer.

Tied to this issue of consumption and dedication, we can see the way in which class excludes some from becoming "gamers." Taylor argues, for instance, that "play is situational and reliant not simply on abstract rules but also on social networks, attitudes, or events in one's non-game life, technological abilities or limits, structural affordances or limits, local cultures, and personal understandings of leisure" (2006, p.

156). That is to say, if performance of gamer identity is predicated on material consumption and expertise, those who do not have access to the necessary resources cannot claim gamer status. Several interviewees pointed out, for example, that they did not play as children because their families could not afford consoles. Some saved money with siblings to buy them. Others only played computer games, because their parents could justify the purchase of a computer for academic purposes, and in turn long term economic success. Still others received used consoles from family friends. Even now, cost affects their decision to buy consoles or identify as gamers. Gregory played many games, and has for most of his life, but he did not think of himself as the kind of gamer that seeks out tournaments or would pay full price for a game: “\$60? That’s a T-Mobile bill! Girl, that’s electric!” As a child he played games owned by his better-off cousins. As an adult he buys nearly all of his games used, and stressed that when he had a PlayStation2 part of the logic for buying it was that it could also play DVDs. He got his PlayStation Portable after his cousin found a sale on them and because he can access the Internet through it, as he must share a computer with his other family members. Though class does not solely determine who identifies as a gamer, it does shape at a basic level how people engage with the medium. Income directly affects whether or not people can afford to engage in the proper amount of consumption to earn gamer status. This is not to say that economic capital is a necessary precursor to subcultural capital. Other resources, however, like time (to seek out deals) or commitment (to save up funds) are necessary to compensate for a lack of economic resources. Related to this, interviewees, or people they knew, who lacked certain levels of manual dexterity or who possessed physical disabilities could not play certain kinds of games.<sup>[6]</sup> Julia, for example, was limited in what games she could play by her multiple sclerosis (MS) and the impact it had on her vision. Others played because health issues required them to spend a great amount of times indoors and it provided them with a more engaged form of entertainment than less interactive media.

Finally, how interviewees identify themselves must be understood as a momentary articulation rather than a solidified identity. Thus they must be seen as a performance that occurs in the research moment, as I describe below. Identifying as a gamer was not a constant state for interviewees, as Janet discusses:

*Janet: I always think of that as a comparative term and I know people that are so much more into gaming than I am. [...] But it’s — I guess in more of an objective sense than I am. It’s like I don’t really think of myself as a hardcore biker but then I talk to people who don’t ride bikes at all and they’re like: “Wow, you ride seven miles a day?!” [...] So I guess in that sense I don’t think of myself as a gamer. But I guess I am.*

When interacting with those who play more than she does, Janet does not see herself as a gamer. If she simply considers herself a gamer because she plays every day and others do not, however, she does see that gaming is something specific she chooses to do with her leisure time. Gamer identity, claiming gamer as a status, is in part a marking of gaming as something peculiar, something distinct from other types of media consumption. As I discuss later, however, it is this exceptionality of games that must be



dealt with more directly in demands for representation, as it is this exceptionality so often used to defend their lack of diversity.

The continued performance of gamer identity, as discussed by those who do and do not identify as gamers, is what constitutes this category as something distinct against which game play as a practice is understood. Identifying as a gamer does not necessitate fulfilling a specific set of criteria, and yet being recognized as a gamer implies a certain level of social readability of the codes of game consumption. We must be careful as scholars to not assume that people play because they love games, or do not play because they do not understand them. It is those at the precarious edge of gaming, as discussed above, who are often lost in attempts to locate gaming solely within the bounds of gamer identity and dominant forms of commerce. Identifying as and being seen as a gamer, as with anything, is also contextual and socially fraught.

### **Social capital, context, and gamer identity**

In addition to making sense of how gaming subcultural capital is deployed, what performance allows for, as Butler describes it, is a way to conceive of the self, individual, and identity as results of momentary, fraught and complex intersections between the social and the individual. The relevance of particular identities in particular social interactions helps make sense of how people come to identify with categories like gamer. Gamer identity, moreover, is highly contextual. In her ethnography of *Everquest*, Taylor found that her identity as a player on one server became relevant during a 'real life' *Everquest* convention (2006, p. 30). This shared space made her identity as a specific kind of gamer relevant. The research moment too can make gamer identity relevant. When recruiting people to talk about video games, for example, there is an assumption that you are calling upon them to answer as gamers. Snowball sampling and distributing the recruitment announcement through my social networks allowed me to encourage anyone who had played any sort of digital game to fill out the survey. Yet even then many people wondered why I wanted to interview them, particularly as they did not see themselves as gamers. In many ways, this is the precise reason I did not emphasize that I was looking for people who were members of marginalized groups in the recruitment announcement. It would, as it had in my past research, put individuals in the position of answering as representatives of a single, specific group (Shaw, 2012b).

Related to this, interviewees who did not identify as gamers were not sure what they had to offer. Conversely the two interviewees who fit the standard image of a gamer assumed that their viewpoints were "a dime a dozen," as Chuck put it. There is an expectation that as an interviewee one is being called upon to speak from a particular point of view. Interviewees wanted to know which identity I was attempting to hail when I made them research subjects. Certainly, researchers must be conscious of oversimplifying the identities of their participants. And yet, at the same time, in any social situation people perform in particular ways and interviewees were quite conscious that they were being called upon to take a specific role.

In addition to cultural capital, we can also think of gamer identity as a form of social capital, both in a positive and negative sense. Positively speaking, Devon said: “Whenever I make friends I’m always excited if somebody else plays video games.” Having a social circle defined by gaming was part of what defined the gamer identities of Zahriel and Ephram as well. Connie attributed part of her newly rekindled gamer identity to the fact that she now talks with other people about games. Those that did not identify as gamers related this to the fact that they are not social about it. Violet discussed the fact that she does not play online as one of the reasons she does not consider herself a gamer. Indeed, *World of Warcraft*, a widely popular massively multiplayer online roleplaying game, was mentioned by several interviewees as a touchstone of gamer credibility. When he stopped playing the game, Malcolm felt he had lost his gamer social capital. When asked if he identifies as a gamer Malcolm said “I don’t really have any gaming cred, as it were, anymore. So yeah, I would still check that box, but that’s just because I would still sort of think of myself as that. But I don’t think a gamer would consider me a gamer.” There is an uneasy tension between how players self-identify and how they are identified by others as gamers. While playing games at all might enable one to form connections with other people, and even mean one has gamer cultural capital, in Malcom’s case, deeper connections might be troubled by how other gamers read his play.

Interestingly, gaming can also act as a positive form of social capital outside of gamer circles. Klara’s mother is Japanese and her father is Norwegian. She said that her mother was not a gamer, but she would get into games when around her Japanese friends because of games’ association with Japanese-ness. That is, performing as a game player in certain social contexts allowed her to express her Japanese identity. Renee, who did not identify as a gamer, still felt like she gained status from her familiarity with games.

*Renee: It’s funny, because I’ve always played them I don’t even think about it anymore [...] Again not a gamer, so it’s not geeky, because geeky means gamer and playing games is something that is totally different. But at this point, I’m 30. I’ve been playing video games as long as I can remember. I had some friends over and we were playing video games and I was like, “Oh I got a new game. Like you guys aren’t game people but you will like this” [...] One of my friends was like, “It’s kind of cool to see you totally geek out.” And I’m like (looks shocked), “Pardon you I’m not ‘geeking out!’” [...] So it’s kind of like a little identity thing I guess. Like a little feather in the cap (Laughs).*

Even though she does not convert her cultural capital into gamer social capital or gamer identity, Renee gains a sort of status from her gaming abilities. Gaming as a skill set, as a consumption practice, is not a field open to everyone and thus having expertise can be a status symbol in certain interactions.

Gamer identity can also be a disadvantageous social position to take, however. Generally interviewees, much like Yates and Littleton’s (1999) focus group participants, discussed this in terms of the negative connotations about gamers. From high school

coolness to romantic relationships, interviewees discussed the many ways in which playing video games can be a problematic social practice. This is because the performance of identities in the social sphere has important implications:

*Evan: Actually being with [my boyfriend] changed my perception of gaming a little bit. Because I never felt guilty or like, it should be a guilty pleasure that once every six to nine months I'd play games. I was like, I don't do it often. It's not like I waste my life away doing it. But even that little bit [he] criticized and I was like now I'm starting to think it's juvenile, maybe I should get rid of my game system.*

As with a variety of marginalized genres, from soaps (Ang, 1989) to romance novels (Radway, 1984), there is a stigma attached to certain media, a guilty pleasure as it were. Some texts, genres, and media are viewed as either feminine or juvenile, both of which are commonly viewed negatively. Along similar lines, many interviewees described games as “silly” and thus not to be taken seriously. Moreover, claiming gamer cultural capital, for anyone, has social repercussions. Like other identities, choosing to identify as a member of a particular group affects one's relationship to others, as well as the investments one has in that identifier. When it comes to gamer identity, defined by consumption, this investment, or lack thereof, is applied to the medium as well. People tied their opinion of games to whether they thought representation in video games is important.

Beyond understanding gamer identity in relation to proximal social contexts, we might consider the role age and time play in how people identify with the category. Indeed, several interviewees mentioned identifying as gamers at some points of their lives, but not at the time of the interview. The research moment only gives me glimpses into interviewees' identities and tastes. In an email exchange a few months after the original interviews Connie said that she would not have identified as a gamer at the time of the interview, but as she had recently bought a Wii she currently does: “I had been a gamer growing up and now am it again.” Chuck said that he identifies as a gamer now that he plays so much, but he went through a long period where he did not. Moreover, while he was a child though he did play video games he did not identify as a gamer because “that wasn't a thing. There wasn't a gamer. You were an 8 year old boy, you played Nintendo.” For Connie, as a girl growing up gaming was less normative and this perhaps is why she saw her childhood play as “counting” for gamer identity, but for Chuck growing up game play was normative and thus gamer identity not a salient category. Interestingly, twenty-two interviewees brought up playing *Mario Bros* and eleven mentioned *The Legend of Zelda*, but these shared cultural texts were viewed more as part of a general conception of generational culture than as part of gaming fan culture (though they exist as both). One thing that might be worth further research is that at present just as gaming is becoming a more diffuse practice, gamer as a category has a great deal of cultural weight. As this is a particular construction that both researchers and marketers have helped create, both have a role in recreating the category of gamer. So far this has only involved developing new ways of defining gamers. What if we simply got rid of gamer as a category in our research? Can we start talking about game play as normal without in turn saying that everyone is a gamer

now? Beyond that intentionally provocative question, I argue that the focus should be on how audiences view their relationship with this medium and, in turn, if and how they expect to be represented in games.

### **Identifying as a gamer and demands for representation**

As discussed above, “gamer” as a category carries social weight and bespeaks a particular level of investment in the medium. Being a gamer can result from, and in, establishing connections with other gamers. For some people, not having connections with others who self-identify as gamers was a reason they did not identify as gamers. At the same time, the negative “geeky” connotations of video game play led some people to reject gamer identity. In order to maintain their social status, they deny, downplay, or even hide their gaming. In sum, not everyone can or does equally convert their gamer cultural capital into gamer social capital. In turn, gamer social capital shapes, in some ways, whether one’s game play counts as gamer cultural capital. More than just helping make sense of how gamer identity is performed, these issues also connect to questions of representation in video games.

Cultural production studies argue that the lack of representation of marginalized groups is attributable to the fact that the gamer market, at least in Europe and the North America, is constructed as primarily young, heterosexual, white and male (Kerr, 2006). Part of the limited construction of gamer as an identity has often been tied to the way members of marginalized groups are represented in games. This, in turn, is tied to the way game makers have often been critiquing games assuming that their audiences are “like” the game designers. In making games for people “like them” AAA designers make games for a heterosexual, white, male audience (following from industry statistics anyway).<sup>[7]</sup> “What unfolds in the managed dialogue of commercialized digital design is a process in which commodity form and consumer subjectivity circle around each other in a mating dance of mutual provocation and enticement” (Kline et al., 2003, p. 196). Game developers create games that they think appeal to their target market. These games are successful and thus the companies continue to produce them over time. As only really successful genres are reproduced, this results in a narrower vision of what ‘gamers’ play. This is particularly displayed in what Kline et al. (2003) describe as the “militarized masculinity” prevalent in many video games. In response activists, scholars, media producers, and other stakeholders find ways to demonstrate that a given marginalized audience is indeed a viable market or that those that play games are more diverse than is typically thought (discussed in Shaw, 2012). This is certainly an important line of inquiry when it comes to the politics of representation. As discussed above, however, we can also look at how individual players relate to this constructed target audience. The audience is an industrial construction, yes, and these constructions shape how people approach media, but other factors are important factors as well. As I have discussed, whether people see themselves as members of the intended audience or not shapes their reactions to the medium. What happens to arguments for representation when players are *not* that invested in the medium?

Players I interviewed who are members of marginalized groups accept, if begrudgingly, the lack of representation of that group in video games because they are not part of the adolescent, white, heterosexual, cisgendered male gaming market. At times this results in a sort of defeated apathy or the assertion that their groups are indeed good markets for video games and that not marketing to certain groups is both discriminatory and illogical. Carol recounted a scene from the television show *Mad Men* in which executives from a television company clearly allow their racism to trump their desire for money when the character Pete tries to convince them to sell to African-American markets: “It’s stupid to not market to people who have money to spend on your product.” Sasha, another interviewee, made a similar point: “by excluding certain characters you are more likely to exclude certain markets [...] that’s why they made a black Barbie.” While not all games are designed for “gamers,” the definition of what a gamer is impacts how games for both gamers and non-gamers are designed.

Of course, asserting one’s presence in the marketplace does not ensure an equal place in mainstream gaming texts. The ‘girl games’ movement, for example, did not result in the creation of a place for female gamers in the mainstream video game market, but rather the active marking of content designed to be ‘for girls’ (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Hayes, 2007; Kafai, et al., 2008). Carol described this in one interview: “The marketing for girls’ games that I see is so atrocious. It’s like everything has to be pink.” In the context of discussing whether games will be marketed to a gay audience, partners Devon and Ephram brought up the girls’ games example as well:

*Ephram: I think it can happen I don't think it's really going to happen a lot. Like it's happened with girl gamers already where they had these awful awful...*

*Devon: oh those were awful...*

*Ephram: here's girl games, and everything is pink and has ponies and you can decorate stuff and cook*

*Devon: and yeah that's what girls want*

Interviewees recognized that representation is tied directly to expected profits. Marketing to particular groups, however, results in the same sort of marginalization that mis- or under-representation does. A dominant thread in much of my research is that in many ways marginalized players do not care about the lack of representation in games, or at least do not expect it to happen particularly when they do not see themselves as gamers.

The need to simultaneously recognize difference without codifying it, is a fundamental paradox of the politics of representation, described by Julie D’Acci (2004): “We face the importance of recognizing the need for groups forged within the terms of the binary’s inequalities... at the same time as we try to break the binary apart.” Even as studies of representation critique media portrayals of marginalized groups, they often reify, in some ways, the identity categories they interrogate, and I suggest that this is the case

with how gamer as category has been used. The challenge now is to demand representation without redrawing the circle of gamer identity to encompass more bodies.

## Conclusion

The construction of the video game audience may affect the representation of groups in games. It also shapes, though it does not determine, who identifies a gamer. Demands for representation cannot simply focus on making the category of gamer more expansive, however; attempts thus far have simply resulted in the further marginalization of marginalized audiences. Female gamers, for example, have been appealed to as “girl gamers.” Gay gamers are marketed to via advertisements placed in gay magazines (Sliwinski, 2006). As I have discussed elsewhere, explored targeted marketing defines marginalized groups as particular kinds of gamers who are discursively distinct from an implied mainstream gaming audience (Shaw, 2012a). Targeting specific markets via representation in game texts or working to prove that members of marginalized groups play games has dominated how we understand the relationship between audiences and representation. Other factors, however, shape one’s relationship with this identity. Rather than change how gamer identity is understood, and the marketing discourse that it calls upon, I argue that the goal should be to change how audiences think about their relationship with this medium, in part by rejecting “gamer” as the dominant mode of understanding playing games. More than making games “for everyone” as the casual revolution as done (Juul, 2009), in some ways I think we need to work harder to make more people “for games” and in turn feel invested in them as cultural texts.

Relying on the construction of particular kinds of audiences means that the only members of marginalized groups who are represented are those in the position to be “good” consumers. Katherine Sender (2004), for example, demonstrates much of the “progress” made in gay representation in marketing in the 1990s focused on “good gays”: those who were middle- or upper-class, usually white, homonormative<sup>[8]</sup> and, more often than not, cisgendered male. If my interviewee Gregory, for example, were to say that it was important to him that he see himself represented in games, then that would only be of interest to those marketers that wish to target him as a consumer. As he was at the time of the interview an unemployed, gay, African American male in his early 30s who lives with his mother, he was unlikely to be a target market for many game makers, let alone other media industries. Market logic makes a social argument personal, as it stresses an appeal to individual consumers via an appeal to “group-ness.” The emphasis on consumer choice obscures the social and political importance of representation. Related to this, I think that feminist game studies must look more closely at why people do not play, do not identify as gamers, and do not think representation in games is important. Making the personal political, as a long history of feminist activism has called for, means that we can take as our starting point for inclusion arguments about the rejection of gamer identity by some women, and marginalized groups more generally. Indeed gamer identity has been made to matter

in particular ways as I describe above, which I have found shapes how those that play games relate to the medium. In turn, identifying as a gamer seems to shape if and when diversity in game texts was important to interviewees. As an intervention in this conversation, in this article I argue that game scholars must find a way to talk about audiences and representation in texts that accounts for a wide variety of relationships with the medium.

Some might argue that demanding representation in a medium and a subculture that have been historically unfriendly to women amounts to dismantling the master's house with the master's tools. Indeed, Sender asserts that it is problematic for marginalized groups to look solely for tolerance in consumer spheres (2004, p. 242). If we dig deeper into Audre Lorde's essay castigating the structural racism of much of second wave feminism in which she makes the master's tools analogy, however, I think we actually see a way to reconcile demands for representation, more flexible understandings of game play outside the "gamer" label, and feminist politics. In that famous essay, Lorde calls on feminists to learn "how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*" (1984, pp. 112, italics in original). What she discusses, however, goes beyond the way the analogy is often used. She argues that the oppressed are often called upon to educate the masters, the oppressors. To assert that the marginalized demand that the center acknowledge them, however, is a displacement of responsibility. That displacement is the very core of the market logic argument for representation. Market logic is more precisely the master's tools, which "may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde, 1984, p. 112). Rather than call upon groups to demand representation, or display their need to be heard, researchers, activists, and interested producers can argue that everyone shares the obligation to acknowledge and celebrate difference. Women, and indeed all marginalized groups, need not simply be represented "well" in the games they play or when they are being targeted as a particular type of audience. Those placed at the precarious edge of gaming by economics and/or embodiment, those denied the charge to "properly" perform gamer identity are inevitably left out of demands for representation that center on reconstructing the center of the audience.

Rather than argue that the gamer identity is too narrow or blissfully democratic (it is neither), I assert that critical perspectives, such as feminist and queer theory, offer an approach to video games that can focus more attention on the lived experiences of those who engage with these games outside the dominant audience construction — indeed outside of identifying as gamers — and make an argument for representation that takes seriously those perspectives. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler asserts that "to intervene in the name of social transformation means precisely to disrupt what has become settled knowledge and knowable reality" (2004, p. 27). It is in this spirit that I argue here that the focus on gamer as a privileged position can result in arguments for representation that are pre-determined by consumer demand and market segmentation. Working beyond this I suggest that feminist game studies can make an argument for diversity in the audience and texts that can better account for the

complexity and intersectionality of identities. Not arguing that those at the margins of the “gamer” construction could be gamers, but that their play practices and representation in all types of games is important regardless of whether they are gamers or not.

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—CITATION—

Shaw, A. (2013) On Not Becoming Gamers: Moving Beyond the Constructed Audience. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, No.2. doi:10.7264/N33N21B3 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.7264/N33N21B3>)

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