Of Headshots and Hugs: Challenging Hypermasculinity through *The Walking Dead* Play

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Abstract: This paper examines how players' intersectional subjectivities inform their experiences of Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* (2012) videogame. Drawing from "microethnographic" recordings and analyses of gameplay, this paper reports on the playthroughs of two African American males and their subsequent reflections on in-game decisions. This exploratory analysis contributes to an emerging, but underdeveloped, understanding of the play practices of diverse participants, while drawing critical attention to player performances of masculinities through gameplay. Building from these feminist interventionist studies, we offer an analysis that takes into consideration both the intersectional and performative aspects of (different) gaming masculinities.

Introduction

This paper undertakes a microethnographic exploration of masculinities, enacted by two young African American men as they play through the first season of Telltale's *The Walking Dead* (2012): an adventure game in which the player controls an African American protagonist as he attempts to guide a surrogate daughter and band of survivors through the American South after a zombie apocalypse. This game has received critical acclaim for its engaging dialogue, non-stereotypical characters, and a provocative system of morally ambiguous choices, in which player decisions have lasting effects on the behaviors of other characters. As researchers, we wished to see how these young men enacted masculinity when interacting with a game that presents players with non-stereotypical characters and gameplay scenarios.

In undertaking this exploration, we understand gender as performative (Butler, 1998), enacted within intersectional matrices of race, socio-economic status, sexual

orientation, ablebodiedness, etc. (Crenshaw, 2012). Furthermore, in the context of digital gaming in particular, we understand intersectional subjectivities as networked – as articulated and performed through associations between bodies, software and hardware, narratives, rule sets, characters, other players, and the material infrastructures of digital play. Significantly, gendered subjectivity is therefore co-constitutive with tools, technologies and contexts (Jenson & de Castell, 2008). This enables us to consider how conventional masculinities may be 're-tooled' through subversive or non-normative play practices. We believe this framework allows us to apply Connell's (2005; 2014) project to document and theorize multiple, historically — and culturally — situated masculinities (2005; 2014) to studies of gaming and gender, which have, by and large, regarded masculinity as singular and monolithic, often as a means of contextualizing the experiences of female gamers.

Discussions around masculinity and gaming tend to examine the all-too-prevalent misogynistic and homophobic characteristics and practices of certain player communities (Consalvo, 2012; Salter & Blodgett, 2012). These discussions link gaming's persistent gender inequities to practices of aggression, exclusion, and privilege within the production and consumption of digital games. While these issues are prevalent, other scholars have noted that not all masculinities, including those within the world(s) of gaming, are hyper (Taylor, 2012). In documenting (and intervening) into gender inequities in gaming, as with scholarship around critical studies of men and masculinities (Pini & Pease, 2013), we must acknowledge gaming's long-standing gender gaps, while also exploring spaces for non-hegemonic masculinities. The ensuing project becomes one of finding and making room for masculine subject positions that are rooted in "peace-making, not war-making, and flourish in a context of gender equality" (Connell, 2014, p. 10).

Thus, hypermasculinity remains an important tool for theorizing games-based cultures and subjectivities, so long as we recognize its instability: it is the product/ongoing production of contingent, historically situated relations of power. To paraphrase Hearn's discussion of the "category of men," we suggest that with regards to gaming culture, the concept of hypermasculinity is "both fundamental to the understanding of gendered power relations," while also "liable to deconstruction and abolition" (Hearn, 2013, p. 35).

In what follows, we provide a micro-ethnographic (REFS) analysis of our participants' experiences playing, and subsequently reflecting on, the first two episodes of the five-

episode adventure game *TWD*: *Season One*. The point and click interface of the game emphasizes dialogue and decision-making over combat. Furthermore, the complex, non-normative characters subvert player expectations for conventional zombie games. After screen-capturing the initial play sessions and recording their utterances through a headset, the game footage was replayed for our participants in order to facilitate discussion and reflection. We suggest that this approach provided participants with a chance to enact and reflect upon forms of masculinity that are quite different than those normally associated with young males' play practices (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). Among them are masculine subjectivities rooted in care, responsibility, and negotiation rather than aggression and domination. This analysis allows us to explore the extent to which certain games and gameplay practices de-stabilize normative connections between gaming and hypermasculinity — specifically, connections responsible for and reproduced through the forms of misogynistic and homophobic toxicity so prevalent in mainstream gaming communities (Taylor, 2009; Consalvo, 2012).

The aims of this exploratory analysis are threefold: to contribute to an emergent but underdeveloped understanding of the play practices of diverse participants, to use micro-ethnography as a means to observe how non-hyper masculinities are performed and 're-tooled' through gameplay, and to explore a game that is unique in regard to representation, narrative, and mechanics and may provide a space for players to enact non-hegemonic forms of masculinity.

Literature Review: Revenge of the (White) Nerds

As indicated above, we find it productive to engage with masculinity as an emergent performance shaped by social and technological factors, rather than a static construct. Despite two decades of critical masculinities studies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), research on masculinity and gaming is still in its formative stages. Available scholarship generally focuses on male gamer identity in terms of either "athlete/jock" or "nerd/geek" (Taylor, 2012), based upon attenuations made between gaming and more conventional masculine discourses. In practice, these performances are not mutually exclusive and remain flexible in their enactment; nonetheless, taken as discrete notions, each offers insight into the construction of male identity within these spaces.

With regard to conventional masculine traits, the 'nerd' is non-normative: he is typically White, middle-class, intelligent and privileged, but has experienced powerlessness in his personal life through a loss of social and sexual status and subsequent marginalization by his peers (Kendall, 1999). The nerd identity works to

rectify this duality of hegemony/transgression and privilege/disadvantage. Nerds are commonly stereotyped as weak, easily bullied, and socially awkward males who lack social skills, athletic abilities, and physical attractiveness; however, in contrast to these negative attributes, nerds are perceived as possessing mastery over digital technologies (Kendall, 1999 & 2011). Describing this tradeoff as a hypothetical "bargain," Kendall (1999) asserts that nerds trade "some aspects of hegemonic masculinity for others, losing social sexual/status and gaining intelligence and prowess over technology" (p. 7). This familiarity with computational tools aligns this subjectivity with immanent forms of cultural and economic power.

While the nerd can be viewed as an outcast from some groups, he often views his own community as one of exclusivity and intellectual elitism. In enforcing this exclusivity, these communities inadvertently further stereotypes regarding computational competency: it is simultaneously associated with masculinity while signifying general incompetence when interacting with women (Kendall, 1999). Indicatively, geek communities and technical conventions are often as hostile to women as those domains more typically associated with hegemonic masculinity (see, for example, Letamendi, 2012). Recent online debates, such as those arising around MIT professor Scott Aronson's insistence that "feminism" is to blame for his depression as a young adult, highlight the fraught character of this masculine subject position (see, for instance, Chu, 2014). The contemporary nerd both embodies tremendous forms of social and economic privilege — much of it based on the exclusion and marginalization of women and people of color — while also remaining alienated from the trappings of traditional hegemonic masculinity (including heterosexual desirability; see, for instance, Chu, 2015).

Geek masculinity has historically been associated with Whiteness and often presented as a direct opposition to Blackness' coolness and athleticism. While there have been a select few examples of Black geeks in the media (Steve Urkel, Geordi La Forge), very few operate in comparison to White nerds (Kendall, 1999 & 2002). To toy with this contradiction, there have been humorous examples that merge hip-hop culture with nerds (*Office Space*, Weird Al's *White and Nerdy*) — parodies that, as Kendall points out, often reaffirm rather than subvert the dichotomization between the (White) nerd and (Black) jock.

The 'jock'/'athlete' is a more generic masculine identity, conventionally associated with physical activity. In an effort to reframe gaming as manly (as opposed to nerdy or

childish), some gamers perform as athletes. These performances need not be entirely divorced from an individual's past: many professional gamers have a background in athletics and attribute that to their dedication and competitiveness. To those players, gaming is a continuation of their athleticism (Kane, 2008; Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2012) and is therefore consistent with a masculinized sporting subjectivity. Indeed, Nick Taylor (2012) notes that in some communities, the professionalization of competitive gaming is carried out, in part, through the vigorous enactment of gender roles imported from the male-dominated world of professional sport; women are seen to "lack the testosterone" required to play games competitively.

One's ability to enact a jock identity is not simply a matter of (perceived) physical or mental ability, it is also bound up in one's social and economic reality. DiSalvo (2008), through interviews with young Black men, found that few homes had computers, which in turn limited the types of games they had access to. Playing videogames (almost exclusively on consoles) was often a group activity; sports games were preferred, in part because they offered social experiences. This context of play, focused on performances of masculinity rooted in competition and virtual athleticism, is itself a result of specific constellations of technological access and social practice, both of which are bound up in power and privilege.

Building from this work, Taylor (2013) considers the ways in which preferences for particular game genres become "shorthand" for racialized patterns of access to gaming technologies, contexts and practices. In Taylor's analysis, an interviewee's assertion that "brothers don't play" PC-based strategy games simultaneously reflects and obscures the socio-economic conditions through which computers, and computational ability, become associated with Whiteness. Similarly, Eglash (2002) asserts that the identity of nerd carries with it "routes to science and technology [is] still guarded by the unmarked signifiers of whiteness and male gender" (p. 60). This work parallels studies by the Pew Internet and American Life Foundation (Smith, 2014), which found that White households were more likely to have multiple personal computers in their households than Black households. Seiter (2008) argues this divide of digital literacy between black and white children is a symptom of the economic disparity between blacks and whites. The categories of 'jock' and 'geek' can therefore operate as a convenient means of sketching out the racialized contours of gaming masculinities, insofar as these stock characters correspond to (and help reproduce) racialized discourses regarding gaming technologies, genres and communities.

While not inclusive of all possible male identities, the geek/jock binary provides a useful starting point for discussing the intersections of race and gender in gaming contexts. The discussion above has focused on social performances of identity, and does not engage with more private, potentially transgressive identities that can emerge when players do not feel pressured to fit into dominant gender norms. In this regard, Kennedy (2002) and MacCallum-Stewart (2008) argue that gaming can provide a safe space for players to experiment with other enactments of gendered identity. In order to explore this possibility, our study sought to engage participants in single-player, offline play experiences that could at least temporarily disrupt the conventional connections between (hyper)masculinity and gaming. This work necessarily requires an understanding of subjectivity as both malleable and networked.

Theoretical framework

Our examination is informed by two theoretical traditions: post-structuralist understandings of gender, particularly the work of Judith Butler (1999), and post-humanist understandings of agency and sociality, as characterized in theories of the "actor-network" (Latour, 2005). This involves seeing gender as something articulated and enacted through associations with particular tools, contexts and ideologies, rather than conceiving of it as a simple property of the body. To this end, we read the practices that surround gendered subjectivities and technological artifacts as co-constitutive. Following Wajcman, we think of gender relations as "materialised in technology and masculinity and femininity [that] in turn acquire their meaning and character through their enrolment and embeddedness in working machines" (2008, p. 149). As Haraway reminds us, this perspective resists the binary categorizations of male/female as well as human/non-human — modes of thought which serve to reify the subjectivities of western, White masculinity. Instead, we conceive of technologies as both arbiters and mediators of gendered subjectivities.

Jenson & Castell's (2008) interventionist research with a school-based gaming club illustrates this understanding of gender and technology as "products of a moving relational process." Upon introducing *Guitar Hero* to participants, they observed that its guitar-shaped controller demanded a novel form of embodied expertise, giving the young girls in the study a point of access into gaming expertise and, by extension, gaming culture. Many of the boys in their study had prior familiarity with more standard video game controllers, which, under other circumstances, would allow them to command expertise and exclude female novices from play. *Guitar Hero*'s controller was essentially alien to all participants, allowing players to engage as equal newcomers.

Consequently, girls who did not have the ability to play games at home were able to become experts, unsettling the typical division of leisure and labor shaping girls' and boys' differential access to gaming culture (Bryce & Rutter, 2003). Jenson and de Castell were thus able to observe the cultivation of new gendered relations among their participants, enacted through small but pivotal re-configurations of the material infrastructures used in digital play.

The above example demonstrates the extent to which gendered performances are affected by technical mediation and material constraints; within our study, we wish to extend these considerations to also include gameplay mechanics, representational opportunities, and narrative configurations — the experiential possibilities offered by the game itself. In other words, we explore how playing *TWD* creates different opportunities for enactments of masculinity, and how participants recognize, negotiate, and dispute these performances in subsequent discussion. In doing so, we hope to access some of the players' more subtle, intersectional subjectivities: intersections constituted through relations of race, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, ablebodiedness, etc. (Crenshaw, 2012). In this respect, our research allows us to access the broader semiotic-material networks of gaming and media practices, all of which impact the racial and gendered aspects of our participants' relationships with each other.

In focusing on these intersections, we acknowledge (as researchers) the danger of 'picking and choosing' which intersections to examine; we engage in a Burkean selection and deflection of reality (1989). However, we contend that such an approach, despite its limitations, allows us to detect performances which are transgressive, conflicting, and consequently, less intentionally visible. As researchers, we consciously select aspects of player performance that we deem significant; we make no assertions as to their prevalence; rather we mean to identify their presence and the tensions they produce in the context of gameplay. To observe these phenomena, we adopt a methodology that attends to the minutiae of participants' interactions with a game that offers an unconventional construction of masculinity, race, and violence. In taking this approach, we expand on nascent work that has begun to chart intersections of gender and race within gaming cultures (DiSalvo, 2008; Gray, 2012).

Methodology

Our exploratory study develops accounts of how participants' embodied subjectivities, and their previous experiences with games and zombie media, interact with their play

of TWD. To this end, we combined semi-scripted interviews, observations, recorded playthroughs, and follow-up discussions, similar to studies by MacCallum-Stewart (2008) and Shaw (2013).

Close analyses of audio-visual recordings, either of in-game activity or 'meatspace' player behaviors (or both) have been conducted in several "micro-ethnographic" studies of digital gaming. Theoretically based in Goffman's dramaturgical micro-studies of social order (Streeck and Mehus, 2005), micro-ethnography works with short segments of data (typically audio-visual recordings) to document how social realities and relations are reproduced through the minute, mundane choreographies of participants' interactions (Erickson, 1982). Giddings' analyses of children's gaming (2008) have been instrumental in introducing micro-ethnography to game studies, referring to it as an "opportunistic approach to recording, describing, and analyzing brief moments of everyday technocultural activity" (2009, p. 149). The approach has since been deployed to analyze interactions between *Dance Dance Revolution* players involved in a school-based gaming club (de Castell, Boschman, and Jenson, 2008), the shifting emotional and sensual associations to in-game avatars elicited by games (Giddings and Kennedy, 2008); and the performance of 'professional' gameplay at e-sports tournaments (Taylor, 2011). As illustrated by these studies, micro-ethnography enables researchers to perceive the localized, temporary, and "imbricated" connections between players and the many non-human actors that populate the socio-technical "circuits" of digitally mediated play (Giddings and Kennedy, 2008). Extending from this work, our own approach not only involves close readings of participants' speech, gesture, and interactions with the game's inputs, mechanics, characters, and scenarios; by inviting participants to watch clips of their play, we are involving them as micro-ethnographers of their own data.

Description of Study

We conducted this research in the summer of 2013, recruiting 8 participants (4 male, 4 female), ranging in age from 20 to 35, via personal connections and social media. Participants came in pairs to a graduate research studio, located on a university campus. With one exception, paired participants knew each other beforehand (one romantic couple and two pairs of same-sex friends). Participants sat in the same room, roughly ten feet apart. Each played from a designated computer station, equipped with dual monitors and headphones. We made no efforts to obscure participants from each other, so they were free to watch or talk to each other.

Each pair's involvement in the study consisted of three sessions.

First session. We conducted an intake interview, asking about participants' demographic information, as well as their prior experience/familiarity with videogames, the *TWD* franchise, and zombie narratives across various media. Then participants played through the first episode of the game. We used screen-recording software and field notes to document their in-game activities, utterances, postures, gestures, as well as their interactions with the researcher(s) and each other.

Second session. The same documenting procedures were used as participants played through the second episode of the game. Prior to the third session, we contacted the participants via email and asked them to identify moments from their playthroughs that they found troubling, surprising, entertaining, or otherwise compelling. Using this feedback and our own field notes, we developed a 'highlight reel' of recorded in-game actions.

Third Session. We showed the participants the highlight reel in order to prompt their reflections to their reactions in the given moment, rationales behind decisions, perspectives on what was happening, and the characters involved. We concluded with a follow-up interview, in which participants were asked about final reflections on the game and on the study.

Our goal in employing this procedure was to allow participants to scrutinize their own play/behavior — a form of reflection that is not possible during immersive play — thereby engaging them as collaborators in a shared analysis of *TWD*.

The Game

TWD is an action-adventure game based on Robert Kirkman's series of graphic novels about a zombie epidemic in America, and playable on multiple platforms (iPad, iPhone, PC, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3). It tells the story of a Black history professor turned fugitive, Lee Everett, who struggles to protect a young Black girl, Clementine, from the dead and the living in rural Georgia. Telltale's choice of a non-stereotypical Black male protagonist and deuteragonist is unique. Black characters are vastly underrepresented within games; a 2009 content analysis of 150 games found that only 9.67% of primary characters are Black. When games include Black characters, often they are portrayed as either athletes (such as in sports games) or as gangsters (Leonard, 2005; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009). In *TWD*, the player is faced with making ethically

ambiguous decisions in limited time, such as who to save during a zombie attack and how to handle a dying boy who will inevitably become a zombie. The game adapts to the choices the player makes, altering the make-up of Lee's group of survivors as well as his relationships with other characters. Importance is played on group communication and conflict resolution; the player chooses what to disclose to others, who to trust, and whether to present himself as friendly or aggressive. Telltale's system documents the major choices made by each player and at the end of the game, reveals what percentage of players made similar decisions.

Buddies at Play

We chose to focus our study on two friends who often game together, 'WD1' and 'WD2'. We originally gathered a diverse pool of players with the intention of studying how their embodied subjectivities inform the play of an innovative and emotionally challenging game. After observing and interviewing WD1 & WD2, we became interested in better understanding their experiences, specifically because their play seemed to disrupt the normative understandings of how African American men play videogames. That is to say, we did not set out with the intention of studying race and masculinity with regard to *TWD*; rather, in keeping with traditions of constructivist qualitative research, our participants led us there. In the following section, we provide some background on our players to give readers a more nuanced understanding of their identities and gaming experience. This background is essential for understanding the reasoning behind their choices and gameplay style, but also serves as a comparison for when our players are compelled to step outside their world-view.

If you spend any time around WD1 and WD2, it becomes apparent from their teasing, jabs, and laughter that they enjoy each other's company. Both participants visited our lab on a hot summer night and were eager to relax while playing a new game. The environment was casual and light-hearted; we got to know them over pizza, cookies, and soda. In their interview, they both mentioned they consider themselves to be gamers, yet their gaming histories and perspectives are very different. WD1 spoke more about his desire for competitive play and social gaming experiences. WD2 spoke of his preference for single-player role-playing games, particularly those that offer interesting characters and complex, surprising narratives.

WD1 is a 19 year old African American and Native American. He started playing Super Nintendo at age five. Soon after his parents purchased the system, he became "obsessed"; he says, "from the second I started playing it, I asked if I could have it in my

room. I started playing it pretty intensely." He had the only gaming system in the neighborhood, so his house was very popular with the neighborhood children. Most of his play was shared with others and he still prefers playing with friends (whether online or in person). Once he became a young teen, he started playing as a sponsored, professional *Gears of War* player. He would spend his entire weekends and 10-11 hours every school day practicing. He maintained good grades so his mom allowed him to compete, but she didn't think it was lucrative or healthy and would have preferred that he participate in athletics.

He considers himself to be better at gaming than most. He plays mostly first person shooters (FPS) on consoles, but can pick up any game quickly. He enjoys *Black Ops 2*, *NBA 2K* 13 and *Rock Band*. WD1 stressed that a good narrative is important and has boycotted games with bad stories. Unlike WD2, however, he spoke very little about what he considers to be a good narrative. He instead spoke much more about playing with friends, competing, etc. He had no prior experience of the *TWD* franchise. With the exception of the *NBA 2K* franchise, WD1 has played very few games featuring minority characters. He will choose darker skin when given the option, but in all, he said that the race of playable characters isn't very important to him. He will play as a different gender if the character proves to be more effective, stating that female characters often offer a "smaller target" in competitive FPS play.

WD2 is a 22-year-old male who self-identifies as "Black." He has many fond memories of playing Sega with his father, starting when he was in the 3rd grade; they still play sports games together. He enjoys playing multi-player games with friends, but prefers to play narratively driven single player games alone so he can fully become absorbed in the story. He plays a variety of genres on a variety of platforms, but is very selective about the specific games he invests time in; they must be critically acclaimed. He attributes this to working in a video game store, where he got to test lots of games. This led him to become disenchanted with many franchises, like Call of Duty, because "they really have not changed in the last three years". He loves the *Bioshock* and *Mass Effect* series, lauding their rich, branching narratives.

WD2 stated that he doesn't usually see games with Black characters, and complained that most games have a token Black character that always dies first. Because of this frustration, he will go out of his way to keep that Black character safe. He is tired of zombie narratives ("they're overdone") but enjoys the trans-media *TWD* franchise; he's read the comics and watched some of the television show (which he prefers). He says

TWD has realistic characters and it keeps you on your toes — anyone can die, no matter how important.

Observations: From Zombie Killer to Father Figure

In what follows, we share moments from both the play sessions and the third, replay session, which best characterize the approaches these two players took to *TWD*. We focus more on the play and subsequent reflections of WD1, whose orientation to the game seemed to shift over the course of the three sessions. WD2's actions and insights are incorporated primarily as a means of comparison.

"Zombie-killing Machine"

At the outset of Episode 1, whereas WD2 instantly focused on being a conscientious character through building relationships with characters and caring for the young Clementine (Clem), WD1's play seemed to be shaped significantly by his previous experiences with more action-oriented science fiction games, such as *Mass Effect* and *Gears of War*. He seemed pre-occupied throughout this first episode with locating weaponry and ammunition, and killing zombies — these two interconnected activities being the central and persistent objectives in most of the mainstream FPS and role-playing games he is familiar with, and indeed excels at. In those few, sporadic moments during the first and second episodes where Lee actually fights zombies, WD1 punctuated his actions with exclamations such as "bro, nothing but head shots," and would often look over at WD2 to draw his attention or to compare their progress. While watching highlights of his Episode 1 play, he described himself as a "zombie killing machine."

Early on in his interactions with other (computer-controlled) survivors, WD1 seemed intent on 'clicking through' dialogue options, much more quickly than WD2. He initially seemed less concerned with building relationships with survivors and more with securing weaponry and getting to the next action sequence. Those characters he did spend the most time talking to, re-initiating conversations with them and deliberating over dialogue choices, were Carly and Kenny — both of whom wield guns when Lee first encounters them. When Carly and another character were at risk, WD1 chose to save Carly, because she "had a gun."

As these details illustrate, WD1's play, particularly early on in Episode 1, was characterized by his enthusiasm for killing zombies, his careful cultivation of relationships with non-player characters who carry weapons, and his comparatively quicker interactions with other (non-gun-wielding) survivors. Following on Shaw's (2013) close attention to the ways previous gaming experiences inform current ones, we can see these initial reactions and interactions as vestiges of the kinds of dispositions, competencies and expectations associated with the more action-driven games WD1 normally plays. What we want to draw attention to now, however, are the ways in which *TWD* actively resists and subverts such orientations towards combat. Unlike most mainstream games set in post-apocalyptic settings, *TWD* does not centrally involve "existents" that "obstruct the player's progress towards a winning state," to be eliminated through mastering the game's GUI, mechanics, and input devices (Schott, 2008). Rather, player agency in *TWD* is largely directed towards building up Lee's character through dialogue-driven interactions with other survivors, particularly Clem, such that players are encouraged to treat Lee as a vessel for expressing and reflecting on their own 'character.' In his exit interview, WD1 claimed that the game made him agonize over in-game decisions more than he normally does, remarking:

> There are all these variables you don't get to see until you choose a decision and see the cut scene right after. Yeah, it made me second guess myself more than I've done and it put me in the most parallel shoes (like if I was in the game) that I've played as a character before.

We turn now to a consideration of particular instances where the game may have prompted WD1's shift, from playing the game as a "zombie-killing machine" to enacting a version of Lee as a compassionate, defensible father figure. As WD1 told us in the third session, the game compels players to "create the best image of him that you could."

"Clementine will remember that"

Lee encounters Clem, an 8-year old girl separated from her parents, near the beginning of Episode 1, when she passes him a hammer in order to repel her undead babysitter (thereby saving Lee's life). From that point on, she serves as a moral compass for players. In numerous instances where players are tasked with a particularly fraught or ambivalent choice, such as whether to kill the remaining member of the cannibal dairy farmers that imprison the group during Episode 2, Clem will either visibly react to the player's choice and/or the (normally sparse) UI will provide some kind of textual

indication of her reaction – such as, "Clementine will remember that" — in the top corner of the screen. In other scenarios, such as whether to take food from an open car trunk the group stumbles upon, Clem will attempt to directly persuade Lee to make a particular choice — in that case, to not 'steal' the food.

In WD1's playthrough and his subsequent reflections, Clem seemed to act as a catalyst towards re-configuring his orientation to the game, away from an emphasis on weaponry, combat, and defeating zombies and towards constructing a compassionate, considerate version of Lee. On numerous occasions, WD1 went out of his way to help and protect the young girl. During one moment in Episode 2 for instance, after seeing "Clementine witnessed what you did" pop up in the game's UI, he threw up his arms in frustration at his choice. By the third session, he referred to Lee and Clem as having "a father-daughter relationship" and he thought it was important that they also maintain a friendship in addition to one of care and support, despite asserting that one can be a parent regardless of whether the child likes you. At the outset of the game, he seemed primarily concerned with developing Lee's alliances to gun-wielding characters; by the end, however, he viewed his care for Clementine as the most important relationship in the game, despite the fact that she offers no strategic advantage. Reflecting on this relationship during the third session, he said:

> With Clementine, because I assumed responsibility of taking care of her, whenever I said I tried to keep team members that were beneficial, I would put a plus Clementine because I assumed responsibility over her. So if it was something that I could save Clementine or Carly, even though Carly had a gun, I would save Clementine because I assumed responsibility and it has more weight on me.

WD1 was worried that their relationship was fractured by his earlier violent decisions, so he made a decision not to steal the food in the car; despite believing he should, in order to appease her. He rationalized:

> Clementine's opinion probably had something to do with it… Because I already killed somebody in front of her and I guess me taking her side was me — not like mend the fence of our relationship, but let her know that I did that…I felt that I needed to do something drastic that wasn't the right thing but was right for her because she saw me kill somebody.

During his exit interview, when asked what was his most memorable moment from the first two episodes, WD1 replied that it was his decision to not kill Andrew St. John, the

remaining member of the cannibal dairy farmers in Episode 2. This decision to not kill an antagonist was, as WD1 put it, "the most profound in me painting Lee's image as a character." In a moment that articulates his understanding of the kinds of agency the game allows for – forms of agency that are less instrumented around killing zombies, and more around constructing a complex, compelling portrait of Lee — WD1 says this choice "put a really good layer of humanity in who he [Lee] was as a person." He continues: "as much as we want the characters in the game to be invincible, no matter how hard I play it out…he's still vulnerable."

"Always the first to die"

In WD1's shift, from killing zombies to "painting" a "vulnerable" father figure, we can trace a number of small, subtle but nonetheless significant, transformations in the ways he connects masculinity, race and gaming in terms of both representation and play practices. In his intake interview before playing *TWD*, he admits that he does not pay attention to the race of playable characters in the FPS, role-playing and sports games he normally plays; these games typically present race either as inconsequential color choice, or as tokenism, featuring Black or Hispanic characters as 'colorful' sidekicks (Barrett, 2006; Glabuke et al., 2001; Leonard, 2006). His reflection after playing *TWD* provides a more critical stance on these same genres; in the exit interview, he remarks that in the games he most often plays, "the African American dude is never the leader. He's always the first to die, or he is the fastest, he can jump all high." Notable here, for us, is the contrast he is able to make between these normative representations and Lee Everett, a character whom he regards as more compelling given "he's an African American male and he's older…you get to mold how other people perceive him a lot by the actions you do".

In addition to shifting WD1's expectations with regards to the portrayal of African American men in games, *TWD* also disrupted his expectations of player agency inherited from FPS and role-playing franchises. WD1 claimed to be both surprised and frustrated by Lee's limited power, noting that at times, the group's actions diverged from his even though he was the de facto leader. In comparison, *Rainbow Six: Las Vegas*, a favorite of his, offers complete control over non-player group members: "They're not even really people, they're just pawns." In contrast to WD1's more conventional play experiences and their masculine fantasies of dominion over narrative, environment, and other characters, *TWD* offers a world in which Lee (and by extension, the player) is most often rendered ineffective and vulnerable.

What is more, WD1's overriding concern with Lee and Clem's relationship suggests at least a temporary disruption in how WD1 reads (and enacts) the instrumentalist approaches often associated with digital play. As he learned over the course of the first three episodes, currying favor with Clem offers little strategic reward; Clem favors walking away from a car full of food at the end of Episode Two, for instance. Similarly, Clem often reacts negatively if the player chooses a violent means of settling confrontations. For instance, if the player chooses to kill Danny, one of the cannibal dairy farmers during Episode 2, she becomes frightened; caring for Clem arguably undermines the kind of vengeful, violent orientation towards non-player "existents" that is often left unquestioned (if not outright celebrated) in many other zombie games (Schott, 2008). WD1's decidedly un-strategic focus on Clem thereby further complicates normative associations between masculinity and digital play.

Discussion: Playing with Paternity

Thus far, we have explored how WD1's subjectivity, rooted partially in his extensive (and lucrative) immersion in first-person shooter games, comes into play as he navigates the ethically fraught world of *TWD*. We now consider how this interaction between gaming and subjectivity connects to broader socio-cultural understandings regarding African American masculinities and digital play. These discourses shape what kinds of gamers these players are (and can be), as well as the typically narrow range of game characters, genres and mechanics through which African American masculinities are invoked and portrayed.

TWD thrusts players into a new apocalyptic world with very different rules than those encountered in the games our participants normally play. Their gendered identities were pulled and twisted by two forces; the confines of the gaming cultures they inhabit, and the world they see and experience through Lee. As in other contexts (Butler, 1999), players construct a subjectivity that is as much a product of what is done to them in an unforgiving and unpredictable environment, filled with complex and seemingly autonomous individuals, as it is of players' own decisions. *TWD* confounds conventional notions of game expertise through its simple-to-master mechanics, hard-to-handle choices, and necessary mastery of interpersonal communication; through this it disrupts the conflations between technological skill and masculinity. The player doesn't need to be good at 'headshots' or button-mashing to excel at the game; rather, they need to be reflective, empathetic, and protective.

While our participants agreed that their in-game decisions reflected their perspectives and values, the game encourages a high degree of empathy with Lee and his comrades, essentially putting players, as WD1 said, in "Lee's shoes." As we have illustrated, this makes it a compelling site to consider the ways in which participants' embodied subjectivities – their backgrounds, and personal gaming histories — come 'into play.'

In creating both a non-normative protagonist and a game world that disrupts expectations of player agency commonly found in zombie games, Telltale has created an environment that allows (or compels) players to explore enactments of masculinity not normally associated with mainstream gaming cultures. As we illustrate, it is possible to track the ways in which, over the course of his play, WD1's experiences within the game lead him away from a relatively straightforward and uncomplicated hegemonic performance rooted in technological virtuosity and the violent elimination of "existents" towards something more complex. As a former pro-gamer, we expected WD1 to perform more of a sporting, aggressive, masculinity, from start to finish — yet even though he was informed by his love for guns, strategy, and action sequences, he became attached to characters, sacrificed himself to help others, and worked toward building relationships that often offered no strategic advantages. At times he chose non-violence over confrontation, and showed regret after making violent decisions; such behaviors are often counterproductive in games where violence is often the only (or the most pleasurable) option. The most obvious and clear example of our players' performance outside of the jock/geek dichotomy is the manner in which they, as Lee, act as father to the youngest survivor, Clementine. Clementine's initial innocent, vulnerable portrayal of femininity works as an impediment against potential hypermasculine acts; our players avoided killing, stealing, and other forms of aggression when Clementine was witness to their behavior. WD1 grew more concerned with protecting, teaching, and caring for Clementine and, like WD2 did from the outset, gradually constructed this game to be primarily about fatherhood and survival.

The game's representation of Lee as a father breaks away from unfounded stereotypes around Black fathering, and offered a more accurate (and positive) reflection of its contemporary constructions. Even though Lee is not related to Clementine, he acts as a "social father" (Coley, 2001): a father figure who provides ethical guidance, nurture, and emotional support (Connor & White, 2007). Social fathering is common in African American and low-income homes, which are more likely to be run by a single parent (Coley, 2001). Despite the high rate of separation among African American parents, it's important to note that a recent CDC study (2013) found that Black fathers that are

separate from their children are as involved (if not more so) with their children than fathers of other races (Jones & Mosher, 2013); the same is true for Black fathers who live with their families. These facts directly contradict the stereotype of the absentee "deadbeat dad" commonly associated with Black fathers in previous research (Connor & White, 2007).

We can also compare *TWD*'s enactment of fatherhood to other recent, successful games portraying father/daughter relationships, including *BioShock: Infinite* and *The Last of Us* (Voorhees, 2014, April). In contrast to the violent, ruggedly individualistic and hegemonically masculine fathers offered by these games, *TWD* rewards a fatherhood rooted in non-violence, nurture, and self-sacrifice — gendered characteristics that are commonly categorized as feminine, yet are essential for a father to raise an emotionally and behaviorally healthy child (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 2001). Furthermore, unlike the previous games mentioned, Lee does not simply act as a protector/savior for a "damsel in distress"; rather, the game asks you to choose how to prepare Clementine for a world without you in it. Depending on your choices, Clementine may accompany you on missions and protect you from certain demise. Your choices carry much weight, because during the next season of the game, the player acts through the young girl who is navigating alone and unprotected. To prepare her for this post-apocalyptic world, Lee cuts her hair, teaches her how to shoot a gun, gives her food, consoles her when upset, and bandages her when wounded, moments of compassion and caretaking that players have to act out in order to advance in the game. We can thus see in the play of our participants an enactment of a "mature paternal identity" (Connor & White, 2007), a conscious shifting of thought and behavior as they become more focused on Clementine, and express emotional openness, patience, compassion, and selflessness. As in parenting, it's possible the numerous moments of reciprocal interactions between Lee and Clem "fuel the development of each and power them forward" in the game (Connor & White, 2007).

Our participants' play in "social fathering" highlights the need within game studies to theorize – and crucially, help enact — a broader range of subject positions than just "jock" or "geek," both of which reinscribe male power (Kendall, 1999; Taylor, 2012). This analysis puts forth the possibility that some games and gaming experiences, like *TWD*, can provide opportunities for players to engage non-hegemonic, slightly less 'hyper' constructions of masculinity.

Conclusion

We conclude with a consideration of two contributions this research offers to scholarship on gender and digital play. The first is methodological and the second theoretical. Methodologically, we want to re-emphasize the importance of surprise in qualitative research on gender and gaming. Part of the work of feminist games research is not only to identify where structures of gender-based inequality persist, but also to consider how they might be disrupted (Jenson & de Castell, 2008). Several studies of gender and gaming acknowledge that gender is malleable and volatile, while at the same time depicting it as an immutable facet of their lives (see, for instance, Walkerdine, 2007). This means that we, as researchers, continually re-discover the same 'truths' about gender-based distinctions, privileges and inequities in gaming culture. As Jenson and de Castell (2008) argue, one way out of this epistemological morass is to conduct longitudinal and/or interventionist research that both sets in motion and documents changes in gendered play patterns, preferences and pleasures. Both they and Carr (2005) provide illuminating accounts of when and how taken-for-granted facts about gendered play — such as, girls do not trash talk, and boys prefer violence — can become un-learned through this kind of approach. As we demonstrate here, however, it may be possible to at least temporarily unsettle some of the associations between gaming and hegemonic masculinity through more short-term interventions. Specifically, we argue that this is possible by inviting participants to play — and significantly, discuss — games that offer non-normative mechanics and representations. In our sessions with WD1 and WD2, both participants played through and critically reflected on constructions of masculinity that fell outside of their normal experiences with games (especially games featuring African American characters). This seemed to open up a space where WD1 in particular could find pleasure in performances of masculinity that are significantly less 'hyper,' less rooted in violence, mastery and domination, than those offered by the games he usually plays. We offer this methodological approach in the hopes that it may find purchase in further studies of gaming, intersectional subjectivities, and social change.

The third contribution we offer here is theoretical, and concerns the ways in which communities of feminist scholars, activists, artists and students might productively engage with the persistent gender-based inequities that characterize gaming culture. Efforts at challenging mainstream gaming's misogyny and homophobia, carried out by and on behalf of those at the margins of gaming culture, have intensified in recent years (Consalvo, 2013; Fisher & Harvey, 2013). We believe that these efforts might be productively complemented and extended by seeking to challenge the connections between gaming and hypermasculinities from within. This entails working with

communities and individuals that have historically enacted, embodied or otherwise espoused these connections, and introducing, supporting and documenting possibilities for the performance and legitimation of alternative masculinities in games and gaming culture. Our exploratory study of *TWD*, in which we pursued a reflexive and "co-constructed" (Lather, 1986) exploration of play that privileges non-violent conflict resolution, nurture, and emotional vulnerability with our two male participants, offers one localized way in which we might subvert constructions of hypermasculinity in ways that neither alienate nor demonize individual male gamers.

Finally, we believe our methodology could be adapted for future pedagogical purposes. As WD1's experience demonstrates, *TWD*'s nuanced characters, ethically ambiguous decision making, and complex interpersonal interactions, coupled with the opportunity to watch and comment on these interactions, might encourage a critical reflection on one's own motivations and dispositions. At the same time, such approaches might begin to operationalize what feminist scholars have often said of gender inequities more generally: that so long as we treat them as solely, or even primarily a 'women's problem,' we leave masculinities off the hook.

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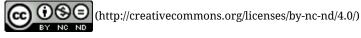
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