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Casual Threats: The Feminization of Casual Video Games

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There has been a long history of linking mainstream or popular culture with the feminine for the purpose of denigrating both (Huyseen 1986). So-called casual video games lend themselves well to mainstream or popular audiences because of their pick-up-and-play nature and intuitive controls. In fact, some developers even prefer the name mainstream or mass market games to casual games, although they fail to see the way those terms are equally devalued by certain sub-cultures, including a vocal contingent of core gaming culture (Jul 2010, 214). Once linked with popular culture, casual games become discursive representations of passive consumption and femininity for hardcore gamers and as a result are treated by a significant number in the gaming community as either threatening because they supposedly herald the end of so-called hardcore games or irrelevant because casual games do not count as legitimate game experiences. The cultural opposite of casual games, hardcore games, are thus paired with masculinity and celebrated as the authentic and superior game design and experience.

Today, popular video games, particularly those associated with the core base of players, are arguably dominated by a white, hegemonic masculinity (Everett 2009). Early work on masculinity and video games emphasized the relationship between video games and children even as this same work aptly explored gender stereotyping in games, gendered game design, and the disproportionate number of men in the games industry (Cassell and Jenkins 1998). Today, although more women than ever play games, the industry and culture remain fixated on a masculine gamer identity (Kafai *et al.* 2008). Although the Entertainment Software Association, the American video game industry's flagship lobbyist group, reports that 47% of game players are now women, Kafai et al. contend that the same issues of gender representation that plagued video games and their industry in the 90's still persist, regardless of the increased female player base. Indeed, one important reason for the abiding marginality of the feminine in gamer culture is arguably the absence of women from the video games industry. While female players may have increased in number, the percentage of women in the industry has remained between 11 and 12 percent for years (Miller 2012). Moreover, recent work by Nina Huntemann (2013) illuminates the often invisible or neglected feminized labor of video game hardware production and promotion, usefully drawing links between low-wage and low-skilled female labor in manufacturing plants with the use of "booth babes" at

trade show events that perpetuate a culture of sexism while continuing to marginalize or render invisible the contributions of women in the industry. This work accentuates the need for a continual interrogation of not just video games and their audiences but also the industrial cycles of production and promotion that help construct the total discursive matrix of video game cultures. Along with Kafai et. al, Huntemann, and other scholars, I agree that the continued exploration of gender and video games remains as important as ever and thus situate my case study within the ongoing discussion of video games and gender.

Not enough scholarship currently investigates how the popularization of the feminized casual games genre has impacted masculinized video game culture. However, Erica Kubik tackles this exact problem in a chapter of *Cyberfeminism 2.0* titled "Masters of Technology: Defining and Theorizing the Hardcore/Casual Dichotomy in Video Game Culture." Here Kubik suggests the terms casual and hardcore are relational and each constitutes the other; definitions for these terms help construct gaming identity by denigrating the casual gamer and celebrating the hardcore. Equally, Kubik deftly points out that "the end result is a normative value to the masculine hardcore gamer, and devaluation for the feminine casual gamer" (2012, 136). The majority of the work for this article was conducted between 2008 and 2010, and unfortunately I did not encounter Kubik's work until recently. As such, my work reaffirms many of her salient observations and arguments. However, while Kubik focuses largely on casual as a modifier for the identity of the gamer and couches part of her argument in online social spaces like *World of Warcraft*, I explore casual as a modifier for gamers, games, and hardware, perpetuated not just by game players themselves but by an array of discursive forces, including industry professionals and marketing teams. Ultimately, I hope this essay compliments and builds off the work of the scholars above, in general, and Kubik in particular.

In this article I analyze the spectrum of gendered discourses surrounding so-called casual video games over the last half-decade, or roughly between 2006 and 2011 across popular culture, the video game industry, and in core gaming culture. This particular period was chosen because the commercial success of Nintendo's Wii, released in 2006, publicly galvanized what was already a thriving casual games industry and arguably brought the phenomenon to popular attention. However, as with everything in the technology industry, the landscape of digital games changes rapidly and the "casual games" moment has largely subsided, giving way to an era of social and mobile games. Although the same gendered discourses circulate around these new forms of games, I

limit my study to the commercial and discursive zenith of the casual video game, with an emphasis on the Nintendo Wii. Through an analysis of interviews, advertisements, and articles in mainstream and trade publications, I argue that journalists, developers, executives, and marketers have contributed to the cultural feminization of casual video games resulting in the recreation of a traditional, gendered cultural hierarchy in the medium of video games. Troublingly, this broader cultural feminization supports the discursive sentiments of some core gamers found on several popular video game blogs, sentiments that continually delegitimize and marginalize the feminized genre of casual games, despite the co-presence of voices that counter this assault, which I acknowledge near the end of this article. Together, sectors of commercial culture and core gaming culture work to position casual games as first feminine and then, tacitly if not vocally, as inferior and lacking when compared to masculinized hardcore video games. As a culture established upon a vulnerable masculinity with anxieties of infantilization and illegitimacy, hardcore gaming culture perceives these feminized casual games as a threat.

The Mom Test: Industry Logics

At the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) 2010, all three major console platform holders – Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft – reiterated and reproduced the casual and hardcore binary during their always anticipated and carefully planned press conferences. As the current leader in the casual home console space at the time, Nintendo surprised many attendees by focusing on their core franchises rather than the family-friendly line of casual games that made them so successful over the last several years. Many enthusiast press outlets took note of this and celebrated Nintendo for their returned focus on the "hardcore" gamer. As one *Kotaku* writer wrote for the title to his impressions post, "Nintendo finally remembers what E3 is for" (Plunkett 2010). Plunkett implies here that E3 is not for just any video games, but for core video games and core video gamers. Impressions like this suggest any time spent at E3 promoting casual experiences is an inappropriate use of stage time at the expo.

On the other hand, Sony and Microsoft devoted large amounts of time in their press conferences to their attempts at motion-controlled gaming, Move and Kinect respectively, and the same enthusiast press similarly criticized both for the time spent on their new casual experiences (Oldenburg 2010). In this response and in the overwhelmingly positive reaction to Nintendo's showing, the prejudices of core gaming culture find an encouragement in video game journalist practices. Some in the enthusiast press celebrate the attention paid to traditional, core gaming titles, while

attention paid to newer, culturally assigned casual experiences is met with derision and tension. The acknowledgement of the casual and hardcore schism being epitomized in "Mom," on the one hand, and the mid-20s male gamer, on the other, by the platform holders during their press conferences and the enthusiast press in their impressions of the conferences, exacerbates the gender dichotomy. Even though the platform holders value their customers who purchase their intentionally branded casual offerings for contributing significant revenue to their company, these corporations still create the conditions for the "othering" of these casual game players within gaming culture. While Nintendo might use the terms "active" and "casual" (Ohannessian 2010) and Microsoft the terms "blockbuster" and "family," (Xbox 360 Tranforms 2010), all the platform holders recognize and reproduce the dominant genre binary in gaming along with the implicit, yet often understated, gender dimensions of this binary.

The video game industry treats the term casual as a beneficial target consumer, a potential profit, but this enthusiasm is tempered by the subtle devaluation and more blatant feminization of this same market. The gaming industry helped coin and popularize the terms "hardcore" and "casual" in the first place and has used them historically for marketing and product differentiation purposes, although more recently these terms have shifted to "core" and "family," as noted above. For industry professionals, the term casual has come to be associated with non-traditional gamers, none more so than the proverbial mother-figure or *Mom*.

It is difficult to determine if the gaming industry was the first to connect mothers, non-traditional gamers, and females to casual games, but it is evident that the discourse continues to reflect this connection. For instance, at the 2007 Game Developers Conference, Steve Meretzky from the casual game company Bluegill, stated that one way to define casual games is by describing them as games for casual gamers. This definition seems obvious when isolated, but when combined with articulations of the audience for these casual games, casual games become games targeted toward a feminized audience. This association began to emerge when Meretzky mentioned that casual games are games for people who would not define themselves as gamers, as he here was constructing a binary between the casual player and the gamer who would describe him or herself that way (GDC 2007). Casual game designer Dave Walls (GDC) expresses the sentiments of many people when he suggests, "You know it when you see it." For many developers, there is something about a casual game that announces itself as such to an audience.

This casual gamer "who would not describe herself as a gamer" almost always eventually gets articulated as the mother-figure or *Mom* in industry discourse. The game we know as casual when we see it is a game that has been created for *Mom*. One 2006 survey indicates 71 percent of the casual gaming audience is female and most of these players are over the age of 35 (Dobson 2006). Another survey by Jesper Juul indicates that as many as 93 percent of casual gamers might be female (2010, 154). Walls (GDC) summarizes how the industry views casual games when he articulates, "If my mom can play it, it's a casual game." In fact, Popcap's Jason Kapalka gives the games he produces "the mom test," meaning that if a mother can understand and take pleasure in the game, then he is producing a game that will sell to the casual market (Sheffield 2009). Hence, such sentiments discursively link the proverbial *Mom* with the casual video game.

Another example of video game marketing positioning mothers within the casual paradigm in the last few years occurs in Electronic Art's early 2011 media campaign for the game *Dead Space 2*. Encapsulated in the slogan, "Your Mom Hates This," the campaign incorporates various commercials featuring the horrified look upon the faces of "mothers" as they view the game on a monitor. Here the marketers for *Dead Space 2* want to situate the game firmly in the hardcore category. They accomplish this by highlighting just how far from the tastes of *Mom* the game strays. While casual games are not mentioned in this campaign, the cultural link between mothers and casual games is utilized to position *Dead Space 2* as distinctly hardcore, masculine, and edgy. Equating female players, articulated as *Mom*, with casual games not only feminizes the category but also connects it to middle-class luxuries of disposable income and devoted leisure time this proverbial figure is assumed to have.

Along with the link to mothers, the industry often speaks of casual games as those games that lack the qualities of core gaming titles. Rebel Monkey's Nick Fortugno (GDC 2007) suggests casual game players are not familiar with gaming culture and gaming history; these players do not have those "desire structures." The desire structures Fortugno mentions refer to conventional gaming expectations. These might include fighting and shooting mechanics, or anticipations of difficulty and complex level design. Here game players who prefer experiences designated as casual are defined by their *lack* of cultural gaming knowledge and literacy, their *lack* of desire for violence and sexuality in video games.

Descriptions provided by the designers and develops above imply that gaming culture and hardcore game design share similar values and expectations, but that casual game design and so-called casual game players necessarily exist outside of this culture. If hardcore games are defined by their adherence to these cultural expectations, such sentiments suggest casual games are defined by the absence of the traditions, tropes, and gameplay of hardcore titles. This assumes that just as a casual gamer lacks the cultural knowledge a core gamer possesses, a casual game lacks the aesthetics, content, and interactions a core game allows. In other words, the casual space is defined negatively by a lack of hardcore gaming qualities. The repeated association of casual gaming and "lack" echoes the state of the feminine as defined by Lacan, a cultural feminine that lacks the ultimate, phallic expression of masculine power. Owing to this lack, feminized casual games are positioned as inferior to hardcore games, existing in their shadow. They are seen and discursively positioned as deficient.

Despite the construction of the feminized casual gamer as deficient when compared to the "proper," core gamer, the game industry still understands this new, feminized audience as a valuable market, at least in terms of profit. To the industry, the rise in popularity of casual games, and the cultural feminization of these games, means a wider consuming audience and higher profit. According to Popcap's Dave Rohrl, casual games earned nearly half a billion dollars in 2007, and that is excluding mobile earnings, a market space which has greatly increased in recent years thanks to the proliferation of smart phones and tablet devices (Casual Games Sector Report, 2012). Yet this enthusiasm for profit does not keep the gaming industry from positioning casual games as inferior or lacking in comparison to hardcore games in multiple, albeit often inadvertent ways.

Gender, Technology, and the Living Room

Another aspect of the feminization of casual video games involves the video game console design, specifically the Nintendo Wii, the gendered dimensions of hardware aesthetics, and the contentious spatial dynamics of the living room. Lynn Spigel (1992) points out that the problem of integrating new media technology into the home has always been a spatial problem. The recent integration of HDTV has signaled a similar dilemma. As Newman and Levine suggest, "A desire at once to hide and display the flat-panel bespeaks a tension between the excitement over television's reinvention as masculinized, legitimated HDTV and ambivalence over the incorporation of massive hardware into feminized domestic spaces" (2011, 111). Newman and Levine argue that the massive size of the HDTV required a rethinking of the living room's domestic space,

a rethinking that revealed the gendered tension present when masculinized technologies are brought into the domestic space structured by feminized interior design aesthetics. Bernadette Flynn outlines the migration of video games from the video arcade to the home living room in her article, "Geography of the Digital Hearth," but recognizes that, at the time she wrote, there was "little attempt by video console manufacturers and distributors to present the video-game console as a domesticated object" (2003, 557). This remains somewhat true for Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Sony's PlayStation 3 consoles, although in the last few years they have both released motion control peripherals and issued console redesigns to capitalize on the Wii's success. Regardless, Nintendo has aggressively pursued the domestic sphere and the non-traditional game players that inhabit that sphere for years now.

In her examination of female electric shavers, Oost finds that "[m]asking the technology was a systematic element of the gender script of the Ladyshave" electric shaver (2005, 206). In other words, Oost suggests covering up the technology involved in the operating process feminized the shaver. Weighing in at a little less than four pounds, the Wii is a small white rectangle, about the size of three DVDs stacked. As a simple white rectangle, the Wii understates the technology behind it. Additionally, rather than the hard-to-miss presence of the older PS3 and the 360 models, the Wii easily disappears into the domestic, living room setting. The console can exist in the family room space without clashing with the décor. The emphasis for the Wii isn't on the technological look, but in the gestural controls of the console. With its minimalist design, similar to the aesthetics that have brought Apple such mainstream success, Nintendo's Wii opened itself up to a cultural re-gendering that has de-masculinized the technology behind it. While Flynn is right when she proposes "the design of the console has changed from a toy, to an entertainment unit, to a futuristic appliance," and thus the Nintendo Wii has reintroduced the console-as-toy concept (564). Yet rather than positioning it as just a masculinized toy, Nintendo has successfully created a family toy, harkening back to early home console system marketing of the Atari 2600 (Atari Commercial 2006).

Game Libraries

Although the Wii offers titles that fit into both culturally constructed casual and hardcore categories, the casual games discourse around the system overshadowed the hardcore offerings and skewed the general perception of the system. Nintendo did not exclusively market its Wii console toward the "casual market." In addition to the *Mom* figure, the elderly, and children, the company also reached out to the core Nintendo fan

base, many of whom grew up with Nintendo franchises. The commercials for more "core" titles like *Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* and *Metroid Prime 3* tended to feature solitary males seated alone in dark rooms in front of the television, heavily engaged with the action on screen, despite a few foreign versions of the *Metroid 3* commercial featuring a female Samus Aran lookalike, the protagonist of *Metroid* (Zelda Commercial, 2008; Metroid Commercial, 2008). *Twilight Princess* and *Metroid Prime 3* do feature gestural controls, taking advantage of the Wiimote's spectrometer for motion controls, but these features were deemphasized and balanced with more traditional controller inputs such as analog stick manipulation and button-mapped actions. The result is that for *Zelda*, the primary motion performed was a quick flick of the wrist for sword swiping (this could also be controlled with a button), and for *Metroid*, subtle movements of the Wiimote to direct the first-person camera around the environment. Both games featured expansive game-worlds and narratives that required many hours to experience in full. Indeed, these two games represent just a few of the many "core" titles on offer for Nintendo's Wii console. Other examples include *No More Heroes*, *MadWorld*, *Tatsunoko vs. Capcom*, and *Sin and Punishment: Star Successor*. However, none of these games sold particularly well, with the stylish, gory, black and white *MadWorld* performing particularly poor commercially.

One reason for this sales performance may be that advertisements for these "core" games, like the games themselves, tend to be marginalized in Wii marketing and popular discourse in favor of titles with a broader, family appeal. For instance, the top selling games for the Wii include *Wii Sports* (79.6m) and its sequel (30.14m), *Mario Kart Wii* (32.44m), *Wii Play* (28.02m), and *Wii Fit* (22.67m), all of which cater to quick play sessions, intuitive motion-based controls, and were heavily positioned discursively in advertising and the popular press as emblematic of the Wii's status as a casual console (Nintendo Software Sales 2012).

"Sometimes I Play for Me": Marketing Casual Game Devices

As two of the most popular examples of the casual games movement, the marketing of Nintendo's Wii and DS has been instrumental in the gendering of casual gaming. The feminization of Nintendo's consoles, and the casual play associated with them, begins even in the color associated with their business strategy. After the 2004 launch of the DS, the 2006 re-launch of the DS Lite, and leading up to the launch of the Wii, Nintendo began to describe its business strategy as a Blue Ocean approach, an approach that relies on creating a new audience rather than fighting for an existing one and allowing your consumer-base to stagnate. Speaking of the book *Blue Ocean Strategy*, Nintendo's

Vice President of Sales and Marketing Reggie Fils-Aime claimed that the book "cites successful companies who've looked beyond the bloody, red waters of ruthless competition. Companies who pushed the accepted definition of their markets and found so-called blue oceans, where they were able to expand business while their competition remained behind" (Casamassina 2005). Fils-Aime goes on to describe the DS and Revolution (the code name for what would become the Wii) as adopting this approach, as seeking out new audiences of non-traditional game players.

The Blue Ocean metaphor participates in the gendering of casual games in a way that becomes apparent when it is contrasted with the Red Ocean approach. In a *Palermo Business Review* article, Patricio O'Gorman suggests, "The video game industry has been locked into what can best be described as a Red Ocean, where the focus is on beating the competition, winning market share, capturing consumers and outselling the competition" (2008, 97). The verbs O'Gorman uses in relation to the Red Ocean business model – beating, winning, capturing, outselling – are aggressive, competitive ones married to traditional masculinity, as well as to free market capitalism and gaming culture itself. When contrasted with the Red Ocean business approach, Nintendo can be seen as embracing a cultural feminization, a softening, of their game platforms.

Whereas the Red Ocean strategy of Sony and Microsoft is one characterized by fierce competition, struggle, the allusion to bloodied waters, and the intense loyalties and caprices of core gamers, the Blue Ocean strategy of Nintendo is tranquil, untainted, and characterized by an audience interested in cooperation, friendly family fun, and non-violent types of gameplay. Even though Nintendo has replaced the "bloody" Red Ocean approach with a more "serene" Blue Ocean tactic, the company is not anti-capitalist. Nintendo is still competitive in its search for new markets; however, the company chooses to characterize its approach as peaceful and calm, juxtaposing its efforts with the aggressive, violent, and cutthroat approaches of Sony and Microsoft. However, problematically, these qualities have been historically feminized in our culture and contribute to the feminization of the Wii.

This feminization can be seen in the way these experiences were sold to consumers as well as in the company's market discourse. Indeed, looking at the advertising surrounding these game systems is important to understanding the ways gender is constructed through them and how Nintendo welcomes a feminization of their technologies as a way to enhance the bottom line. Shira Chess (2010) argues that Wii and DS magazine advertisements targeted toward women essentialize feminine play

and restrict this play to productivity. Chess suggests that advertisements for the Wii system and the games *Brain Age*, *Wii Fit*, and *EA Sports Active* are "targeting a feminine readership, and suggesting a proper time and place for video game play" (10). In other words, Chess argues that Wii ads targeting women construct and limit feminine play as another form of productivity and self-improvement, either through sharpening an aging brain or tightening a sagging body. While it is troubling that these advertisements construct productivity as a requirement of feminine play and also reproduce damaging feminine beauty standards, I offer Chess's work primarily as evidence that Nintendo has actively sought out feminine players with the Wii and DS and aided in discursively feminizing their products in the process. Moreover, other ads Chess does not consider for the Wii and DS strengthen the link between these systems and a female, or at least feminized, player.

In 2008, Nintendo launched the celebrity-fueled campaign "I Play for Me," a campaign that featured popular female stars America Ferrera, Carrie Underwood, and Liv Tyler playing Nintendo products. Importantly, this campaign complicates Chess's assumptions about the essentializing of feminine play in a few ways. Rather than focusing on self-help or fitness in the form of *Brain Age* and *Wii Fit*, these ads highlight the independence of play the DS offers female players. The ads do not necessarily suggest women play to maintain a youthful brain or culturally ideal body shape, although the use of successful, beautiful celebrities does not dispel these notions, but rather these ads suggest that women can play for themselves, for fun, a time away from family, as a way to further define their unique identity and create a personalized space. The Carrie Underwood online ad shows her smiling while holding a white DS Lite, the ad copy reading, "I play for me" (Underwood Ad 2008). The viewer is also prompted to click on the online ad to see which game Underwood plays in her free time. The linked video is a documentarian style commercial where Underwood plays her (now pink) DS as her tour bus barrels down an American interstate (Underwood DS Lite 2008). With its focus on Underwood's amused expressions, her relaxed posture on her tour bus couch and her tactile interaction with the game *Nintendogs*, a game about virtual puppy rearing, this ad is emblematic of the whole campaign and attempts to normalize the celebrities and thus emphasize everyday women having fun and kicking back with video game software, something almost unheard of in the popular imagination prior to the rise of the "casual" genre. In slight contrast, however, the America Ferrera series oddly includes the qualifier "*Sometimes* I play for me," perhaps alluding to Ferrera's job as an actress or player of roles, including *Ugly Betty* at the time (Ferrara Ad 2008). Taken more critically, however, the ad may suggest that feminine play often revolves around

the needs of others, and that occasionally, *sometimes*, feminine play can be individually focused, such as when playing the Nintendo DS alone. Although Ferrera's ads are the only ones that include the qualifier "sometimes," they nonetheless reveal that these ads, just as much as those Chess analyzes, still characterize feminine play in a limiting way, contextually if not purposefully.

Because *They* aren't *Us*: Fear of Feminization in Gaming Culture

Through industry and marketing discourses and hardware aesthetics, the culturally feminized modifier casual has been applied to game players, game experiences, and console platforms. At the same time, video game culture online has also actively engaged in this feminization. Whereas the industry subtly devalues casual game players for their preferences and casual games for their *lack* of hardcore qualities, many people who post on hardcore gaming blogs make no effort to hide their gendered disdain for casual games and casual game players. In fact, the marketing, industry, and mainstream discourses may enable the more overtly sexist treatment of casual games by this aggressive community of gamers.

In order to access a contingent of this community and its relationship to casual games, I examined conversations happening on the popular Internet video game blogs *Kotaku*, *Joystiq*, and *Destructoid*, sites chosen as much for their traffic rankings as for their structures that facilitate and encourage user comments and conversations on every piece posted. According to traffic data collected by Compete and Quantcast, *Kotaku*, *Joystiq*, and *Destructroid* ranked fifth, tenth, and fourteenth, respectively (eBiz Top 15 2013). The majority of this research was conducted in 2009 and referenced stories posted between 2006 and 2009; accordingly, the sentiments examined should be understood as historically contingent, even as the masculinist discursive affect they represent remains active today. Furthermore, since the time of data collection, all three sites have gone through significant design changes, and this has unfortunately led to the deletion of many of the articles referenced or comments analyzed. Nonetheless, I provide the original links in my references for accuracy's sake and in case a personal archive of them ever arises. Although this development significantly hinders the validity of my arguments in some cases, it also points out the ephemerality and fragility of online sources. Seen another way, my use of the comments below now works doubly to capture a particular cultural mood at a specific historical moment and as an archive of alarming sentiments toward casual games that would otherwise have been lost to the ravages of Internet erosion.

Centered on casual games, these conversations suggest a vocal contingent of hardcore video game culture privileges a specific type of hegemonic masculinity, one that adheres to and interpellates a heterosexual, male identity. Despite the co-presence of dissenting voices that critique these gendered attacks, the core gamers I highlight utilize hegemonic conceptions of gender to degrade casual video games, employ post-feminist sarcasm that ends up reifying the hardcore/casual binary even as they critique it, and evoke a protest rhetoric of victimization by positioning the casual games movement as a dominating, oppressive force bent on destroying and replacing traditional, masculinist games. It is through this often disdainful and sexist treatment of the casual genre that some core gamers constitute an anti-fandom of casual games, a group Gray (2005) discusses as forming around a mutual hatred for a specific cultural text.

Part of the gendered distain for casual games in core gaming culture has a direct connection to the industry and commercial logics of always connecting the wife or mother-figure to the casual category, as I discussed above. For instance, *whether users proudly proclaim, "My Wife loves 'em" (Strider_mt2k 2007), whether they negatively chirp, "*i dont like my mom playing tetris all day on my game boy" (Rojo 2007), or whether they blatantly state, "Girls can have their types of games and guys can have their own" (Joeshie 2008), the marrying of females and femininity with the casual game space continually reproduces and cements itself as common sense. Casual games are understood by these so-called representatives of hardcore gaming culture as games wives love, as games the proverbial *Mom* plays, and as games specifically for girls or women. As a result, this discourse promotes notions of difference and distinction that ultimately recreate gender and power hierarchies in games culture and beyond.

In addition to marrying the feminine with the casual space, part of this positioning of the other happens through the labeling of casual games as other in sexual orientation. To these particular gamers, hardcore games not only represent the masculine, they represent the heteronormative ideal. A discourse exists in this community that links casual games with homosexuality. This is exemplified in comments such as "Casual games? GAAAAAAAY!" (samfish 2007) and "Casual Games are for gay people or men that are very very very in touch with their feminine side; so in touch it's scary" (Cyro 2007). Both comments explicitly conflate casual games with homosexuality and femininity. However, the second goes further by evoking a masculine heteronormative anxiety at the thought of a male in touch with his emotions. Indeed, if this discourse links casual games with emotions, it would make sense that "men don't talk about

casual games because they aren't worth talking about. Playing, perhaps, talking no" (Batzarro 2007). In this way, like emotions or homosexuality, "real men" are not supposed to discuss casual games, even if they do secretly play them. This reflects the expectations of hegemonic masculinity that limit men from discussing their feelings. Additionally, this comment echoes historical regulations in America's armed forces that were founded on the credo, "Don't ask, don't tell," a policy that supports the invisibility and indeed the annihilation of queer lifestyles. In this logic, playing casual games, like homosexuality, is something to be ashamed of and kept secret. In core gaming communities, even if males play casual games behind closed doors – and according to this reasoning they should only be played behind closed doors – the discourse suggests that male players are culturally encouraged not to bring it up.

Not all comments are so easily read, however. Angela McRobbie (2007) argues that contemporary culture produces a post-feminist mindset that announces the victory of feminism while marginalizing its current efforts and surreptitiously undoing all the advances it helped achieve regarding gender and sexual equality. In a post-feminist culture, sexism and misogyny appear not as proof that feminism failed but as proof that it succeeded. That is, because women supposedly no longer suffer inequalities in society, sexist jokes are taken to be self-aware and ironic; any overt devaluation of women or the feminine is meant to be seen as sarcasm. As enlightened cultural and consuming beings, we are meant to be in on the joke. These types of post-feminist comments appear on *Kotaku*, *Joystiq*, and *Destructoid*, and serve to poke fun at the assumed connection between femininity and casual games and the antiquated concept of ideal gender roles. However, while most are meant as tongue-in-cheek remarks, this kind of language still reproduces and reinforces the marrying of casual games and gamers with the feminine and duplicates traditional gender and power hierarchies.

These post-feminist comments appear on popular gaming blogs when male-coded gamers link females with casual games in degrading and pre-feminist ways. In one post on *Kotaku* titled, "Who Knew: Men Like Casual Games, Too," a commenter named Onizuka-GTO writes, "female presence = casual. It's a fact. Honest. 😛 " (2007). This comment is reinforced by two others. A user named THE-HATER comments, "All you guys who bought Puzzle Quest **[1]** are proof of the horror of casual games. Casual games are evil, they are the worst thing ever. They keep women at the computer instead of in the kitchen" (2007). Additionally, ParadoxControl quips, "listen, I don't play games unless they come with a full rack of ribs, a 2lb sirloin, Mashed Potatoes, Budweiser, a shotgun, camo pants, and a stack of playboys, because I'm a real man!" (2007). The first

of these comments explicitly joins casual games with the female, stating it as a fact beyond reproach and effectively gendering those types of game experiences. At the same time, Onizuka-GTO uses an emoticon that resembles a face sticking its tongue out, a sign that he is aware of his own absurdity and is joking around. On the other hand, THE-HATER's words are less playful, conflating the already established feminine space of casual games with *evilness* and then finishing his comment by evoking pre-feminist gender roles, metaphorically plucking the woman from the office computer and plopping her back in front of the stove. However, his sarcasm is revealed by the comment's exaggerated nature, just like ParadoxControl's satirical tirade about what makes a man, and more importantly here, what makes a manly game. Though varying in tone and execution, ParadoxControl and THE-HATER both use humor to play with gender stereotypes to reveal the performative nature of masculinity and femininity and to reveal the artifice of gendering casual games as feminine; although their intentions might be to deconstruct these notions, they might also, if misread, reinforce, reproduce, and strengthen the ideologies that link masculinity to "serious" games and femininity to casual games in the first place.

In her ethnography of male gamers in Northern Ireland and southern England, Helen Thornham suggests games "are claimed by adult [male] gamers as serious, rational and logical pastimes" (2008, 142). Part of taking games seriously and rationally for the users on *Kotaku, Joystiq*, and *Destructoid* is staying informed and making smart purchasing decisions, traits typically assigned to masculine consuming habits. In contrast, these commenters position casual gamers as "simple people…[and] you can sell them stupid games" (TrenchyC 2007). Moreover, what "worries [them] most about casual gamers is that they'll stupidly throw so much money at tech that they know nothing about, and have not researched at all" (human-cannonball 2006). Here, hardcore gamers position casual gamers as passive, naïve, and mindless consumers of popular culture. To the hardcore discourse community, casual gamers become feminized shoppers lacking agency and intelligence. Rather than doing proper (masculine) research such as reading games news, reviews, and previews, "Casual gamers DON'T care about reviews" (Jeff 2007), don't seem to understand "that generally [a] video game movie=suckage" (SoCoolCurt 2007), and "have the attention span of a three month old dog mixed with a squirrel" (mix 2008). Here, feminized casual gamers are depicted as less intelligent, less informed, and less important than their masculine hardcore counterparts. Most strikingly and troubling of all, they are positioned as sub-human and animal in their worth and intellect.

In contrast to the so-called ignorant purchases of the casual masses, the hardcore gaming discourse seems to suggest that even if hardcore gamers do play casual games, they are smart enough not to spend money on them. Indeed, hardcore gamers "won't actually buy 'casual' games, since most are shameless clones of earlier casual games" (ShaggE 2007). As one user commented, "I download all my casual gaming for free. Who's crazy enough to pay for it…oh yeah, wii users. All their games are casual" (nxp3 2008). These comments suggest that hardcore gamers do not spend money on casual games because they are not *serious* and *real* games. They lack the blockbuster budgets, visual fidelity, and narratives associated with traditionally masculine game titles. Here too the Wii is evoked as one of the worst offenders in the casual game space, a system that has opened up gaming to girls, women, and the elderly, if not millions of non-gaming men. This is reinforced when the gamer badasscat argues that casual games are "not some sort of stepping stone to 'real' gaming" (2007). [B]adasscat suggests that casual games are not real games. They lack the qualities of masculine games and are thus denied the right to call themselves video games at all. As feminized entertainment, casual games are annihilated from the landscape of serious games and serious games culture, quite like the feminine in general.

This annihilation can be seen as part of a greater taste struggle by hardcore gamers against casual games and the femininity attached to them. In this struggle, hardcore gamers position themselves as the victims and position the growing number of casual players and games as an invading, threatening force. Ann Johnson has analyzed a similar phenomenon in her article, "The Subtleties of Blatant Sexism." She argues that *The Man Show*, a masculine comedy program that gains laughs through largely sexist humor, utilizes protest rhetoric and "depicts women as the dominant group in society and addresses viewers as potential agitators in a struggle against women's dominance" (2007, 167). Johnson contends that even while patriarchy continues to operate relatively unopposed, *The Man Show* creates a reality where men are relegated to subordinate positions in both the public and private spheres, always at the mercy of dominant women in their lives. This same logic is used in the hardcore gaming community when discussing casual games. To core gamers, casual games represent a very real threat that is gradually blighting their cherished pastime with products that do not resemble the games they are used to.

Part of this protest rhetoric in the hardcore community is fueled by fears that casual games will gradually take away limited retail space and developer resources from "real" games, eventually replacing them altogether. In this logic, traditional, narrative-

driven games will eventually die out as casual games flood the market. No longer will there be *Halo, Grand Theft Auto,* or *Call of Duty*; instead, there will just be clones of *Peggle*, *Wii Sports*, and *Solitaire*. Indeed, this fear persists even though core games are still cash cows for the industry. For example, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, arguably a traditionally masculine video game, earned an estimated $550 million in its first five days on sale (McElroy, 2009). Just the same, *Destructoid* user Necrozen positions core gamers as a dying breed when he writes, "We are a minority now. We = Less Money than Them. So you know that it's a losing battle" (2009). Furthermore, as an imagined minority, core gamers believe their interests are no longer being taken into account by game developers and publishers. More than anything, they "hate the fact that more immersive games are gonna disappear because everyone is into the casual games now of days [sic]" (Ambitious009 2007). Ultimately, their protest can be summed up in the words, "It's the attack of the killer casuals, and we need to make sure we're not lost in the noise" (Ketsuban 2007). Although casual gamers do not make much noise in gaming culture because they exist outside of it, the attention the mainstream press pays to them and the interest developers have taken in them are seen as signs of a very significant threat by core gamers. In the hardcore gaming discourse surrounding casual games, core gamers on *Kotaku*, *Joystiq*, and *Destructoid* utilize hegemonic conceptions of gender to denigrate casual video games, exploit post-feminist sarcasm within the discourse of casual games, and evoke a protest rhetoric of victimization by positioning the casual games movement as a dominating, oppressive force bent on usurping traditional, masculine games.

Moreover, some "core gamers" fall closer to the developers discussed earlier, complicit in the gendering of casual games but not adverse to them; though they accept, even love, casual games, these game players can still perpetuate their feminization. For example, *Kotaku* user indiemike freely admits to playing casual games but also connects these games to the preferences of his girlfriend and her female friends: "I find that my girlfriend, and all of her friends that I've played games with prefer the casual games I have on hand, and don't want to get wrapped up in a story within the game" (indiemike 2007). In fact, many commenters on the blogs I analyze openly support casual games and admit to playing and enjoying them, but just as many also reproduce the feminine gendering of the category. Even when some game players make an effort to embrace casual games, as *Kotaku* writer Luke Plunkett did in the article, "Instead of Laughing at 'Casual' Gamers, Try Helping Them" (2010), they still inadvertently reproduce the effect of otherness by maintaining the stereotypes and assumptions of the casual audience and the casual game experience as feminized.

I want to be clear that this argument does not suggest women are easy victims in this discourse nor that there has not been and does not continue to be significant critique of this derogatory feminization from within video game culture by gamers who are part of the blog communities analyzed. Additionally, I do not mean to imply here that all hardcore gamers share these historically contingent discursive sentiments or actively support the kind of gendered hierarchy I propose exists in this culture. Indeed, significant work to critique these masculinist arguments has been done by feminist games critics like Patricia Hernandez on *Kotaku*, Leigh Alexander on *Gamasutra*, Mattie Brice across multiple venues, and many other writers on emerging community hubs like *Border House Blog*, *Critical Distance*, and *Nightmare Mode*.

Still, why does a contingent of core gamers feel so threatened by the culturally feminized genre of casual gaming? This intense reaction to casual video games and casual game players by the core gaming community suggests a vulnerability in the specific masculinity of core gaming culture. This vulnerability may stem from the low cultural status of the video game medium. Like the medium of the graphic novel or comic book, video games historically have been infantilized and seen as immature. Also, since video games stem from early computer culture, which even today often gets conflated with geek culture, video games share that culture's emasculated stereotypes. Regardless of the fact that a whole generation of men and women have grown into adulthood while still playing video games, video games continue to be understood culturally as a childish distraction, at best, or a complete waste of time, at worst. Michael Kimmel (2008) suggests in his book *Guyland* that many men in their 20s and early 30s use video games as a form of escapism to put off growing up and taking on the responsibilities of male adulthood, including starting a family. A myriad of online opinion pieces focus on whether games will ever grow up as a medium (Alexander 2009). Additionally, in an examination of gamer identity, Shaw (2011) reveals that one of the main reasons players are reluctant to identify as "gamers" is not so much the association with hegemonic masculinity but instead the continued stigmatization of the medium in popular culture. Most notable within this larger discussion is the ongoing argument, fueled by the comments of famous film critic Roger Ebert (2010), of whether video games can ever be art. Though this marginalized cultural status may be changing, as Felan Parker (2013) suggests in his examination of art games, the other side of gaming's popularization, the acceptance of casual games into the family entertainment sphere, has only further irritated the masculine anxieties of core gamers.

Gamers have traditionally been characterized by a marginalized masculinity, one that mimics but does not match real-world soldiers and athletes. Being good at video games does not grant the same social and cultural benefits as being good at a sport or a traditionally masculine trade. The masculinity associated with gaming is a fragile, defensive one that has relied repeatedly in its short history on extreme violence, the sexualization of women, and strong, male homosocial bonds for its sense of power and personal legitimacy. The introduction of a feminized, popular category of video game to gaming culture might be seen as undermining the fragile masculinity that has had to continuously defend its cultural position for several decades.

Conclusion

I have argued that casual video games, epitomized by Nintendo's Wii console in the late 2000s and strengthened today by the proliferation of mobile devices, have been discursively feminized in popular and industry cultures by associating casual games with a feminine audience. Although the feminization of casual games by the industry is largely tied to market demographics and branding, it remains nonetheless troubling, especially given that this cultural labeling enables some disgruntled, anxious core gamers to engage in sexist and misogynistic attacks on casual games and game players. Some in the core gaming community, invested as they are in hegemonic masculinity, reject femininity and therefore reject casual games as a potential infection, rather than an extension, of the video game medium. The gendering of casual games in industry, marketing, and fan discourses not only continues the troubling and limited understanding of what it is to be feminine but it limits the cultural understanding of casual games to a single gendered standpoint. Moreover, there is a contradictory positioning of casual games by hardcore gaming culture as either inconsequential and worthless or domineering and threatening.

In the first case, when core gaming culture marginalizes and delegitimizes casual games it does so by adopting the dominant gender hierarchy that always privileges the masculine and devalues the feminine. Feminized casual games become insignificant, frivolous, and a waste of time and money as opposed to masculinized hardcore games, which are viewed as important, serious, and worthy of investment. When casual games are denigrated as feminine, and therefore "trivial," and traditional video games are celebrated for their seriousness and authenticity, both of which are qualities nested in masculinity, a power hierarchy is created that places the masculine in the superior position and the feminine in the inferior position, the result of which is the reproduction and perpetuation of gender inequalities. Hardcore games become the

dominant masculine while casual games become the subordinate feminine. This reveals the way hegemonic masculinity goes beyond the mapping and categorizing of the human body in damaging and consequential ways and maps onto every other aspect of our lives, including technology. When this happens, that technology is employed in the maintenance of patriarchal, masculine power in society and culture, even when that technology is meant for entertainment, like video games. The consequences of this are far reaching and can be seen to perpetuate the dearth of females in science and technology sectors, among other social inequalities.

In the second case, rather than espousing the insignificance of casual games, core gaming culture views casual games as a Trojan horse for femininity to creep in and fundamentally alter the gendered game experiences that culture values. Here we see the power of the dominant gender position to incorporate and adopt defense techniques from those in the subordinate position. Even while hegemonic masculinity continues to dominate in culture, it is positioned as subjugated and oppressed after the successes of second wave feminism. This occurs throughout popular culture, as Ann Johnson argues in the case of *The Man Show*, but until recently has not been seen in video game culture. The adopting of this dominated, protest rhetoric by masculinized hardcore gamers reveals the vulnerability of that gender position in the realm of gaming and points to the equal vulnerability of the hegemonic masculinity it seeks to emulate.

While the category of casual games was prominent during the period of my study, the terms mobile or social are now more widely associated with the casual game type; likewise, smartphones and tablets are the current popular devices to play these games on. As Shaw suggests, while continuing to explore marginalized communities within gaming culture, we ought not to forget the marginalized position of video games themselves within larger culture and the ways that marginalization influences those prejudices and identity politics ever shifting within gaming culture.

The audience for video games is growing. Along with this growth comes a shift in the focus of the games industry toward this broader audience. Both of these shifts have had and will continue to have a profound and gendered impact on video game culture. The casual game has become yet another threat, whether real or imagined, to the vulnerable masculinity of video game culture. This vulnerability manifests itself in an aversion to the feminine, to the queer, and to the non-masculine in general. Moreover, the discourses surrounding gender and video games also speak toward larger cultural

discourses around gender, sexuality, and racial politics. Moving forward, the "casual threat" we see here is not from the video games that fall under the casual moniker; the threat is from a gaming culture that continually reproduces a dominant, hegemonic masculinity that is just as damaging to those who adopt this position as it is to those groups subjugated, denied, and excluded from its ideal world. This threat is anything but casual.

Notes

[1] *Puzzle Quest* is a hybrid of the role playing game and puzzle genres. It features traditional puzzle-based gameplay while asking the player to level his or her character to gain more abilities and further the narrative.

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5 THOUGHTS ON "CASUAL THREATS: THE FEMINIZATION OF CASUAL VIDEO GAMES"

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Alexis

JANUARY 5, 2015 AT 11:06 AM

Thank you, thank you, thank you for writing this. This was on my mind for a while.

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