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INTERSECTIONS OF PLAY AT THE MARGINS: EXPERIENCES ACROSS GENDER, TEHNICITY AND SEXUALITY IN GAME CULTURE

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Digital gaming, and the physical and virtual spaces formed around its play and engagement, has long been seen as male-dominated and marginalizing, especially for females. Most research that explores issues of equity and play is focuses on gendered imbalances. This line of research, which has spanned the past 30 years, was prompted by concerns that game-based subject matter wouldn't be of interest to females, and their lack of access would lead to differential experience and confidence to pursue and engage with skills and competencies that computers and digital games fostered (e.g., Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Kafai, Heeter, Denner & Sun, 2008; Searle & Kafai, 2009). However, some researchers criticized this line of research for stereotyping gender preferences (e.g., Carr, 2005; Dickey, 2006). Contemporary work is also demonstrating that females and males enjoy more things in common when it comes to gaming despite gender (Lazzaro, 2008; Yee, 2008). Overall, "physical and social barriers to entry for women become misrepresented as a lack of desire to play video games" (Yee, 2008: 86). In other words, and as emerging research continues to point out, gendered access and experience are increasingly being shown as more significant when it comes to differential use of digital games (e.g., Jensen & deCastell, 2011).

Despite the long line of research on gendered experience, there is relatively little written about its intersections with race, ethnicity (Kafai, Cook & Fields, 2010) and sexuality (Sunden & Sveningsson, 2012). Emerging research on ethnic minorities and gaming efficacy is finding that certain minority groups are less likely to have access to high-tech gaming and computer equipment than Whites, which limits the kinds of technology literacies they can engage in (Disalvo & Bruckman, 2010; DiSalvo, Yardi, Guzdial, McKlin, Meadows, Perry & Bruckman, 2011). In addition, research on ethnic minority experiences in game culture is finding that their play experiences are often colored by ethnic harassment and marginalization (Gray, 2012; Nakamura, 2009; Richard, 2012), often across gender (Gray, 2012; Richard, 2012; Richard, 2013); specifically, ethnic minorities cite linguistic profiling, or being targeted by the way they speak (Gray, 2012), and discrimination based on their play styles (Nakamura, 2009).

Furthermore, little has been studied regarding male experiences in game culture (Searle & Kafai, 2009). Focusing on gender difference tends to privilege masculinity as the

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“norm” and everything else as the alternative (Dickey, 2006), which is partly to explain why the focus on gender tends to focus on female experiences. However, scholars have found gaming spaces to be places where males can try out different masculinities (Jenkins, 1998; Searle & Kafai, 2009), “dominance bond” (Kimmel, 2008) or “perform” masculinity, as it has been culturally defined, through violence and competition (Burrill, 2008). While this creates a unique space for masculine gender expression, it may also be creating a space of exclusion for those that may threaten that expression (Kimmel, 2008).

Despite notable emerging work on experiences across race, ethnicity and sexuality (e.g., Gray, 2012; Richard, 2013; Shaw, 2012; Sunden & Sveningsson, 2012), there is still a lack of understanding of the nuance in marginalized play, particularly across intersecting sociocultural experiences, in part because different groups’ experiences are assessed separately and juxtaposed to the experiences of the dominant group (in this case, white male players). This paper will detail survey and interview data of gamers across gender, ethnicity and sexuality to highlight where identity and play experiences intersect and diverge. It will discuss the ways that players experience support and unsupport within the greater gaming space, and within supportive communities built around identity characteristics (i.e., female-supportive communities).

In particular, the paper will discuss how gender and ethnic signifiers play similar and different roles in shaping play, as well as the tenuous role of negotiating homophobic norms in game space. For example, gender has become an increasingly easy to target identifier, in part due to the rise in voice-based player communication and in part due to the greater propensity in which gender has been a point of discussion and focus, whereas race and sexuality are somewhat more difficult to pinpoint. However, LGBT gamers are often frustrated by the homophobia and heteronormative nature of gamer lingo, which often frames homosexuality in negative terms (such as “gay” being used as a term for incompetence or stupidity in game play). Furthermore, LGBT gamers that don’t fall into the gender binary – particularly trans-gamers – find that supportive communities, often framed to provide support from gender harassment, aren’t always accepting of their gender. Moreover, since most of the social understanding of marginalization in game culture has focused on gender, racial and ethnic sidelining and harassment is less discussed and explored. Gamers across race and ethnicity have similar and diverging experiences of harassment and vitriol, which can be derived from “linguistic profiling” (Gray, 2012) and other tactics (such as looking up one’s ethnicity in their profile or avatar). However, survey and qualitative data shows that, in most instances, gender and race/ethnicity are related to sense of ability, investment and persistence in gaming, with females and racial/ethnic minorities more vulnerable to experiencing performance drops and lack of identification.

Based on the research and related literature in similar domains, I will offer suggestions for understanding the complexity of intersectional experiences in game culture in the interest of creating a more inclusive and multifaceted space across the multiple identities that define our experiences.

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