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Hypermasculinity & Dickwolves: The Contentious Role of Women in the New Gaming Public

Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett

As video games have attracted more critical attention and theoretical discourse and games play a more visible part in our media landscape, the modern video game community impacts the wider world of online culture and warrants more detailed study. Using the case of the Dickwolves incident from Penny Arcade.com, the authors address issues of hypermasculinity and sexism within the gaming community and how this lens brings to light issues with a hostile response to the expression of a female identity or femininity. The authors argue that this case highlights how the hypermasculine discourse encourages the overt privileging of masculinity over femininity and discourages women from engaging in gendered discourse within the community.

The centering of gaming culture around technology means that the shared identity of gamers is defined in the publicly mediated intersection of social networks. The authors will examine the Dickwolves incident as an exemplar of gendered discourse within these publics. Penny Arcade, a webcomic and blog that has arisen as a dominant voice in video game culture, published a series of comics on rape that started a controversy. A rape survivor explained her intention to boycott the major gaming event Penny Arcade Expo because of the sale of "Dickwolves" t-shirts. The comic creators responded by mocking the boycott, suggesting that the right of rape survivors to respond to the rhetoric of aggressive gendered discourse within the gaming community was itself laughable, and further inciting the community to try to silence the protest with threats created under a veil of anonymity. This furthered the othering of female participants in a male-dominated space and extended the discourse from the virtual to the physical world.

While the technologies of the new gaming public put on an air of openness and inclusiveness, the authors argue that this is a mask behind which a form of gender

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essentialism hides which precipitates a harsh reprisal for any who dare to speak out about the dominant paradigm. Although the original gaming public's identity is based upon the outsider group mentality, their in-group dynamics have expanded upon women-hostile concepts of masculinity within the larger social sphere. This discourse, as amplified across social networks and in public online spaces, allows for extreme and virulent lashing out against those who are perceived as others, most notably women. Such silencing warps the seemingly social spaces of Web 2.0 into tools for the exclusion and perpetuation of a male-dominated gaming social public.

These patterns of exclusion within the gaming community are reflected within the games themselves, where women are often presented in background roles supporting a man's heroic quest. In many games women are objects existing for man's pleasure, serving as enemies, or are simply invisible. The projection of this heroic struggle into the subtext of the community's discourse is reflected in rhetoric of villains and enmity, of outsiders and insiders. Through analyzing the Dickwolves incident, we will examine how the gaming community often acts as a literal "boy's club," with non-conforming individuals often entering a cultural battlefield while rejecting safe spaces and embracing hostile models of discourse.

Hypermasculinity and Gaming

Hypermasculinity is a psychological term coined to describe the exaggeration of masculine cultural stereotypes within subcultures (Parrott & Zeichner, 2008). The term can apply to an overemphasis upon masculine-gendered physical traits and/or behavioral patterns, particularly dismissal or hostility towards feminine displays (Mosher & Anderson, 1986; Mosher & Sirkin, 1984; Parrott & Zeichner, 2003). Hypermasculine action has often been linked to media consumption (Cohn & Zeichner, 2006; Scharrer, 2004). Researchers have observed these media stimuli impacting individuals beyond the period to which they are exposed, setting a higher "baseline" for response in general (Reidy, Shirk, Sloan & Zeichner, 2009; Scharrer, 2004). Video games can often reinforce hypermasculine stereotypes (Dill & Thill, 2007), despite the continued tension of geek "masculinity" as defined in opposition to athletic masculine norms (Taylor, 2012). The appearance of characters (Kirkland, 2009), their actions (Yao, Mahood, & Linz, 2010), and their perceived role within the game society (Scharrer, 2004) have all been addressed as problematic areas in the development of players' masculine identities.

Sexism remains prevalent throughout this media and social sphere (Jenkins & Cassell, 2008; King, Miles, & Kniska, 1991). The choice of female characters and actions within games leaves women with few realistic, non-sexualized options (Bryce & Rutter, 2003; Downs & Smith, 2009; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009). The veil of feminine empowerment, employed by iconic characters like Lara Croft, falls under analysis that reveals their role as a "visual spectacle" for the masculine gaze (Kennedy, 2002). Women who work within the field remain a small minority (Abbiss, 2008; Jenson & de Castell, 2010) and report hostile experiences when

working in the industry (Abbiss, 2008; Kerr, 2003). Often this hostility is felt through the gender roles in the dominant discourse (Eklund, 2011; Kerr, 2003). Researchers have noted that women within the public are pressured to avoid gendered discourse (Carr, 2005; Cockburn, 1992; Schofield, 1995), forcing some to avoid "outing" themselves as a female gendered player within their communities (Dill, Brown, & Collins, 2008; Hussain & Griffiths, 2008) and discouraging many others from opening up conversations about gender and sexism within the community for fear of reprisal or unwanted attention (Lewis & Griffiths, 2011; Norris, 2004).

In her study on geek identity and gender, T.L. Taylor (2012) notes that women remain "all too frequently marginalized," thanks in part to "an imagined difference between men and women and gamers [which] remains a persistent myth" (p. 119). This distinction leads to a focus on women as casual gamers, found in social game communities such as Words with Friends or Farmville, and games that themselves are labeled as lesser by the rest of the gaming community (Taylor, 2012). In online "hardcore" gaming communities, which remain focused on genres of games that are traditionally associated with male players, public discourse is often dominantly male with little visible feminine influence. In Kendall's (2002) case study of BlueSky, a text-based online public, masculinity was preferred in part: "Because Western culture in general associates computer competence and interest with masculinity, femininity can come to be associated with lack of competence and an inability to fit into the dominant social norms" (p. 96). Kendall's (2002) analysis of the silencing of femininity stated,

The cultural connections on BlueSky among work, masculinities, computer use, and sociability ensure a male-dominated atmosphere regardless of the number of women present. For the most part, BlueSky participants ... conform to dominant masculinity standards ... [demonstrating] that even as members of nondominant groups increase, their effect on existing social norms may be minimal" (p. 107).

The same patterns she observed in the tech-centered "virtual pub" have echoes within the current masculine dominance of gaming culture.

Publics and Voice

Hauser (1998) redefined the concept of a public sphere to be centered upon a singular topic of discussion which binds together members of a community, regardless of personal characteristics. Through shared common ground, individuals may enter into the public discussion of an issue within a rhetorical public and add their voices to the developing dialogue (Hauser, 1998; Keane, 1995). While this new conceptualization addressed some of the issues of access, it often did little to mend the difficulties of inequality and power within the public sphere. As Mansbridge (1996) and others identified, it was often the very rhetoric that defined the public discussion of an issue that also limited and excluded private members and groups from full participation (Fraser, 1992).

Technology enables the expansion of rhetorical publics through the incorporation of additional platforms for discourse and the leveling of some physical requirements for active dialogue (Barlow, 2007). However, with this incorporation the distinctions between the types of publics come to the forefront due to the mediated nature through which most discourse now occurs (boyd, 2007; Coleman & Blumer, 2009). boyd (2007) recognizes four characteristics which separate mediated and non-mediated publics today: persistence; searchability; replicability; and invisible audiences. Unlike non-mediated publics, mediated publics expand the potential audiences for the discourse and make what is often theorized as a transient activity into one that has permanent, traceable records (boyd, 2007; boyd, 2011). Due to these features, new methods of creating, subverting, or dominating discourse have developed (boyd, 2011; Howard, 2010; Morozov, 2011). While these new media open discussions of the publics to many new populations, they also reinforce many of the problematic issues that remain fundamentally unaddressed from within the original Habermasian conceptualization (boyd, 2011; Castells, 2000).

Method

This article uses case study analysis of the Dickwolves incident as an exemplary case of hypermasculine discourse and conflict within the gaming public. The complex and social nature of this case makes it difficult to separate the problem from the context in which it occurred (Yin, 2003). Given the rich data and analysis that may be derived from this case, examining it contextually is the only way for it to be fully understood (Yin, 2003).

The Penny Arcade case was selected for several reasons. First, it involved a large mobilization of individuals and personalities within the gaming world. Although the infamy of this case does present a problem, the elements which public scrutiny brought to light highlight many of the themes addressed within this work. Given the nature of the individuals who participated and the lack of balance in power that is associated with them, this case is an excellent example because it highlights not only the smaller, micro-aggressions (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Williams, 1978) that women experience within the gaming public but also how the larger discourse is guided by the power brokers.

The case spreads across a number of sources: forums, blogs, Twitter feeds, and general Web sites which were saved for later review and coding. The basic measure is the "page." Using the term page balances weighting across the different document sources. A single news headline would be counted as 1 page. If the event were to be covered on two separate days by the same Web site it would then count as 2 pages. However, if a forum thread has 30 pages of discussion each one will count separately. Almost 300 pages of discussion were collected in the data gathering phase. The pages were collected from an initial Web search based on terms related to the case. The terms used included "dickwolves," "penny arcade," "women gamers" plus other permutations.

This study used an inductive approach to coding data. An open and selective coding was carried out on each saved page, resulting in a set of themes and categories, similar to the methods used in grounded theory. This coding occurs in an iterative process that is meant to capitalize on the ability to compare the data as they are collected (Seidel, 1998). Given the socio-technical nature of the case, not all elements that are important will be captured in existing theoretical literature.

Case: Penny Arcade and the Dickwolves

A particularly charged debate about gender representation within gaming occurred in 2010 when a dominant gaming website came under attack for making rape jokes with ramifications across the community. The blog and Web comic Penny Arcade, which began in 1998 as the creation of Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik (better known as their comic alter-egos Tycho and Gabe) is responsible for beginning the dispute. The comic is a continual commentary on gaming, and emerged as a dominant voice, particularly as they expanded to include podcasts, video games, and a charitable foundation. In 2004, they started hosting the Penny Arcade Expo (PAX), which is now one of the largest and most important video game conventions in the country and the industry.

Penny Arcade has always prided itself on controversial or offensive jokes, as exemplified by their 2010 comic on “Dickwolves,” an imaginary beast that is described as having phalli instead of limbs. The comic is on the surface a parody of a game mechanic, where a player is given a quest such as “free x prisoners” or “rescue x slaves.” After the number of rescues is complete, the player can no longer interact with the remaining prisoners or slaves resulting in players spending a great deal of time ignoring the plight of virtual characters.

Penny Arcade’s comic turned this act of willful dismissal into the punch line of a rape joke, suggesting that the slaves in question are “raped to sleep by the Dickwolves” each night (Gabe & Tycho, 2010). What might have been dismissed as a joke about game mechanics caught the attention of a blogger at the “progressive feminist” site Shakesville, who noted:

But unlike Gabe killing Tycho so he doesn’t have to share a video game, a slave being raped is a real thing that happens in the world every day. I don’t find this “joke” funny because, unlike characters cartoonishly killing each other repeatedly and coming back to life, just as in video games, rape isn’t a central feature of (most) games—at least in the actual gameplay, totally aside from the language used by players (Shaker, 2010).

The blogger’s last point resonated with readers who commented on their own experiences with the rhetoric of rape within the community. One commenter explained:

I’m a former WoW player, and when I decided to quit, the rape jokes that my guild continually employed in and out of raids, on vent and on chat, weighed heavily

on my decision ... it is my thought that the reason this cartoon thought a rape joke would be funny is the pervasive use of "rape" among WoW players to mean something other than rape. (Sydera, 2010)

The commenter refers to the tendency of "rape" to be used by gamers as slang for victory over an obstacle or fellow player, part of a shared rhetoric of sexual violence within gaming culture.

Some of the readers offended by the original comic wrote to Penny Arcade's creators, and were met with a response posted 2 days later in the form of a follow-up comic depicting the two creators' alter-egos reprimanding any rapists who might have been inspired by their previous work. Although on its surface the comic appears to be an apology for the insensitivity displayed by their last posting, by situating it within the larger body of Penny Arcade's work it becomes apparent that the comic is making explicitly hostile mockery of the readers' right to be offended. The comic was accompanied by a post on the Penny Arcade blog from "Gabe" entitled "Tragedy is when I cut my finger" that said:

For the most part I think that people are perfectly happy to laugh at offensive jokes until the joke offends them. Then it's not funny anymore. There is no way we can know what each and every person who reads the comic has decided to find offensive. In the end I just disagree with these people about what's funny and that's perfectly okay. (Gabe, 2010b)

This response reframed the argument, suggesting that the only possible protest to the joke was the idea that it encouraged rape, rather than any underlying message of sexual violence or hostility. The sarcasm in the drawn expressions of the characters lends itself to dismissal of the text's apparent condemnation of rapists.

Penny Arcade continued to evoke the controversy by making Dickwolves part of the rhetoric of their comic, integrating the phrase into the graphical representation of generic gamer characters in unrelated storylines including the t-shirt of an achievements-obsessed white male gamer in "The Ultimatum," September 2010. Penny Arcade also addressed the tendency of the Internet to encourage strong reactions, particularly when the speakers are protected by the guise of anonymity. Their comic illustrating "John Gabriel's Greater Internet Fuckwad Theory" is one example of their humor and engagement with gaming culture's tendencies. This comic's summation of the hostility in anonymous Internet discourse offered a prescient foretelling of the behavior of many of Penny Arcade's fans in the wake of the controversy ahead.

In October, the issue re-emerged when Penny Arcade took the mocking of the offended further by outright dismissing the rhetoric of "trigger warnings." Trigger warnings are a common practice within online space to designate material that might invoke reactions or memories for those with post-traumatic stress related to the content at hand. On October 6, 2010 Gabe posted a short message that began "Trigger Warning for attempts to coerce laughter through foul language, Dungeons, Dice rolling, contempt for Hydra's bodily autonomy, Dragons," (Gabe, 2010a).

As trigger warnings are intended to create safely-navigable spaces for survivors of traumas, Gabe's usage of the term could have been seen as parody but demonstrated hostility and mockery akin to the false apology that had previously escalated the conflict. This was further juxtaposed with the announcement of a Dickwolves t-shirt for sale in the Penny Arcade store.

Analysis

The Dickwolves case brought to the forefront the continuing problems of gender discourse within the gaming publics and the renegotiation of gamers' roles. The rise of casual gaming has left some hardcore players alienated, as Juul (2010) addresses: "the traditional hardcore player is worrying that the games he or she enjoys will stop being made. For some players, there is a genuine sense of loss, watching games becoming mainstream and accessible" (p. 151). The association of these casual games with femininity, while hardcore games and technology are intertwined with masculinity, perpetuates the marginalization and invisibility of femininity within gaming culture (Kendall, 2002; Taylor, 2006). Three themes from within the Dickwolves case highlight how this tension of femininity and masculinity the nature of the hardcore video game public has resulted in a hostile discourse for women.

The Good Ol' Boys Club?

Courtney Stanton, a video game project manager and blogger, critiqued the Dickwolves shirt, suggesting that the intention was in part to create an atmosphere of hostility at the upcoming Penny Arcade Expo:

I have to wonder at the creative meeting that spawned the final design—in my mind, it was a 10-second event that consisted of, "maybe we should have the word 'Dickwolves' on it somehow—" and then the fire alarm went off and they had to evacuate the building, never to continue the discussion. Given the hostile attitude Gabe and Tycho have continued to display toward the issue, I can't help but feel like they just want anyone who spoke out to walk into PAX East and be confronted with a wall of "Dickwolves" text at the official merch table. (Stanton, 2010a)

Penny Arcade's problematic theming of the shirts proved symbolic of the complaints throughout the case. The sports-team design reinforced the hypermasculine associations of the Dickwolves by adopting a signifier of athletic masculinity (Taylor, 2012), and given that these imaginary creatures had been introduced as rapists, the shirts seemed to offer an implicit team-spirit endorsement of rape as a joke, if not as an outright action.

Penny Arcade's creation of Dickwolves merchandise shifted the conflict from cyberspace to branded physical space. This heightened a visible sense of "my

team” thinking, particularly showcased when Stanton translated her opinions on the conflict into her own shirt design, pricing the shirt to raise money for charities supporting rape victims. Stanton positioned the shirt’s phoenix imagery as suggesting a rising up for the community brought together by their protest of this rhetoric of rape culture. Visually, comparing the two shirts shows the aesthetic tensions present on both sides of the debate. Because athletics have required legislative action and years of campaigning to create opportunities for both male and female athletes, the evocative sports-logo style of the original Dickwolves t-shirt tapped into another arena dominated by hypermasculinity. The fierce, teeth-baring image of the wolf would not be out of place on a team jersey, and the group identification encourages wearers of the shirts to view others wearing it as allies. In contrast, the Dickwolves Survivor’s Guild t-shirt uses a curved phoenix to suggest resurrection even as it juxtaposes the body of a presumably dead wolf with the ashes required for that rebirth. The use of the word survivor, combined with a logo that more resembles the iconography of a non-profit than a sports team, references a movement against the word “victim” to focus on empowerment and progress.

This explicit labeling of groups within the discourse highlighted the areas where contention existed over control of the “gamer identity” and showed how attempts made to improve the “gamer” image were limited by the inability of members to face serious discussions of systemic issues. In the debate on the comments that followed the announcement of the Dickwolves Survivors Guild T-Shirt, Stanton clarified her expectations of Penny Arcade as:

a comic and community for gamers about games and the game industry—*especially* ever since the PA guys undertook the self-appointed task of trying to improve the public perception of gamers ... and trying to strengthen and broaden the gamer community (creating PAX and PAX East, game conventions that purport to be a place for “all” gamers) ... PA is part of the game community. I am part of the game community. I do not have, and refuse to accept, the expectation that an organization that claims to be for all gamers exists to oppress me, silence me, or discriminate against me. (Stanton, 2010b)

Her critique focused on the power of dominant community figures to silence dissent, furthering the hostility of an already mostly male convention space. Her argument further illuminates the role of Penny Arcade as gatekeepers of the dominant public’s perception and rhetoric, as the representations within Penny Arcade offer an image of “gamers” that remains unchanged despite the widening of the community’s membership. This echoes the experience of women in BlueSky as Kendall (2002) similarly observed that the association of technical skills and prowess with masculinity encourages a rejection of the feminine as nontechnical and irrelevant to digital spaces.

This collision of the discourse of rape as humor with female members of the gaming community echoes in other debates, including the debate over a game called “Tentacles Bento” themed around players taking the role of tentacles rap-

ing schoolgirls to score points. The game was brought to the community-sourced funding site Kickstarter, which ultimately cancelled the campaign when the game's content started to receive negative public attention (Alex, 2012). Penny Arcade's Gabe amplified the signal of the campaign when the creators resurrected it on another platform with a call to action to his team to support the project, which still includes rewards for donations including one level of funding that includes a drawing of one's wife or girlfriend as a card. In doing so, Gabe argued that the project was protected as "free speech," an ironic reminder of the culture's selective view of standards of accepted discourse (Alex, 2012).

The Failure of Safe Spaces

As the donning of group identity symbolized by the t-shirts heightened tensions, both groups used narrative framing to set themselves up as the "good guys" in this fight. The highlighting of flaws regarding gender equality wasn't a call to awareness but instead was the line in the sand which some members of the gaming community felt compelled to defend until total defeat and exile of their "enemies" was accomplished. Due to the strong anti-feminine and anti-feminist undercurrents that were brought to light during the initial comics' sessions, the framing and dominant public's dialogue during this period became overtly hostile. When the Penny Arcade creators removed the Dickwolves from the store, the perception of PAX as a safe space was listed as a concern:

PAX is a different matter though. We want PAX to be a place where everyone feels welcome and we've worked really hard to make that happen. From not allowing booth babes to making sure we have panels that represent all our attendees. When I heard from a few people that the shirt would make them uncomfortable at PAX, that gave me pause. Now whether I think that's a fair or warranted reaction doesn't really matter. These were not rants on blogs but personal mails to me from people being very reasonable. (Gabe, 2011)

The apologetic tone is undermined by the use of the descriptor "rants on blogs" to dismiss the writing of female commentators within the community, characterizing their discourse as unworthy of attention or response while elevating the "personal mails"—those who chose to correspond with him directly rather than disagree with the comic and shirt in public. As one of the arbiters of gaming culture, Gabe's choice to dismiss women's writing as "rants" echoes similar rhetoric used to marginalize women's opinions as irrational. Such wording changes the tone of his apology to conciliatory, reminding the woman audience that their presence—but not their voice—is desirable within the community.

This removal did not take the Dickwolves shirts out of the spotlight, as several fans reiterated their intention to wear their shirts, and PAX East's perception as a safe space was called into question. An analysis of nearly 3000 of the tweets collected using The Archivist during the weekend of PAX East (April 6–8, 2011)

showed the dominance of two accounts representing over a quarter of the activity. Those accounts, “teamrape” and “Dickwolves” directed their attacks against those who voiced any criticism of Penny Arcade. Several participants in the issue went as far as to make threats of rape and violence against those who spoke out. These accounts thus hearkened back to Penny Arcade’s own commentary on the ability of anonymity to enable some of the worst behaviors possible within an online community.

The “teamrape” account called for supporters to wear their Dickwolves shirts to PAX, even suggesting that they should gather in a flash mob. The account called those who were offended “wimps,” tweeting: “@cwgabriel treated ‘rape culture’ wimps w/repsect [sic] it deserved. NONE” and “Celebrate ur freedom of expression with a dickwolves tshirt. Game said ur a vocal MINORITY. Tycho said no conversation is possible” (Teamrape, 2011). The group behind “teamrape” further noted that Gabe would be wearing his Dickwolves t-shirt at the event, thus continuing to give the movement a clear authority figure to rally around and offering his endorsement of an act now embedded with implicit rhetorical hostility. The activists in the Dickwolves protest found themselves assailed with vitriol. One of the most outright violent accounts, Dickwolvington, no longer exists. The account closed following a tweet from Penny Arcade’s writer, Gabe, who asked him to stop. Only an authority figure’s intervention appeared to silence the hostility, reinforcing the rhetoric of privilege.

Framing for a Lack of Common Ground

A continuing challenge for the debaters during the Dickwolves episode was finding a common point of dialogue. Those who supported Dickwolves derailed debate by reframing the issue as one of free speech, as reiterated by the assertions by the Penny Arcade team (Herring, 1999). Yet to cast Penny Arcade’s actions, and those of their supporters, merely as an assertion of free speech ignores the highly unbalanced power dynamics at work and the privilege of the position from which Penny Arcade operates. The exposed public dialogue diminishes the role of women within the discourse, focusing more upon silencing and undermining complaints than in addressing them.

The commonality of rape references in the dialect of gamers is associated with the dominance of hypermasculine rhetoric within the space. In January 2011, an archive emerged dedicated to the hostility of male players to those identified as women. The archive was called “Fat, Ugly or Slutty.” The site creators noted that: “Every message is the same. I’m always either fat and ugly, or a slut” (Fat, Ugly, or Slutty, 2011). The often violent and sexual attacks captured in screenshots and audio recordings on the site are a testament to the female gamer’s experience. Lori Kendall (2002) observed similar problems of discourse in the BlueSky community, as with the reflexive use of the question “Didja spike her?” in conversations among some members discussing women.

Courtney Stanton (2011) addressed this rhetoric of sexual violence when she analyzed trolling comments taken from her posts and revealed a clustering of comments sharing the common root “i hope you get raped,” in one instance with the corollary “by Dickwolves.” This repeated phrase is reminiscent both of the rhetoric experienced by individual gamers posting to “Fat, Ugly or Slutty” and of larger rhetoric of silencing through threats of violence.

Discussion

This rhetoric and silencing of marginalized voices is part of a larger trend in the hardcore gaming public. The digital representations of women and other marginalized figures within the public are rarely rich or complex. This flaw plays out in two ways when the discourse is analyzed during and after polarizing events: the identification and enforcement of strict social roles and the manipulative use of technology.

Women within the hardcore gaming public are given tightly bound roles to play and punished for stepping outside of them (Herring, 1999; Taylor, 2006). As other authors have shown, these roles include the woman as sex object, exemplified by booth babes and services that offer virtual “dates” with attractive girl gamers, and women as invisible, jokingly erased through memes like “There are no women on the Internet” or purposefully through self-sublimation of feminine identifiers (Herring, 1999; Taylor, 2006; Taylor, 2012). The third role for women is that of the enemy. This article examines one incident within the gaming publics which clearly brought forth the framing of woman as enemy. Throughout the Dickwolves incident, women who spoke out were belittled, verbally assaulted, and harassed from many areas within the hardcore gaming public. From the explicit creation of teams to oppose female voices, the reduction or removal of safe spaces for women to participate in the dominant public, and deliberate reframing of discourse to avoid common ground, women, or feminine supporting others, were made to feel ostracized and unwelcome within the bounds of spaces owned by the dominant public.

In a recent opinion piece, Leigh Alexander (2012) examines the resentment towards the “hipster developer” within gaming development. As Alexander states,

[...] this group, accustomed to being marginalized as “geeks,” wants to keep its club pristine [...] They had to develop their own society with its own laws in order to feel safe and empowered. Now here we are in the democratic Internet age, an info-overloaded digital world where anybody and everybody gets access to everything and anything, and the boundaries of a secret world get harder and harder to draw.

When online communities engage in contentious discourse about the shared rhetorical identity, some level of anger, frustration, and bitterness is expected.

Given the expansion of the gaming community beyond traditional hardcore genres (Juul, 2010), it is not surprising that this contention currently centers on defining identity boundaries within the gaming public, particularly as those coded as outsiders appear to be trying to wrest control of those definitions. Within the dominant public this problem is solved by identifying certain “elite” members from within their group who are solely responsible for identity formation, such as Gabe and Tycho of Penny Arcade, whose opinions are policed by the remaining populace. However, problems arise when members of this group support initiatives which continue to destabilize the discussion. Penny Arcade’s development of PAX as a welcoming environment shows that there is an acknowledgement of the community’s flaws as present. This opens the dominant gaming public to many individuals and groups which seek to address the community shortcomings regarding inclusivity and acceptance.

There are still limits upon the ability of expanding dialogue through co-opting members from the dominant public. Underprivileged groups or those that are members of marginalized publics are often the ones which bring to light transgressions but just as often face reprisal, which forces them to be silent or leave the community. It isn’t until a greater number of individuals within the hardcore gaming public begin to address their adoption of a hypermasculine discourse that true progress will occur.

These boundaries act to alienate, separate, and redefine in groups and out groups within gaming. Any community that is built upon commercial success and shared consumerism cannot afford to alienate members of the general audience. Given the expanding range of “gamers” over the last decade, active discussions of the roles of gender between the different gaming publics are needed. As the hardcore gaming identity resists the incursion of casual and female gamers, the larger discourse of gaming publics is still controlled by their rhetoric.

The roots of the hardcore gamer identity are found within the definition of geek masculinity (Taylor, 2012). This definition was itself created in opposition to the glorification of the athlete and with the goal of creating sagas of geek power, such as *Revenge of the Nerds* (Kanew, 1984). For a long time, geeks’ mastery of social media enabled them to form and control their own gaming publics. This mastery and technology helped them to turn their isolation into a powerful social network.

These same technologies that appear to offer spaces for shared discourse can just as easily be used for the suppression of political views, and thus can further alienate women. Even if many women avoided PAX, some reminders of the need for change remained. These included a project out of the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab which was brought to PAX with a “Hate Speech” video inspired in part by the Dickwolves conflict. The experiment invited participants to create a gaming handle such as “PROUD_2B_MUSLIM” or another clearly minority-coded name and play in an online game. This allowed players to experience firsthand the hate speech that those identities could arouse (Tan, 2011).

Technology use within the publics complicates the dialogue, creating tensions between competing views of a communal identity. The low cost, ephemeral nature allows for the manipulation of sock puppetry, creating empty accounts which echo

one's point of view. These types of actions not only make apparent support for an idea within the community seem much larger, but also may sway individuals who are unsure of their stance but fear speaking out. At the same time, it allows for public acts to be captured and displayed for the hateful messages they espouse. Without the technological mediation, these acts would often come down to episodes of "he said, she said" which results in the public dismissal of minority groups claims in favor of supporting privilege.

However, the dominant rhetoric of privilege even in apparently open social platforms must be taken into account when change is called for—projects that ask players to see past their privilege, or games that evoke nuanced representatives of marginalized groups, are still vastly outnumbered. The hypermasculine discourse deflects any attempts at transformation, leaping to its own defense in the face of any protest against its rhetoric.

Conclusion

As the Dickwolves case shows, the white male "gamer" identity is under contention at the boundaries of the gaming public and marginalized communities. As boundaries blur, flaws within the supporting structure of the hardcore gaming identity become points of contention around which community members seeking affirmation of their place within the "secret world" rally (Alexander, 2012; Juul, 2010). Increasing presence of female gamers is met at the contentious boundary by pushing femininity to the outskirts of gaming spaces, thus reaffirming the role of the masculine with hardcore gamer identity. The hostile response to increasing femininity within the identity becomes understandable, if not desirable. Female gamers, by their very participation within the public of gaming, act to transgress their traditionally coded roles and interests. The perceived transgressions are met with hostility from those invested in the hypermasculine identity and its dominance of the space.

As Kendall (2002) and Taylor (2012) note, mastery of technology is coded as a masculine trait within these publics. Video games have caught the attention of researchers and remain a potent tool within STEM education and training. However, participating in the dominant hypermasculine public remains a difficult and potentially harmful and isolating action for women and other minority groups. As long as the discourse of games and technology remains masculine-coded, the silencing of women and invisibility of women in these parallel publics is unsurprising.

The gaming publics remain a contentious area where identity, as viewed from the outside, is continually negotiated and bounded by the many groups which participate within the technological space. While some work has examined the relationships of the gaming "texts" to their narrative and cultural messages, more work connecting the broader discourse of these publics is required. In particular, the co-creative relationship of the publics' dynamics and discourse and the texts themselves should be probed.

While this work seeks to examine and address issues of inclusiveness within the broader gaming public it is based upon only one of many instances of an explicit gendered argument within the community. More research is needed to better understand the construction of gaming publics and its identity as new technologies of community offer the illusive promise of free platforms without enabling truly shared spaces for discourse.

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