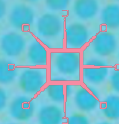


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Kishonna L. Gray
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Editors

Feminism in Play

Gerald Voorhees
Managing Editor

palgrave
macmillan

Editors

Kishonna L. Gray
Department of Gender and Women's Studies
and Communication
University of Illinois at Chicago
Chicago, IL, USA

Gerald Voorhees
Department of Communication Arts
University of Waterloo
Waterloo, ON, Canada

Emma Vossen
Department of English Language
and Literature
University of Waterloo
Waterloo, ON, Canada

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Contents

1	Introduction: Reframing Hegemonic Conceptions of Women and Feminism in Gaming Culture	1
	<i>Kishonna L. Gray, Gerald Voorhees, and Emma Vossen</i>	
Part I	Neither Virgin Nor Vixen: Representations of Women	19
2	Women by Women: A Gender Analysis of Sierra Titles by Women Designers	21
	<i>Angela R. Cox</i>	
3	The Material Undermining of Magical Feminism in <i>BioShock Infinite: Burial at Sea</i>	37
	<i>James Malazita</i>	
4	From Sirens to Cyborgs: The Media Politics of the Female Voice in Games and Game Cultures	51
	<i>Milena Droumeva</i>	
5	The Magnificent Memory Machine: The Nancy Drew Series and Female History	69
	<i>Robyn Hope</i>	
6	The Sexual Politics of Video Game Graphics	83
	<i>Robert Mejia and Barbara LeSavoy</i>	

Part II All Made Up: Gendering Assemblages	103
7 Women's Experiences on the Path to a Career in Game Development	105
<i>Johanna Weststar and Marie-Josée Legault</i>	
8 Rule Makers vs. Rule Breakers: The Impact of Legislative Policies on Women Game Developers in the Japanese Game Industry	125
<i>Tsugumi Okabe</i>	
9 Sexism and the Wow Girl: A Study of Perceptions of Women in World of Warcraft	143
<i>Thaiane Oliveira, Reynaldo Gonçalves, Alessandra Maia, Julia Silveira, and Simone Evangelista</i>	
10 With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility: Video Game Live Streaming and Its Potential Risks and Benefits for Female Gamers	163
<i>Lena Uszkoreit</i>	
Part III Beyond Feminization: Gaming and Social Futures	183
11 Doing/Undoing Gender with the Girl Gamer in High-Performance Play	185
<i>Emma Witkowski</i>	
12 The Magic Circle and Consent in Gaming Practices	205
<i>Emma Vossen</i>	
13 Shoot the Gun Inside: Doubt and Feminist Epistemology in Video Games	221
<i>Elyse Janish</i>	

14	Women Agents and Double-Agents: Theorizing Feminine Gaze in Video Games	235
	<i>Stephanie C. Jennings</i>	
15	Feminism and Gameplay Performance	251
	<i>Emma Westcott</i>	
	Index	267

Notes on Contributors

Angela R. Cox received her PhD in English Rhetoric and Composition from the University of Arkansas, USA in 2016. She grew up playing Nintendo and Sierra games, unaware that these were “for boys.” Her scholarly interest in games started while studying at Ohio State University, USA, with some research in fantasy that quickly grew into research in feminism. She teaches English at Ball State University, USA.

Milena Droumeva is Assistant Professor of Communication and Sound Studies at Simon Fraser University, Canada, specializing in mobile technologies, sound and multimodal ethnography. She has a background in acoustic ecology and works across the fields of urban soundscape research, sonification for public engagement, as well as gender and sound in video games. Milena is co-investigator for ReFiG, a SSHRC partnership grant exploring women’s participation in the games industries and game culture.

Simone Evangelista is a PhD candidate in the Post-graduate Program in Communication at Federal Fluminense University, Brazil, and a member of the Laboratory in Experiences of Engagement and Transformation of Audiences (LEETA).

Reynaldo Gonçalves is a Master’s student in the Post-graduate Program in Communication at Federal Fluminense University and a member of the Laboratory in Experiences of Engagement and Transformation os Audiência (LEETA).

Kishonna L. Gray is an assistant professor in the Department of Gender and Women’s Studies and Communication at the University of Illinois at Chicago, USA. She is also a faculty associate at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, USA. Gray previously served as a MLK Scholar and Visiting Professor in Women and Gender Studies and Comparative Media Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA.

Robyn Hope is a Master's student in Media Studies at Concordia University, USA, finishing her thesis under the supervision of Mia Consalvo. Prior to studying at Concordia, Robyn obtained an undergraduate degree in English and Cinema Studies at the University of Toronto, Canada. Her academic interests include digital games, game narratives, and play performance. In her spare time, she practices digital art and enjoys tabletop role-playing games.

Elyse Janish is a PhD candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado Boulder, USA. She researches issues related to gender and sexuality in digital contexts, focusing lately on the spaces and communities that arise around video games.

Stephanie C. Jennings is a PhD candidate in the Department of Communication and Media at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, USA. Her research focuses on feminist theory, play, horror films and video games, and histories of witch trials. She also occasionally dabbles in pedagogical theory and games-based learning.

Marie-Josée Legault has taught labor relations at TÉLUQ, Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), Canada, since 1991, where she is also responsible for a graduate program in HRM in project-based context. She is also an associate professor at the Laval Faculty of Law and UQAM's Department of Sociology. She is pursuing research on regulation of work in project-based environments, among software designers and video game developers in Canada. She has been responsible for four formally funded research teams and projects and has a current industry partnership with the International Game Developers Association to conduct their annual Developer Satisfaction Survey. She is a member of the Interuniversity Research Centre on Globalization and Work (CRIMT).

Barbara LeSavoy, PhD is Director of Women and Gender Studies (WGST) at The College at Brockport, SUNY, USA. She teaches Feminist Theory; Global Perspectives on WGST; Gender, Race, and Class; and Senior Seminar in WGST. Her research/publication areas include women's global human rights, sex and gender in literature and popular culture, intersectionality and educational equity, and women's stories as feminist standpoint. LeSavoy serves as lead faculty for a COIL global classroom linking students at the College at Brockport in NY and Novgorod State University in Russia and has taught several WGST seminars at the NY Institute of Linguistics, Cognition, and Culture in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Alessandra Maia acts as Innovation Researcher of the Laboratory of Digital Media (LMD-PPGCom/Uerj), with a Qualitec Research Scholarship of InovUerj. With a degree in Game Designer (2017) from Senac Rio, and PhD (2018) and MA (2014) in Communication from the Post-graduate Program in Communication of the State University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (PPGCOM/Uerj), Alessandra conducts research investigating entertainment, especially video games, and the potential for learning and development of cognitive skills for different areas of social interaction.

James Malazita is Assistant Professor of Science & Technology Studies and of Games & Simulation Arts & Sciences at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, USA, where he is the Founder and Director of Rensselaer's Tactical Humanities Lab. Malazita's research interests include the epistemic infrastructures of computer science, design, and the humanities; digital fabrication; the politics of the digital humanities; game studies; and the synthesizing of humanities and technical education. His research has been supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Popular Culture Association, The New Jersey Historical Commission, and Red Hat Inc.

Robert Mejia is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at North Dakota State University, USA. His research focuses on the relationship between culture, economics, politics, and technology, and addresses how these factors affect the operation of race, propaganda, entrepreneurialism, philanthropy, and video game play. His research has been published in journals and edited collections, such as *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, *Explorations in Media Ecology*, *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, and *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class, and Culture Online*. He is co-editor with Jaime Banks (West Virginia University, USA) and Aubrie Adams (California Polytechnic State University, USA) of the *100 Greatest Video Game Characters* and *100 Greatest Video Game Franchises*.

Tsugumi Okabe is a PhD candidate at the University of Alberta, Canada, where she is conducting her SSHRC funded research on detective manga in the Department of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies. She is co-translator of *Game Freaks Who Play with Bugs – In Praise of the Video Game Xevious* and the translator for the PC game *Nagasaki Kitty* (<http://nagasaki-kitty.ca>). Her research on women's participation in the Japanese game industry is ongoing. For more information, please visit her personal website: <http://mimiokabe.com>.

Thaiane Oliveira is a professor at Federal Fluminense University, Brazil, in the Post-graduate Program in Communication and coordinator of the Laboratory of Investigation in Science, Innovation, Technology and Education (Cite-Lab), which develops practice research on engagement experiences in the Laboratory in Experiences of Engagement and Transformation of Audiences (LEETA).

Julia Silveira holds a PhD in Communication from Federal Fluminense University, Brazil, where she teaches in the Post-graduate Program in Communication and conducts research on gender in digital environments.

Lena Uszkoreit is a postdoctoral fellow in the UXR lab at the University of Ontario, Canada's Institute of Technology. She received her PhD in Communication from the University of Southern California, USA's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. Her dissertation explored the relationship between viewing and objectifying female Twitch streamers and the perception of female gamers and women in general. Her favorite games include *Portal 2*, *World of Warcraft*, *The Sims*, and *Overwatch*.

Gerald Voorhees is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Waterloo, Canada. His research is on games and new media as sites for the construction and contestation of identity and culture. In addition to editing books on gender and digital games, role-playing games, and first-person shooter games, Gerald is co-editor of Bloomsbury's *Approaches to Game Studies* book series.

Emma Vossen is an award-winning public speaker and writer with a PhD from the University of Waterloo, Canada. Her research about gender and games was selected as the focus of a 50-minute documentary made by CBC Radio and broadcast across Canada in 2016. Her dissertation examines the sexism girls and women face when participating in games culture. She is the former Editor-in-Chief of game studies publication *First Person Scholar*.

Emma Westecott is Assistant Professor in Game Design and Director of the game:play lab at the Ontario College of Art & Design (OCAD), University in Toronto, Canada. She has worked in the game industry for over 20 years in development, research, and the academy. She achieved international recognition for working closely with Douglas Adams as game designer then producer for the best-selling CD-ROM adventure game, *Starship Titanic* (1998). Since then, Emma has built up a worldwide reputation for developing original as well as popular game projects.

Johanna Weststar is Associate Professor of Industrial Relations and Labour Studies in the DAN Department of Management and Organizational Studies at Western University, Canada. A primary research topic is project-based workplaces with a focus on working conditions, worker representation, and workplace regulation in game development. She also studies pension board governance. Johanna is a member of the CRIMT research network and a past president of the Canadian Industrial Relations Association (CIRA).

Emma Witkowski is a senior lecturer at RMIT University, Australia's School of Media and Communication. As a socio-phenomenologically informed ethnographer, her research explores esports cultures, high performance play, gender, and networked play. She is a board member on the Australian Esports Association and in 2017; she was a postdoctoral researcher with Locating Media, University of Siegen, Germany, studying pro-esports teams, coaching, spectatorship, and mega-events. Her current research explores esports in Australia, and grassroots cultures of involvement.

List of Figures

- Fig. 4.1 Voice actress sounding out Elizabeth: ‘Putting the body into it’: source 1 (<https://goo.gl/6dz baj>); Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider 2013* navigates the environment with breathy moans and pants at the forefront of gameplay: source 2 (<https://goo.gl/gTqqcM>) 57
- Fig. 6.1 Screenshots from *Adventure* (*left*) and *Pitfall!* (*right*). Courtesy of the Wikimedia Foundation 88
- Fig. 6.2 Screenshots from *Beat'em and Eat'em* (*left*) and *Philly Flasher* (*right*). Courtesy of James Rolfe and Mike Matei of *Angry Video Game Nerd* 89
- Fig. 6.3 Screenshot from *Menace Beach* (*left*) showing Bunny's decaying clothes. Courtesy of James Rolfe and Mike Matei of *Angry Video Game Nerd*. Screenshot showing Samus Aran without her Power Suit (*right*). Courtesy of the Wikimedia Foundation 90
- Fig. 6.4 Screenshot from *Final Fantasy VII* featuring a long shot of Aerith Gainsborough's home in the sector 5 slums. The grandeur of this shot—combined with the relative insignificance of the game character (bottom left corner) due to the disparate character-to-screen ratio—encourages the player to pause and become consumed by the exceptional beauty of the game world. Such moments have become a part of modern gaming since the advent of the PlayStation, and cannot be thought of as “pauses” or “deferrals” but rather an essential feature of world building. Screenshot by first author 92
- Fig. 6.5 Aerith Gainsborough from *Final Fantasy VII* (*left*) and Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* (*right*). Regarding the image of Lara Croft, as we are introduced to her in this sequence, the man in her reflection states: “what's a man gotta do to get that kind of attention from you.” Screenshots by first author 94

xvi **List of Figures**

Fig. 6.6	The Evolution of Lara Croft's character models from 1996 to 2013. <i>Tomb Raider Chronicles</i> (TRC [2000]) was the last <i>Tomb Raider</i> developed solely for PlayStation 1 equivalent platforms; and it is important to note that while <i>Tomb Raider: Anniversary</i> (TRA [2007]) and <i>Tomb Raider: Underworld</i> (TRU [2008]) were developed for PlayStation 3 equivalent platforms, their visual design was held back by the need to operate on "last generation" equivalent platforms. Courtesy of Ron from Cloud Gaming (2014)	95
Fig. 6.7	Lightning from <i>Final Fantasy XIII</i> (left) and Lara Croft from <i>Tomb Raider</i> (right). Screenshots by author	96
Fig. 7.1	General model of a traditional career pipeline	106
Fig. 7.2	Percentage of class that is women. Source: IGDA DSS 2015	111
Fig. 7.3	Occupational segregation of non-managerial core developer roles by gender. Source: IGDA DSS 2015	113
Fig. 9.1	Comparative board between male and female respondents	156
Fig. 9.2	Reactions to expression "rape the boss"	157
Fig. 9.3	Gender and safety	157
Fig. 10.1	A female streamer playing League of Legends	168
Fig. 10.2	A male streamer playing League of Legends	168
Fig. 10.3	Alinity's Twitch profile	171
Fig. 10.4	Hafu's Twitch profile	173
Fig. 10.5	SeriouslyClara's Twitch profile	175
Fig. 12.1	Author's chart	211



1

Introduction: Reframing Hegemonic Conceptions of Women and Feminism in Gaming Culture

Kishonna L. Gray, Gerald Voorhees, and Emma Vossen

Despite the disciplinary norms and institutional investments of games studies that malign and marginalize critical perspectives (Jensen and de Castell 2009), recent history has proven feminist lenses to be an essential facet in examining games, gamers, and gaming culture. As Nina Huntemann (2013) argues, feminist game studies examines how gender, and its intersections with race, class, sexuality, and so on, is produced, represented, consumed, and practiced in and through digital games. This volume continues and extends the project of feminist game studies, examining the varied representations, practices, and institutions of games and game cultures from a feminist perspective, exploring personal experiences, individual narratives, and institutional phenomenon inherent in the hegemonic, often patriarchal, structures of gaming.

Though current events make it all the more pressing, in fact there is a rich, far-reaching history of feminist theory and games criticism that the essays in this book build upon. Media scholars have long examined the presumption that games depict women in a manner that is both polarizing and marginalizing: as either sexual objects or damsels in distress (Gailey 1993; Dietz 1998).

K. L. Gray (✉)
University of Illinois, Chicago, IL, USA

G. Voorhees • E. Vossen
University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON, Canada

The continued under-representation (and erasure) of female game characters has been documented (Williams et al. 2009), as has the tendency to depict women in a sexualized manner with either less clothing (Beasley and Standley 2002; Taylor 2006), absurd or idealized body proportions (Schröder 2008; Martins et al. 2009), or narrative and discursive positioning as sexually promiscuous (MacCallum-Stewart 2009). Nevertheless, some studies examining the depiction of women in digital games have drawn attention to an increasingly diverse set of portrayals of female gender identity. One of the first game characters to warrant this attention is Lara Croft, the titular character of the *Tomb Raider* series. There is a small but significant body of feminist media criticism that argues that Croft functions (alternatively or simultaneously depending on the author) as an object of sexual desire, a femme fatale, a model of empowered womanhood, or a masculine style of femininity (Schleiner 2001; Kennedy 2002; Mikula 2003; Jansz and Martis 2007). Stang (2017) and Voorhees (2016) each finds an extremely capable and heroic figure in Ellie, the teenage girl from *The Last of Us*, who is nevertheless disempowered not through sexualization but rather by the game's positioning of her as a daughter-figure to Joel, the other, and primary, playable character. Still, despite the proliferation of increasingly capable heroines, Summers and Miller's (2014) recent study of game advertising demonstrates that while the more traditional depiction of the virtuous damsel in distress is less common in games, female game characters are simultaneously increasing sexualized.

As feminist game studies has developed, a number of focal points have emerged, notably: women and marginalized peoples' erasure or unfavorable representation in games, exclusion and harassment in game cultures and communities, and participation in the game industry and other sites of production. More recently, it has become increasingly clear that the intersecting facets of these problems (which we discuss in detail in the next section) and the intersectional identities of the people who experience the greatest precarity in games and game cultures are vital sites of inquiry.

This volume aims to continue to propel feminist theory and criticism of games forward in the midst of the social, political, and material reality that is #Gamergate, Black Lives Matter, the Trump administration, and the general social trend toward a more reactionary, conservative politics of exclusion. As the chapters within this volume reveal, these conditions may shift the grounds of the complex conversations we continue to have about women within games, women and girls as gamers, and women within the industry, but they do not fundamentally redefine it.

Patriarchy and Power in Games

Whether visible in the persistent color line that shapes the production, dissemination, and legitimization of dominant stereotypes within the industry itself, or in the dehumanizing and hypersexual representations commonplace within virtual spaces, video games encode the injustices that pervade society as a whole. According to Williams, Martins, Consalvo, and Ivory (2009), gaming is a space defined by the “systematic over-representation of males, white and adults and a systematic under-representation of females, Hispanics, Native Americans, children and the elderly.” Similarly, rape culture, inscriptions of toxic masculinity, and homophobia are ubiquitous to gaming; the criminalization of black and brown bodies and the profiling of black and brown gamers is foundational to gaming culture; and the injustices that predominate in gaming culture also sit at the core of the political, social, and communal arrangements of mainstream US culture. In this way, games provide both training grounds for the consumption of narratives and stereotypes and opportunities to become instruments of hegemony. As many of the essays argue in Nick Taylor and Gerald Voorhees’ edited volume, *Masculinities in Play*, they offer spaces of white male play and pleasures, and create a virtual and lived reality where white maleness is empowered to police and criminalize the Other. Games provide opportunity to both share and learn the language of racism, sexism, and the grammar of empire, all while perpetuating cultures of violence and privilege (Gray 2012, 2014; Nakamura 2009; Leonard 2003, 2006, 2009, 2014).

No contemporary example of this hegemony is more salient than #Gamergate. #Gamergate gained media attention through misogynist and racist attacks on women gamers, critics, and developers. Followers of #gamergate attempted to justify their campaign as a move to restore ethics in video game journalism, resulting in hostile and violent environments for women, queer folk, and people of color. This is exceptional, given the way that “gaming capital” has been distributed, historically, in a manner that overwhelmingly centers heteronormative, white, masculinity, equating this perspective and identity as the default player (Consalvo 2008). However, it is not new. For women, the sexually marginalized, and people of color, this treatment reaches far back beyond this moment, and stems from certain elements fundamental to games and game cultures.

While #GamerGater may have been the “straw that broke the camel’s back,” it certainly does not represent the origins of harassment experienced by the marginalized in gaming communities. Kishonna Gray’s foundational

work explores harassment campaigns and hostile environments experienced by women in console gaming since these spaces first went live (Gray 2012). She also explored the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities within gaming communities for failing to conform to the White male norm (Gray 2014). Additional work is emerging showcasing the disturbing realities for women, people of color, and queer gamers within streaming communities (Gray 2016). These examples rightfully demonstrate that #Gamergate did not create a culture of toxicity; rather, this reality is central to gaming contexts.

Prior to #Gamergate, harassment in gaming has been excused, minimized, and outright overlooked as a matter of boys and men too immature to understand the consequences of their vitriol. But now that the average age of a gamer is 31 (Shaw 2012), there is an increased urgency to acknowledge that the normalizing of this behavior is inherent to the patriarchal culture of digital games. This culture extends beyond the gamers; the devaluation of marginalized bodies is present in the games that we play, the developers who create them, and the culture and institutions that sustain them—making them all complicit in the continued oppression of the marginalized.

The attention generated by another recent controversy also highlights that women in games have always experienced marginalization and erasure. During the design and development of *Assassin's Creed: Unity*, Ubisoft developers revealed that they viewed the task of creating a female playable character for the game's multiplayer mode with customizable avatars to be an unreasonable burden. Their comments are illustrative of their stance:

It would have doubled the work on those things. And I mean it's something the team really wanted, but we had to make a decision... It's unfortunate, but it's a reality of game development. (Williams 2014)

Concerned gamers immediately took to Twitter to critique the legitimacy of the notion that creating a female character was double the work using the hashtag #WomenAreTooHardToAnimate. One commenter rightfully stated that, “unless you are killing her, buying her or selling her, @Ubisoft can't animate a woman you can actually play #womenaretoohardtoanimate.” In short, this “inability” to animate women is a part of a larger culture of exclusion in which women gamers have always found themselves situated.

This blatant sexism has become a highly visible antagonist in an increasingly dominant narrative about the importance of diversity in the content and even production of games. But it bears repeating that #Gamergate doesn't reflect some aberration or new subculture within gaming—this is the culture in gaming. This is our society. As Lisa Nakamura (2012) states, masculinity is

performed by the display of technical knowledge, and gaming is the most recent iteration of this form of social display. Gaming itself becomes a mark of privilege within symbolic discourse. Following Adrienne Shaw (2012), through this project we endeavor to continue the work of dispelling the myth and imagery of the “dominant White, heterosexual, male, teen gamer image” (29). Arguments for the practical and economic necessity of this inclusion aside, we embrace the ethical, political imperative of this act: the inclusion of women and other marginalized people in games and game cultures is fundamentally about justice, parity, and access to the common (media) experiences that connect us.

It is in this context that we view, with some uncertainty and even concern, the growing trend of development studios claiming to be willing to respond to calls for creating more diverse content, diversifying teams, and creating a more diverse industry. For an industry that actively and intentionally centers men, such efforts will no doubt be troubled by entanglements with entrenched cultural values masquerading as objective, neutral practices. History is replete with instances where the rhetoric and ideals of inclusion are contradicted by the very policies and practices intended to instantiate them. One such effort to challenge the preeminence of masculinity in the game industry and carve out women’s spaces in games, which peaked in the 1990s and early 2000s, is the “pink games” movement. While still pursued by some, in addition to fostering greater uptake and involvement by women, “pink games” also re-entrench a number of essentialist stereotypes about women and girls (Cassell and Jenkins 1998). Aside from this, this collective history of games is largely the story of women as passive, casual, or non-essential participants within a culture dominated by endless narratives of men and hegemonic masculinity. Thus, one of the imperatives of this book is highlight how women have been and continue to be vital to the making of games, the building of community around them, and constructing cultures of play.

Despite efforts to involve more women in games, the promotion and marketing discourses employed by the gaming industry are also complicit in reinforcing the assumption that women are intermittent, casual participants while men are perpetual hardcore players (Chess 2010). During a press release for the Xbox 360 at E3 in 2005, the new console was pitched to appeal to the casual gamer (Plunkett 2011, para. 1). This included a comparison between two fictitious users, one named Striker and the other Velocity Girl. Velocity Girl is described as someone for whom gaming is not a “central part of her existence”:

now, she might never pick up a controller, never take a run in the halfpipe but she'll be able to design and sell stickers, shirts, boards, sound tracks and even design her own skate park for those hardcore gamers like Striker. (Plunkett 2011, para. 3)

Aside from feminizing and gendering the gamertag associated with womanhood, the story highlights how gendered cultural scripts are embedded in the codes of media artifacts. The framing of Velocity Girl serves as an example of how powerful and pervasive the narrative of subservient, passive women is within mediated contexts. The female gamer is there to support the experience and recreation of the male gamer through her labor, with her creations. According to Wood (1994) media are “one of the most pervasive and powerful” influences on how we view people because they are “woven throughout our daily lives” and “insinuate their messages into our consciousness at every turn” (p. 31). The media rely on stereotypes to frame messages and narratives. As Potter and Kappeler (2012) posit, “the end result of these media portrayals is a reinforcement of ethnic, gender, and class stereotypes, cobbled together in brief, dramatic, and disturbing images and words” (p. 9). The framing of Velocity Girl as a passerby within the world of gaming serves to distort women's contributions and construct a reality of men and masculinity as the central and normal entity within gaming. The term framing can be understood as a “point of view” on a given issue or event used to interpret and present “reality,” magnifying or shrinking aspects of that issue or event to make it more or less salient (Hardin and Whiteside, p. 313). There is both a conscious and unconscious process occurring with the framing of Velocity Girl. While the creators intended for her framing to serve as a catalyst to encourage passive, casual gamers (i.e. girls) to become a part of the Xbox community, the ultimate effect was reify the stereotype that women as not real gamers.

Because frames are usually based on cultural understandings, they are easy for media professionals to access (Hertog and McLeod 2001; Ryan et al. 2001; Entman 1993). And the framing of women through this lens becomes even more powerful when aggregated across time and space and we begin to see the pattern of continual diminishing of women's participation in gaming. Indeed, the gendering of play has received much attention from feminist media scholars such as Shira Chess (2010) who focuses on how labor and leisure within gaming contexts have become gendered. She argues that “the playful is political” and calls for feminism to adopt play as a form of activism whereby seemingly frivolous activities can serve to unite women, especially younger feminists, and subvert the dominance of play practices defined by masculinity (Fron et al. 2007). Chess (2010) specifically refers to online worlds and games

as “creating limitless possibilities for potential forms of playful activism” (13). In a way, it is co-opting a potentially negative framing of women’s engagements, appropriating the hegemonic narrative of women, leisure, and casual play.

Much of feminist games scholarship pushes back against the pernicious conception of women as accessories to games and game play, and so it is imperative that this volume seeks to decenter the presumption of the male player as default, and to amend the narrative of women in gaming so as to highlight vital contributions by women in game development and culture. As Laine Nooney (2013) rightfully asserts, historical recallings of video game history are largely imagined as a “patrilineal timeline.” She further explains that when women emerge as participants in the game industry, they are typically portrayed as outliers, exceptions, or early exemplars of “diversity” in the game industry.

We join with others who are cultivating an emerging groundswell of efforts to decenter masculine perspectives within games and gaming. Kaifai, Richards, and Tynes’ *Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat* (2016) is one of the first efforts to not only critique to masculine bias in games and game studies but to also displace it by focusing on intersectional voices. Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm’s compelling volume, *Gaming Representation* (2017), participates in this movement to displace representations that have historically, and consistently, reflected the narratives, worldviews, and desires of cis-heterosexual white men. The volume reveals the ways that folks marginalized on the basis of their gender, sexuality, race, and nationality—a rich diversity of creators and characters—are variously valorized, demonized, and otherwise domesticated (for the presumed cis-male white player) in games and gaming contexts. The powerful volume, *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (2017) reflects the efforts of queer scholars and intersectional feminists within the gaming community to rethink and make visible the queerness inherent to games. Their volume goes beyond traditional explorations of representations within games to also think about mechanics and community norms as queer, challenging traditional dichotomies within game studies (i.e. narratology/ludology) that restrict innovation ways of experiencing and studying games. Unsurprisingly, these queer mechanics and norms are most explicit in independently published, or indie, games. The volume *Queerness in Gaming* edited by Todd Harper, Meghan Adams, and Nick Taylor also participates in this project to decenter men and masculinity from discussions about games. It does so by looking unapologetically and intensely at queer games and game mechanics, queer players, and queer practices.

In this light, another imperative of feminist game studies is to continue highlighting the innovative games being created at the margins. Take for example the interactive game “Hair Nah” created by Momo Pixel. This game allows players to customize an avatar who can “smack away as many white hands” as possible within a certain time frame as they approach locs, twists, braids, or relaxed hair (Callahan 2017). The game quickly went viral. It captured a convergence of powerful contemporary racial and gendered dynamics and histories, from Black hair politics to the history of white supremacy as it relates to the hyper policing and surveillance of Black women’s bodies to the daily toll of racial microaggressions Black women face. From its conception to reception, *Hair Nah* exemplifies the yearning for disruptive and transformative games. It also demonstrates the ways that games, online technology, and game culture have the potential to disrupt the hegemonic structure of gaming and address physical inequalities using digital tools.

These spaces for change are where we exist—at the intersection of possibility and potential for effecting significant change. Within the sites where games are produced, technology, communities of gamers, and virtual reality are important and potentially powerful tools for broader fights for social justice. The works of Anna Anthropy, a transgender video game designer, serve as a powerful example of using tools to fight for social and material justice. Fed up with the limited character development options and clichéd story lines in AAA games, she challenged conventional game development and design principles. Using Game Maker, a novice friendly computer program, she began creating her own games. This and other accessible game design tools enable communities traditionally excluded from power structures in gaming to participate and create innovative games. Anthropy’s games include *Keep Me Occupied*, a collaborative two-player arcade game featuring Occupy protesters in Oakland being subject to tear gas and grenades, as well as *Dys4ia*, a game based on the creator’s experiences with hormone replacement therapy (Lipinski 2012). As more people work their way in from the margins of games and game cultures using these and other tools, games become an increasingly viable platform for feminist activism and the struggle for social justice. It is clear that women in games and gaming push back and contest patriarchy in as many ways as they are challenged and ensnared by it; that there are as many misconceptions about the history of women within gaming culture as there are actual issues facing women in games. Women are harassed and terrorized when they play games, and so in this book we explore how graphic engines, genres, and design decisions perpetuate this. But this is the backdrop within which women also dominate by demonstrating highly skilled play, do the work of building communities around games, and generate their own experiences

and meanings from play. Women are marginalized in an industry that thrives on masculine norms and expectations, so in this volume we continue to direct attention to sexism in the profession and pipeline. But in spite of and sometimes because of this, women nevertheless persist to make games and to challenge conventions rooted in bias. And because women continue to be portrayed in games in demeaning ways that diminish their worth, in this book we explore how graphic engines, genres, and design decisions perpetuate this. But women and feminists have cultivated a growing number of progressive representations, feminist histories, and ways of perceiving and experiencing games which need to be highlighted and carried forward.

Beyond these timeless yet timely problems, it is our hope that the scholarship in this book can help to address the deeply rooted, mythical assumption that women are new additions to the games industry and games culture and instead demonstrates their integral shaping of games and games culture throughout history *despite* continued attempts to exclude and alienate them from it.

* * *

Like the other books in this trilogy, this volume is organized by its examination of how gender is represented in games, how gender is constructed in and through the cultural and material apparatuses that constitute game cultures, and the future directions for research and for feminist intervention in and around games. In the first section of the book, “Neither Virgin Nor Vixen: Representations of Women,” we assembled five chapters that scrutinize how women are depicted in games. These essays highlight that, both historically and presently, narrative and visual representations of women in digital games are more complicated, as is their relationship to patriarchy, than we typically give them credit for. And while they are all anchored in textual (or content) analysis, these chapters also take great pains to consider how norms of production, practices of consumption, and technological systems impact the representation of women typical of contemporary digital games.

The first chapter, Angela Cox’s study of the representation of women in the Sierra games designed by women, challenges the assumption that more women in game development automatically equate to more positive or progressive portrayals of women. Looking closely at Roberta Williams’s *King’s Quest* series and *Phantasmagoria*, Lori Cole’s *Quest For Glory: So You Wanna Be a Hero?*, and Jane Jenson’s *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers*, Cox argues that having women in lead roles in the game development process is necessary but not sufficient to break out of androcentric conventions. We shift granularity

from a studio to a specific series with Robyn Hope's chapter on feminist history in Her Interactive's *Nancy Drew* series. Hope (mostly) lauds the series' representation of Nancy Drew, but argues that, ultimately, the series captures the fraught relationship that present-day women experience in relation to female histories.

Milena Droumeva's chapter continues and extends the examination of the representation of women in games but focuses specifically on the aural dimension, on the voices of the characters. Droumeva notes that most women are represented in action sequences through higher pitched vocalizations, including a variety of "breathy exhalations, grunts, and moans," and by examining specific female characters, as well as positive and negative player reactions to character voices, offers a set of tropes that identify conventional representational norms. Droumeva's reading of voice in games is grounded in sonic studies and is keenly aware of the role of technology in the generation of patterns of representation, like the subsequent chapters in this section.

The final two chapters in this first section focus on more contemporaneous developments regarding the representation of women in games, looking at a modern game series and studying how advances in technology impact representation. James Malazita's critique of "magical feminism" in *Bioshock Infinite* (2013) focuses on the character of Elizabeth and argues that over time she transforms from a resilient "magical feminist" sidekick into a fearful playable character whose primary agency is to sneak and hide. Malazita discusses developer interviews alongside the contrasting depictions of Elizabeth in both *Bioshock Infinite* and its downloadable content (DLC) *Burial at Sea* (2014), but also emphasizes the discursive and material impact of the game engine. His analysis illustrates the political implications of the representation of Elizabeth's character while also taking note of technical and economic constraints that both the game and the DLC were created in. Robert Mejia and Barbara LeSavoy's chapter shares a concern for how game technologies, and discourses about them, have impacted the sexual politics of video game graphics. Focusing on the *Final Fantasy* and *Tomb Raider* franchises from the Playstation 1 to Playstation 3 eras, Mejia and LaSavoy critique the "photorealistic imperative" typical of the video game industry as a direct contributor to chauvinist and misogynist sexual politics of the industry. A fitting end to this section on representation, both of these chapter chart the evolution of representations of women in games in order to remind us how the technical and the sociocultural work together to create design choices.

The second section of this volume, "All Made Up: Gendering Assemblages," features four chapters that each center a different phenomenon or experience that is typically treated as marginal. Instead of centering games, they center

the sites where games are produced and the communities where players organize and around games. Together, these chapters illustrate how women in the game industry and game cultures navigate the vast material and discursive contexts in which games are situated, and remind us that not all gameplay occurs on or in front of a screen.

The first two chapters look at women in the global game development industry. Johanna Weststar and Marie-Josée Legault's chapter examines the "pipeline" to careers in game development, asking the question: can women take the dominant career path into game development or do they have to forge their own alternative paths? Weststar and Legault comb through the International Game Developers Association's 2014 and 2015 Developers Satisfaction Survey," in order to outline what it means to be a woman in contemporary game development. Highlighting statistical evidence that suggests that women experience "blocks and leakages" when they attempt to access the dominant pipeline, Weststar and Legault identify a set of persistent cultural and institutional factors that, ultimately, suggests that an alternative, indie pipeline may be a more viable option for women. Complementing the previous chapter's focus on how women enter the game industry, Tsugumi Okabe provides a detailed examination of why there are so few women in the Japanese games industry that moves deftly between national labor policies and interviews with women working at game development studios. The chapter takes into account the cultural context of Japanese labor and what Okabe has called "gendered work practices." In Japan only 12% of game developers are women and only 5% of women developers stay in the industry for longer than five years, in her chapter Okabe interviews women working in the Japanese games industry and discusses the various causes for these low numbers. In addition to illuminating how culture and policy intersect in a very specific domain of women's experiences, the chapter also contributes to the emerging body of work in regional and global game studies, helping counter the often Western and Eurocentric perspectives of game studies.

The next set of chapters turn their focus on women's experiences in the mediated spaces in which communities of players associate. Thaianne Oliveira and Reynaldo Gonçalves' chapters bring us, again, outside of the typically Eurocentric scope of game studies. They focus their analysis on the Brazilian website *WoW Girl*, which is managed by women and features content produced solely by women, and supplement it with a survey of users of the *WoW Girl* website. In doing so, Oliveira and Gonçalves build a strong case for understanding how Brazilian women gamers resist marginalization and "machismo." Lena Uszkoreit's chapter also examines the lived experience of female gamers, studying how streamers are using Twitch as a platform on which they perform

their identity as both gamers and women. Uszkoreit identifies the conventions—*aesthetic and performative*—that are relatively unique to women streamers, all grounded in case studies of the practices of three women streamers. Uszkoreit's chapter also draws our attention to the dialectic of feminized, arguably exploitative, performances by certain streamers and efforts to displace this construction of women in games, ultimately reminding scholars and players alike that feminism can be messy, even unruly, in practice.

In the last section of the book, "Beyond Feminization: Gaming and Social Futures," we turn our attention to future directions for research and for feminist intervention in and around games. While the chapters in this section share the same concerns about the (re)production of current oppressions, the works gathered here all have strong bearings on the possible futures for women in games and feminist intervention in game cultures.

The first two chapters in this section are concerned with understanding what it means to be a "gamer girl." Picking up similar themes as Uszkoreit, Emma Witkowski's chapter looks at the different personas and performance of female gamers who are "high performance players" in the e-sport community. Witkowski tackles the complexity of the term *gamer girl* and, through a series of in-depth interviews, identifies the struggles of players to establish themselves as "real gamer girls" as opposed to "fake gamer girls" in e-sports, and the ways that the very notion of the "gamer girl" is formed, policed, lived, produced, and fought against. This chapter offers a much-needed counterweight to the prevailing idea in game studies, that women do not see themselves as gamers, instead providing an insightful historical account of the contexts in which they do. Emma Vossen's chapter offers a more personal and highly vulnerable perspective on the "gamer girl" by bringing her own experiences with consent as a young female gamer into conversation with theorizations of Huizinga's "magic circle." Vossen starts off the chapter with the provocative question: "why was I more afraid to pick up a controller than take off my clothes?" She then attempts to answer this question by interrogating how consent is practiced (and often ignored) between and among gamers, arguing that troubling conceptions of the magic circle contribute to the contemporary context. By drawing from sexuality studies, Vossen attempts to build a model for thinking about and practicing critical consent with other players when playing games.

Elyse Janish's chapter proceeds similarly, methodologically, in its effort to illustrate how self-doubt structures women's gameplay. Beginning from an autoethnographic study of her own experiences, Janish leads the reader through her own experiences of doubt playing and studying online games as well as her experiences of doubt as a feminist scholar presenting this research