A lived and living UK gaming oral history:

untangling narratives of resistance and resurgence in videogame space

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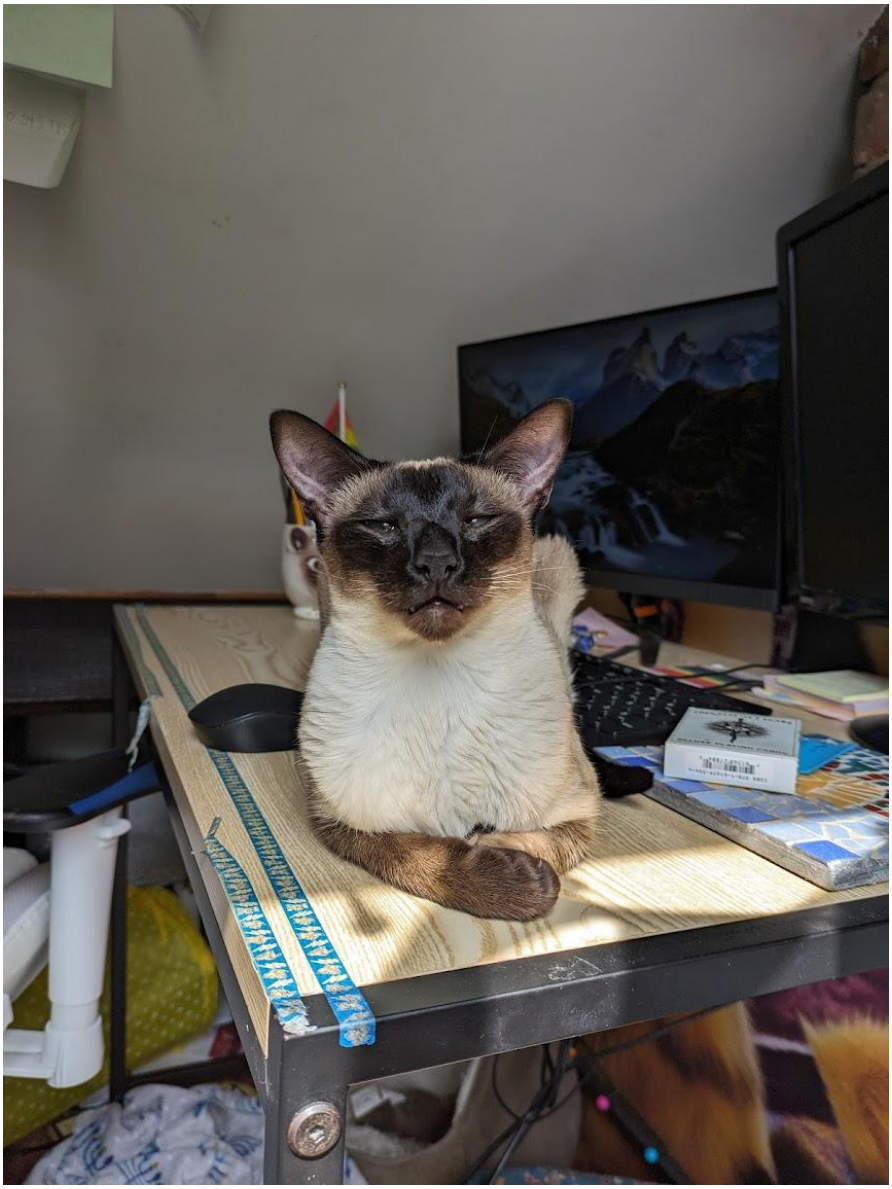
Content Warning: Mentions (but no graphic discussion) of Racism, Homophobia, Misogyny, Ableism, Antisemitism, Threats of sexual violence, Mass shootings, Online harassment and abuse, Death (including child death), Cancer, White Supremacy and adjacent belief systems. Depictions of racist and misogynistic imagery (drawn, not photographs) in Chapter 3.

Dedication

This piece of research is dedicated to Gadget (2021-2024), who sat with me through most of my work – and made sure I never felt alone.



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Abstract

This thesis critically examines gaming subjectivities, games culture, and ideologies that circulate within videogames and their communities. Via a series of oral history interviews, and with an emphasis on a person-centred approach, this research scrutinises the bleed between gaming culture and far-right belief systems, evidenced by issues like identity policing and online harassment. However, rather than focusing on the extreme edges of games culture, which movements of organised harassment like Gamergate made overt, this work considers the gaming mainstream and the experiences of ostensibly "normal" people within gaming; what they think, and how they feel, about videogames, gamer identity and games culture.

As well as examining challenges games culture faces, this work considers how we can resist resurgent discourses within game space. Through a feminist, queer point of view – that is grounded in the thesis' theoretical approach – this research seeks to not only understand the ideological knots and contradictions that far-right discourses operate through in gaming, but how we might begin to untangle them. This untangling is facilitated by an overarching concern and implementation of affect as a theoretical and analytical framework; emphasising the importance of how videogames make people feel. Part of this emphasis is framing gamer as an "affective" identity. In other words, gamer identity as made, maintained and disturbed through feeling and emotion.

I am concerned with how videogames are meaningful to the interview participants here, players in gaming communities, players *outside of* gaming communities, and the stereotypical gamer. Examining this meaningfulness requires understanding how we relate to gaming histories, as well as how we think about gaming in the present, which has implications, in turn, for how we do or do not connect with gamer identity. What is at stake in conversations about videogames and gaming culture, the stories, opinions and thoughts that interview participants articulated, is often more than just videogames; it is about access to spaces, belonging to a community, how we perceive our own identity, and our ability to play and have fun. Ultimately, this research is about people in gaming spaces, and how videogames are meaningful to them in ways that are inherently subjective and personal. This subjectivity is reflected in the research's interview-led approach. This thesis contends with what is difficult about videogame culture but is also concerned with the people who exist within and move through it, and how they feel about videogames, and why this matters.

Introduction

Through close readings of oral history interviews about lived and living gaming experiences and gaming life stories, this thesis seeks to intimately examine how videogames matter. Looking at gaming subjectivities, in particular the identity of "gamer", this research will scrutinise how we position ourselves and others in gaming space(s), and in relation to gaming histories. The "mattering" of this research is emphasised by the 10-year anniversary of Gamergate in 2024, an event which haunts gaming narratives and discourse (whether we talk about it or not) yet epitomises challenges gaming has faced since the 1980s and we can trace into the present day.

This thesis is invested in how videogames are meaningful, to my interview participants, to myself, and to players more broadly. This meaningfulness is grounded in two ways. Firstly, because videogames simply mattered *so much* to interview participants; whose lives were defined, enriched, and permanently changed through play, and gaming culture, even if sometimes only in small, subtle ways. Secondly, this project is meaningful through its engagement with gaming culture's insidious intersection with far-right beliefs, and how they interact with and through gaming discourse and spaces. When I write "discourse" I am referring to how participants talk about gaming culture; experiences, ideas, stories and concepts that have implications for how they understand gaming culture/space. As Hawreliak and Lemieux argue, when articulating an approach to examining social justice issues in gaming, "social justice inevitably becomes part of both individual play experiences, and the broader discourses surrounding games and gaming culture."[1] This project is invested in the latter, and in line with Hawreliak and Lemieux's concern surrounding "broader discourse", this work considers mainstream gaming culture; the interviews having been conducted with participants from ostensibly "normal" gaming spaces, who were not overtly far-right or intentionally espousing Gamergate-related views. In fact, many expressed concerns about issues like representation, harassment, and accessibility in gaming spaces.

The mattering of this research, its concern with people, players, and personal stories, determined not only the primary methodological approach of the

[1] Jason Hawreliak and Amélie Lemieux, 'The semiotics of social justice: a multimodal approach to examining social justice issues in videogames', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 41, no. 5 (2020): 728.

research but the structure and broader argument of the thesis. This thesis is foremost led by interview participant data generated from twelve oral history interviews.[2] The thesis was, as ethnographer Karen O'Reily advocates for, "replanned and redesigned" as it developed in line with a reflexive research approach that actively, and repeatedly, engaged the interview data.[3] In addition to reflexively engaging with oral history data throughout the research process, this thesis' overall themes and approach hold great importance for core texts and ideas from game studies – as well as being deeply informed by them in turn. In the next subsection, I will address core principles and research from game studies in more detail.

Whilst this thesis contributes to gaps and emerging fields within game studies – for example: gathering gaming oral histories, bringing queer theoretical approaches to issues like the far-right in gaming – it is primarily led by interview data. What participants did, and did not, talk about determined topics of chapters, the direction of analysis and the overall thesis argument.[4] For example, participants often mentioned fun when asked to explain what "gamer" meant to them, which generated *Chapter 2: Gamer as Affect*; a chapter which considers gamer identity through an affective lens. Across the interviews, Resistant and Resurgent discourses emerged in the interview data (in *Thesis Structure* I will explain these terms), over and over, like waves crashing into one another. The main body of thesis analysis is split into two parts "Resurgence" and "Resistance" to reflect the constant, cyclical and even sometimes contradictory ways interview participants would address the same issues, such as gamer identity.

To begin the first analytical subsection, this thesis closely examines resurgent ideas in videogame spaces. *Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer,* primarily led by archival objects, historically traces the production of gamer identity by analysing objects from the National Videogame Museum's (NVM) archive that are deemed inappropriate for display, contrasting them against objects on display in its gallery. *Chapter 4: A Certain Kind of Gamer*, the second half of "Resurgence", looks at the myth of the boy in the basement – which many interview participants brought up unprompted – and the narratives which are attached to him. The second half of the thesis, "Resistance," focuses on interview participant's words and ideas which work to challenge the issues uncovered in "Resurgence" – for example, the white male hegemony in gaming which the boy in the basement feels entitled to. *Chapter 5: Gamer Counter-spaces* focuses on interview participants who talk about how they manage and negotiate physical gaming spaces with issues like inclusivity in mind; using my Collaborative Doctoral Award project partner the NVM as a case study. *Chapter*

[2] Karen O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods* (Routledge, 2004), 43; Patricia Leavy, *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research* (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2011), 8.
[3] O'Reilly, 43.
[4] O'Reilly, 154.

6: A Gamer Apocalypse looks at resistant possibilities in how interview participants articulated endings. Originally stemming from interview analysis looking at the resistant play practices, (e.g. quitting a game early), I realised almost all participant responses were about endings and death. Finally, I conclude the thesis by contending with the paradoxical nature of the resistant/resurgent tension that emerged across interviews; stressing the importance of embracing the discomfort in the imperfect project that is resistance. Oral history interviews themselves and their inherent subjective qualities mean that this work is producing new ideas, and new value, that speaks to existing literature. By allowing the interviews to so strongly inform the thesis; the personal, people-centred meaningfulness of gaming remained integral throughout.

The timing of this research, its finishing year being the 10-year anniversary of Gamergate brought additional importance. However, while grounded in concerns about Gamergate and far-right radicalisation, this thesis is about more than Gamergate; the possibilities that stretch before, and beyond it. It is about how gamer identity does and does not work; how negotiating the limits of such identity borders is often about negotiating the limits of hegemony and access in game culture. It is about gameplay; how play makes players, gamers, people in gaming spaces feel, how the ability to perform it (gameplay) can be wrapped up in wider performances – ones that have implications for prowess, belonging, and gender – and how sometimes the absence of play, not being able to play or walking away from a game, is just as important as the act of play itself. It is about gaming space, not just the virtual worlds play affords entry to, but the physical spaces that exist in relation to gaming – cafés, theatres, museums – and the bodies that move through them. And finally, I am concerned with endings; how games end, how those endings make players feel, and how they respond to them. This reframing of endings, or *the end*, will reveal queer possibilities of confronting the problem that the intersection that the far-right and gaming manifests.

Relationship to wider research

To set groundwork for the thesis, I will first consider wider research it is informed by and builds upon. I should note that throughout the thesis, at the beginning of each chapter, I engage with relevant scholarship and frameworks in more depth. This structure reflects the project's interview-led approach. The project's interview design, whilst building on existing interview-led Game Studies research (which I extrapolate below), addressed a lack of life stories in Game Studies. In other words, the interviews were designed to capture

participants' gaming life stories; their experiences and thoughts about videogames throughout their life and into the present. This is why I refer to the interviews as "oral history" interviews specifically, as capturing life stories is integral to oral history practice.[5] The timing of this research also meant the interviews would inherently capture a post-Gamergate experience of videogames and gaming culture which, as I will argue, is vital contextualisation for understanding the ways interview participants relate to gaming culture.

The nature of the oral history interviews – interviewing people who have a relationship to gaming beyond play alone and spend a lot of either/and their leisure/work time in gaming spaces, in the UK – is original gaming research that was greatly informed by other interview-led game studies researchers such as Helen Thornham and Adrienne Shaw. Gathering gaming life stories from people across different gaming spaces in the UK contributes to the growing fields of ethnographic, autoethnographic and more broadly interview-led research within game studies. However, beyond methodological approach, this thesis holds relevance for work concerned with gaming subjectivities, gamer identity and ideological discourses within gaming.

This research contributes to existing work on digital subjectivities in relation to videogames. Rob Gallagher is a scholar whose work is concerned with digital cultures, online communities, and interactive media. Especially relevant here, is his work *Videogames, Identity and Digital Subjectivity*, which examines gamer identity through close readings of videogames, considering the importance of spatiality, temporality and the way(s) gaming systems can relate to working/capitalist realities. When discussing how gaming culture is diverse yet fragmented, he writes:

> Today it would be absurd and inaccurate to claim that all gamers are men, misogynists, addicts, adolescents or hermits. But it would be equally absurd to deny that, whatever individual gamers might feel about it, triple A videogaming in particular remains a bastion of hegemonic white heteromasculinity.[6]

This negotiation of mythos and reality is especially relevant to the trope of the boy of the basement, which I unpack in *Chapter 4*, but holds relevance for the theoretical underpinning of the whole thesis; how discourse, the stories we tell about gaming, relate to, and resist, gaming realities. This project complements the work of Gallagher by examining similar fields – gamer identity, digital subjectivities – through a different methodology: focusing on people versus videogames, with analysis led by interview data. Gamer identity itself is a huge

[5] Leavy, *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research*, 10.
[6] Robert A Gallagher, *Videogames, Identity, and Digital Subjectivity* (Routledge, 2017), 9.

field of research, the focus often being its gendered dimensions.[7] Other especially relevant work regarding gamer identity comes from Adrienne Shaw, a game studies scholar, whose research interests include queerness, identity, and representation.

Shaw has highlighted the tension between gamer identity as individually expressed or adopted, and the market-constructed gamer the industry perpetuates; within this framing, identifying as a gamer cannot be an apolitical act. She writes: "being a gamer is defined in relation to dominant discourses about who plays games."[8] In earlier work, Shaw has argued we must be cognisant of the difference between people who identify and who *counts* as a gamer too, stressing gamer identity cannot escape the wider discourses it operates through.[9] However, Shaw's most relevant work here is *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the margins of gamer culture*, where she explores how marginalised players identify with videogames and by extension gamer identity through a series of interviews. One of her core arguments is that identification is a complex, messy process, partly because gamer itself is not a "stable category."[10] This messiness is especially relevant to *Chapter 2: Gamer as Affect*, where I consider the wider implications of the incongruous ways interview participants define the term "gamer".

Another scholar who foregrounded interview-based, ethnographic, game studies research is Helen Thornham. Her work, *Ethnographies of the Videogame: gender, narrative and praxis*, combines interview data with ethnographic research in a domestic context. She determines that gaming is a "gendered, corporeal and embodied activity", that is incredibly social despite its isolated, loner associations; this sociality a part of why gendered power dynamics are key to understanding gameplay and how we experience games.[11]

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[7] Bertan Buyukozturk, 'Gendering Identity Talk: Gamers' Gendered Constructions of Gamer Identity', *Sociological Focus* 55, no. 2 (3 April 2022): 173-90; Rebecca Davnall, 'What Does the Gamer Do?', *Ethics and Information Technology* 23, no. 3 (1 September 2021): 225-37; Jeffrey A. Stone, 'Self-Identification as a "Gamer" among College Students: Influencing Factors and Perceived Characteristics', *New Media & Society* 21, no. 11–12 (1 November 2019): 2607-27; Benjamin Woo, 'Nerds, Geeks, Gamers, and Fans: Doing Subculture on the Edge of the Mainstream', in *The Borders of Subculture: Resistance and the Mainstream*, 1st ed., ed. Alexander Dhoest, Steven Malliet, Jacques Haers, and Barbara Segaert, 17-36 (Routledge, 2015); Benjamin Paaßen, Thekla Morgenroth, and Michelle Stratemeyer, 'What Is a True Gamer? The Male Gamer Stereotype and the Marginalization of Women in Video Game Culture', *Sex Roles* 76, no. 7 (1 April 2017): 421-35.

[8] Adrienne Shaw, 'On Not Becoming Gamers: Moving Beyond the Constructed Audience', *A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 2 (2013), https://doi.org/doi:10.7264/N33N21B3.

[9] Adrienne Shaw, 'Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity', *New Media & Society* 14, no. 1 (2011): 29.

[10] Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 151.

[11] Helen Thornham, *Ethnographies of the Videogame: Gender, Narrative and Praxis* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 1–16. Quote on page 1.

Aligned with my own approach, Thornham stresses the importance of the person involved with the act of play, as well as videogames themselves.[12] Only one chapter in this thesis – *Chapter 6: A Gamer Apocalypse* – will feature consistent, close-readings of videogames. And even then, said analysis is led by interview data. Thornham's emphasis on gaming's gendered, interpersonal operation is relevant to the thesis' concerns about the construction, and performance, of gamer identity and its implications for digital masculinities more broadly. This thesis is greatly informed by, and contributes to, the wider field of game research led by interviews; which both Thornham and Shaw have heralded.

Considerable work around digital masculinities and gaming is concerned with Gamergate and Gamergate-adjacent issues. For example, Bridget Blodgett and Anastasia Salter are scholars concerned with digital spaces and social impact, having produced a number of co-authored pieces of research.[13] One of their works looks at the reaction to the all-female-cast *Ghostbusters* trailer and how the YouTube comment section became a source of connection, and recruitment, between Gamergate reactionaries and explicitly alt-right figures/community.[14] They stress the importance of the gamer narrative Gamergate sought to construct, which started with being bulled in high school, videogaming providing solace from this, finding community with other gamers and then "along comes the invasion of politics and social justice warriors."[15] Which Gamergate itself was a reaction to. The importance of a gamer's narrative emerged consistently in the interview data, as participants relayed stories surrounding the stereotypical gamer archetype; for example, they are a vocal minority, or upset by women in games. Another key group of scholars is Nicholas Taylor, Katreena Adler and Gerald Voorhees. Taylor is interested in serious leisure cultures and has conducted work surrounding gaming cultures, masculinities, and play.[16] Voorhees, a scholar whose interests lie with games and media as sites of identity construction/contestation, has also paid a lot of attention to gendered research within gaming – co-authoring *Masculinities in Play* alongside Taylor.[17] And Adler's research is based in communication, rhetoric, and digital media. Her co-authored work with Taylor, a DiGRA piece:

[12] Thornham, 8.
[13] Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, 'Hypermasculinity & Dickwolves: The Contentious Role of Women in the New Gaming Public', *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 56, no. 3 (2012): 401-16; Bridget Blodgett and Anastasia Salter, 'Ghostbusters Is For Boys: Understanding Geek Masculinity's Role in the Alt-Right', *Communication, Culture & Critique* 11, no. 1 (2018): 133–46; Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing* (Springer, 2017).
[14] Bridget Blodgett and Anastasia Salter, 'Ghostbusters Is For Boys: Understanding Geek Masculinity's Role in the Alt-Right.'
[15] Blodgett and Salter, 137.
[16] Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees, *Masculinities in Play* (Springer International Publishing AG, 2018).
[17] Taylor and Voorhees, *Masculinities in Play*.

"Man Caves and the Fantasy of Homosocial Escape," is especially important in *Chapter 4: A Certain Kind of Gamer: The boy in the basement*, where I adapt their analysis around the man cave to unpack how the basement facilitates a materialistic isolation. They emphasise the importance of *stuff* in the man cave; how said "stuff" (videogames) allows the gamer to prolong his boyhood, escaping the gendered labour of the home and encountering women "only through digital media."[18] Taylor and Adler's stressing of materiality will be especially relevant when paralleling the boy's basement with a prepper's bunker: somewhere to escape the end of the world.

This thesis will contribute to broader work surrounding Gamergate, and gaming's relationship with radicalisation and the far-right online, by addressing problems that are incredibly relevant to said phenomena. For example, gamer identity, which will be a key focus of this thesis; how participants articulate their own gamer identity, what the word gamer means to them, and the stories they associate with it. Another important way this thesis will contribute to such a project is its emphasis on a feminist, queer approach. The values this research operates through are demonstrated readily by game scholars such as Bo Ruberg and Aubrey Anable. Ruberg is a prominent researcher in the field of queer game studies, and in a piece co-authored with Amanda Phillips looking at queer resistance and games, in particular scrutinising the role and responsibility of game scholarship, they write:

> Video games offer opportunities for resistance. At the same time, it is crucial to resist games themselves, at least as we know them today: the ways they have been traditionally imagined, the communities they have commonly hailed, the problematic politics and values they often embody.[19]

I strive to bring this critical lens to my analysis here, to question and scrutinise games culture as it emerged in the interview data. Ruberg's wider works will be especially relevant in *Chapter 2: Gamer as Affect: Activation and alignment through the lens of fun,* when I try to prise out the wider implications of fun, and *Chapter 6: A Gamer Apocalypse: Resistant narratives in how we end things*, where I find power and possibility in the paradoxical, no-win scenarios Gamergate dogmas can entrap us within. Despite not exclusively interviewing queer participants, or being about queer games, this thesis is a queer project in that it is vitally invested in the project of queer resistance that Ruberg and

[18] Nicholas Taylor and Katreena Adler, 'Man Caves and the Fantasy of Homosocial Escape', *Proceedings of DiGRA 2018 Conference: The Game is the Message* (2008): 2.
[19] Bo Ruberg and Amanda Philips, 'Special Issue -- Queerness and Video Games Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games (Introduction)', *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (December 2018), https://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg.

Phillips advocate for: "Queer game studies is tied to politics, both within games and on a national level, as well as the work of political resistance."[20]

Aubrey Anable, a feminist scholar whose relevant work here, is interested in gaming and affect and stresses the importance of understanding videogames as "affective systems."[21] This not only holds special importance for *Chapter 2*, and its work defining gamer through affect, but for the approach of the whole thesis, which is concerned with how gaming, both videogames and games culture, makes us feel. Anable, when articulating the relation between bodies, screens and interfaces, writes they are "crucial sites of touch and entanglement, where representation still matters and representation is *matter*" (her emphasis).[22] Even in virtual spaces, Anable stresses the importance of materiality; that the mattering of what is represented on screen is partly a literal *matter*, a physical thing or something with corporeal implications. She goes on to connect the materiality of the digital to the materiality of affect, and how it manifests itself in objects and bodies, especially in how they are meaningfully gendered.[23] The relevance of Anable's approach is twofold; to understand videogames as affective systems – and gamer identity through an affective lens by extension – and to apply this understanding with an emphasis on materiality. I am not just invested in emotion, how videogames make us feel, but how affect impacts the bodies that exist within gaming spaces. In *Chapter 1*: *Theory*, I will address what I mean by affect, emotion and feeling as relational, but different, terms. This research contributes to wider work, like Anable's, which connects affect and videogames through its emphasis on feelings and emotion. This approach is guided primarily by feminist and affect scholar Sara Ahmed, whose theoretical framework will be laid out in *Chapter 1: Research Methods*.

Another core game studies text this work builds upon is Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck: the future of narrative in cyberspace*, which sits at an intersection between literature, media, and communication studies. Originally published in 1997, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* was a groundbreaking piece that interrogated the possibilities of virtual spaces and interactive narratives, speculating about the trajectories of such technologies – much of which Murray correctly predicted. Two arguments Murray makes are especially relevant. Firstly, in her 2016 edition of the text, where she builds upon her previous ideas surrounding immersion, she writes: "Despite their seductive hold on us, immersive experiences are paradoxically fragile and easily disrupted."[24] This

[20] Ruberg and Philips.
[21] Aubrey Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), xii.
[22] Anable, 46.
[23] Anable, 100.
[24] Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (MIT Press, 2017), 120.

idea of paradoxical fragility will emerge a lot throughout the thesis, not to do with immersive play experiences specifically, but in the affective possibilities this project is interested in (which includes immersive play). I extend the idea of paradoxical fragility to the ways in which gamer identity is constructed and undone (*Chapter 2: Gamer as Affect*), and this has implications for the ways in which the boy in the basement feels protective about his identity (*Chapter 4: A Certain Kind of Gamer*). Secondly, Murray writes about electronic closure and how we contend with endings: "The refusal of closure is always, at some level, a refusal to face mortality. Our fixation on electronic games and stories is in part an enactment of this denial of death."[25] Murray points out that games, especially ones that let us restart, replay, or reload, can perpetuate this denial; facilitating fantastical worlds in which death is without consequence. In *Chapter 6: A Gamer Apocalypse*, I consider how games allow us to explore, enact, and sometimes demand, closure from us. How we deal with death in videogames, and the ways we respond to endings, could inform how we deal with other things that are difficult in game space; difficulties that an event like Gamergate brought to the forefront. The idea of refusing closure will be important when considering the boy in the basement too (*Chapter 4*), and how his basement can be understood as a prepper's bunker; perpetuating his denial, whilst consolidating his interactions with "electronic games." But before we can understand the boy in the basement, we first must understand the event that caused him to bunker away - his gaming apocalypse. To provide context for future analysis, and a baseline understanding for those unfamiliar, I will now briefly summarise Gamergate.

Gamergate: A brief summary

Whilst this thesis is concerned with issues before and beyond the moment that was Gamergate, Gamergate is still emblematic of the wider challenges this thesis is concerned with: gamer identity, policing the bodily and digital borders of game space, how videogames make us feel and why this matters. This summary is not a comprehensive breakdown of Gamergate in its entirety but covers key issues and incidents.

Gamergate was one of the largest online hate campaigns and mobilisations of harassment ever in internet history, at least in such an organised form. It was, as feminist cultural and media studies scholar Andrea Braithwaite writes, "an articulation of technology, privilege, and power."[26] Gamergate was essentially

[25] Murray, 163.

[26] Andrea Braithwaite, 'It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity', *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 4 (2016): 1.

this: an online harassment campaign aimed at women, and people perceived as women, who worked in and around videogames. This abuse was not new, as the terrible harassment Bioware writer Jennfier Hepler had faced a year earlier in 2013 demonstrated, but took on a more organised, persistent form.[27] Whilst "ostensibly dedicated to reforming ethics in video games journalism […] in practice, it [Gamergate] is characterized by viciously sexual and sexist attacks on women in and around gaming communities [sic]."[28]

In 2014, Zoë Quinn, game developer and writer, released their interactive story game *Depression Quest* (2013) on Steam, one of the largest online videogame libraries, meaning it was suddenly brought to a much bigger audience.[29] *Depression Quest* received some initial derision for being a story-based game, and for its subject matter, but it faced a far more intense wave of criticism when Quinn's ex-boyfriend, Eron Gjoni, posted a malicious rant on Penny Arcade's Something Awful Forum on August 15th, 2014. This rant posited several accusations against Quinn, including accusing them of sleeping with a game journalist for a good review of *Depression Quest*. Despite Gjoni's rant being taken down, it quickly moved onto other websites, including a WordPress Gjoni made himself, 4Chan, Reddit and 8Chan; the latter three all key organisational hubs for the Gamergate movement to come.

This sparked a sexual harassment campaign directed at Quinn, originally under the name "Quinnspiracy." Many online actors were already involved at this point, including content creators, game journalists, game developers and online gaming news sites such as *Polygon* and *Kotaku*.[30] On August 27th, actor known for his political conservatism, Adam Baldwin would coin the term #Gamergate in a tweet referencing several of Internet Aristocrat's videos, an online content creator who had posted videos reacting to events surrounding Gamergate.[31] Milo Yiannopoulos would later go on to popularise #Gamergate as a term on Breitbart, a far-right news website, in September.[32] Yiannopoulos is a far-right political commentator, who has made a career out of being overtly anti-feminist, homophobic, and racist, aligning himself comfortably with right-wing reactionary groups, including those with neo-Nazi beliefs, despite being Jewish and queer. Yiannopoulos and other people at Breitbart, including Steve Bannon,

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[27] Brian Crecente, "From Dragon Age to Games that Foster Behavioral Change," *Polygon*, 27th July, 2016. https://www.polygon.com/2016/6/27/12039582/dragon-age-hepler-talk-bullying.
[28] Braithwaite, 'It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity', 1.
[29] Samuel Greengard, "Gamergate: online harassment campaign," *Britannica*, 14th March, 2024. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gamergate-campaign.
[30] For example: Christopher Grant, "On GamerGate: A letter from the editor," *Polygon*, 17th October 2014. https://www.polygon.com/2014/10/17/6996601/on-gamergate-a-letter-from-the-editor.
[31] Andy Baoi, "72 Hours of #Gamergate," *Medium*, 27th October, 2014. https://medium.com/message/72-hours-of-gamergate-e00513f7cf5d.
[32] Blodgett and Salter, 'Ghostbusters Is For Boys: Understanding Geek Masculinity's Role in the Alt-Right', 134.

would capitalise on Gamergate as an opportunity for alt-right recruitment, as well as advancing their own careers.[33]

When "Quinnspiracy" became #Gamergate more people were explicitly targeted, including Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist media critic who also does activism and charity work tackling harassment, and gendered bias, in gaming culture. Sarkeesian had received vitriol already over her YouTube series *Tropes Vs. Women in Video Games*; she released an instalment of this series on the 25th August, 2014: "Women as Background Decoration: Part 2."[34] Brianna Wu, a game developer whose career has also dabbled in American politics, would receive a significant quantity of harassment too. All three people, Quin, Sarkeesian, and Wu, would receive terrible online abuse; including rape threats, death threats, and doxing (having addresses and personal details leaked). Sarkeesian had even experienced gamified abuse before Gamergate, in the form of a "Beat up Anita Sarkeesian" game in 2012.[35] At several points during Gamergate, and beyond it, Quinn, Sarkeesian, and Wu would all be forced to leave their homes for fear of their own, and their families', safety. Despite mostly occurring in online spaces, Gamergate evidently had material impact on those being harassed; seriously affecting their lives.

The harassment they faced was, at least in part, intentionally co-ordinated on sites like 8Chan. Gamergaters would claim that the movement was misrepresented, not actually about harassing women but about "ethics in game journalism."[36] Anxieties around journalism were exacerbated by a series of articles that came out around this time, calling into question gamer identity and/or the state of gaming culture, which were springboarded by Leigh Alexander's piece "'Gamers' don't have to be your audience. 'Gamers' are over."[37] However, the degree of harassment undermined the legitimacy of any Gamergater's claims about their true intentions. Harassment continued well into 2015, and worked to normalise issues in gaming which we can still find in gaming present, e.g. the prevalence of harassment towards female game

[33] Kristin M. S. Bezio, 'Ctrl-Alt-Del: GamerGate as a Precursor to the Rise of the Alt-Right', *Leadership* 14, no. 5 (2018): 556–66.

[34] Feminist Frequency, "Women as Background Decoration: Part 2 – Tropes vs Women in Video Games," *YouTube*, 25th August, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5i_RPr9DwMA.

[35] Sarah O'Meara, "Internet Trolls Up Their Harassment Game With 'Beat Up Antia Sarkeesian'," *Huffpost*, 6th July, 2012. https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/07/06/internet-trolls-online-beat-up-anita-sarkeesian-game_n_1653473.html.

[36] Braithwaite, 'It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity'; Adrienne Massanari, '#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures', *New Media and Society* 19, no. 3 (2017): 2; Torill Elvira Mortensen, 'Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate', *Games and Culture* 13, no. 8 (2018): 787–806.

[37] Leigh Alexander, "' 'Gamers' don't have to be your audience. 'Gamers' are over," *Game Developer*, 28th August, 2014. https://www.gamedeveloper.com/business/-gamers-don-t-have-to-be-your-audience-gamers-are-over-#close-modal.

developers. The pathways of radicalisation Gamergate helped formalise have serious implications too. In 2022, David Depape attacked Nancy Pelosi's (USA House Speaker at the time) husband; in his blog where he recants his right-wing leaning conspiracy theories, Depape wrote: "How did I get into all this […] Gamer gate it was gamer gate."[38]

Whilst externally Gamergate was evidently an abusive movement, it was internally propped up by narratives which were ostensibly about fun, particularly the white man's fun, as well as being about gamer identity, and concerns about "ethics in game journalism." Increasing conversations about issues like diversity in gaming, led by figures like Anita Sarkeesian, were seen to be politicising videogames, and/or ruining the fun, because they called attention to issues stemming from gaming's predominantly white, male hegemony. As Braithwaite writes, Gamergaters were "on a crusade to save an innocuous male pastime from killjoy critics."[39] Braithwaite's use of "killjoy" speaks to Sara Ahmed's writing on her concept of a feminist killjoy, where she writes: "The feminist subject in the room hence brings others down, not only by talking about unhappy topics such as sexism but by exposing how happiness is sustained."[40] Gamergate was essentially a reaction to this "bringing down," as awareness was being raised about issues like representation. In other words, how the stereotypical white, male gamer's fun was being maintained (through white, male hegemony) was being more explicitly called into question.

Gamergate affected game studies too. Gamergate had its roots in online conspiracy theories and would later set the groundwork for "pizzagate", an alt-right conspiracy that circulated during the 2016 American Elections and would become a predecessor to QAnon, another right-wing conspiracy theory which originated in 2017, but gained special traction during the COVID-19 Pandemic.[41] To explain QAnon briefly:

> "QAnon" is a baseless internet conspiracy theory whose followers believe that a cabal of Satan-worshipping Democrats, Hollywood celebrities and billionaires runs the world while engaging in pedophilia, human trafficking and the harvesting of a supposedly

[38] Alex Woodward, "Paul Pelosi's alleged attacker left digital trail of extremism and far-right conspiracy theories," *Independent*, 29th October 2022. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/crime/paul-pelosi-david-depape-conspiracy-theories-b2213224.html.

[39] Braithwaite, 'It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity', 1.

[40] Sara Ahmed, 'Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness', *Signs* 35, no. 3 (2010): 582.

[41] Mike Bedigan, "What was the QAnon Pizzagate conspiracy theory?" *Independent*, 29th November, 2023. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/what-is-pizzagate-qanon-b2455425.html. Sarah Jeong, "If we took 'Gamergate' harassment seriously, 'Pizzagate' might never have happened," *The Washington Post,* 14th December, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/12/14/if-we-took-gamergate-harassment-seriously-pizzagate-might-never-have-happened/.

> life-extending chemical from the blood of abused children. QAnon followers believe that Donald Trump is waging a secret battle against this cabal and its "deep state" collaborators to expose the malefactors and send them all to Guantánamo Bay.[42]

This conspiracy has roots in antisemitism, signalling to the myth of blood libel, and the idea that Jews secretly run the world.[43] The emphasis on conspiratorial thinking in Gamergate meant Gamergaters understood game studies as *part* of this conspiracy (the conspiracy being against them, gamers). Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw have discussed how Gamergate brought with it an awareness of feminist game scholars, which in turn meant a response to their work *from* Gamergaters.[44] They retell how a google doc produced during a DiGRA fishbowl was both a target of harassment, and proof of their part in the "conspiracy," as well as Shaw's work being government funded (which proved her complicity).[45] Sargon of Arkkad, a right-wing YouTuber, would even make a YouTube video about this: where he "disclosed the names of all of the DiGRA board members from 2003 through the current board, classifying each board member as either an ''academic'' or a ''feminist,'' making an argument that the board has been taken over by feminists, as well as implying that one cannot be both academic and feminist."[46] It was not just that academic ideas were being derided, or accused of being part of some bigger sinister plot; academics were literally being named and shamed in online publics; meaning they were targets of harassment too.

In 2015, at the XOXO festival, Quinn reflected on their previous year and on Gamergate. An article summarising their speech at the event recounted, when talking about the mindset of Gamergater's:

> "It's this thought that if what they're going after is so powerful and so corrupt, they still get to be the underdog," Quinn said. "They [Gamergaters] get to be the good guys."[47]

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[42] Jule Carrie Wong, "QAnon explained: the antisemitic conspiracy theory gaining traction around the world," *The Guardian*, 25th August, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/25/qanon-conspiracy-theory-explained-trump-what-is.

[43] *Anti-Defamation League,* "Blood Libel: A False, Incendiary Claim Against Jews," *Anti-Defamation League*, 9th January, 2016. https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/blood-libel-false-incendiary-claim-against-jews.

[44] Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, 'A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity', *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 59, no. 1 (2015): 208.

[45] Chess and Shaw, 212–13.

[46] Chess and Shaw, 213.

[47] Casey Newton, "How Gamergate's earliest target came to empathize with her abusers / 'If Gamergate had happened several years ago to someone else, I would have been on that side,'" *The Verge*, 14th September, 2015. https://www.theverge.com/2015/9/14/9326207/zoe-quinn-gamergate-xoxo-festival.

Here, Quinn makes a really important point. Regardless of Gamergate being an overtly abusive movement, the stories (or conspiracies) Gamergate was constructed through allowed perpetrators to situate themselves as the underdog, the "good guys." This intentionally paradoxical positioning will be key when thinking about how the thesis contends with these issues, and how we might contend with Gamergaters.

So many individuals were involved in Gamergate it would be impossible to name them all. When thinking about the development of gaming culture, however, it is important to note the rise of many online content creator's careers during this time; whose popularity benefitted from the sensationalism Gamergate fed. Carl Benjamin, a British man whose YouTube account goes by "Sargon of Akkad," has made countless videos deriding Anita Sarkeesian and her views about videogames. In December 2014, he had 21,170 subscribers but by March 2015, Carl had 72,578.[48] Having started his account a year before Gamergate in 2013, it is impossible to cleanly separate his early success from it. Now his YouTube channel, at time of writing, is shy of 900,000 subscribers and in 2018 he even joined the UK Independence Party (UKIP), although he lost in the 2019 elections that followed.[49] Carl clearly found prominence through Gamergate, and muted political success beyond YouTube itself. On the 27th of March, 2024, Carl posted a video titled "GamerGate 2.0" on his channel, which currently (at time of writing) has over 140,000 views.[50] Carl is still benefitting from Gamergate and its adjacent discourses. Important to note too, is that content creators like Carl make up a part of gaming's cultural landscape; normalising some of the ways that people speak about videogames, what criticism is perceived as legitimate, and even the jokes we make about them. For example, in 2017, three years after Gamergate, PewDiePie – one of the largest and most successful gaming YouTubers ever – would pay two men to hold up a sign that read "Death to all Jews" in a video. Whilst he claimed it was a joke, the fact that PewDiePie thought it was funny, and thought it was acceptable, tells us a lot about gaming culture, and wider internet culture, at

[48] Sargon of Akkad, YouTube Channel, December 2014 – March 2015, https://web.archive.org/web/20141004154630/https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-yewGHQbNFpDrGM0diZOLA, https://web.archive.org/web/20150308183205/https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-yewGHQbNFpDrGM0diZOLA.
[49] Sargon of Akkad, YouTube Channel, n.d. https://www.youtube.com/@SargonofAkkad/featured.
[50] Carl Benjamin, "GamerGate 2.0," *YouTube,* 27th March, 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbIuC7s0WEI.

that time.[51] As does his ongoing success since. PewDiePie, or Felix Arvid Ulf Kjellberg, at time of writing, has over 100 million subscribers.[52]

Despite being 10 years ago, the interview data I have collected betrays the prevalence of ideas that Gamergate perpetuated; for example, that gamers are young men who enact toxic behaviour online, or that "proper" gamers play big AAA games. Most interview participants who did bring up such ideas actively disagreed with them; but the bringing them up in the first place is still important, betraying the wider circulation of said ideas in gaming's mainstream. Despite being a decade past, Gamergate – the issues it brought forth and intensified – is still hanging around. The structure of the thesis reflects this – how Gamergate has lingered in the way we talk about videogames – in that it is concerned with resurgence (Gamergate ideas resurfacing and circulating) and resistance (how we resist or tackle the ideas Gamergate propagated). Next, I will layout a detailed structure of the thesis and explain exactly what I mean when I refer to "resurgence" and "resistance."

Thesis Structure

This thesis starts with *Chapter 1: Research Methods*, which will lay out the *Methodology* that the thesis adopts: primarily qualitative research led by oral history interviews. Then I will address how my *Positionality* affects my research, and finally I set up a baseline understanding of this project's *Theory* by going over the core theoretical frameworks which ground the thesis, focusing on feminist affect theorist Sara Ahmed. The second chapter, *Gamer as Affect: Activation and alignment through the lens of fun*, will establish how we understand gamer identity throughout the rest of the thesis. Using oral history data, I will set out an understanding of gamer as a subjective, affective identity by examining the differing ways interview participants deploy fun to define gamer identity. *Chapter 2* will not only address how fun can be used to assess, even if only implicitly, who counts as a gamer but also how fun works to activate and justify certain belief systems that gamer identity functions in and through – for example, the idea that too many women in videogames (as we saw in Gamergate) could seemingly ruin the medium.

Next, the thesis is divided into two halves: *Resurgence* and *Resistance*:

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[51] Arwa Mahdawi, "PewDiePie thinks 'Death to all Jews' is a joke. Are you laughing yet?," *The Guardian*, 15th February, 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/15/youtube-pewdiepie-thinks-death-to-all-jews-joke-laughing-yet.

[52] PewDiePie, YouTube Channel, n.d. https://www.youtube.com/user/pewdiepie.

These sections reflect the two narrative strands that emerged over and over in the interview data; how stories about Gamergate, toxic gamer identity, policing in gaming spaces, emerged in distinct ways. Within resurgent narratives, ideas were either brought up by interview participants to be disagreed with - for example, the idea that grim, beige war-based videogames are somehow proper games is a resurgent narrative that an interview participant brought up to refute - *or* resurgent stories emerged more quietly, often in subtext, the words talked around or unsaid. Participants either did not directly address the resurgent issues at hand, or perhaps (unintentionally or not) signalled to Gamergate-adjacent world views.

Resistant narratives emerged in both explicit and implicit instances. For example, when participants talk about trying to make their café or theatre production more inclusive (a focus of *Chapter 5: Gamer Counter-spaces*), these are active choices participants are engaging with. However, resistant possibilities can still be read into segments of interviews which were not ostensibly about issues like accessibility or representation. As we will see in *Chapter 6: A Gamer Apocalypse*, a lot of resistant instances of play are affective, about how we feel, not about intentional choices we make. One example I look at in *Chapter 6* is Participant 8's feelings about the ending of a videogame, and how that ending was not the ending he expected; within this affective experience – refusing the ending – we can find resistance. Now, in more detail, I will extrapolate what I mean by *Resurgence* and *Resistance* and set out the rest of the thesis structure.

Resurgence

Following on from *Chapter 2: Gamer as Affect*, chapters 3 and 4 of the thesis are grouped together under the heading 'Resurgence.' *Resurgence* examines how resurgent ideas are prevalent in gaming spaces, historicising their origins in gaming culture beyond Gamergate, and tracing them into the present day – not just through oral history data, but in pop cultural depictions and archival objects. When I write 'Resurgence' I am referencing the re-emergence of toxic ideas that events like Gamergate made evident, and normalised, such as: policing gamer identity, normalisation of harassment and abuse online, unhealthy industry practises (e.g. crunch), and videogames being codified as a white, masculine domain. Importantly, these ideas can be traced back before and beyond Gamergate, to more extreme belief systems. Resurgence of ideas that are from, or tangential to, Gamergate also means a resurgence of ideas that have implications for the far-right and/or white supremacy, especially in online spaces and pathways of radicalisation. The term resurgence intentionally signals to the cyclical nature of these issues, they are resurgent because they keep *resurging* in gaming culture, and can be connected to gaming histories as well as being found in contemporary gaming culture, as I demonstrate in

Chapter 3. In *Chapter 3*: *Historicising Gamer*, resurgent ideas will be key in establishing a core concept, the **foundational norm.**

Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer: Uncovering the foundational norm focuses on objects on display, and from the archive, at the National Videogame Museum. Using objects that span a period of 1982 to 2006, this chapter closely analyses gaming objects to historically trace back constructions of gamer identity. The selection criteria for objects under discussion were objects that negotiated gaming subjectivities, especially in relation to gamer identity, in the museum's collection across its exhibits/archive. In terms of exhibited objects, this included objects that negotiated gamer identity through their display text/paratext. For example, a display about the Nintendo Wii Console (2006) which explicitly discusses gamer identity, or the *Ms. Pac-Man* (1982) arcade game, which paradoxically suggests an assumed female gamer whilst somewhat absurdly sexualising Ms. Pac-Man's form. Within the archive, I engaged objects which are deemed "inappropriate for display" in the collection which still do gamer identity construction work; sometimes this "work" constitutes said inappropriateness. For example, the game *Fernandez Must Die* (1988) contains a poster which depicts racist imagery and humour, implying its assumed audience is white. The time period of the objects selected, 1982 to 2006, spans the videogame market crash (1983) to the casual revolution of gaming (2006).[57] This time period is intentionally pre-Gamergate, demonstrating how ideas associated with Gamergate (e.g. the geeky, male gamer stereotype) can be traced *before* Gamergate, and are deeply entangled with gaming's early history. This point is especially important when I establish the **foundational norm** in this chapter; a concept I will reference throughout the rest of the thesis. The foundational norm in gaming is the continuous reinvestment in the fundamental belief that:

> Videogames are made for young, white, heterosexual, cisgender men and are naturally, and have always been, this way.

The term "foundational norm" is intentionally contradictory in order to capture the paradoxical belief systems (the norms) it (re)produces and functions through. The contradiction is that the idea that videogames are naturally for white men is not actually foundational and has only been constructed as such. Gamergate is an example of said construction work; a reactionary movement responding to increased diversity, and discussion around it, in videogames; when in fact videogames had previously catered to a more diverse audience before the 1980s videogame market crash (something I extrapolate in *Chapter 3: Historicising* Gamer) and only pivoted to a young male market after the fact. The "foundational norm" has relevance for more formalised belief systems,

[57] Graeme Kirkpatrick, 'How Gaming Became Sexist: A Study of UK Gaming Magazines 1981–1995', *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (1 May 2017): 453-68; Jesper Juul, *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players* (MIT Press, 2009).

such as white supremacy and the far-right, but also holds its own, less formalised ideological dimensions. 20th century French Philosopher, Louis Althusser, whose work was primarily concerned with Marxism and Structuralism, writes that ideology "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."[58] This is essentially what the foundational norm conceptually captures: the imagined relationship to videogames, and their culture, from Gamergates and others invested in Gamergate-adjacent narratives. The foundational norm is especially key in the next chapter, *Chapter 4: A Certain Kind of Gamer: The boy in the basement*.

Chapter 4 centres on participant quotes that reference the boy in the basement trope; usually a pale, overweight young man who lives in his parents' basement playing videogames, and generally not doing much else with his life. Alongside interview excerpts, pop cultural depictions of this trope from TV and film will facilitate tangible analysis of the boy's otherwise messy, and inconsistent mythology. Spatially, this chapter understands the basement, and the boy who resides in it, as foundational to the house the basement sits within; the house representing gaming culture as a whole. It considers the implications of the basement through the frame of a prepper's bunker, somewhere to hide away from the end of the world, because in a sense the basement boy does believe his (gaming) world is ending. Within this framework, the boy and the basement become a rhetorical device for extrapolating, and perpetuating, post-Gamergate anxieties.

The thesis subsection *Resurgence* establishes how the issues gaming culture has been wrangling with, before and beyond, Gamergate - primarily the white, male codification of gaming and the implications this has for gamer identity, and how we (those in gaming spaces) relate to it – haunt my interview data. The stereotype of the boy in the basement emerging in a third of interview data and connecting so clearly to the challenges I can historically trace back to the 1980s when the masculinisation of gaming really took hold, demonstrates the prevalence of these ideas in gaming discourses. Importantly, as I will explain in more depth, the narratives that resurgent ideas in gaming emerge in – such as the idea that gaming has always been for men – often operate through, rather than despite of, their paradoxical frameworks. I will demonstrate this in *Chapter 2: Gamer as Affect*. Because gamer identity can be understood through affect, the contradictory narratives gamer identity becomes associated with, e.g. gamers only play AAA videogames *yet* a gamer can just be someone who enjoys videogames, do not have to make sense to work; they just have to *feel real* within gamer's affective determination.

[58] Louis Althusser, *Essays on Ideology* (Verso, 1984), 36.

In addition to unpacking the resurgent ideas that emerged across the interview data and the National Videogame Museum's collection, the second section of this thesis more practically confronts these ideas through a frame of resistance.

Resistance

The thesis subsection *Resistance* emerged through interview data that responds to the resurgent ideas I unearth in the previous subsection. When I write "resistance" I am referring to both explicit and implicit resistance against resurgent ideas in gaming spaces, that the event that was Gamergate made overt. This resistance can be affective, in other words, to do with how we feel about, or react to an emotion, about videogames (I will explain what I mean by "affect" and "emotion" in *Chapter 1: Theory*). In addition to affective modes of resistance, resistance possibilities were sometimes more formalised in interview testimony; in how participants addressed certain issues, e.g. representation, how they discussed their own conduct/behaviour, and even how they organise the spaces they are in/response for. For example, modding a game to include more queer play possibilities, or stopping playing a game that was ruined by excessive monetisation, can be read as resistant acts.

The first chapter in this section, *Chapter 5: Gamer Counter-spaces*, uses oral history data, alongside the space of the National Videogame Museum as a case study, to explore the possibilities of gaming counter-spaces in real life. Rather than considering the virtual, this chapter focuses on interview participants who talk about physical spaces, such as a classroom or a café. This focus grounds the analysis in the UK and emphasises the material possibilities at stake; the arrival, departure, and comfort of certain types of bodies in said spaces. *Chapter 5* is interested in the operations of counter-space; its implicit identity shaping, how it produces habits and is inhabited in turn, and how *countering* is a never-ending project due to the cyclical nature of resurgence in game space. In interview data, both within single interviews and across interviews, it [resurgence] kept emerging and (re)emerging, so to be effective counter-space must keep countering and countering.

The second chapter in *Resistance*, and the penultimate thesis chapter, *Chapter 6: A Gamer Apocalypse: Resistant narratives in how we end things*, seeks a way out of this cycle, of these ideological knots, through embracing ruination, death, and endings as a modality of resistance. Focusing on oral history data where interview participants talk about endings – all manner of endings in videogames – and adapting approaches of queer game studies and queer history, this chapter considers how we negotiate gaming subjectivities when contending with loss, agency, and control. Finally, this chapter feels a way forward by considering how interview participants confront endings in game play; stressing the importance of sitting with and feeling ruination in order to move through it – a direct contrast to the boy in the basement from *Chapter 4*,

who bunkers down away from anything that might make him uncomfortable; grounding himself in isolation and avoidance.

The thesis subsection *Resistance* addresses the issues that *Resurgence* lays out; how problems like toxicity, identity policing, and harassment, haunt my interview data – even if interview participants did not directly talk about them. These issues can be connected to the event that was Gamergate, which established a certain kind of gamer identity as both legitimate yet in crisis, and normalised abusive behaviours as processes which police gaming space – and gamer identity by extension. *Resistance* seeks to consider new, and consolidate existing, ways to confront these resurgent issues in the gaming mainstream. It establishes two critical points: how countering resurgent issues is an ongoing, imperfect project and the importance of confronting the harm, and sitting in it, to move on *through it.*

Finally, this piece of work will conclude by tentatively feeling forward to unknown gaming futures by reflecting on possibilities of resurgence, ruination, and resistance. The repetitive nature of resurgent issues *alongside* moments of resistance not only betrays the wider circulation of toxicity, resurgence, in game space but the wider circulation, and possibility, of resistance too. Rather than advocating for entirely eradicating the harm, harassment, and abuse in gaming space – a noble but almost impossibly large project for one thesis alone – I advocate for the importance of engaging with this hurt without being consumed by it; for the power in acknowledgement as a process of *moving through*. Ultimately this thesis has, through a framework led by feminist affect theory, revealed how Gamergate and its ideas are still in circulation in gaming spaces whether we talk about them or not. Consisting almost entirely of interview-led analysis, this thesis examines the importance of silence, talking around issues, as well as what we actually say, about videogames. Drawing on ongoing, vital work in queer and feminist game studies, it reasserts the importance of talking (writing) about what is difficult or uncomfortable in videogame culture, and by extension gaming research, especially when writing about ostensibly mainstream gaming spaces and subcultures.

A note on language

I am going to address the language choices this thesis makes. Firstly, this thesis uses the word queer when writing on queer people and identity, but also in reference to queer theory and queer analytical frames. Bo Ruberg writes that when using queerness as a lens of study, it “must come with an

acknowledgement of and respect for real, queer lives."[59] Whilst this thesis often engages with queerness more abstractly, such as its discussion of counter-space or finding power through pain in *Chapter 6: A Gamer Apocalypse*, such discussions are always additionally grounded in a concern for real lived queer experiences. Specifically, queer experiences of gaming, which resurgent discourses hold implications for, and this thesis is concerned with.

Secondly, this thesis will, when referring to race, write Black capitalised and white uncapitalised. This decision is informed by the Diversity Style Guide, as AP's Vice President of Standard's John Daniszewski explains:

> AP's style is now to capitalize Black in a racial, ethnic or cultural sense, conveying an essential and shared sense of history, identity and community among people who identify as Black, including those in the African diaspora and within Africa. The lowercase black is a color, not a person [sic].[60]

However, white remains uncapitalised because, as Mike Law at the Columbia Journalism Review points out, "white carries a different set of meanings; capitalizing the word in this context risks following the lead of white supremacists [sic]."[61] This thesis is concerned with not lending credence to the beliefs of white supremacy, nor legitimising far-right propagations about white identity, and therefore does not capitalise white.

This thesis will use both terms far-right and alt-right. Alt-right is a belief system that stems from wider far-right ideologies, having been coined in 2008 by Richard Bertrant Spencer, a far-right figurehead who runs The National Policy Institute (a white nationalist think tank). Spencer's motivations in coining the new term were partly to rebrand old, conservative values in a younger, more appealing movement separate to conservative apathy/liberalisation, and to lean into its new digital edge – which the plethora of far-right news outlets and think tanks, such as The National Policy Institute or Breitbart exemplify.[62] The alt-right flourish in cyberspace and through online movements (including Gamergate), such as dedicated news media channels, men's rights content and figureheads. Here, I use far-right as well as alt-right to ground such movements

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[59] Bo Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (New York University Press, 2019), 19.
[60] John Daniszewski, "The decision to capitalize Black," *AP*, 19th June, 2020. https://blog.ap.org/announcements/the-decision-to-capitalize-black. *The Diversity Style Guide*, "African American, African-American, Black, black," *The Diversity Style Guide*, February, 2021. https://www.diversitystyleguide.com/glossary/african-american-african-american-black-2/.
[61] Mike Laws, "Why we capitalize 'Black' (and not 'white')," *Columbia Journalism Review*, 16th June, 2020. https://www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.php.
[62] *Southern Poverty Law Centre,* "ALT-RIGHT," *Southern Poverty Law Centre,* n.d. https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alt-right.

in their ideological significance, and to resist reproducing the rebranding the term alt-right has supposedly aimed to do.[63]

Throughout the thesis I sometimes refer to ideology, or to ideological implications. This project's understanding of ideology is primarily guided by Stuart Hall. Hall was a cultural theorist, and a founding figure in British Cultural Studies.[64] Much of Hall's work theorising ideology is in dialogue with Louis Althusser, who argues that "ideology is the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group."[65] Within this project, I am especially concerned with gamers as a social group, and how the category of gamer is negotiated, party via ideas that "dominate" gaming culture. Hall, building on this, argues that ideological systems are not mutually exclusive: "often drawing on a common, shared repertoire of concepts."[66] This framing of ideologies as drawing from shared concepts is important, as I will often refer to ideas or narratives interview participants articulate as signalling to both Gamergate narratives, and far-right ideological beliefs. This does not mean that all Gamergaters are far-right, or believe in far-right ideas, but signals to the fact that Gamergate arguments often draw from concepts that have strong connections to far-right beliefs and white supremacy. For example, the idea that 'gamer' is a naturally white, male category and that diversification of videogames somehow encroaches this hegemony is a belief that is loaded with gendered and racial inferences, even if not stated explicitly, about who belongs in gaming spaces. The other important definition Hall theories relevant to this research is, when writing on neo-liberalism, that ideology is always contradictory. He writes:

> ideology works best by suturing together contradictory lines of argument and emotional investments.[67]

The interplay of argument and emotion will be key in understanding how ideologies dominate the social groups that make up gaming culture, especially when we interrogate gamer as an affective identity in *Chapter 2*. In other words, contradictory concepts will be understood as part of how ideology functions, rather than something ideology functions *despite of*.

Finally, I will address the structuring of the thesis' content and how it presents different voices throughout. At the start of chapters, small vignettes are written in a different font which reflect my own experiences of gaming culture, and

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[63] Shawn Wen, "Alt-What? Understanding the Rebranding of White Supremacy," *YR Media*, 26th September, 2017. https://yr.media/news/understanding-the-brilliant-rebranding-of-white-supremacy/.

[64] Katherine Sender and Peter Decherney, 'Stuart Hall lives: cultural studies in an age of digital media,' *Critical Studies in Medic Communication* 33, no. 5 (2016): 381.

[65] Althusser, *Essays on Ideology*, 32.

[66] Stuart Hall, 'Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-structuralist Debates,' *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2, no. 2 (1985): 104.

[67] Stuart Hall, 'The Neo-Liberal Revolution,' *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 6 (2011): 713.

gaming spaces. This is to contextualise and acknowledge my own positional stakes in this research but is not intended to overtake overall chapter analysis. I will address the impact of my own experiences on this project in *Chapter 1: Situating Myself.* The length and presentation of interview participants' answers within chapters is intended to centralise their voices within the thesis, guiding analysis and structuring chapter arguments. This means some quotes run on quite long and are edited as little as possible (vs. editing for easier readability). Alongside interview quotes, supplementary material including the National Videogame Museum and its collection, pop cultural examples from TV and film, are brought in to extend and supplement the interpretation of interview testimony. The only chapter not primarily guided by interview data is *Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer*, which explores objects from the museum's collection. Whilst not analysing participant responses, the purpose of the chapter – to historicise gaming subjectivities – is driven by wider thesis analysis their personal testimonies generated; primarily the prevalence of gamer identity in interview data as inconsistently defined and understood.

Introduction: Summary

Here, I have set out the intentions of this thesis, the relevant literature, and wider fields it engages with, summarised the narrative of Gamergate and laid out the thesis structure. To finish the introduction, I want to stress how much all this matters; both meaningfully and materially. Whilst, in this thesis, I am primarily focused on a small group of individuals and their stories, I want to emphasise that what is in discussion here – gaming identity, digital masculinities, policing boundaries of play and virtual space – has ramifications for not just gaming culture, but society beyond it. What Gamergate demonstrated, especially with its connections to wider conspiracy theories, to real life, and violent events, is that it was never *just* about videogames whilst being so *very much about* videogames. I do not want to approach these issues with a fatalistic, all-consuming negative point of view, but with a productiveness that, whilst it acknowledges the painful and difficult, also acknowledges the happy, the funny, and the odd.

Next, *Chapter 1: Research Methods*, will lay out the relevant methodology, theory and position myself as a researcher for the work that follows.

Chapter 1

Methodology, Positionality and Theory

Methodology

As previously stated in the *Introduction*, this research set out to capture participants' gaming life stories, and engaged with further materials online and in the National Videogame Museum's archive, to build on the analysis drawn from the interview data. In this chapter, I will outline the thesis' methodological framework before considering my positionality as a researcher, and then I will summarise the thesis' core theoretical frameworks.

This research is ethnographic and qualitative, centralising the human experience(s) within gaming in its approach. Oral history is the main research method, but the nature of the interviews themselves was a nontraditional oral history, combining classical oral history techniques with central concerns of game culture research. More traditional archival research, which the National Videogame Museum's archive expedited, allowed for a recovery of videogame histories, and contextual analysis, to build upon said interview data. Online research also provided primary data, such as demographics and journalistic work across the period the interviews covered (the 1980s to the present day).

Uwe Flick, sociologist and qualitative researcher, writes that qualitative research is not a set of methods, but a set of attitudes of:

> openness towards who and what is studied, of flexibility in approaching a field and moving in it, of understanding a subject's or a field's structure rather than of projecting a structure into what is studied.[68]

Openness and flexibility were integral to the interview approach, which was reflexive and adaptive. The interviews were between one and two hours long. Whilst the interviews had a semi-formal structure – there was an interview protocol – there was no set order questions were asked in after the opening question, and organic follow up questions emerged in response to what

[68] Uwe Flick, *Designing Qualitative Research* (SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2007), 14.

participants talked about.[69] As O'Reily writes, "if you are wanting to learn about feelings and thoughts […] then questions will mostly be unstructured and the approach informal."[70] The interviews sought to record a lived and living UK gaming oral history. And within the interviews, narratives kept emerging – about the contentiousness of gamer identity, about what it means to enjoy and be good at videogames, how the way we (mis)remember games is important. And throughout participants' stories patterns, divergences and similarities kept emerging: those of *Resurgence* and *Resistance* in gaming culture and gaming space.

This is the first section of a three-part chapter that will establish the methodological approach. I will address what a qualitative and ethnographic approach means within the context of this project, the intentions, and techniques of the oral history interviews, the incorporation of archival data from the NVM, discussions of videogames themselves, and additional online primary sources. Following on from this section, I acknowledge the implications and limitations of my own positionality within this research and then establish a theoretical framework for the thesis.

The Conceptual Approach

Almost all primary data collected was through qualitative, ethnographic methods, or was led by the findings of these methods; the archival research at the National Videogame Museum was directed by the arguments the interview data generated. Within the Collaborative Doctoral Award brief with the National Videogame Museum, interviews were a stipulated part of the research project. I chose to conduct the interviews as oral history interviews in order to gather peoples' gaming life stories (a currently underexplored practice in game studies methods), and as a method which readily facilitates exploration of shared social identities within communities.[72] In other words, oral history methods allow for a rich examination of gamer identity, as well as a broader exploration of the subjective ways participants experience and interact with gaming culture, and communities, throughout their lives. Gamer identity, play itself, videogames (which are made by people), and gaming histories are a complex phenomenon, and can only be effectively explored by acknowledging the fallibility of personhood within the methodological practice. These are

[69] See Appendix 1: Interview Question Protocol.
[70] O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, 126.
[72] Linda Shopes, 'Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities', *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 2, Special Issue: History and September 11 (2002): 588-598.

intricate, multifaceted concepts; therefore, the method must acknowledge such complexities.

To investigate lived experiences of gaming in the UK, the methods of investigation – primarily interviews - were conscious of the individuality of the person and the subjectivity of play. Going into this project, I understood that I could never capture the entire gaming experiences of the UK, or the entirety of a "gamer identity." As Denzin and Lincoln note, qualitative research "embraces tensions and contradictions."[73] This research embraced the very same; by investigating identities it cannot fully comprehend, with an understanding that this limitation is foundational to its good research intentions.

As the project developed, my oral history approach was redesigned and reconsidered reflexively, as researchers such as O'Reilly and Leavy recommend.[74] Ethnographer Karen O'Reily states that: "Rather than beginning with hypotheses to test it is usual to start with some foreshadowed problems or an intellectual puzzle that guides the design and process."[75] The "puzzle" here was the relationship between videogames, play and identity *and* the implications such relationship(s) have for discourses, politics and ideologies within gaming. I entered the interviews with no idea as to what I would find, and very prepared to not find anything that pertained to such concerns. The results of oral history interviews cannot be wholly predicted, and therefore the research approach was adapted as the project itself progressed. This adaptiveness is readily demonstrated by the thesis' analysis and structural arguments being drawn *from* the interview data. Another example would be that I had to adapt my transcription process due to an interview going wrong because of technology not working as intended.[76] In one interview, the recording software only recorded the participant, not myself. I dealt with this issue in transcription by writing approximations of what I thought I had asked and asking said participant to confirm/edit my approximations (which he did).

Relevant theoretical intentions include reflexivity, post-positivism, and anti-foundational approaches. Reflexivity, situating oneself as a researcher and understanding the impact of our positionality, not only in attitude but in data collection, is key to good qualitative research.[77] Understanding how my own attitudes, my own time and place, especially within gaming contexts can affect

[73] Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 'Introduction: the Discipline and Practise of Qualitative Research,' in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* 5th ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (SAGE Publications, Inc., 2018), 47.
[74] O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, 43. Leavy, *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research*, 8.
[75] O'Reilly, 43.
[76] Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, 'Slowing Down to Listen in the Digital Age: How New Technology Is Changing Oral History Practice', *The Oral History Review* 44, no. 1 (1 April 2017): 96.
[77] Scott Reeves, Ayelet Kuper, and Brian David Hodges, 'Qualitative Research Methodologies: Ethnography', *BMJ* 337 (7 August 2008), https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.a1020.

my work will be elaborated on in the next section *Situating Myself*. The approach of this project is post-positivist, in that it understands that a full truth or complete reality do not exist, and that no hard hypothesis can be constructed prior to research, or even during. It is anti-foundational in that there are no universal truths, or facts, to be discovered, only patterns, commonalities, and possibilities. For Lincoln, Lynham and Guba a post-positivist and anti-foundational approach is key to effective critical research, with the understanding that ethics are inherently tangled with such paradigms and have wider implications for social change and justice.[78] As I will further detail when I explain the ethics process for this research, such theoretical approaches directly influenced the open nature of the interviews, and the inclusion of processes like an optional post-script which implicitly acknowledged the not-quite-completeness inherent to interview data as well as extending participant agency.

Ethnography within a digital context facilitates research into individual voices, localised meanings and a visceral understanding of culture(s).[79] Whilst this is not an entirely traditional ethnographic project because data was not being collected by immersing myself within a community for a long duration of time, some ethnographic fundamentals are still relevant. I did not immerse myself within a gaming community because I was (and continue to be) *already immersed* in gaming communities, giving the research a quasi-auto-ethnographic element. I play videogames, a lot, and have worked in gaming spaces (including the NVM and a second-hand electronics store), *and* now research in game studies. The videogames I do and do not discuss and how I discuss them, cannot escape partly reflecting my own gaming experiences – even though most game-based discussions are entirely interview-led (otherwise certain videogames are only brought up to evidence claims). Throughout the process of my research, I remained immersed within gaming spaces and will continue to do so after this project. Oral history, my main research method, is a pillar of ethnographic methodologies too.[80] This research focuses on the individual voices of interview participants, the pockets of localised meaning they describe and reveal to us, and the wider implications their words/narratives/stories have for gaming culture as a whole.

[78] Yvonna S. Lincoln, Susan A. Lynham, and Egon G. Guba, 'Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions and Emerging Confluences, Revisited', in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 3rd ed. (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2005), 218, 229, 237 and 247.
[79] Anette N. Markham, 'Ethnography in the Digital Internet Era: From Fields to Flows, Descriptions to Interventions,' Denzin and Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 1150.
[80] O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, 128.

For anthropologist Judith Okley, the unplanned nature of ethnography within the field is where its value lies.[81] The ability of ethnographic, qualitative research to embrace uncertainty within the interview practice, for example being open and reflexive about what your participants do or do not discuss, allowed this project's methodological design to reflect the subjectiveness of videogames and how participants do, or do not, experience and discuss them. Not all videogames can be played or known; some videogames have been lost to history, and now there are too many games in existence to be quantified. Every experience of videogame play, even if only minutely, is individual and unique; each moment of play subjective, as well as each player. I did not know what I was going to find in interviews, but I entered them curious; curious about how we talk about videogames, and why it matters.

The Oral History Interviews

Oral history is the primary research method. This thesis was led by the interviews themselves, with participant's words guiding which games and issues analysis turned to, as well as the overall structure of its argument. Oral history itself is a complex and subjective practise, with its own limitations and potential. Oral historian Linda Shopes has argued that we should not approach interviews "with a check list of criteria that define what counts as oral history and what doesn't."[82] Unlike many oral history projects, this research investigates ongoing and present events and identities, as well as past ones. It is not collecting life story interviews, but specifically participant's life stories of games; their *gaming life stories*. Interview discussion spanned videogames, and gaming experiences, participants remembered from childhood to games they play in the present day. Therefore, content of interviews, which was also affected by participant age, spanned videogame past, present, and future (there was some speculation about the future of gaming in interviews).

Engaging in a non-traditional oral history was not just necessary due to source material (the "newness" of videogames and gaming culture) but allowed me to engage with the emerging practises within oral history research which stress understanding the interview as intersubjective, personal data.[83] Oral history as a medium is in a transitional period, not just in ideological approach (moving away from its fixation on objectivity), but partly due to changing digital research methods and opportunities; and my interviews were conducted within these

[81] Judith Okely, *Anthropological Practice: Fieldwork and the Ethnographic Method*, 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2020), 48.
[82] Linda Shopes, '"Insights and Oversights": Reflections on the Documentary Tradition and the Theoretical Turn in Oral History', *The Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (2014): 262.
[83] Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 86.

new digital parameters, which are still being negotiated within oral history practise.[84] As Sheftel and Zembrzycki point out, being interviewed online can change participants' behaviour and answers.[85] This was exactly my intention, as I wanted to interview people from gaming spaces within a context that was most familiar for them (most gaming community and co-play occurs online). New digital possibilities within oral history research also have implications for transcription and analysis, but as I will lay out in more detail below, I opted to transcribe almost all my interviews myself without the assistance of transcription software.

Within oral history practise, scholars have argued for embracing the performative, narrative nature of interviews, and that their unreliability is a part of their value.[86] The subjectivity, of the interviewee, the interviewer, and the interview itself, is no longer being entirely mitigated in oral history practise, but embraced. In the next section when I discuss *Situating Myself*, this positional grounding is to acknowledge the importance of the intersubjective interaction that the interview takes place within; acknowledging how I affect the data.[87] As oral historian Alessandro Portelli writes, when describing the interview as an "exchange of gazes," it is vital to understand how I (the interviewer) is seen by the interviewee, and how this affects the interview.[88]

Who?

People interviewed will be referred to as participants with the understanding that the interview was a partly collaborative endeavour, and that meaning is generated through the discussion itself and the production of a subsequent transcript.[89]

Oral history interviews were conducted with participants who have a relationship to videogames beyond play itself, whether it be through the gaming industry, gaming heritage, or online gaming spaces. Participants from

[84] Sheftel and Zembrzycki, 'Slowing Down to Listen in the Digital Age: How New Technology Is Changing Oral History Practice'; Michael Frisch, 'Oral History in the Digital Age: Beyond the Raw and the Cooked', *Australian Historical Studies* 47, no. 1 (2016): 92-107; Steve Cohen, 'Shifting Questions: New Paradigms for Oral History in a Digital World', *The Oral History Review* 40, no. 1 (2013): 154-67.

[85] Sheftel and Zembrzycki, 'Slowing Down to Listen in the Digital Age', 99.

[86] Martha Rose Beard, 'Re-Thinking Oral History – a Study of Narrative Performance', *Rethinking History* 21, no. 4 (2 October 2017): 529-48; Alistair Thomson, 'Making the Most of Memories: The Empirical and Subjective Value of Oral History', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 9 (1999): 291-301.

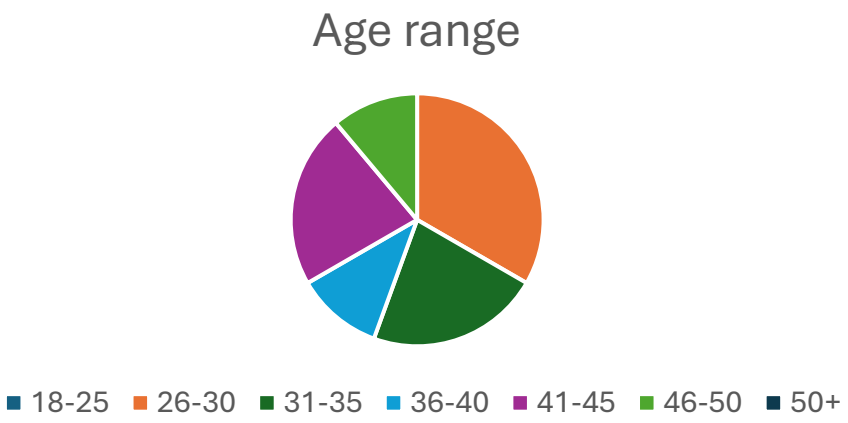
[87] Valerie Yow, '"Do I like Them Too Much?": Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa', *The Oral History Review* 24, no. 1 (1997): 55–79; Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*.

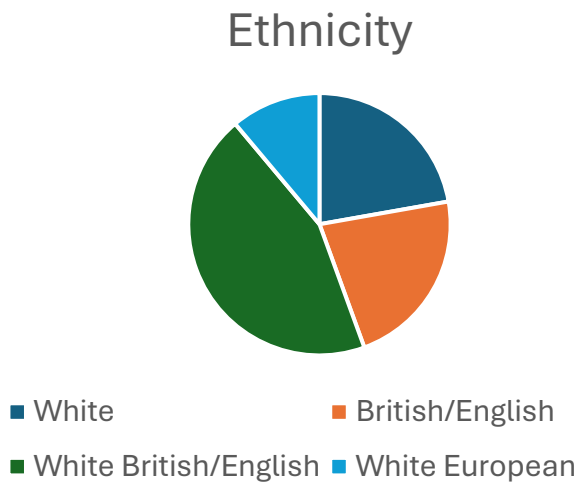
[88] Alessandro Portelli, 'Living Voices: The Oral History Interview as Dialogue and Experience', *The Oral History Review* 45, no. 2 (1 August 2018): 239–48.

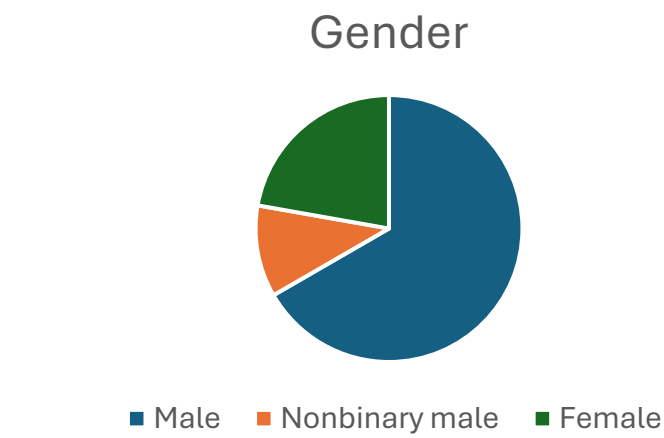
[89] Leavy, *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research,* 8, 11 and 18.

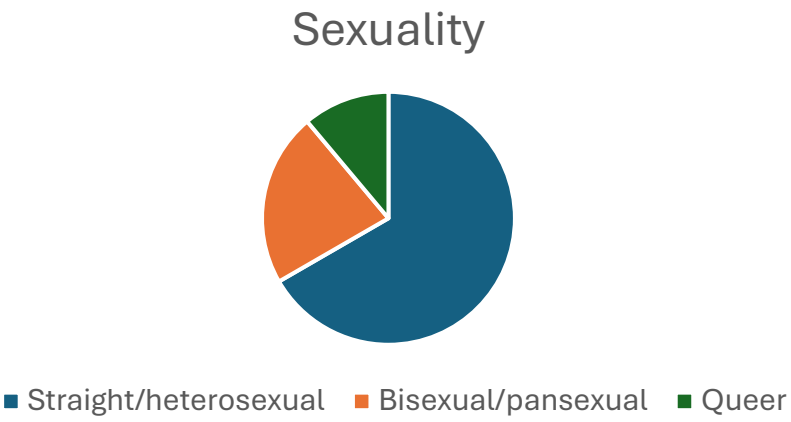
heritage spaces could include staff at the National Videogame Museum. This ensured that participants have had substantial experience with gaming spaces beyond play alone. When I write "gaming spaces" I mean any space that is related or tangential to videogames, for example a streamer's Discord server – a digital community space that includes text and voice channels – is not usually a space where game play actively occurs but is a space brought together by videogame(s) and often features heavy discussion of them.

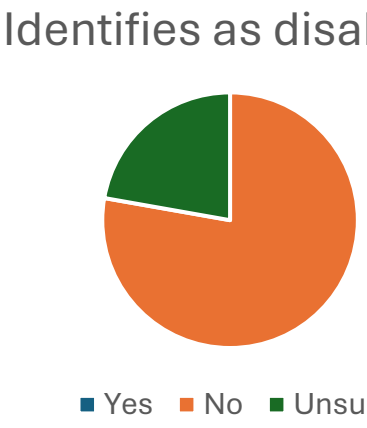
Participants were offered an optional demographics form to fill out post-interview, which recorded some data about interview participant's identities and experiences. 9 out of 12 participants filled in this form.






Gender
Male
Nonbinary male
Female


Sexuality
Straight/heterosexual
Bisexual/pansexual
Queer


Identifies as disabled
Yes
No
Unsure

Breaking down the demographic data:

There was quite good variation in age amongst participants, but there was a struggle reaching especially young and mature people from gaming spaces. Aside from age, every form response was a blank text box so participants could use their own words to describe themselves. Whilst this made answers slightly harder to group (e.g. some participants referenced race and put "white" when describing their ethnicity, whereas others just described their nationality, e.g. "British/English"), it meant that participants had the most agency possible when self-describing. Having open text boxes also avoided the problem of many demographic surveys, which often do not provide enough, or the right, options for whomever is filling them in. As a white Jewish person, I rarely ever see myself on demographic surveys – usually putting down "white other" or "other." I did not wish to repeat the literal othering that a more check-box style form can reproduce, in line with my wider methodological concerns that connect qualitative research to social justice.

Almost every participant was British and/or white and every participant who opted to fill in the demographics form was white. Most participants were male, and heterosexual. No participants clearly identified as disabled, but a small proportion did express uncertainty about whether they should.

The demographic survey also asked: *Thinking back to when you were aged about 14, which best describes the sort of work the main/highest income earner in your household did in their main job?*

The answers were as follows: Engineer (x 2), Steel Worker/Supervisor at Steel Works, Mechanics/Engineering, Primary School Teacher (x 2), Civil Servant Chartered Surveyor, Care-home Staff, Manager at Engineering Company.

These answers suggest that most participants probably came from middle-class households, with some more typically working-class career paths being a minority. The most common interview participant was white, middle-class, heterosexual, and male – which also reflects the dominant demographic of the game industry.[90]

Recruitment

Finding interview participants mostly occurred online, partly due to recruitment happening in 2021, when a lot of COVID-19 restrictions were still in place. I primarily used Discord and Twitter/X (which I will henceforth refer to as Twitter for ease) and combined both calls for recruitment posts/messages alongside messaging people directly. Discord was used to message and gain

[90] *UKIE*, "UK Games Industry Census – understanding diversity in the UK games industry workforce," *UKIE*, 4th February, 2020. https://ukie.org.uk/resources/uk-games-industry-census-2021.

access to streamers/content creators (who often use Discord) and communities around videogames, for example some servers exist around videogames to find other players to play a game with. On Discord, I was specifically interested in interviewing either streamers, content creators, or moderators of gaming communities. Twitter was, at time of recruitment, a site often used for game industry networking, so a lot of people who worked in and around the game industry were recruited from Twitter. I considered using Reddit as a possible third site, but the harassment risk is higher (in other words: getting harassment via exposure on Reddit surrounded my research), due its connections with Gamergate, as described in *Gamergate: A brief summary* in the *Introduction,* so I decided not to recruit via Reddit.

In line with my ethical concerns (which I will detail more later), I did not message anyone who I suspected to be far-right or be overtly sympathetic to far-right views, to protect myself as a female-presenting Jewish researcher. I made an effort to message people directly who were from varying different positions and backgrounds in gaming spaces, and people outside the white, heterosexual norm which dominates gaming – but white, heterosexual, male participants were those most likely to get back to me and most likely to have the spare time for the interview process (they were also the most likely to respond to the general/open calls for interviews). Some people may have not got back to me because they felt like they did not have anything important or interesting to say (an anxiety many participants expressed to me throughout the process) or because I am a white, female presenting interviewer who they did not feel comfortable talking about their gaming experiences with. I only knew one participant before the interview (through The National Videogame Museum) and knew *of* another as a streamer before contacting him. Having to mostly rely on digital routes of recruitment meant I was limited to interview participants who had a degree of online presence (even if only a small one), but it also meant that participants had plentiful experience of videogame spaces – not just the gaming spaces they existed in (e.g. the game industry) but online community spaces like Discord or Twitter.

Participants were approached with an opening message that explained the purpose of the interview, alongside an optional informational sheet about what an oral history interview is like. I answered any questions or concerns and if participants were happy to go ahead then a privacy notice and participant information and consent form was sent over to them. A few participants initially started the interview process but for one reason or another the interview did not go ahead – this is why I have 14 participants, but only 12 participant interviews. Before the interview process, interview participants were informed that they would get two adult vouchers for The National Videogame Museum for taking part.

I stopped at 12 interview participants but had anticipated potentially going up to 20. The reason I stopped at 12 was because the interviews were already so rich with data I had more than enough data for a single thesis (potentially several), and I needed to practically manage how much data I could handle within the scope of this research. As social researcher Alan Bryman writes, "saturation is [the] process in which the researcher continues to sample relevant cases until no new insights are being gleaned from the data."[91] As I was interviewing and transcribing, I was simultaneously going over, studying, and revisiting the interviews I had already conducted. I also did not want more participants to give up their time and energy if this meant that overall, the data gathered would receive less attention to detail and depth. Jennfier Mason, sociologist and qualitative researcher, argues that it is better to have less interviews and do the ones you have recorded "justice."[92]

Conducting the Interview

Before I conducted my interviews, I carried out pilot interviews with friends who played games. This gave me practice conducting interviews and using the recording software (OBS – a free online video and audio software) and Microsoft Teams. The pilot interviews helped develop my interview guideline questions (which I will detail below). The also gave me experience with interview participants who struggled to give more than short, or a few word, answers.

The interviews were conducted over three stages. A pre-interview was held with every participant, which helped build up trust and rapport.[93] These were short and informal conversations lasting no more than twenty minutes and were not recorded. During the pre-interview I checked if they were any topics the participant did not want me to bring up and established safety protocols if they wanted to stop or pause the interview at any time – this included verbally asking to pause/stop, creating an X with your forearms on the camera or typing a capital X into the Microsoft Team chat function.

I planned to do online interviews, in my PhD proposal, before the COVID-19 pandemic, to keep people in their context (most gaming communities and spaces are digital). And those very immersed in gaming are typically more comfortable in online spaces (something one interview participant explicitly talked to me about). The COVID-19 restrictions that were in place for the first few years of this research made interviewing online a necessity regardless of initial intentions, due to safety regulations.

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[91] Sarah Elsie Baker et al., 'How Many Qualitative Interviews Is Enough?', *National Centre for Research Methods*, 2012, 18.
[92] Baker et al., 30.
[93] Baker et al., 40-44.

The interview was held on a different day to the pre-interview and had the audio recorded only, except in one interview in which I had to record on Teams itself due to OBS not working properly. Going into interviews I had an interview protocol, which was developed as part of the ethics application. The interview protocol set out core themes for the interview, for example "Childhood," within which there were several question prompts, for example "What games do you remember playing when you were young?" The protocol had an opening statement, which importantly reiterated the participant's option to stop the interview at any time (and how to do so) and set out rules of practise for myself as the interviewer, which were:

- Avoid asking questions with bias. Do not be afraid of open questions.
- Do not ask the participant about personal details, e.g. specific usernames or work addresses.
- Ask short, concise and confident questions.
- Give the participant time to process and answer questions.
- Assure the participant if they are ever unsure and help keep them at ease.
- Stop the interview straight away if the participant requests it or there are any concerns from the researcher, regarding participant or researcher welfare and comfort.
- Keep the participant the focus of the interview; it is about their views and perspectives.

The question themes were: **Play**, **Genre**, **Characters**, **Choices** (e.g. choices you can and cannot make in games), **Identity** (e.g. would you identify as a gamer?), **Values**, **Online gaming**, **Online communities**, **Childhood**, **The games industry**. Within each theme, were approximately 3-8 questions. Whilst not all questions were asked in each interview, as often participants would address the relevant question/issue while discussing something else, all themes were covered to a varying degree – to what degree was guided by the participant themselves, and how much they had to say about, for example, online games (some played online games a lot, some not at all). Interviews always started with the question:

Would you like to start by telling me a bit about yourself and how you got into games?

The range of interview topics meant the interview gathered participant thoughts, experiences, and opinions on a range of gaming phenomena and gaming spaces; in other words, it gathered their gaming life story. Throughout the process of the interview, gaming experiences were uncovered from participant's childhoods/early years up to the present day – as well as their thoughts and opinions on a wide range of gaming issues, including

representation in gaming, the politics of game choice/genre and experiences of interacting with gaming communities online.[94]

At the end of the interview, I asked every participant if there was anything else they would like to add or anything they wished I had asked. This resulted in a few very interesting answers, for example one interview participant decided to tell me about what direction he thought the game industry was going in, and another participant decided to tell me about how playing games had helped him recover from a serious medical incident.

Each interview was approximately an hour, but some ran over or a little under. One interview ran especially long, for about two hours, but this was due to the length of the participant's answers – I had asked about the same amount of questions/covered the same degree of topics as the other interviews.

After the interview, I followed participants up via email to inform them how to claim their two free vouchers to the National Videogame Museum and with instructions about how to submit a postscript if they should ever want to. The postscript was a written post-interview option for participants to add any lingering thoughts or to readdress anything they said in the interview. No participant followed up with a postscript but one participant, who owns a gaming café, did send me a tour of his café on YouTube.

Transcription

All interviews were transcribed personally by me. Two interviews were put through a secure transcription service, but I found editing partly transcribed interviews harder than transcribing from scratch – so opted to transcribe the rest entirely myself. This was sometimes a struggle as I am dyslexic and have perceptual hearing problems. My dyslexia means there will be some mistakes in the transcripts I have not managed to catch. However, doing my own transcription ensured I was very familiar with the interview material, and could more readily scrutinise my interview technique throughout the research period.

Interviews were transcribed and discussed as honestly as possible throughout the thesis, and as a researcher I did not deliberately misrepresent or misquote a participant's own words. As Svend Brikmann, who works in communication and psychology research, points out, the researcher has a "monopoly of interpretation." This monopoly must be taken seriously.[95] Transcripts were written as accurately as possible – recording pauses, corrections, and stutters etc. The use of "-" indicates a brief pause, and longer pauses were noted in [square brackets]. Due to not wanting to warp participant's words more than

[94] See Appendix 1: Interview Question Protocol for full list of questions.
[95] Brinkmann, "The Interview," 1017.

the transcription process inherently demands, I did not edit the transcripts for readability but left each answer as total paragraphs (unless significant pauses or an interruption occurred). This means some answers are several pages long, which one participant did comment on when receiving their transcript. They did not like that the interview read like a stream of consciousness, and I explained my reasons for not heavily editing their speech. Participants could ask to see their transcripts but could not edit them. They could ask certain answers to be redacted entirely, which was a necessary precaution as those who work in the game industry could be under NDAs, however they could not rewrite the words they said. This is because this research is an *oral history* and keeping the spoken nature of the interview data intact was integral. And, as oral historian Patricia Leavy has argued, participants may double back for performative means, to seem conscious of social norms. For example, rephrasing a statement that the participant is worried may seem misogynistic.[96] Throughout the research gathering process, however, participants could still withdraw their data from the study.

Accessibility

Accessibility is an issue to be conscious of within digital oral history practises especially, as people needed access to digital devices and a stable Wi-Fi connection to carry out the interview.[97] They also needed access to a quiet space, which was usually in their home (not an office or workplace) as interviews took place when some lockdown measures from COVID-19 were still in practice. The accessibility issues of this project are reflective of the wider accessibility issues with videogames. If a person does not have access to a computer, or to a console, or (usually) to the internet, then they would struggle to play videogames regularly or be immersed in gamer communities, which have almost all migrated online.

For those without computers, or access to the internet, a phone call could have been used as an alternative method of interviewing, but no participant required this.

One potential participant I spoke to wanted to do the interview entirely over text – I would type out questions, they would type back – due to anxiety issues about speaking. I opted not to do this interview, as to only collect oral data from participants.

[96] Leavy, *Oral History*, 48.

[97] Sheftel and Zembrzycki, 'Slowing Down to Listen in the Digital Age: How New Technology Is Changing Oral History Practice', 107.

Archiving and exhibiting

It is possible that the interview data will be archived at the National Videogame Museum after my PhD, if the NVM's archival practises are in accordance with The University of Nottingham's requirements. If it is not archived, with the NVM or through The University of Nottingham, all data will be destroyed within 7 years of the project's completion. Participants could opt out of having their data archived at the NVM.

Participants were asked if they wanted to be contacted about a potential exhibition at the NVM, which would use their interview data. Participants were contacted in September 2023, before my placement with the National Videogame Museum was due to start, in case there were any concerns or questions they had about this process. In the end, the interview data was not integrated into my placement project, which I will discuss more in the *Concluding Chapter* of the thesis.

Coding and analysis

To code the interview data, I first went through each interview individually – highlighting common themes, talking points, and annotating them. As I completed more interviews and transcripts, I began to code across interviews – identifying emerging themes and ideas – this was important when identifying when to stop interviews, and judge when the data set had reached saturation.[98] Once I had my twelve interview transcripts, I began to code the interviews as a complete data set. I went on to produce several mind maps and spider diagrams, collating all the different themes, ideas and concerns that arose across interviews. The interviews were coded inductively, in that the themes emerged from, and were guided by, the interview data. This was the most appropriate method, versus deductive coding, as it allowed the interview data to guide the analytical themes that materialised.

Throughout the coding process, 6 core themes emerged:

- Gamer identities
- Social/Communities
- Values (ideologies)
- Memory/Nostalgia
- Play (including personal play)
- Space/Place (including bodily space)

All themes are integral to the overall thesis argument. Gamer identity is consistently relevant but holds special importance for *Chapter 2: Gamer as Affect*, which is concerned with gamer as an affective identity. Gaming

[98] Ayelet Kuper, Lorelei Lingard, and Wendy Levinson, 'Critically Appraising Qualitative Research', *BMJ* 337 (7 August 2008), https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.a1035.

communities are discussed in several chapters, as are aspects of social play, but they especially come to the forefront in *Chapter 5: Gamer Counter-spaces*. Values and ideological belief systems emerge throughout the thesis but are of special significance to *Chapter 4: A Certain Kind of Gamer* – where participants discuss the myth of the boy in the basement and speculate about his belief systems. Memory and nostalgia are relevant to the boy in the basement too (one could argue he feels *too* nostalgic about videogames) but additionally emerge in *Chapter 6: A Gamer Apocalypse*, when participants discuss their memories of specific games, and in *Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer*, where I retrace gamer identity through gaming objects. Play surfaces throughout the thesis but is especially relevant in *Chapter 2* when participants discuss play as a performative parameter within which fun/gamer identity is negotiated. Finally, space and place are very important across the thesis – especially when considering the bodily space of a gamer (*Chapter 2*), and the spaces we play games within (*Chapter 5)*. Whilst this thesis could not contain *all* the interview data, and absolutely everything participants said, it's overall themes and concerns were directly derived from the data in line with the thesis' interview led approach.

The direction of the thesis' argument was, whilst led by interview data, narrowed down by returning to the "problem" I initially entered the interviews curious about: the interaction(s) between videogames, play and identity *and* the implications such relationship(s) have for discourses, politics, and ideologies within gaming.[99] The 10 year anniversary of Gamergate in 2024, certainly brought certain issues – like gamer identity, inclusion/exclusion in videogame space – more readily to the forefront as well. My own gaming experiences too (which I will consider in *Positioning Myself*) no doubt affected what aspects of interview data I was drawn to, and what felt important.

I should note, that because the interview data may go into the NVM's archive, others could make use of these interviews in further game studies research and bring an alternative point of view to the data set. For example, discussion of roleplaying games (RPGs) came up a lot and a thesis exclusively about RPG games could probably be produced from my interview data. There is discussion of RPGs in the thesis, but not an entire chapter dedicated to them.

Whilst I, the researcher, analysed certain reactions, points-of-view, or patterns of speech within the interview I did so with the understanding that I can never know a participant's internal thoughts, or the entirety of their motivations or feelings. Conceptually, as referenced earlier, analysis of interviews will take a post-positivist approach; understanding that the interviews are incomplete sources of research but are worthy of research because of said incompleteness (not despite it). Through the writing up process, I continuously returned to the interviews, rereading them, reannotating them and reconsidering them. They led and informed analysis throughout, rather than a linear process of coding then analysis.

[99] O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, 43.

Additional Data Collection

Online data

Some online data has been gathered, including statistics, journalistic articles, and tweets/online posts. In accordance with ethical guidelines, no data was included that required an account to access and no personal names are shared (names from public facing roles, such as a content creator or journalist, are shared as they are already publicly associated with said data). Any online data used was to provide context and build on analysis that was led by the oral history interview data.

Archival data

To provide historical context and analysis archival data, and gallery objects, from the National Videogame Museum were used. Despite limited access, objects from the archive provided pivotal historical analysis and grounding for the thesis, especially in *Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer* (I only gained access to the NVM's archive in my fourth year). Using objects out on the gallery floor, when I could not access the archive itself, meant I engaged with the gaming histories, and gaming spaces, the NVM was actively presenting and offering to visitors. It also provided a rich analytical opportunity when exploring the hidden/seen dichotomy of gaming objects in *Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer*, where I look at objects out on the gallery floor *and* objects that were deemed unfit or inappropriate for public display in the NVM archive. Thinking about the space the NVM provides through what is/is not on display was integral to *Chapter 5: Gamer Counter-spaces* too, where I considered the NVM as a gaming space.

Ethical concerns

All research processes were undertaken with the ethical approval of the University of Nottingham.

As already stated, in interviews participants could pause/stop the interview at any point, request their data be redacted or removed from study and had ample opportunities to check in with me as the researcher. The participant information sheet contained mental health resources in case they were needed.

To protect myself as a researcher, being female presenting, queer and Jewish, I did not interview anyone explicitly alt-right or extremely right-wing or contact them. Interviewing people online meant I avoided the risk of going to unknown peoples' houses to record them, a common practice in oral history routines.

When game scholar Adrienne Shaw, in *Gaming at the Edge*, writes about her oral history research she tells us: "I argue that we can better make sense of why representation is important in a broad social sense by first unpacking how it becomes important in an individual sense."[100] Akin to Shaw, my thesis is interested in relationship(s) between gaming and identity by focusing on individual experiences through the use of oral history, with an understanding that the individual's sense of self and the lens through which they view the world is subjective. Whilst not focusing so acutely on the relationship between identification, identity and representation and not only using queer participants, Shaw's argument still grounds my own oral history approach. Oral historian Leavy also advocates for the combination of micro and macro analysis in her own research.[101] My project investigates gamer subjectivities, but through analysis relates these subjectivities to wider communities, identities, and histories.

COVID-19 Impact

Whilst not explicitly being about COVID-19, this research cannot help but partly be about COVID-19 because it was conducted during a global pandemic. Unlike a lot of other research, COVID-19 did not especially affect this project because almost all research was conducted online (and planned to be before lockdown measures came into place). Whilst not affecting the interviews themselves, COVID-19 did affect the recruitment process. If COVID-19 restrictions had not been in place, I could have used physical call outs for interviews (posters, flyers etc) placed in gaming cafes and The National Videogame Museum (and other in-person gaming spaces, such as gaming and electronic stores), which would have potentially attracted different types of interviewees, especially those with little/no internet presence.

It would be impossible to say if I would have faced the same archive access issues regarding the NVM had the pandemic not happened. The pandemic was talked about in interviews but was never the focal point or driving narrative of the entire interview. In interviews, COVID-19's main influence could be seen in participant's recent gameplay choices; often discussing games as a means of

[100] Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*, 7.
[101] Leavy, *Oral History*, 11.

spending time with others, when they could not otherwise hang out with family or friends.

Another significant effect COVID-19 had on this research was on me, as a researcher. Doing a PhD project is a notoriously lonely endeavour. COVID-19, and the rareness of my subject area (I was the only videogame studies scholar in my department for the first two years) only exacerbated this. Despite these issues, I eventually managed to find a research community both in person and online. I had opportunities through my partnership with the NVM to connect with the wider research community. I got to present about the NVM's Animal Crossing Diaries Project, a project which recorded peoples' stories from Animal Crossing: New Horizons (2020) during the COVID-19 pandemic, at several conferences.[102] I got the opportunity to do collaborative work with another Collaborative Doctorate Award PhD student at the NVM, Dr. Velvet Spors, who was based in Computer Science at The University of Nottingham. This included written work and a game jam we ran together around the theme of Self-Care.[103]

Methodology: Summary

Oral historian Linda Shopes tells us that oral history has a broadly political purpose.[104] And this thesis has a political purpose too, in that it is invested in videogaming and all the wider facets of culture that gaming touches – including us, the people in it – and how videogaming matters, both materially and emotionally. And there is a quieter purpose too; an investment in the problem that the stereotypical gamer, capital "G" gamer, or boy in the basement trope presents. It is necessary that oral history helps do the work of untangling the ideological knots I will examine throughout the thesis; because ultimately this piece of work is invested in how we talk about things, and how the ways we talk about things matters.

Finally, to close the methodological section of this chapter, I want to stress that whilst this research has put significant emphasis on the importance of participant agency – this does not mean that I cannot challenge what participants had to say in interviews, that I cannot search for hidden meaning,

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[102] *The National Videogame Museum*, "Animal Crossing Diaries," *The National Videogame Museum*, 2021. https://animalcrossingdiaries.thenvm.org/.

[103] Velvet Spors and Imo Kaufman, 'Respawn, Reload, Relate: Exploring the Self-Care Possibilities for Mental Health in Games through a Humanistic Lens', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 5, no. CHI PLAY (6 October 2021): 1-31. *The National Videogame Museum,* "The Self Care Jam," *The National Videogame Museum* Blog, n.d. https://thenvm.org/blog/the-self-care-jam/.

[104] Shopes, '"Insights and Oversights": Reflections on the Documentary Tradition and the Theoretical Turn in Oral History', 267.

or question what they said, in my analysis. For example, Participant 1, in his interview, told me his Discord server was an inclusive space – I know this not to be true because of my own experiences. Whilst I was in there, a man spoke to me in a very derogatory way, including making jokes about black lesbian representation in media. How can you tolerate such abuse and humour in an inclusive space? This is a reflection, too, of how my own positionality affected my work; how the way I present, behave, and conduct myself has implications for the data I collected. This leads me to the next chapter section, where I will consider my positionality as a researcher.

Situating Myself

Researchers such as Karen O'Reilly have highlighted the importance of examining your own time and place within ethnographic work.[105] I will situate my positionality as a researcher, which is especially important here for two reasons: in an oral history interview, I will always inherently make up part of the data as the interviewer alongside the participant; and as someone deeply immersed in gaming culture, I cannot ignore that my own gaming experiences will have affected how I approach my work. My experiences will have, no doubt, partly determined my thesis topic in the first place. Understanding my positionality is vital to understanding the biases and values I bring into my research, and how they impact my methodological practise and analysis.

I am a queer, white, Jewish person who has grown up in a lower middle-class household. My access to videogames was mostly limited until my early to mid-twenties, when I finished my undergraduate degree and obtained a more disposable income. As a child, the videogames that were available to me mostly consisted of hand-me-downs from my siblings, and the games I managed to persuade my parents to get me, which were almost all *Pokémon* and other Nintendo titles. I had an Xbox 360 as a teenager but could afford few games for it. As a result of this, I probably clocked at least a couple of hundred hours into *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) whether I really liked it or not.[106] That was until a girl I later nearly dated gifted me several videogames when I fell ill for a

[105] O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods*, 59.
[106] Bethesda Game Studios, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, Bethesda Softworks, Windows, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 5, 2011.

short while, including the *Mass Effect* series.[107] Playing *Mass Effect* changed my relationship with gaming, and with myself. I loved the dynamic combat in *Mass Effect*, and I loved Commander Shepard too. Now I have more means, I play a lot of different games across Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 5, and PC. I occasionally still pick up my old Nintendo 3DS and Gameboy Advance too. I have no game-genre-loyalty, flitting between competitive first-person-shooters, farming sims, brutal roguelikes, and role-playing-games that feel like they are bursting at the seams. My wide-ranging play preferences meant in interviews I could usually keep up with participants when they spoke about different games and could ask confident questions even when they spoke about unfamiliar titles.

As discussed in *Introduction: A note on language,* throughout this thesis, I briefly bring in and acknowledge my own experiences in gaming spaces. Two gaming spaces are especially important. Firstly, a second-hand electronics store I worked at in London for about six months over the course of my masters degree. This store provided everyday interactions with people who were invested in gaming, and gaming communities, and gave me a lot of experience interacting with those types of men (almost all, were men) as a female presenting person in a customer service role. This time in my life was very difficult for me for a number of reasons, and this store – and the men I had to interact with inside it – were one of them. I do not just bring personal knowledge from my own experiences of this store, but survival instincts. For example, my time at the second-hand game store in London gave me a lot of experience interacting with men who play videogames in non-threatening ways (in other words, appearing *just knowledgeable enough* to discuss games with, but not *too knowledgeable* as to transgress gendered, gaming expectations).

The second important place is the National Videogame Museum, the charity this project is in collaboration with and somewhere I used to work. I will talk a lot about the NVM and the space it affords in this thesis, especially in *Chapter 5: Counter-spaces*, but it is important I acknowledge my experience of the NVM will always be personal for me, as well as being a key site of research. I have worked at the NVM as front of house staff, and the PhD being collaborative with the museum was integral for me (the collaborative doctoral award with the NVM was the only PhD I applied to). I completed my masters thesis whilst I was working front of house at the NVM, and in fact got support from other museum staff when conducting research for its topic: transgender representation in videogames. This also meant my introduction to game studies was specifically through queer game studies, an area of research I will always be indebted to;

[107] BioWare, Edge of Reality, Demiurge Studios, Straight Right, *Mass Effect Series*, Microsoft Game Studios, Electronic Arts, Xbox 360, Windows, iOS, PlayStation 3, Windows Phone, Android, Wii u, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, 2007-2021.

not just for its incredible contribution to game studies, but for drawing me into this field of research in the first place.

Other gaming spaces I have experience of, of course, are relevant – I start the *Concluding Chapter* by talking about experiences from university, and a game about hunting down Hitler (it will make sense, later). I do not share the vignettes at the start of chapters to present my experiences as objective truths, but to stake my positionality finitely in my work; to attempt to illustrate what I bring to the analysis, what I brought to the interviews, and what brought me to this area of research in the first place. Within these short stories, the almost-auto-ethnographic elements of my methodology emerge.

I have to acknowledge that my own politics, as well as my own identity markers and personal experiences, have shaped what I have looked for in this piece of research; what I deemed intriguing, important and urgent. Of course, my politics are inherently personal too; as a queer, left-wing Jew how could they not be. Within my politics, I am invested in anti-racism, feminism and queer liberation. These investments are part of what matters to me both within research, and beyond it; they are a part of what, and how, I value ideas.

The values that I endeavoured to bring into this project are intersectional. Pioneering scholar and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw, whose work specialises in race and gender, tells us that an intersectional approach is key to challenging dominant narratives and being reflective of discriminatory realities. She writes: "If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them."[108] This approach is vital in that I am not just focusing on gender, race, or sexuality etc. A pitfall of some gaming research, especially looking at how gamer identity is gendered, is to fail to intersectionally engage with this question; the stereotypical gamer's whiteness, maleness, straightness, youth, and seeming able-body are all vital parts of the puzzle which hegemonic gaming culture constructs.[109] In line with this thinking, I acknowledge that my Jewishness, my

[108] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 149 and 167.

[109] Some examples: Buyukozturk, 'Gendering Identity Talk: Gamers' Gendered Constructions of Gamer Identity'; Marke Kivijärvi and Saija Katila, 'Becoming a Gamer: Performative Construction of Gendered Gamer Identities', *Games and Culture* 17, no. 3 (1 May 2022): 461–81; Amanda C. Cote, 'Writing "Gamers": The Gendered Construction of Gamer Identity in Nintendo Power (1994–1999)', *Games and Culture* 13, no. 5 (1 July 2018): 479–503.

These are still very valuable pieces of research, and I am not trying to single any one scholar out. I only share examples here to demonstrate the normalisation of discussing one identity in game studies (e.g. gender) without acknowledging how it interacts with other identity markers explicitly. Of course, some research can and should focus on gender, but an overemphasis on gender (without acknowledging race, for example) risks reproducing issues we see in gaming spaces, for example failing to engage with how race and ethnicity affects us

queerness, and my whiteness all impact how I experience videogames, and wider academia and research practices.

Game scholars Flanagan and Nissenbaum, when writing about values and videogames, point out:

> Games embody beliefs from a time and place, provide a sample of what is important to a particular group of makers and players, and offer us a way to understand what ideas and meanings are valuable.[110]

This thesis can be understood through a parallel framing. It captures a time and place in gaming culture, through the ages and experiences of those I interviewed, and in its own right. The year I completed this project was 2024, the 10-year anniversary of Gamergate and a year of another Trump election. The issue of far-right ideologies and practise encroaching into mainstream spaces, and politics, is not just theoretical, but a reality we are living with. This thesis embodies what was important to my interview subjects, what they felt was important to talk about, and what I thought was significant in their interviews. Layers of meanings, meaningful stories, ideas, and moments have built up over one another to facilitate this piece of work.

Finally, I want to note that in this thesis I write a lot about emotion, which I will ground theoretically in the next subchapter. I write about how interview participants seem to feel, how the people they describe or imagine – the boy in the basement trope, or the players who criticise our gameplay – feel too; I write about how feeling, circulates and matters. I want to acknowledge, here, that this thesis embodies my own emotional experiences too; how this research, these ideas, how gaming, makes me feel. Writing this thesis made me emotional, frustrated, inspired, angry, excited … more feelings than I could probably name. And these feelings are a part of its value too; how it matters.

Theory

Here, I outline the main theoretical frameworks for the thesis, which pull on affect and queer theories. This subchapter is not intended to be a comprehensive breakdown of every theoretical aspect of this project but will

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and how we interact with gaming spaces (which, in turn, normalises a white point of view being assumed and anticipated).

[110] Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum, *Values at Play in Digital Games* (The MIT Press, 2014), 33.

set up a baseline understanding for analysis throughout. It will signal to which chapters different theoretical frames are especially relevant for.

Affect

Theories that engage with the complex notion of affect are central to the approach I adopt in this thesis. This was not decided before interviews were conducted but emerged through the interview data – as participants talked a lot about emotion, especially when talking about how videogames made them feel. Here, I will clarify when I mean by "affect" and "emotion" before I engage the theoretical framework in more detail below. Emotions are understood as a response to affect; an impression or sensation a body can experience which can generate a feeling. Affect can be understood as the function of emotion; how emotions not only affect our bodies, and the emotions they can experience, but how said emotional responses can orient bodies, including groups of bodies, in relation to objects and spaces. Affective impressions can also generate the absence, or loss, of a certain feeling. For example, as will be discussed especially in chapters 2 and 4, *Gamer as Affect* and *A Certain Kind of Gamer*, losing an affective experience, such as joy, fun or a sense of belonging, and feeling its *absence* is just an important emotive experience as the initial feeling itself.

Not only the interviews, but the research areas they highlighted such as gaming culture, digital masculinities, and Gamergate, naturally drew me to feminist theories of affect and feminist implementations.[111] Articulating affect to scrutinise these issues is feminist in intention. Gamergate was a moment in gaming history when especially women, people of colour, and queer people were under attack across gaming and digital spaces. Untangling the ideological discourses which upheld such modes of harm through affect theories that align with feminist intentions feels meaningful as well as instinctive. Affect then, in my analysis, becomes not only interrogatory but transformative.[112]

Important to establish in this subchapter is what affect *does*; what are its (dis)functions in gaming spaces, what does it do and not do, how does it make and unmake? To break down affective functions, I will be primarily using the affect theorist Sarah Ahmed. Sara Ahmed is a feminist scholar whose work sits at an intersection of queer, feminist and race studies. Her work is "concerned

[111] For example: Linda Åhäll, 'Affect as Methodology: Feminism and the Politics of Emotion', *International Political Sociology* 12, no. 1 (2018): 36-52. Todd W. Reeser and Lucas Gottzén, 'Masculinity and affect: new possibilities, new agendas', *International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 13, no. 3-4 (2018): 145-157.

[112] Clare Hemmings, 'Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation', *Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (1 August 2012): 147–61.

with how bodies and worlds take shape; and how power is secured and challenged in everyday life worlds."[113] Her academic interests are incredibly relevant to my own approach, which is invested in how bodies and gaming spaces function and form, how masculinity and whiteness, in particular, operate within gaming spaces and identities; and the consequences of such operations for women, people of colour, and queer people.

Bodies and Objects

Figure 1, a screenshot from *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Siege* (2015) in which a player on the defending team aims their gun at a member of the attacking team.

First, we must establish how affect interacts with objects and bodies. Affect is not just understood as something pre-conscious but is understood by some to be pre-individual, which has implications for how we understand its interactions with bodies and objects.[114] Or, to put it more simply, affects can exist before we encounter them. Ahmed argues that emotions themselves do not circulate but rather the objects of emotion, that can become "sticky" or "saturated" with affect, do.[115] I will address this idea in *Chapter 6: A Gamer*

[113] Sara Ahmed, "Bio," *Feminist Killjoys Blog,* n.d. https://www.saranahmed.com/bio-cv.
[114] Patricia Ticineto Clough, 'The New Empiricism: Affect and Sociological Method', *European Journal of Social Theory* 12, no. 1 (1 February 2009): 48.
[115] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Second edition. (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 10–11.

Apocalypse, where players discuss how they felt about certain videogames, especially how those videogames ended or why they ended; in other words, how videogames as objects can be sticky with affect. Within such operations, it is important to understand that we can encounter the same affect, for example the same videogame, but have a different feeling towards it. Ahmed describes this as miscommunicating. [116] For example, two players can have a different response to a videogame. One player might find a violent first-person-shooter like *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Siege* (2015) exhilarating, whilst another might find its presentation of violence stressful or gratuitous [*Figure 1*].[117] Both players have an affective response to the game, to the game's features, and the affective "stickiness" of *Siege* circulates; but they have a different feeling, or reaction, to the affective impression the game gives.

Affects do not just circulate across bodies and objects, but orient bodies in relation to other bodies, objects, and spaces; affect operates *relationally*. In other words, they can determine how we relate to ourselves, each other and, in this instance, videogames. And a key part of affect's relational function is the emotions we experience *from* affective impressions. Emotions are relational in that they "involve (re)actions or relations of 'towardness' or 'awayness'."[118] We can see this towardness/awayness in my *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Siege* example, how the way an object's affect on us makes us feel might, in turn, affect how we orient towards or away from it. Affects have bodily implications, not just for how we feel but how we literally position ourselves in relation to others, and other things. Ahmed builds on the idea of orientations in *Queer Phenomenology*, when she writes that "it matters how we arrive at the places we do."[119] How we arrive determines what is in view, what is in reach, and what sits behind us: our conditions of "emergence."[120] The importance of unpacking how bodies emerge in the places they do will be especially pulled upon in *Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer*. To return to bodies and objects, our direction and location can be the result of affect – how we feel about what brought us to this time and place, and what objects are in reach around us.

Finally, when writing on bodies especially, I want to stress the materiality of affect. Feminist philosopher Teresa Brennan and human geographer Nigel Thrift argue that we cannot just understand affect as social but inherently physiological, as biological in some sense.[121] To turn to game studies briefly, Aubrey Anable is a games scholar who interrogates games as "affective

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[116] Ahmed, 10–11.
[117] Ubisoft Montreal, *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Siege*, Ubisoft, PlayStation 4, Windows, Xbox One, PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, Google Stadia, 2015.
[118] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 8.
[119] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 2.
[120] Ahmed, 119.
[121] Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Cornell University Press, 2004), 3; Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory* (Routledge, 2008), 252.

systems."[122] She focuses on casual games, but importantly introduces affect theory to the analysis of videogames – an analytical framework I build upon by bringing together *gamers* and affect. Anable's emphasis on materiality, stressing the importance of touch, buttons, and screens as well as the game that sits beyond them, folds comfortably into Ahmed's own framework in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.[123] Ahmed writes about how emotions shape surfaces of individual and collective bodies; how the reaction (the way we relate to the emotional response generated) to an affect is about how that affect impresses upon us. She writes:

> If the contact with an object generates feeling, then emotion and sensation cannot be easily separated.[124]

This is another way in which affect becomes material, literally imbuing an object with the affective impression it gives. The press goes both ways when we play a videogame, we press the joystick, buttons or mousepad and watch something change on screen as a result; and the game presses *back* through the affective sensations it affords. I will prise apart this concept more in *Chapter 5: Gamer Counter-spaces*, when I discuss a gaming controller to set up a spatial framework for my analysis. Important to stress here, is that affect – whilst being an often intangible, hard to pin down thing – is materially felt and embodied.

The virtual aspect of play can complicate understanding affect as a bodily, corporeal function but Brian Massumi's conceptualisation of affect can help us understand the body as *virtual* in its inherent, contrasting incorporeality and materiality.[125] Massumi is a philosopher who is heavily invested in the functions of affect when considering power and embodiment, emphasising the importance of understanding the body in motion (never static) when conceptualising its virtual state. Whilst Massumi's insistence on virtuality may stray too far from Ahmed and Anable's own prioritising of materiality, which my research is concerned with, his understanding of the body as simultaneously incorporeal and material may help bridge the gap between the physical body and the digital body (the bodies of people who exist in online spaces, or avatars in a game, for example). The body can exist, through Massumi's interpretation, as "real yet incorporeal" which helps it maintain legibility in a semi-virtual, semi-material sense.[126] Through this legibility, the body's affective impressions maintain coherence within and between virtual and material space.

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[122] Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*.
[123] Anable.
[124] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 6.
[125] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Duke University Press, 2002), 21.
[126] Massumi, 5.

Spaces and Shapes

Affect constitutes how we feel about the gaming world(s) we are in, not just the objects and other bodies we encounter within them. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed argues that happiness is a form of world making and articulates this by building on the idea of bodily orientations that she set up in *Queer Phenomenology.* Here, I am understanding pleasure, or happiness, as possible impressions of affect. Ahmed writes:

> When we feel pleasure from such objects, we are aligned; we are facing the right way. We become alienated – out of line with an affective community – when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are attributed as being good.[127]

The community takes on a shape because of how affect creates connective possibility. Importantly, an affective community is also a potential site of disconnection; of an affect we might turn away from. This simultaneous moment of connection and disconnection is what determines a community's shape; not only what bodies could fall into affective community together, but what bodies *do not*.

In *Queer Phenomenology* Ahmed writes a lot about how bodies and spaces interact. She writes that "space is dependent on bodily inhabitance," and goes on to articulate that: "phenomenology reminds us that spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body."[128] Vital to the interplay of body and space that Ahmed constructs, is that bodies affect the spaces they are in, as well as being affected *by* those spaces.[129] This means my interview participants, as well as describing how they experienced different gaming spaces, are simultaneously shaping those gaming spaces themselves when they describe them. Sometimes bodies can fit differently in spaces too. We will examine this concept more in *Chapter 2: Gamer as Affect*, where I discuss the different relationships participants have with the word gamer. Ahmed herself highlights this possibility when writing about comfort and effort, how to fit in a space is to be comfortable, but not to fit comfortably but arrive anyway (to be in a space even if does not feel right, or was not made for someone like you) can involve "painstaking labor [sic]."[130] This framework, of spaces being harder for certain types of bodies to arrive in, will be especially relevant in *Chapter 5: Gamer Counter-spaces*, when I consider the National Videogame Museum as a gaming space.

Finally, the spaces affect constructs are fragile and we can observe this by using Gamergate as an example. As set out in the *Introduction*, discourses surrounding Gamergate were heavily invested in fun; the fun of white men in

[127] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010), 41.
[128] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 6–9.
[129] Ahmed, 12.
[130] Ahmed, 62.

particular and how it was under attack.[131] In Ahmed's seminal piece "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness" she argues that you, the feminist, "cause unhappiness by revealing the causes of unhappiness" by "exposing how happiness is sustained."[132] Whilst discussing happiness here, not fun, Ahmed's conceptualisation of the "killjoy" is key to understanding the affective operations of Gamergate. Part of what triggered Gamergate was increased discussion of issues like representation in gaming spaces. In other words, discussions that exposed "how happiness [was] sustained" for the stereotypical, white and male Gamergater; games being (the majority of the time) for people like him. It is through the feeling of your fun being killed, or under attack, that white men can view themselves as an aggrieved party, a grievance we will unpack in more detail in *Chapter 4: A Certain Kind of Gamer: The boy in the basement*. Ahmed stresses that even if joy is premised on false pretences, we must understand that "to kill a fantasy can still kill a feeling."[133] This means, as I will address further in *Chapters 4 and 6* especially, that affects can still be generative and productive even if rooted in falsehoods, or illogical beliefs. The idea that videogames are apolitical, for example, is a fantasy that allows players to disengage from social and representational issues that might affect the enjoyment for, usually, non-white male players. To point out representational issues in videogames is to kill the apolitical fantasy that representation in games is a non-issue. By revealing the cause of unhappiness, you become the *cause* of unhappiness; allowing the white man, the aggrieved party, to see you as a killjoy and not the actual issue, i.e. representation. How we *feel* about representation in a videogame can affect how we relate to the videogame as an object, and how we engage with the space the videogame provides; whether we play it, or even how we play it. For a white male Gamergater, the affective impression an encroachment on the white male hegemony within gaming gives could be one of *loss*; of something taken away. Representation, through its affective impression, becomes about more than just representation, but about a gamer's sense of belonging, and potentially his sense of self. This is one of the ways affect operates beyond feeling itself, constructing our understandings of our surroundings; of the spaces we exist within. And importantly, the fragility of affect opens it up to possibility. Ahmed assures us that to kill joy is also to make space, room for "possibility" when writing about seats at a table as an example.[134] To undermine the beliefs Gamergate propagated is a necessary act but not necessarily a wholly destructive endeavour.

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[131] Bo Ruberg, 'No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games That Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt', *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2, no. 2 (2015): 111.
[132] Ahmed, 'Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness', 582–91.
[133] Ahmed, 582; Jonathan A Allan, 'Phallic Affect, or Why Men's Rights Activists Have Feelings', *Men and Masculinities* 19, no. 1 (2016): 28; Bezio, 'Ctrl-Alt-Del: GamerGate as a Precursor to the Rise of the Alt-Right', 557.
[134] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 20.

Clare Hemmings, a theorist who works at the intersection of feminist and queer studies, is invested in how ideas circulate and the interrelation between nationalism, sexuality, and feminism. She writes that in order to know differently we have to "feel differently."[135] At stake in considerations of fun and pleasure, then, are not just those very feelings but the consequences of the way those emotions orient us to and away from objects, bodies and the narratives attached to them. And part of this orientation is not just how we feel but how we understand discourses that surround us and, in turn, shape the conditions gaming functions within. Within the thesis, affective frameworks provide vital building blocks for understanding the operations of feeling, bodies, and spaces; both within and beyond the interview data itself. However, queer frameworks (including Ahmed's) more so facilitate the active untangling, reframing work that occurs within analysis; especially analysis that tackles complex ideological issues like how to breakdown the boy in the basement's worldview (*Chapter 4*). In more detail, I will now lay out frameworks and concepts that have a grounding in queer theory and queer approaches.

Figure 2, a screenshot from *Getting Over It,* where the player attempts to climb a mountain using very difficult in-game controls. Losing your grip will result in you [the player] falling all the way back down to the bottom.

[135] Hemmings, 'Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation', 150.

Queerness

Two additional queer scholars, Jack Halberstam and Heather Love, alongside Ahmed and primarily her work *Queer Phenomenology*, provide vital queer frameworks here; some of their core arguments underpinning the thesis' broader theoretical contributions, and its argumentative approach to the challenges that participants identified in gaming space. Jack Halberstam is a queer studies and gender scholar whose relevant work here will help us unpack paradox and find pleasure, and hope, in hopelessness or in loss. Heather Love is an english and history scholar whose feminist work is concerned with social justice, queerness, and gender. Here, Love's work on the past – how we engage with especially painful pasts – will be key to considering how we can contend with gaming's complex histories. Next, I will lay the groundwork for Ahmed, Halberstam and Love's relevant queer theoretical frameworks throughout the thesis.

Paradox and Pain

Ahmed argues that pain takes apart and reshapes individual and collective bodies. Whilst this pain might reorient us, create or break down new borders, the issue of pain is partly our inability to move away from it.[136] Whilst pain might shift us, or pull us, the pain itself presses on *our* surface or skin and is materially embodied and felt; we are reformed, wounded. Pain must not be understood as a binary bad feeling, but as a potential site for transgression and transformation. There are moments where pain and pleasure blur. For example, a frustrating game like *Getting Over It* (2017) deliberately combines difficult, irritating play with the immense pleasure of actual victory in-play (derived from the very struggle to obtain victory in the first place) [Figure 2].[137] As Participant 1 described his experience of *Getting Over It*: it was "the worst seven hours of my life but also the greatest."[138] It is within these parameters, of transition and torment, that I turn to Halberstam.

When Halberstam writes about losing in *The Queer Art of Failure*, he considers how it functions within a queer framework, or rather, a queer reimagining. He writes: "Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well."[139] Within heteropatriarchal systems of expectation and success, queers will always fail; we cannot meet the requirements of succeeding within such parameters, nor should we want to. And there is power in this failure, in this

[136] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 24–39.
[137] Bennett Foddy, *Getting Over It*, Windows, MacOS, Android, iOS, Linux, 2017.
[138] Participant 1, 4.
[139] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

refusal. Halberstam extends this argument to capitalist systems of power, and how failure can facilitate reformation or change.[140] He argues:

> Resistance takes the form of investing in counterintuitive modes of knowing such as failure and stupidity; we might read failure, for example, as a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing.[141]

He goes on to write that "in losing we will find another way of meaning making."[142] Finding meaning through loss, or losing, will be especially relevant to *Chapter 4: A Certain kind of Gamer: The boy in the basement* and *Chapter 6: A Gamer Apocalypse*, the latter chapter especially focusing on loss in games and how we contend with it. Halberstam's framework of queer failure, how it opens up possibilities as well as negotiating systems which cause us pain, will be vital in finding hope and possibility when contending with moments of fatalism in analysis. As I will explore, especially in *Chapter 4*, the histories gaming culture is built upon can feel inescapable and immutable. A queer approach, finding power in pain and resistance in loss, provides vital survival mechanisms.

Contending with the Past(s)

The second queer approach I want to address is from Heather Love's work *Feeling Backward*, where she considers how the queer community contends, or could contend, with its complex, and often painful, pasts. This relates to my interviews with two different "pasts" to consider; that of gaming's early history – primarily the 1980s – and Gamergate, which happened in 2014. This thesis considers how participants talk about issues stemming from said past(s). In *Chapter 2*: *Gamer as Affect*, I breakdown different participant definitions of gamer identity, and how those definitions relate to gaming histories. In *Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer*, I closely analyse objects from the National Videogame Museum and its archive, my analysis underpinning a historical grounding of gamer identity. Throughout the rest of the thesis, Love's approach to "feeling backward" is integral to my own, and how I understand my interview participants' and the ways in which they "feel backward."

At the beginning of her book, Love sets out that "the challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it."[143] Here, Love is writing about queer histories, but this approach can be relevant to how we contend with gaming pasts too. Gaming histories, especially events like Gamergate, are painful – and sometimes engaging with them can feel like an all-consuming

[140] Halberstam, 88.
[141] Halberstam, 11.
[142] Halberstam, 25.
[143] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 1.

endeavour. Sometimes it is easier to dismiss or distance ourselves from them, and sometimes we do this distancing subconsciously, instinctively. I discuss this act of distancing more explicitly in separate work around how the far-right and gaming as an issue emerged in my interview data.[144] Significant here, and to the wider thesis, is that participants engaged with gaming's history with varying degrees of intimacy; and this held relevance for how they constructed their understanding of gaming culture in the present.

One core aspect of Love's argument, is that to reconstruct the past without acknowledging its hurt or pain, can be to "build on ruins."[145] The concept of ruination will be especially relevant in *Chapter 4: A Certain Kind of Gamer,* when I contend with the trope of the boy in the basement and how the basement he resides in houses this ruination; a place of regret, and rot. Part of what can make looking backwards so hard is, as Love writes:

> Paying attention to what was difficult in the past may tell us how far we have come, but that is not all it tells us; it also makes visible the damage that we live with in the present.[146]

This concept emerged in a lot of interviews, in that participants who more readily engaged with painful pasts – especially Gamergate – could articulate how it affected the gaming spaces they existed in today. In *Chapter 6: A Gamer Apocalypse,* I explore the way participants feel backwards in moments of gameplay – embracing or acknowledging hurt – and how this can inform negotiations of gaming subjectivities more broadly.

Finally, Love's approach does not just resonate with looking backwards, but looking forward. She writes that "Criticism serves two important functions: it lays bare the conditions of exclusion and inequality and it gestures toward alternative trajectories for the future."[147] Reconsidering engagement with gaming pasts, how participants make contact with them, is a modality that *feels forward* as well as feeling back. Part of the work of this project is to lay bare how insidious, far-right ideas quietly circulate in gaming discourses – ideas that emerged explicitly in Gamergate but can be traced back in gaming historically (*Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer*) - and the circulation of such ideas is reflected in the ways we engage with gaming histories. To consider how we can more productively look back without being "destroyed" is a vital endeavour, not just for unearthing a gaming history we can more readily face and unpack, but for addressing those issues in the present and future.

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[144] Imo Kaufman, 'Silence, Distance and Disclosure. The Bleed between the Far-Right and Gaming', *Gamevironments*, no. #18 (11 July 2023): 1–37.
[145] Love, *Feeling Backward*, 21.
[146] Love, 29.
[147] Love, 29.

Queer theory and frameworks, whilst not the primary analytical approach, felt vital here. As I have written in other work, when using Henry Urbach's groundbreaking piece "Closets, Clothes, Disclosure":[148]

> It is significant for queer theory to play a part in eroding ideological ground that threatens the existence and happiness of queer bodies themselves, though I must emphasise it is not only queer bodies that the far-right in gaming threatens but all those outside the white, cis, heteronormative, able-bodied norm – and even many within that norm.[149]

This assertion is relevant here too. It feels important for queer theory, for queerness, to be a part of this project's ideological untangling. Of course, my own queerness and the queerness of some participants – which some did and did not discuss in the interview itself – reasserts the centrality of this approach. I am one of those queer bodies in gaming spaces, as are several interview participants, as were/are many of those affected by issues this thesis is concerned with.

Chapter 1: Conclusion

This chapter has offered a comprehensive breakdown of my methodology, situated me as a researcher, and established the project's theoretical underpinning. Important to reiterate here, is this thesis stems from a nontraditional oral history; a collection of gaming experiences, and gaming lives, that offer glimpses into wider life stories, whilst not intended to entirely uncover them. Even traditional oral history interviews, which might seek to record a more rounded life story, can never be complete; their very incompleteness imbuing them with meaning. The theoretical frameworks I have discussed are not the only theory I pull upon in this thesis, across both queerness and affect, but provide a foundational understanding for later chapters to build upon.

The next chapter, *Gamer as Affect: Activation and alignment through the lens of fun*, will establish how the thesis understands gamer as an affective identity, which has further implications for how we prise it apart.

[148] Henry Urbach, 'Closets, Clothes, Disclosure', *Assemblage*, no. 30 (1996): 63–73.
[149] Kaufman, 'Silence, Distance and Disclosure. The Bleed between the Far-Right and Gaming', 7.

Chapter 2

Gamer as Affect: Activation and alignment through the lens of fun

"I do think it [gamer] does signify different things to different people for sure."

- *Participant 13, 4.*

Figure 3, Duke Nukem Forever, 2011.

Duke Nukem Forever was the first-person-shooter 2011 reboot of the *Duke Nukem* franchise, which originally saw huge success across three titles in the 1990s.[150] The design of its box is audaciously masculine, with Duke's huge pecs and arms emphasised by the pose and low angle view of him on the front cover, a woman's hand slinking around his waist and his large, smoking gun casually leaning between his thighs in a not-too-subtle phallic gesture [*Figure 3*]. The back cover reads:

> THE KING IS BACK! Cocked, Loaded, and Ready for Action. Duke Nukem is pure, unadulterated FUN. Alien hordes are stealing Earth's women. But nothing stands between Duke and his babes. Epic ass-kicking, massive weapons, giant explosions – yes. Inappropriate, insensitive and offensive – you bet. Get ready for the most bitchin' and bodacious time you're likely to ever have.

"Fun" is emphasised in capital letters. This fun is apparently delivered through big guns, explosions and, of course, "babes." The game advertises itself as: "inappropriate, insensitive and offensive." This is all part of the fun, "bodacious" package. However, the game did not see the same success of its predecessors. In a 2020 article exploring why the game was received poorly, game journalist Buck Rivers wrote:

> Critics commonly remarked that the game was juvenile in a distasteful manner. The game featured gratuitous nudity, constant swearing, fecal humor [sic], and rampant misogyny. For many, this was too far to go for a game in 2011, and was the primary problem many had with *Duke Nukem Forever*.[151]

Fun is subjective. The people who designed and put together this game – and its packaging – evidently did think it was fun. They were so confident in its "fun-ness" that they put FUN in block capitals. But, who is this game fun for? Whilst the humour and

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[150] Gearbox Software, *Duke Nukem Forever*, 2K. Windows, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Mac OS X, 2011.

[151] Buck Rivers, "Why didn't Duke Nukem reboot successfully," *Screen Rant*, 29th September, 2020. https://screenrant.com/duke-nukem-forever-reboot-problems-bad-remake-series/#:~:text=Why%20Duke%20Nukem%20Forever%20Didn,had%20with%20Duke%20Nukem%20Forever.

style of game might have been more permissible, more "fun", in the 1990s, it struggled to find a footing in the early 2010s. *Duke Nukem Forever* demonstrates how fun is elastic, it can be stretched across different phenomena like faecal humour or bodacious babes, but also fragile. Fun can go too far, or maybe in the wrong direction, insofar that it no longer becomes fun – it becomes "distasteful," "gratuitous." It can even reproduce "rampant misogyny." This point from Rivers is evocative of how fun can be tied up in wider belief systems, systems which negotiate identity and power. To return to the earlier question I posed, who is this game fun for, it is quite evidently supposed to be fun for young men; with its heteronormative emphasis on getting women and style of humour. And beyond the game, this has implications for who plays games and who games are made for, especially in the first-person-shooter genre – which the original Duke Nukem titles were foundational in the evolution of. However, myself and a fellow member of National Videogame Museum staff *did* have fun when she was sorting through a box in the archive and found this game. We read the description out loud and laughed, we laughed at Duke Nukem's ridiculous pose, and the woman's slinking hand; we found fun in the game's stupidness, in its offensiveness. But we did not laugh *with* Duke Nukem. We laughed at him.

When interview participants talked about gamer as an identity, word, or source of meaning, they often talked about fun or implicated fun. Fun, enjoyment, and pleasure are integral emotional experiences in how we understand videogame play, and by extension gaming identity. Although, as seminal game studies scholar Jesper Juul points out in *The Art of Failure*, the enjoyment we derive from play can, and often is, contrasted by moments of frustration, annoyance and even sometimes tragedy.[152] Fun is often lateral to moments of un-fun in a paradoxical negotiation, in which pleasure is a simultaneous mediation of pain. As Juul writes, when discussing how we dislike failure yet actively seek it out in play, "I dislike failing in games, but I dislike *not* failing even more."[153] *Duke*

[152] Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Videogames* (MIT Press, 2013).
[153] Juul, 2.

Nukem Forever is, as its poor performance suggests, not that fun of a game to most players, even though the design of the game stressed just how FUN it was, and me and a NVM colleague *did* have fun giggling at the packaging even though we would probably find the game content itself "distasteful."

This chapter examines how interview participants deploy fun when talking about gamer identity. It considers the implications fun has for how we might perform a gamer identity, and for the policing of gaming identities and communities more broadly. Fun works as a term to align us to and away from certain identity markers (e.g. gamer), gaming communities and spaces and games themselves. Fun, beyond its significance for how we orient, describe, and feel, has ideological significances. Fun can be deployed to activate, justify, or obscure certain discourses in gaming spaces. Across participant discussions around fun and gamer two key themes emerged, which I will unpack further in analysis below: fun as an aligning, potentially normalising frame and fun as an activating force which can be tied up in wider belief systems. Important across both themes is that fun is explored through an affective framework – which I will establish in the next section – which has implications for gamer as an *affective identity*. This chapter will not only explore the operations of gamer, fun and affect but set a theoretical grounding for the thesis as a whole: **that gamer is an affective identity**, in that it can be made, undone, and negotiated through affect.

As established in *Chapter 1: Research Methods*, affect is understood as the function of emotions that have bodily and spatial implications. These emotions can be unconscious (not consciously felt) or pre-conscious (the affect circulates via the objects it sticks to before we come into contact with it), and can change or maintain how we interact and orient with ourselves, each other, and spaces. For example, to find a game fun can be to be drawn towards it; to not find it fun – or to actively dislike it – can mean to fail to align with that game and fail to enter the (virtual) space it affords.

First, this chapter addresses the subjectivity of fun and establishes looking at fun through affect. It then analyses fun across the two themes identified above: looking at fun as alignment and its implications for community formation; and fun as activating certain ideological beliefs, especially Gamergate discourses regarding gamer identities.

The theoretical frame

Fun

Before breaking down how gamer means and matters through the lens of fun, what is meant by fun must first be established. Here, fun is understood as subjective and inherently personal, which I will unpack in more detail blow. First, I should note this chapter is not interested in resolutely pining down or defining fun. This chapter examines what fun as a term and as an emotional experience is *doing*, not just within the act of play, but in gaming cultural discourses, especially in relation to gamer identity and the ways interview participants articulate it. In this section, how this chapter understands fun will be established, before I go on to introduce relevant theories of affect.

Fun, despite its prevalence in games studies, is rarely defined and sometimes remains unmentioned, existing in the words unwritten. This might be part of a desire for videogames, and game studies by extension, to be taken more seriously; as fun is arguably frivolous in nature, silly and hard to quite pin down. Or fun, perhaps as an obvious goal of play, is often just taken for granted. For example, when Jesper Juul writes in *A Casual Revolution* that being a gamer "[is] the simple feeling of a *pull*, of looking at a game and wanting to play it (his emphasis)" a part of this *pull* could be fun.[154] Despite referencing personal tastes later and mentioning the concept of "taste" several times, he does not make this possibility explicit.[155] Fun often, instead, sits in implications. When we write about what makes a game good, we often mean fun by proxy; surely a good game would be fun, or a game that is fun could be said to be good? Of course, not all games are supposed to be fun, at least not all the time. *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) is a game with a great many accolades, yet is notorious for heart wrenching scenes, including one where a core character from the original game is murdered, that are probably not fun for the average player.[156] Participant 11 describes this scene in his interview: "Joel is so brutally and horrendously murdered."[157]

Within game studies, pleasure is often referenced rather than fun. Useful for understanding fun here, is the different ways scholars articulate pleasurable possibilities. For example, games scholar James Newman has written about the kinaesthetic pleasures of videogame play, and stresses the importance of the

[154] Juul, *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players*, 2.
[155] Juul.
[156] Naughty Dog. *Last of Us Part II.* Sony Interactive Entertainment. PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5. 2020.
[157] Participant 11, 9.

enjoyment the "on-lookers" to videogame play too.[158] In other work, Newman also highlights the "participatory role of the player" in deriving their own enjoyment, pointing out that in games without "win states" (a clear end point or goal) that the player's satisfaction comes from their own concept of 'winning'.[159] In other words, pleasure cannot be understood separately from the body, or bodies, that take part within in play; including the sensory experience of play itself, and the agency of players to determine their own pleasures. James Paul Gee, a linguist whose specialisms include videogames, literacy and learning has called attention to the importance of a game's kinaesthetic pleasure too.[160] However, Gee also highlights the importance of the cultural models videogames provide players to take part (play) within. He writes that popular cultural models amongst young men in particular, such as "fighting (and even losing) against all odds…standing alone against the horde no matter what" are pervasive. Building on this, Gee argues that "People get pleasure out of seeing their cultural models confirmed and, in the case of videogames, actually getting to act them out."[161] This acting out as a part of the very kinaesthetic pleasures games afford; the act of *acting out* inherently connected to the act of play. This last point has implications for Gamergate, and the idea of the white male hero no longer being standard (or at least, becoming *less* standard). In other words, Gamergate can be understood as a moment where the cultural models Gamergates derived pleasure in enacting became under threat.

Pleasure through videogame play, then is a complex experience, that stretches beyond the act of play itself to encompass who is taking part in play, and the cultural contexts play allows us to explore, or affirm, as well as the player's own personal investments - how the player *participates* in the act of play itself by bringing their own win conditions. Even if we just focus on the act of play, and its possible pleasures being kinaesthetic as Newman and Gee put forth, it offers us numerous ways of understanding fun. Fun can be the tingle in your spine when you land the headshot in the first-person-shooter *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* (2020), the warmth in your chest when you feed your chickens in the roleplaying-adventure-management game *Stardew Valley* (2016), or the easing of tension in your whole body when you finally complete your first run in the roguelike *Hades* (2020).

Beyond kinaesthetic elements, here I also understand fun as political and personal. When Gee writes about videogames allowing players to act out

[158] James Newman, 'The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame: Some thoughts on player-character relationships in videogames,' *Game Studies* 2, no. 1 (July 2002), https://www.gamestudies.org/0102/newman/.
[159] James Newman, *Videogames* (Routledge, 2013), 22.
[160] James Paul Gee, *What videogames have to teach us about learning and literacy*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 125.
[161] Gee, *What videogames have to teach us about learning and literacy*, 154.

certain cultural models, this includes cultural models that have implications for certain belief systems or world views. For example, when discussing *Duke Nukem* Forever, as me and a colleague did in the National Videogame Museum's archive, it was quite evident that the game was intended to appeal to young men, and allowed the player to enact a story in which the player gets to be the hyper-macho hero and get all the girls. A player's own political views, how they feel about the representation of women in games, e.g. perhaps they are a woman themselves or a male feminist player who finds that kind of representation uncomfortable, could affect their ability to have fun if playing that game. This connects to Bo Ruberg's work, who, when exploring the queer possibilities of no fun and machoistic play, writes that: "Fun is cultural, structural, gendered, and commonly hegemonic."[162] How we experience fun is inherently tied to our lived experiences, and our identities. This means we can understand fun as subjective; not available to everyone equally and in the same ways.

Because fun can be understood as implicated by lived experience and wider political belief systems, what is and is not experienced, or seen, as fun has implications beyond the singular moment of gameplay. One of the issues Ruberg points out in Juul's theoretical framework in *The Art of Failure* is that he still operates on the assumption games *should* be fun, and that fun means the same thing across players.[163] Part of the issue of this assumption, is that because fun is personal and political, what a game dictates as fun has implications for the kind of player it anticipates, or alienates. For example, if *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* (2020) is supposed to be fun, this might be challenging for a queer player who is aware of Regan's wider political significance beyond his words and actions in-game. Or a player might find *Pokémon Red* (1996) fun but struggle to enjoy a game in which they cannot authentically play as their own gender and/or ethnicity. Fun, in its operation as personal and political, thus works as a **normative frame** within which an implicit player is made and maintained. When the word fun is deployed objectively, or without clarification, it can signal to **normative** ideas that are constructed by and through videogames. For example, even the kinaesthetic features a game deploys are not available equally to every player; some require controllers or game controls which demand two hands, which inherently alienates a player without two hands. The implicit player connects to the broader concept of "implied audience" in media research. Media and communications scholar Sonia Livingstone stresses the importance of engaging with micro and macro analysis in implied audience research, especially when wanting to address/not reproduce existing

[162] Ruberg, 'No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games That Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt', 112.
[163] Ruberg, 112.

inequalities.[164] This is an approach we can also find in game studies when, for example, Adrienne Shaw in her work on "moving beyond the constructed audience" argues: "Identity as a gamer, like all identities, exists as a conversation between the individual and social, structural discourses."[165] *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* and *Pokémon Red* demonstrate how design choices, and the implicit player they construct, have implications for the player the game design anticipates. Games like *Pokémon Red* implicitly assume a male, non-Black player through design choices, and *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* through their narrative assumes a non-queer player.[166] Such assumptions have further implications for fun; the kind of fun videogames can provide us, and who that fun is accessible to.

Fun as affective

Fun, across all its subjectivities and operations, will be understood as affective. When affect, feminist and videogame studies scholar Aubrey Anable tells us that "videogames are affective systems" one possible result of said affect, is fun.[167] As discussed in *Chapter 1: Theory*, affects are pre-individual, meaning they can exist in their own right before we come into contact with them. For example a videogame can become sticky with affect, giving the object an affective impression which can generate an emotional response when we encounter it. To put it simply, affect is pre-feeling; a force that informs our emotional state.[168] These emotions are embodied within the body but also shape and orient bodies in spaces. These orientations can then *shape* the spaces bodies inhabit; in other words, affective operations are part of "our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it."[169] Affect is not just understood as a corporeal embodied experience but, in technological contexts, can produce embodied affects beyond the physical form.[171] An example of this would be an avatar embodying the affects we experience in play; when you absorb a dragon's soul for the first time in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) you might feel a rush of excitement, but the avatar (player character) literally *embodied* the said affect – the affect you then

[164] Sonia Livingstone, 'Audience Research at the Crossroads: The "implied Audience" in Media and Cultural Theory', *Cultural Studies* 1, no. 2 (1998): 193–217.
[165] Shaw, 'On Not Becoming Gamers: Moving Beyond the Constructed Audience'.
[166] In the case of *CoD: Black Ops Cold War* it also implicitly suggests queer people were not present in the game production process, especially in story writing.
[167] Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*, xii.
[168] Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect,* xvii.
[169] Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean O'Malley Halley, *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Duke University Press, 2007), ix; Clough, 'The New Empiricism: Affect and Sociological Method', 48.
[171] Clough and Halley, *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ix-2.

experienced in your material body.[172] In *Skyrim*, this manifests visually on screen as a flash of bright light that pulses across the sky, and the player can now use *Shouts* – a new ability for combat and exploration. Anable writes that screens, bodies and interfaces are "crucial sites of touch and entanglement, where […] representation is *matter*."[173] Here, Anable highlights an important aspect of affect in technological contexts; that it is still crucial in how it *touches* and *matters* in terms of our physical bodies. And this can have implications for the spaces bodies inhabit too. As we will explore in *Chapter 5: Gamer Counter-Spaces*, how participants orient themselves in physical spaces can affect who those spaces are accessible, or welcoming, to. Mattering, for Anable, does not just signify importance but literal materiality, including the body and the objects and/or spaces it interacts with. Affect can be experienced in virtual space but is not wholly virtual itself, the unique aspect of this within play being that our actions – our narrative choices or the press of a button – often trigger the virtual/audio instance which activates the bodily affect. The same can be said for fun; it occurs in virtual space, often because of our own bodily actions, and resonates with us physically.

The main affective framework I will use in this chapter, and throughout the thesis, is guided by the ground breaking feminist, affect theorist Sara Ahmed – whose work is concerned with queerness, race, and social justice. Especially relevant to this chapter, is Ahmed's affective framework in her book *Promise of Happiness*, which will facilitate an exploration of how fun can affectively orient bodies in spaces. Although I do not understand fun and happiness as interchangeable terms, Ahmed's theories of happiness/joy are still very relevant here. Ahmed articulates the way pleasures, or failing to find pleasures, can be embodied by bodies, both collective and individual, which in turn has implication for community formation. Fun can be understood as a kind of gaming pleasure and, as I will argue, is key for breaking down how this thesis understands gamer as an affective identity. An important part of this identity-making is community making. Understanding fun through an affective frame allows us to scrutinise fun's functionality beyond, as well as encompassing, how it is embodied and felt; how it aligns bodies to and away from games, identity markers (e.g. gamer) and communities.

This chapter understands fun as a pleasurable experience, one which affects how we interact with and understand ourselves, others, and objects (in this case, most likely a videogame). Understanding fun through this framework is

[172] Bethesda Game Studios, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, Bethesda Softworks, Windows, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 5, 2011.
[173] Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*, 46.

best facilitated by turning to Ahmed's description of happiness as orientation device. When breaking down the interplay of pleasure, objects, and subjects she writes:[174] She writes:

> When we feel pleasure from such objects [objects that are attributed as good], we are aligned; we are facing the right way. We become alienated – out of line with an affective community – when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are attributed as being good.[175]

Drawing on this framing, fun can be understood an affective experience under which players can become aligned, or fail to align, with gamer identity. Finding a game fun, especially one attributed as "good," facilitates a form of *community formation*. We can see this in practise as communities form, mostly online, around certain videogames – especially those with a significant online player base. For example, *Overwatch 2* was released in October 2022, resulting in the closure of *Overwatch* (2016).[176] Clips were released of the servers' final moments, in which players made their characters dance and move around together – no longer engaging in competition but coming together to celebrate the ending of a game they enjoyed. The in-game chat was flooded with messages, such as "see you on the other side!"[177] *Overwatch's* connectivity was tangible in these final moments, with players ignoring the team divide to come together; demonstrating the game's evident ability to foster a community in which players felt attached to each other, not just to the game itself. Examining moments within gaming communities like *Overwatch's* demonstrates how fun is interpersonal and loaded with connective possibility. However, fun holds disconnective possibilities too: to fail to find a game fun, especially a game like *Overwatch,* can be to fail to find the community it offers.

Another integral aspect of fun's affective operation is understanding how fun is fragile. Fun's fragility can be understood through many possible instances: outside factors (e.g. noise, time constraints) can affect a player's ability to have fun, the play itself (e.g. the game design or mechanics), or other players can disrupt each other's fun (e.g. through verbal abuse or griefing in online

[174] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.
[175] Ahmed, 41.
[176] Blizzard Entertainment, *Overwatch*, Blizzard Entertainment, PlayStation 4, Windows, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, 2016. Blizzard Entertainment, *Overwatch 2*, Blizzard Entertainment, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5, Windows, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, 2023.
[177] Soradot. "overwatch 1 final moments *crying emoji* *crying emoji* *crying emoji*." *YouTube.* 3rd October, 2022. *https*://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBT9pqc7F58.

games).[178] The idea of players ruining each other's fun is especially important when we look back to the discourses surrounding Gamergate, and the idea of certain players' (white, straight, able bodied male players) fun being ruined or under threat. Ruberg themselves has noted how fun was "central" to Gamergate discourses.[179] Ahmed describes a parallel phenomenon in her seminal feminist piece "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness" in which she writes about how to point out issues of oppression and bigotry is often to kill joy: "The feminist subject in the room hence brings others down […] by exposing how happiness is sustained."[180] Whilst again discussing joy/happiness, not fun, Ahmed's articulation of pleasure as a limited resource is key here. Not all kinds of fun are "killed" when we expose how they are sustained but, in Ahmed's words, they can be when we (the feminist) disrupt "the freedom to look away" from the suffering on which such happiness (fun) is premised.[181] When we recall Gamergate, its discourses about games being under attack (due to increased diversity, women critiquing games etc.), part of what sparked such discourses were increased conversations *around* diversity in games, and pushback towards women (or people perceived as women) in game development. Such conversations made it harder for certain types of players to look away or to disengage from explicitly politically loaded discussions, especially around representation in videogames, meaning their fun was under threat because it forced players to at least partly confront their own privileges, as well as disrupting their ability to repeatedly play out their desired cultural models. In *Chapter 5: A Certain Kind of Gamer: The boy in the basement* I will further explore the implications of the white, male gamer feeling like the underdog and how he struggles to confront his own privileges within gaming space. Fun, despite its fragility, can be seriously loaded with racial and gendered expectations; for example, the white, male avatar naturalised as core game design. Fun can be disrupted by awareness of alternative subjectivities, even if a person's own subjectivities allowed them the initial luxury of not knowing (or noticing) how said fun is maintained. This reflects how fun is not only subjective, but *intersubjective*: not just personal, but *interpersonal*.

Another important aspect of fun regarding Gamergate, and broader political gaming discourses, is its ability to activate and justify our emotions. Masculinity scholars Allan Jonathan and Michael Kimmel both look at white men, masculinity and affect; white men being the focal point of Gamergate's

[178] Griefing is when a player in an online game sets out to annoy or disturb other player(s) and does not try and complete the object of game – sometimes players will even lose on purpose for the sake of griefing others.
[179] Ruberg, 'No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games That Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt', 111.
[180] Ahmed, 'Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness', 582.
[181] Ahmed, 196.

mobilisation. When players' declare their fun is under attack, or that their right to have fun excuses, for example, toxic behaviour in online games this is, in Jonathan's words, "a remarkably powerful declaration."[182] He writes this is because it "cannot be denied […] by turning to affect the men's rights activists do not need to prove the truth of their claims because their affects—the feeling […] is true."[183] Kimmel concurs with this point: "White men's anger is "real" – that is, it is experienced deeply and sincerely. But it is not "true"."[184] When Kimmel writes it is "not true" he does not contradict Allan but refers to the premise on which said feelings are based (e.g. female protagonists are ruining games), whereas Allan asserts that the feeling *is* true – rendering the actual validity of the claim irrelevant. This demonstrates how powerful affect can be, even if rooted in falsehoods. Fun becomes a smokescreen through which actual grievances can be implicitly aired. Part of fun's ability to do this is in its inherent subjectivity. Fun is not objective and can mean different things to different people, and through such subjectivities fun can be utilised to justify our own personal, affective experiences. The idea that games are just for white men is fantastical (in that people outside either/both identity markers have and always will play games) and yet it operates within the normative frame fun helps implicitly to establish.[185] Kimmel writes in 2013, the year before Gamergate, that cyberspace is a "new frontier" where men can "make it" and thus feel entitled to it (cyberspace).[186] The spatial element of cyber*space* feels especially important when we consider what kinds of bodies virtual spaces are made for; an idea we build on more in the next chapter, when we consider how videogame marketing and imagery can implicitly effect who feels they belong in the virtual spaces games afford. When thinking about virtual gaming spaces, fun is an affective experience men can feel entitled to. And the fear of losing out on that is a real feeling: ''my experiences are my experiences and you cannot deny them […] we [cannot] deny the veracity of the affect."[187]

To briefly reiterate, understanding fun through an affective frame allows us to conceptualise fun as both corporeal and virtual, as personal and subjective, as interpersonal and intersubjective, as fragile yet powerful – strong enough to align a community, to touch our physical selves through a digital screen and a cluster of pixels. Fun is a paradoxical affect, an instance of disconnection and connection; as we turn toward the screen, toward a certain community, we

[182] Allan, 'Phallic Affect, or Why Men's Rights Activists Have Feelings', 27.
[183] Allan, 27.
[184] Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men* (New York: Nation Books, 2013), 9.
[185] For example, see statistics about female player ownership here: Jim Ryan, Game & Services Network Segment, *Sony Group Corporation,* 7.
https://www.sony.com/en/SonyInfo/IR/library/presen/irday/pdf/2021/GNS_E.pdf.
[186] Kimmel, *Angry White Men*, 20.
[187] Allan, 'Phallic Affect, or Why Men's Rights Activists Have Feelings', 28.

simultaneously turn away from the room we sit in, from those who the community does not make space for. Fun, in its frivolousness, in its distinction to the political (that can ruin the fun) also works to blanket over more serious discourses; “games are for fun, they are not about X.” Fun is one of the many affective encounters that makes up the affective systems of videogames, but its special relevance here lies in its broader political significations; it’s ability to not only align us to and away from certain bodies, spaces and objects, but to activate certain feelings and ideas.

Fun as alignment: community formation and implicit identity policing

Many participants reference fun and/or enjoyment when defining gamer, and although some participants did not explicitly use the word fun, they did describe enjoying games. Enjoyment here appears to be deployed in the same manner that Participant 1 (who uses fun explicitly) uses fun. Enjoying games or finding them fun both involve deriving a kind of pleasure which helps to define gamer.

Note that gamer here is understood as a word with community function and implications; to be a gamer usually means to belong to a gaming community of some kind; even if we acknowledge that there are potentially as many different gaming communities as there are deployments of gamer. This understanding of gamer applies to the thesis as a whole, but is especially important in this chapter, in which we are establishing and exploring gamer through an affective lens.

Here are the core relevant quotes for this subsection, *Fun as alignment*, which I go on to unpack in analysis below.

Three participants align gamer, at least in part, with joyful or fun play:

> P1: I imagine there’s either one or two things it’s either people like my friends just normal people er playing games for fun having a good time they’re

> a laugh to be around or there's the child Fortnite gamers [laughs] with the squeaky voices[188]
>
> P13: I kind of I feel very ambivalent about erm calling myself a gamer in the sense that I do enjoy playing games and I've also kind of dabbled with creating some very short…games erm and I do work in a field where I also have to deal with erm game preservation and talking with creatives and and er game developers so[189]
>
> P14: I think of er just anyone playing games they enjoy […] like a gamer could be anyone any gender any any sexuality doesn't matter like it is someone who enjoys playing games that's what I think what that [unclear] defines a gamer[190]

Fun as a normative frame

Before I move on to analyse the quotes shared above, I want to address participant agency. Here, and throughout this chapter, participants are talking about gamer identity and what it means to them, and whilst I am scrutinising the meaning of their answers – considering how they interact with gaming discourses beyond the interview itself – their original intentions should still be acknowledged. I do not think participants went out of their way to define gamer in ways that intentionally policed gaming identity, at least in insidious or discriminatory ways. To the three participants above, it is important that gamer feels joyful, fun and is defined by such affective experiences: gamer is "fun, "a good time," "enjoy[ment]." This is demonstrative of Ahmed's affective structure, "affective community," which I outlined in the previous section; a community in which bodies (gamers) are "aligned" under their collective, interconnective fun.[191] Drawing on terminology from her book title, "Promise of Happiness," the idea of fun being *promised* feels important here too. As I explored when breaking down how we can define fun using Jesper Juul and Bo Ruberg's works, fun is complex and contradictory; it is never guaranteed, even if it is sought out. The idea of fun being "promised" is evocative of how to play

[188] Participant 1, 3.
[189] Participant 12, 4.
[190] Participant 14, 7.
[191] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 38–41.

videogames is often to take the risk that this promise will not be fulfilled. Within these positive, and relatively innocuous, definitions of gamer united under fun wider systems of power can be implicitly signalled to and negotiated. Just like the "FUN" in *Duke Nukem Forever* has implications for how videogames depict masculinity, and misogyny by extension. It is these, often subconscious, operations of fun's deployment that I turn to now.

Participant 1's description of gamer has implications for how it functions as an identity marker and the expectations of play that surround it. He contrasts a normal gamer against a child playing *Fortnite* (2017), suggesting that a normal gamer is an adult, and does not play *Fortnite* (and by extension, games associated with children). When Participant 1 imagines a gamer, as well as imagining a child who plays *Fortnite*, he tells us a gamer can be "just a normal [person] playing games for fun." Whilst this statement sounds open and flexible, the terms "fun" and "normal" are loaded with assumptions. although Participant 1 does not make any of these inferences explicit, a "normal" player is a determining concept, carrying with it implications for a person's identity, such as gender, race, and sexuality. For example, within gaming the player the market caters to and the reality of gaming's player diversity, are very different.[192] A study that looked at 93 of the top selling games between 2017 and 2021, found that 79.2% of main characters were male, and 54.2% were white.[193] The former statistic sits in stark contrast to Sony's 41% of PlayStation 4 or 5 owners being women in 2021.[194] Participant 1's use of "normal" implicitly suggests that there is a normative frame through which we understand gamer identity, and the existence of an *abnormal* player in turn. Fun is deployed by Participant 1 in the same manner when he says a gamer is someone "playing games for fun." As we have established, fun is personal and political and can mean different things to different players; for example, fun can be affected by a player's own subjectivities or accessibility challenges. What about a player who cannot find popular games, such as *League of Legends* (2009), fun because they cannot afford the bandwidth required and the game lags? Guided by Ahmed's framework regarding community formation, I describe this as "alienation," as failing to align under the affective community that gamer affords.[195] Participant 1 uses normal and fun in tandem; innocuous terms that are loaded with wider significations. Here, gamer is asserted as normal twice, once explicitly and once implicitly – through the unqualified definition of "a

[192] Shaw, 'On Not Becoming Gamers: Moving Beyond the Constructed Audience'.
[193] Brittney Lin, "Diversity in Gaming Report: An Analysis of Diversity in Video Game Characters," *Diamond Lobby*, 14th May, 2022. https://diamondlobby.com/geeky-stuff/diversity-in-gaming/.
[194] Jim Ryan, Game & Services Network Segment, *Sony Group Corporation,* 7. https://www.sony.com/en/SonyInfo/IR/library/presen/irday/pdf/2021/GNS_E.pdf.
[195] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 41.

good time." Participant 1 asserts gamer as "normal," and scrutinising his assertions here demonstrates how fun works as a normative frame when defining gamer; operating through words left unsaid, and in implication.

Limitations of Fun

How we experience fun holds significance, not only for who identifies as a gamer, but the games we choose to play – the gaming spaces we enter. These gaming spaces, in turn, can affect how, or if, we identify as gamers (or identify gamers).

We can observe this in Participant 1's description of *Fortnite*:

> P1: I've just got a big stigma against Fortnite it's not against the actual game itself […] the amount of children on that game is ridiculous the…thing in the gaming world is all that you've speak to just a normal person or it's a squeaker people that like their voices haven't broken they just like wah wah wah it's just weird and they […] tend to be exceptionally annoying[196]

He again asserts "normal people" and children as separate categories in the "gaming world," suggesting that "normal people," and normal gamers by extension, are adults or at least teenagers. He makes a point of telling us that he does not dislike the game itself, but dislikes the other types of players commonly on it (children), who he implies to be mostly male when he says "their voices haven't broken." Then he qualifies why he does not like them: they are "exceptionally annoying." This demonstrates how fun can circulate as a limited resource in gaming, the presence of children playing the game and having their own fun is disruptive to Participant 1's fun – who refers to them as "squeaker people" – meaning he cannot enjoy *Fortnite* despite telling us he has no issues with the "actual game itself." And I should note, as an entirely online multiplayer videogame, the "actual game" cannot exist without the players, and this includes players that are children. This is not only reflective of fun's subjectivity but its fragility; potentially undone by events that occur in gaming

[196] Participant 1, 15.

space, such as the sound of player voices. This demonstrates how, even if we find a game fun, other players can disrupt that fun – sometimes just with their presence (the sound of their voice). Fun is not just subjective but intersubjective, its interpersonal operation(s) in gaming spaces tied up with the fragility of its own affect.

We can observe another instance of fun being interpersonally disrupted with Participant 4. In her interview, she talks about not wanting to play certain online games due to other players swearing at her. She says: "as soon as people know that you've got a feminine voice they're like rah rah rah like straight away and I'm just like I can't be bothered […] entering myself into that."[197] Akin to Participant 1, other players (not the game itself) can drive her away from certain games: "I can't be bothered." Instead of finding them just annoying, however, Participant 4 potentially finds such players abusive. Important too, is that Participant 4's fun is disrupted due to her feminine voice, meaning her identity or performance (if we understand play as a kind of performance), of gamer is being policed due to feminine identity signifiers. Although, I should note that Participant 4 assured me she is not "that fussed [about] playing super competitive games anyway," telling us that not that much fun was at stake for her in said virtual spaces in the first place.[198] Again, reflecting fun's subjectivity. The ability to have fun and to be considered a legitimate gamer, at least in this kind of gaming space – online videogames – blurs. Fun is working to establish a normative gamer, as it circulates as a limited resource, through actual play as well as discourses around gaming. Both Participant 1 and Participant 4 describe issues around the sounds of voices, Participant 4 her own and Participant 1 other peoples'. In online games voices are often the only way we can identify people we cannot see, meaning the sound of a player's voice is one of the only effective ways players can get a sense of who other players are. Finding certain voices annoying, or harassing players because of how their voice sounds, are affective reactions and actions that carry implicit assumptions about who should be in gaming spaces, and who gaming spaces are made for. Fun draws us to, and away from, certain videogames and videogame spaces through such mechanisms.

However, it is not only other players that can disrupt our fun, but ourselves and our own play choices. Despite Participant 1 defining a gamer as someone who "plays games for fun" and "has a good time" he recounts several instances where this is not true for himself. During the interview I asked Participant 1 what disrupts his ability to have fun in online games. He brings up getting

[197] Participant 4, 13.
[198] Participant 4, 14.

"tilted" when other players play poorly due to not committing to the game.[199] This is another instance of players disrupting each other's fun. We then have the following discussion regarding issues of agency, as well as communal play, and Participant 1's (in)ability to have fun whenever he gets annoyed or tilted:

> P1: I'm playing and I'm just having fun trying to win etcetera as soon as somebody says anything o[h] like that were a bad play that ruins the game for me [laughs] like I can try hard I can just be as try and as be good as I possibly can be but if somebody says you did that bad […] I can never recover from it and it annoys me a lot
>
> I: Why do you think that is?
>
> P1: Because I'm concentrating too much on it […] on trying to be to be good rather than just taking it casually I know what the problem is I just can't fix it and it annoys me
>
> I: So for you if you played games more casually do you think you'd have more fun
>
> P1: I'd have more fun and I would probably achieve more
>
> I: Do you know what's stopping you from doing that
>
> P1: […] if I knew how to fix the problem then I would have fixed it but they're the only things that I really notice and I'm like hm this is what I'm doing right now I should stop but it's too late[200]

Participant 1's experience here shows not only how others can disrupt our fun, but how we can disrupt our own fun; how fun is entangled with *agency*. Agency is not just complexified by the game rules, or mechanics but by fellow online players who can (intentionally or not) police our actions. Participant 1 can clearly identify a playstyle which would, arguably, cost him less effort and he

[199] Tilted means, in Participant 1's words, "Tilted means you're not fully angry you're just a bit annoyed…probably the best sort of description I can give you're slightly a bit annoyed with the situation yeah." Participant 1, 6.
[200] Participant 1, 6.

would find more fun: “I’d have more fun [with casual play].” And yet, when asked what is stopping him from doing that, he tells us: “if I knew how to fix the problem then I would have.” When he says “I should stop but it’s too late” it is evident that Participant 1 can identify less fun play when it is happening but feels unable to stop it: conveying a sense of powerlessness. Participant 1’s understanding of *how* to have fun does not naturally translate into his ability to enact it. Participant 1’s fun is affected by others policing his play, as they tell him “that were a bad play.” This means that his perceived skill as a gamer/player comes under scrutiny, a form of gamer identity policing that is not about Participant 1’s personal identity but his play performance. Notably it is someone telling him he played badly, not the act of bad play itself, that is disruptive to Participant 1, again highlighting how fun circulates interpersonally. Policing skill level in an online game has implications for who belongs in such spaces; can we (Participant 1) perform gamer well enough to be accepted? Our ability to have fun, especially when considering the interplay with our own agency, is *both* interpersonal and intrapersonal.

If we map this framework to gamer; we can understand that gamer is not just policed, explicitly and implicitly, between players but that *we* might be the ones who do not consider ourselves proper gamers. Just as Participant 1 criticises his own gameplay and play choices, Participant 13 in her interview questions her own legitimacy as a gamer:

> P13: I wasn’t good enough to be part of a gaming community or to call myself a gamer[201]

Despite telling me that she works with games and in games preservation and has made her own game, she says: “I wasn’t good enough […] to call myself a gamer.” This feeling, this affect, has not come from nowhere.

Fun is ~~not~~ enough

Defining gamer in alignment with fun can be done via more explicitly inclusive norms, versus implicitly applying a normative frame. Akin to Participant 1, Participant 14 imagines a gamer as someone who “enjoys playing games.” He

[201] Participant 13, 4.

goes out of his way to assert that they can be any gender or sexuality: "[it] doesn't matter." The fact that he felt the need to voice that they *can* be any sexuality or gender feels significant; his need to establish such qualifications did not come from nowhere – just as Participant 13's doubt in her own legitimacy as a gamer did not. Participant 14's assertion is undermined by the fact that he felt the need to bring up sexuality and gender; if they did not matter at all – would he be talking about them? The notion that gamer is exclusive to certain sexualities or genders is not voiced, but exists in silence, as Participant 14 intentionally talks around and over it, going out of his way to disagree with a non-present voice. The wider of implications of this are that even if a gamer finds videogames fun/enjoyable, there will be gendered, and sexuality-based assumptions attached to gamer. These very assumptions, that Participant 14 defines against, could be the normative gamer Participant 1 alludes to. I expanded on this idea in an article based on short interview exerts regarding gamer identity, "Silence, Distance, and Disclosure: The Bleed between the Far-Right and Gaming," where I discussed how this kind of discourse – talking around issues of identity policing without directly acknowledging it – betrays the prevalence of identity-based discrimination in gaming space(s).[202] Both Participant 1 and Participant 14 deploy fun and enjoyment as a uniting affective experience under which gamer falls. However, Participant 1 implicitly asserts normative assumptions and Participant 14 goes out of his way to define *against* the normative assumptions attached to gamer. This reflects fun's elasticity as well as its subjectivity; as a normalising (and ostracising to those outside the norm), yet potentially universalising, experience.

When Participant 14 says a gamer *could* be anyone, he asserts that there is potential for anyone to become a gamer. A player can have fun, be any gender or sexuality. However, a player can interact with gaming spaces that disrupt their fun, and identification of gamer, rather than it being disrupted by other players or one's own self-doubt.

As an example, in another interview Participant 8 talks about how videogames have a serious lack of asexual representation:

> P8: I am asexual and it is […] very rarely a choice that you can make in roleplaying games erm it is often like there are like binary romance options erm and I know there was there was […] an asexual character in Outerworlds erm but […] you're very rarely given the chance in a roleplaying game to

[202] Kaufman, 'Silence, Distance and Disclosure. The Bleed between the Far-Right and Gaming'.

> erm have sort of like platonic relationships with people[203]

Whilst we can acknowledge that Participant 8's sexuality should not matter regarding his ability to play games – to perform gamer in turn – it is evident that it does. Participant 8, notably, does not necessarily connect this representational issue to a lack of enjoyment, more to an issue of having the *choice* to play out his own experiences if he wanted to: "I never feel like I'm playing myself."[204] In other words, he can never embody his player avatar authentically, at least in terms of acting out certain relationships. The ways in which Participant 8's identity interplays with a game's system – those with binary allosexual romance options – means that his agency to play out experiences he might want to otherwise are inhibited, specifically in relation to his own subjectivities. Unlike Participant 1, Participant's 8 agency is limited by the game system, not by himself. Participant 8's experience demonstrates how gaming spaces themselves can inhibit our ability to have fun, such negotiations usually taking place within videogame design and mechanical options. The fact that a gamer can be any sexuality, in this case asexual, *does* matter in that the player might not see themselves reflected as an authentic play possibility.

Returning to Participant 14's original point, he simultaneously acknowledges the diversity of gamer whilst not engaging with why he felt the need to bring it up in the first place. "Someone who enjoys playing games" is a category not all of us can fall into, at least not all the time. This is, in fact, exactly what the boy in the basement fears – the focus of *Chapter 4* – that his fantasy of constant fun is under threat (or being exposed for the fantasy it is). I will address this issue in the next subsection too: *Fun: An activating, ideological operation*. To return to the inconsistent accessibility of the gamer category, some gaming spaces are made for some types of players more than others. In *Queer Phenomenology,* Sara Ahmed writes about the interplay of objects, bodies, and spaces and how objects and bodies can both shape and take the shape of the spaces they are in.[205] I will unpack the frameworks *Queer Phenomenology* puts forth more in the next chapter, especially when I prise apart the concept of "backgrounds" and historically tracing gamer back to its own. Important to this chapter, is how Ahmed articulates the shaping that takes place between objects/bodies/spaces:

[203] Participant 8, 12.
[204] Participant 8, 12.
[205] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

> Objects, as well as spaces, are made for some kinds of bodies more than others.[206]

The issue of no/little asexual play options or in-game representation that Participant 8 describes demonstrates this readily, as does the harassment Participant 4 describes in online games – the online game taking on a "shape" that does not so comfortably house female or feminine sounding players, it partly being *shaped* in turn by the players (bodies) that exist within it and harass people like Participant 4. Ahmed adds that for bodies to arrive in spaces not made for them "involves painstaking labor [sic]."[207] If we return to consider fun specifically, this does not mean that a player who does not easily "fit" cannot have fun – Participant 8 himself describes managing to create his own enjoyable experiences with games like *Fall Out: New Vegas* (2010) and *Disco Elysium* (2019) through engaging with play as a kind of roleplay – but that to have fun, and to perform gamer if we understand it as defined by fun, requires more labour on that player's part.[208] In Participant 8's case, this means engaging with more creative, performative play and coming up with a character's backstory. For Participant 4, who describes not playing certain games because of harassment, we might derive that the "labour" of putting up with verbal abuse is not worth it: therefore, she does not appear in those games. Both these experiences highlight fun's inability to firmly secure gamer, despite many participants defining gamer through fun, as fun alone is not always enough to play a desired game or can demand more effort to be reached from certain players. This is another way fun is elastic; in that it can be harder or easier to reach depending on player subjectivities. And if we understand gamer as performed through fun play, as several participants do, then this has implications for who can access gamer identity. This is another way fun works to police gamer identity; as it requires varying degrees of labour to be experienced, performed, and maintained.

Fun's elasticity can be seen in Participant 13's attitude towards defining herself as a gamer, which I already referenced earlier in this section but will expand on here. Whilst Participant 13 attaches gamer identity to having fun, and tells us she does enjoy games, she also says she is "ambivalent" towards the label, despite having even made a game herself. This undermines the power of fun to define and maintain gamer; to align effectively. The fact that she has made a game herself and yet tells us later in her answer "I can't really say I'm a gamer

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[206] Ahmed, 51.
[207] Ahmed, 62.
[208] Obsidian Entertainment, *Fall Out: New Vegas*, Bethesda Softworks, PlayStation 3, Windows, Xbox 360, 2010. ZA/UM. *Disco Elysium.* ZA/UM. Windows, MacOS, PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5, Google Stadia, Nintendo Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S. 2019-2020.

because I'm a fraud" feels significant.[209] She connects feeling fraudulent to having a "strong preference" for narrative style games, a preference that is partly due to, as discussed in other parts of the interview, her often suffering from motion sickness in open world style games, reflecting how gamer as a term is often associated with certain game genres; a stereotype that is brought up in other interviews as well.[210] Participant 13's idea of a fraudulent gamer implies the existence of both a fake and legitimate gamer, suggesting it is an identity that requires a kind of authentication, or proof. She connects this proof, I would argue, to the games she chooses to play, as well as alluding that proper gamers will spend a significant amount of their free time playing games.[211] How long we might play a game for, or what kind of game we might play, both have implications for (and are implicated by) fun. Participant 13 tells us that a gamer identity "comes with being part of a community," stressing the importance of its communal function, and that within said community gamer can be interpersonally attributed: "I'm sure other people would say […] you can be a gamer."[212] But she concludes by telling us that: "at least some people might think it's not the case [that she could be a gamer]." Participant 13's discussion of gamer identity suggests that, even if a minority voice in a community might reject certain identity markers in terms of defining gamer (such as liking narrative games or struggling with open world games), these identity markers affect the community as a *whole*, which has ramifications for Participant 13's ability, or comfort, to identify as a gamer. As well as demonstrating fun's inability to align a player with gamer or a gaming community consistently, Participant 13's experience reflects that maybe fun is always enough to establish a *type* of gaming identity, but that that identity is not guaranteed legitimacy and is subject to authentication through interpersonal policing and community voices (perceived or real).

Fun, in participant responses, works to define gamer with inconsistent effectiveness. And these inconsistencies are prised out when we consider the accessibility of fun itself. Fun is complexified by player subjectivities, as fun means different things to different players, but can still work to implicit establish a normative frame through its objective deployments, especially alongside terms like gamer identity. Because gaming is so subjective and

[209] Participant 13, 4.
[210] For example, we saw this when Quinn's game originally received harassment for its story-style play and mental health subject matter.
[211] Participant 13, 4.
[212] Participant 13, 4.

personal, to deploy fun as a term without clarification – intentionally or not – can mean to signal to hegemonic ideas in gaming, under which assumptions about what *is* fun can carry broader ideas about games culture; who games are, or are not, made for. To define gamer against fun, is to implicitly define it according to the normative frameworks fun operates in and through, especially when it is applied as a neutral term without qualification. These normative ideas circulate within gaming spaces, including the interviews I have conducted for this research; even if they often do so in silence, in words left unsaid or ideas spoken around. Fun is limited, stretchy, fragile; and the same could be said for how gamer is performed, read, or misread.

Judith Butler is a seminal feminist, gender, and queer theorist whose work on gender, and how gender is ontologically performative, has changed the landscape of, and beyond, queer studies forever.[213] They write:

> That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.[214]

We can understand gamer through a similar framing, in that in it arguably has no ontological status sans the "various acts which constitute" it. These acts include videogame play and community participation; to successfully take part in these acts is to perform legitimately or recognisably. This connects to how fun can be understood as intersubjective; as an affective operation that is often affirmed, or disrupted, by others. The legitimate performance of play, or gamer identity by extension, must be contextualised within fun's affective frame. To experience fun, to successfully achieve fun play, through our interview participant definitions – which align gamer identity under the experience of fun or joy – is to successfully identify as and demonstrate a gamer identity within this performative framework; in which gamer is constituted by the acts which consolidate it. This is how fun works to establish a normative frame within which, and against, gamer is defined.

Fun: an activating, ideological operation

In this section, I will explore how fun as an affect goes beyond implicitly shaping gamer identity, and by extension gaming bodies and spaces, to activating and

[213] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble,* (Routledge, 2006).
[214] Butler, 185.

justifying certain world views and beliefs within, and beyond, videogames. Here, I focus on interview quotes in which participants brought up fun when not only talking about gamer identity, but Gamergate and its associated issues of toxicity. When I write "ideological operation" I am referring to the ways fun engages with belief systems that, as articulated in *Introduction: A note on language*, pull on the same concepts across Gamergate and far-right ideas.

Participant 9 brings up fun when discussing their thoughts on gamer; not as a means to define gamer, but as an ideological tool through which gamer identity was explicitly politicised:

> P9: [discussing the time period Gamergate occurred within] what was happening [in] critical discourse [around] games was the problematisation of the idea of straight white cisgender men as heroes […] Gamergate really activated through some quite clever and complex ideological er acrobatics the idea that increased inclusivity in videogames was actually going to diminish the genre […] it portrayed this as something to be opposed because it was going to destroy the fun erm and so this idea of gamer as an identity was also quite cleverly […] tied up along with some quite significantly far right ideologies

What Participant 9 asserts here is the complex ways fun was, and is, interwoven into far-right discourses that circulate in gaming spaces, which events like Gamergate amplified. In this section, I will explore fun as a site of activation across two perspectives extrapolated out from Participant 9's response above: the idea that fun needs defending, *and* that fun can justify, or activate, attacks.

Fun needs defending

Firstly, fun can become a site of defence, something under risk of destruction due to "increased inclusivity." Participant 9 describes this argument as "ideological […] acrobatics," associating the idea that fun was under threat with political ideas, which they specify are "far-right ideologies." And it is not just fun under threat, but the "genre" of videogames as a whole, which fun seemingly

props up in this framing. We can observe fun's fragility and not-enoughness here too, as fun is not enough to secure videogames as a medium due to it being so readily under threat. How politics works in discourses around fun and gaming becomes paradoxical – gaming was seemingly being ruined by discussions around inclusivity, but the arguments on which such ruination were premised were inherently political, the idea of the "white cisgender male hero." Participant 9 themselves highlights this odd, discursive frame when they describe how gamers felt "things were too politicised and yet also in some ways not […] politicised enough."[215] Understanding these ideas through an affective framing allows for this kind of paradox, however, as affect does not have to make sense to justify discourse. This also calls back to Hall's definition of ideology of best working via "contradictory lines of argument and emotional investments."[216] Building on this, Kimmel breaks down the arguments of angry white men who are (mostly) online, especially how white men blame the "other" in contradictory ways. He writes:

> "They" [others] emasculate "us" [white men] – both by being primarily more masculine than we are (and thus in need of control) and, simultaneously, by being dependent and weak [by] needing the state to control "us" from succeeding. Only from the position of aggrieved entitlement can these various images be reconciled – irrationally, but viscerally.[217]

Here, affect works to maintain the paradox of being both hyper masculine and emasculated, of the *other* being both in need of control and weaker; Kimmel calls this affect *aggrieved entitlement*. We can understand Participant 9's description of gamers as a kind of entitled identity, when Participant 9 talks about the idea that games exist to serve the white, cis, heterosexual hero (or at least, the man who looks up to him). Gamergate in particular, according to Participant 9, "activated" said "ideological acrobatics." And, importantly, gamer identity is tangled up in these ideological knots. Here, fun is not constructing a gamer identity but the shared affect of entitlement it generates: the feeling of *your* fun being *under threat*.

To build on the concept of fun being under threat, here is a quote from Participant 6, who works in game studies education, discussing a student who "kicked off" in class when talking about Gamergate:

[215] Participant 9, 13.
[216] Hall, 'The Neo-Liberal Revolution,' 713.
[217] Kimmel, *Angry White Men*, 58.

> P6: he kicked off and started just sort of saying that you know women are ruining games and games are for him or for his you know that they don't understand games […] so Gamergate is as I said [a] shit show[218]

Again, we can observe the idea of gaming being "ruined" due to increasing diversity, specifically due to women, whether that be more women represented in games, playing games or critiquing games is unclear; perhaps it is all these reasons and more. This student asserted that women "don't understand games," reaffirming the idea of videogames as a naturally masculine domain, which women cannot fully appreciate and could "ruin" with their presence. Here I want to call back to Ahmed and her idea of a feminist killjoy, that to point out how the happiness is sustained can be to ruin it. She argues that even if the happiness, or fun, is premised on fantasy – in this instance, the fantasy would be that videogames have been, and always will be, exclusively for men – that "to kill a fantasy can still kill a feeling."[219] This means that even if the ideas that the threat of ruination is based on are falsehoods (women have always been in, played, and made games) or do not make sense (games are for men, and yet women are already playing them) the death of such fantasies can still feel *real*. This is what makes fun such an effective affect; even its death, or threat of its death, holds generative possibilities.

I will fight for my fun

Gamergate did not just draw on a gamer's sense of entitlement but activated the need to take *action* based on such feelings. Participant 6's student standing up and disrupting class is a clear example of someone taking action based on their beliefs. Later in their interview, Participant 9 draws on the idea of fun being under threat as ideologically activating, *and* highlights how the beliefs Gamergate brought to fruition, and amplified, were weaved into wider conservative belief systems:

> P9: the traditional family unit being natural and being good and being healthy for society erm the

[218] Participant 6, 9.
[219] Ahmed, 'Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness', 582.

> idea that a man and a woman should always be together and and for example gay people or bisexual people or transgender people are disruptive to the stability of society […] um it [Gamergate] tied those in with more extreme things that actually that it was actively destructive to society[220]

Across both of Participant 9's responses, they describe how people involved with Gamergate almost paralleled fun and society conceptually within their belief systems; both fun, and the "stability of society," seemingly threatened by increased diversity.[221] Fun and society being deployed interchangeably has implications for how fun functions in gaming discourses, and for how significant a stand-in it can become in ideological arguments – that fun seemingly parallels *the whole of western society* when mobilised as a part of wider, conservative belief systems. Common across both the deployments of fun and society which Participant 9 describes is that fun and society become solid, stable ideas that, whilst under threat, are objective within their conservative framework(s); associated with tradition, heterosexuality, maleness, whiteness etc. However, as explored throughout this chapter, fun is subjective and not a solid, fixed, safe thing. The idea of fun being simple and unpolitical could be understood as the very fantasy that Gamergate discourses invested in; a fantasy that was under threat. The subjectivity of fun, how it means different things to every player, inherently threatens the premise of Gamergate that Participant 9 presents.

We can observe cultural concerns as being integral to Gamergate discourses when Participant 10 describes:

> P10: there was this kind of like cultural swing towards er being a bit more accepting towards people who weren't just this standard erm E-Bro the kind of characters who look like they were the main characters in um Gears of War 1, 2 and 3 um there ended up being a counter counterculture swing against er against […] they ended up using that as an excuse to attack the people who are making erm the points thinking that they were personal against them[222]

[220] Participant 9, 13.
[221] Participant 9 uses the terms conservative and traditional themself.
[222] Participant 10, 10.

A shift towards games being for other people, for people outside the "standard" "E-Bro" type, becomes a justification, an "excuse," to attack others. Participant 10 stresses how the cultural swing towards more diverse gaming spaces felt "personal" to gamers, highlighting the subjectivity of fun all over again. To quote Ruberg, when explaining the subjectivity of fun, they write fun is "culturally specific and personal."[223] Participant 10 particularly calls attention to characters no longer looking like Gears of War archetypes, who are mostly very buff white men (with a few exceptions), which echoes the point Participant 9 also made about an over-investment in the white, heterosexual, male hero. These characters literally present a fantasy, a fantasy which if we return to Participant 9, became integral to the ideological narrative gamer identity is imbued with:

> P9: the gamer label also rejected the idea that erm the straight white cisgender man was a political choice […] it rejected that having [a] straight white cisgender men as the hero in the majority of narratives […] was a political statement that that itself was a political ideology the idea of the white hero[224]

As discussed at the start of this section, the ideological narratives around gamer identity have a paradoxical relationship to the political, which we can also observe in Gamergate discourses. When I write "ideological narrative" I am referring to the stories and ideas participants discussed, which can be connected to wider belief systems in circulation in gaming culture, in which participants discussed contradictory narratives attached to gamer identity. For example, when Gamergate arguments, e.g. around how games are apparently not political (despite said argument being very politically charged), but arguments for changes regarding inclusivity in gaming are simultaneously *too* political (despite usually being quite a minor ask in the grand scheme of games culture), this is demonstrative of the idea of politics or the "political" being deployed paradoxically in discourse. This paradox is maintained through its affective charge. Such arguments always tie back to gamer identity, either explicitly or implicitly, as an identity that is under attack, and needs policing

[223] Ruberg, 'No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games That Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt', 112.
[224] Participant 9, 13.

and/or defending. Participant 9's description of these issues as "ideological acrobatics" feels very apt, as logic twists in and turns on itself within these belief systems. Discussions about politics in gaming are so prevalent Participant 7 even makes a joke about them in his interview. When I asked him a question to do with narrative games, he joked: "Is this a "are there politics in videogames question?""[225]

For Participant 9, the gamer label specifically politicised Gamergate discourses. It was "the gamer label [that] also rejected the idea that the straight white cisgender man was a political choice." If we understand Gamergate discourses as activating – as promoting not just a defensiveness but offensiveness – then we can understand gamer identity wrapped up within such operations. And what are the implications of gamer being made and undone through fun, if fun facilitates an affective community under its affect? To use fun in discourse, to objectively deploy it as a mechanism to attack/defend, not only obscures the subjectivity of fun but that certain communities were brought together under shared experiences of fun in the first place, under their *shared subjectivities*.[226] Such a point of view, allows fun to effectively blanket over the whiteness and maleness of bodies – intentionally or not – as we can see in Participant 1's answer earlier in this chapter: "normal people […] playing games for fun." To return to Participant 9's original point, they articulated that increased inclusivity, and the politicising of the white, male body were going to destroy the fun within Gamergate belief systems. But fun does more than justify and motivate attacks, it also distracts; not only activating but obscuring the actual roots of ideological activation.

Fun can, both as an affective experience and as an ideological mechanism, operate to not only bring together certain communities under shared subjectivities, but activate wider discourses that work to defend said affective communities' shared interests. Part of this defending is not only managing community borders, as fun works to establish an implicit "normal" and police identity borders, but to activate a feeling of *defensiveness* when the parameters within which fun functions come under threat.

Fun, in its ambiguity, can be stretched over arguments to obscure genuine grievances. Yet, its very elasticity rests in its subjectivity, which objective deployments of fun intentionally ignore. However, this does not matter when

[225] Participant 7, 11.
[226] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 41.

considering the effective circulation and argumentation of such ideas, as affective arguments do not have to make sense and can be justified by the *feeling* of being under threat alone. This defensiveness can activate hostility, which across this chapter has manifested in instances of in-game harassment towards feminine sounding players (Participant 4) and in students making declarations in classrooms about games being under attack (Participant 6). Importantly, conversations about fun are often about something else, or something more, than just fun.

Chapter 2: Conclusion

The significance of how fun can activate us, can justify our belief systems, through affect is emphasised by fun's connectivity, its ability to bring us together. Fun works, in objective deployments, to implicitly police gamer identity, not only pushing away those who cannot experience fun in the appropriate ways but pushing those inside (who do fall into gamer) closer together. When we talk about fun, we are often talking about more than fun; who games are made for, gaming skill and accessibility, spatial priorities (e.g. what kind of player does a game anticipate?), and the borders between bodies. It is not just that fun can work to police gamer identity; it can orient us to and away from each other in different ways. When an interview participant associates the word gamer with Gamergate and toxicity, they are simultaneously distancing themselves from that association – from that gamer – whilst drawing that connection.

Fun is one of many frames through which participants defined gamer, but its special importance lies in the normative frame it works to simultaneously maintain and disrupt; its wider ideological significations. Fun's fragility is not just subjective, but rests in its inability to consistently be *enough* - enough to ignore in-game harassment, skill policing, to establish a gamer identity securely. This fragility can activate *defensiveness*, as fun circulates as a limited resource, not available to everyone equally and precious to those who have grasped at it successfully. However, its true value is only felt when we lose it or feel the *threat* of such loss. This threat is emphasised by fun's connectiveness all over again, not just a threat interpersonally but intrapersonally; how we connect to and understand ourselves.

This chapter has established gamer as an affective identity; a subjective and performative identity that is experienced, made, and undone through affect.

Fun as a frame has worked to highlight gamer's affective possibilities and problems, demonstrating how affective discourses are key to not only unpacking gamer identity, but the wider ideas that circulate in gaming spaces. Understanding gamer through affect means it does not have to make sense to exist, to stretch, across all these possibilities. This is why some participants describe gamer in wholly positive, *fun*, ways and others readily associate it with Gamergate, toxicity and far-right ideas. Gamer is fun, positive, and builds community but it can also carry all this other weight – this other baggage – that we do not always feel or notice. This is why the way we talk about videogames matters, and why it is vital we prise it apart. To set up a historical groundwork for this unravelling, the next chapter historicises gamer identity by examining objects from the National Videogame Museum; to scrutinise gamer identity over the past five decades of gaming history.

Chapter 3

Historicising Gamer: Uncovering the foundational norm

"seeing how terms can be reclaimed and taken on as a position of power is is a very interesting thing and so it does does have that question of like should we reclaim gamer or is it […] a problem?"

- *Participant 9, 14.*

Now we have examined gamer through an affective frame, as an identity that is negotiated, maintained, and disrupted through feeling, this chapter will historicise gamer identity through a close consideration of objects from the National Videogame Museum's archive and gallery. From this analysis, I will not only examine gamer identity across gaming history but extrapolate out a key concept I will refer to throughout the rest of the thesis: **the foundational norm**.

By foundational norm I am referring to the normative beliefs that videogame culture and videogames industries appear to cyclically invest in, regardless of any diversions or evolution beyond them. Andy Irwin, language and literature scholar whose interests lie in 20th century queer literature and intersectionality, has written about a similar concept which he coins the "Death Star." Irwin writes the Death Star is his: "chosen metaphor for global oppression, namely, the forces of capitalism, heteronormativity, patriarchy and white supremacy."[227] The Death Star is a powerful metaphor for such combined systems as it, as Irwin notes, demands resistance and operates through intersecting systems of oppression; the Death Star being a weapon of mass destruction created by the fascist regime in the popular science fiction franchise *Star Wars*. I use the term "foundational norm" as it captures the *foundational* nature of such issues, which we will unpack below via historical analysis, and it provides a strong

[227] Andy Irwin, 'Disrupting the Death Star: Applying Feminist and Queer Theories to the Development of Subversive Masculinities', *Ad Alta: Birmingham Journal of Literature* 12 (2022): 2.

visual metaphor if we understand gaming's ecosystem as a house or home. I will build on this idea more in the next chapter, when I introduce the boy in the basement, particularly the literal basement associated with him, and its spatial implications for the house as a whole (if we understand the whole house as gaming's ecosystem; a series of interconnected rooms or spaces). The norm is foundational in that gaming culture, and histories, cannot erode the significance of these ideas in understandings' gaming's past, present, or future.

The foundational norm is essentially this:

> Videogames are made for young, white, heterosexual, cisgender men and are naturally, and have always been, this way.

When I refer to waves of resurgence, I mean a resurgence of this norm, of these intrinsic ideas. Whilst I refer to the norm as "foundational", it is not *actually* foundational to gaming's history, but "foundational" encapsulates the rhetorical work these beliefs aim to do. This is why it "resurges" despite being described as "foundational." As I described in *Introduction: Thesis structure*, the foundational norm is an intentionally contradictory term to capture the paradoxical belief that videogames have always been for white men (they have not) and have always naturally been so (they have also not). The foundational norm is elastic, in that it can be stretched beyond the core principles it encapsulates, but it will, importantly, always snap back. Many participants discussed issues relevant, or reflective of, the foundational norm. But significantly, whether talked about or not, the foundational norm sits in the background, not just in my interviews but within all facets of gaming culture. A core assertion of the foundational norm is that gamers are, by default, white, male, and heterosexual. Acknowledged, or not, this norm is part of gaming's history.

The term "foundational norm" emerged from archival analysis of gaming objects. Guided by interview participant data, which discussed "gamer identity" as a contentious term with no clear definition, I conducted archival and exhibit research at the National Videogame Museum, focusing on objects which, as described in *Introduction: Thesis Structure*, negotiated gaming subjectivities.

In this chapter, I will be closely analysing objects from the National Videogame Museum. This chapter contrasts objects from the NVM's archive that are deemed inappropriate for display (the reasons for which will be unpacked via each object) against objects that are out on the NVM's gallery floor. *Ms. Pac-Man* (1982) and the Nintendo Wii (2006) are both objects out for the public to see and/or engage with. *Fernandez Must Die* (1988) and *MTV's Beavis and Butthead in Little Thingies* (1996) are both games that are considered inappropriate for public display, as per their notes on their archive listings. And finally, the Pokémon Master Guide, Collector's Edition (1999) is an object that bridges these two categories; once out on display, but then considered

inappropriate for display (a change I will extrapolate further in *Chapter 7: Conclusion*, where I discuss my placement at the NVM), this magazine demonstrates how the unseen/seen dichotomy is a slippery one, not a clear-cut boundary. When closely analysing these objects from the archive and exhibits, I am especially concerned with how they are negotiated gaming subjectivities, and in particular, the identity term "gamer."

Objects out on the museum floor are items the NVM has consciously chosen to exhibit and are doing active work in negotiating public gaming space. The archived objects I discuss, in contrast, are items deemed inappropriate for display that are consciously relegated to the "background" by the museum's archiving practises due to their offensive, relevant here: racist and misogynistic, language and imagery. When I write relegated to the "background," I mean they are unlikely to ever come into the foreground, the museum's public space, and be put on display. Whilst these objects are not doing active, public work in shaping how we interact with gaming spaces they importantly archive and evidence harm(s) that have occurred in gaming histories, which those in or tangential to movements like Gamergate might (and historically have been known to) refute.[228] It is significant that the exhibited objects are publicly on display at the NVM and out for visitors to see. The objects the NVM displays not only hold relevance in their preserving of gaming history, but in how they implicitly shape the NVM as a space and in the kinds of ideas they communicate, an idea I will explore in more depth in *Chapter 5: Gamer Counter-Spaces*.

I should note the NVM rarely actually deploys the word "gamer" in its exhibits or in its communications, usually defaulting to the word "player" instead. Down below I will discuss one of the rare examples of the NVM using gamer in its display, and in chapter 5 *Gamer Counter-Spaces* I more explicitly examine how the NVM as a space *implicitly* shapes gamer possibilities. The NVM, akin to the gaming objects being discussed, is doing implicit work in shaping gamer identity – who can be a gamer; what gamer means – because it is creating gaming spaces, and by extension gaming possibilities *and* by further extension also disrupting other gaming spaces or possibilities. For example, their mission "Videogames for everyone, forever" is clearly signposted inside the museum with information boards, troubling the notion of gamer as an exclusive, white and male identity; a notion which several interview participants alluded to in the previous chapter.

The use of objects produced by/within the gaming industry to historicise gamer does mean that my argument will be limited to industry operations; the objects, games and advertising the game industry made and aligned themselves with.

[228] An example of this kind of issue would be: Sistakaren, "We need to Talk About Blackface Leatherface in Dead by Daylight," *YouTube*, 25th November, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RE7RZv_dhC0&t=3s&ab_channel=sistakaren.

Game Scholar Adrienne Shaw has warned against other scholars over emphasising the importance of gamer due to its inherent relationship to consumerism and overinvesting in debates about who "counts" as a gamer.[229] She writes that instead of trying to redefine gamer, we should examine how gamer is constructed to scrutinise player relationships to the medium.[230] Here, I am not reassessing the accuracy of the assumed gamer stereotype the industry has always, and will continue to, invest in. Rather, I am interested in what these assumptions are doing, and have done, in the construction of gamer historically and into the present.

A lot of this thesis is concerned with gamer identity, and gaming subjectivities. Therefore, historicising gamer and understanding the wider discourses it is wrapped up within, discourses which the foundational norm functions in and through, is a vital endeavour. One of the key theoretical frameworks in my thesis is that of Sara Ahmed's work on affect, which I pulled upon a lot in the previous chapter. Here, I am interested in Ahmed's work on spatiality, primarily in her work *Queer Phenomenology*, in which she writes about the importance of backgrounds. She writes that a background "explains the conditions of emergence or an arrival or something as the thing that it appears to be in the present."[231] Within this framing, historicising gamer works to establish the "conditions of emergence" from which gamer as an identity has emerged today. When writing about how backgrounds do not always "come into view," Ahmed uses the fantasy of heterosexuality as a natural orientation to demonstrate how even if a background does not "come into view" it can still be something we orient around.[232] This is also how the foundational norm in gaming often operates; even if its ideological assertions do not "come into view," we can still orient ourselves around them. Just like how Participant 14, in the previous chapter, went out of his way to describe gamer inclusively, to assert that a gamer *can* be any sexuality or gender but does not voice why he felt the need to say so.

In relation to the wider thesis, this chapter seeks to call attention to the "background" of gamer identity by historically analysing its construction across gaming objects that span 1982 to 2006. Importantly, *Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer* asserts that the discourses that were disseminated during Gamergate, around who videogames are made for and who is entitled to gaming spaces, can be connected back to gaming objects and videogames before Gamergate. In other words, it not only contextualises participant discussions of gamer identity in the wider thesis, but also of Gamergate, which we can understand as another instance of the foundational norm's resurgence. Exploring gaming's historically complex relationship with masculinity and whiteness is also key for

[229] Shaw, 'On Not Becoming Gamers: Moving Beyond the Constructed Audience'.
[230] Shaw.
[231] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 38.
[232] Ahmed, 87–91.

understanding the root of the boy in the basement's ideological crisis (the way he sees the world, and the belief systems his ideas are derived from), which is central to the next chapter, *Chapter 4: A Certain Kind of Gamer.*

For this chapter, I firstly examine relevant game studies research around how we understand gamer identity and how it has been constructed, both in present scholarship and historically. Then I closely analyse the objects I listed above, in chronological order. This chapter concludes by considering the significance of this work as the "background" of a gaming identity, the implications this has for understanding a particular kind of gamer that the next chapter discusses: the boy in the basement, and how gaming subjectivities negotiate with/against the foundational norm.

Constructing gamer

A lot of contemporary research on gamer identities has explored the gendered operations of gamer. Game scholar Helen Thornham, whose work centres on gender and digital technology, writes that gaming is a "gendered, corporeal and embodied activity," stressing the importance of gendered power relations framing gameplay.[233] This gendering goes beyond gameplay itself to the ways in which we talk about and consider videogame genres. Media scholar Braxton Soderman has analysed the implications of leisure time as a gendered category, observing that the masculinisation of "hard core" games is simultaneously maintained by the feminisation of "casual games."[234] Affect and games researcher Aubrey Anable mirrors this point, arguing that casual games are "meaningfully gendered."[235] These gendered discourses, in turn, fold into wider discourses around who can be a gamer. In Shaw's work on moving beyond the constructed gamer, she writes that "being a gamer is defined in relation to dominant discourses about who plays games," some of these discourses of course being gendered.[236] She points out that the performance of gamer is not available to everyone equally, conceptually prising this out through Judith Butler's framework of precarity.[237] The significance of gamer being understood through a framing similar to gendered performance is that performances can sometimes be poorly performed or misread; gamer is not just understood

[233] Thornham, *Ethnographies of the Videogame*, 1 and 8.
[234] Braxton Soderman, 'No Time to Dream: Killing times, Casual Games, and Gender' in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, ed. J. Malkowski and T. Russworm (Indiana University Press, 2017).
[235] Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*, 100.
[236] Shaw, 'On Not Becoming Gamers: Moving Beyond the Constructed Audience'.
[237] Shaw.

through legitimacy, but through legibility. And any performance of gamer, in turn, must negotiate with the discourses it circulates in and through. Robert Gallagher, a games researcher who looks at identity and digital subjectivities, writes:

> It would be absurd and inaccurate to claim that all gamers are men, misogynists, addicts, adolescents or hermits. But it would be equally absurd to deny that […] triple A videogaming in particular remains a bastion of hegemonic white heteromasculinity.[238]

These are the conditions within which gamer is being negotiated and performed, especially in terms of gender. To requote Anable, games are not just gendered but are *meaningfully* gendered. Whilst Anable is writing about the feminisation of casual games here, this gendering occurs, as Gallagher rightly notes, across AAA gaming spheres too, which are usually masculinised and considered more "hardcore." Qualitative gaming research also makes evident the importance of gender when scrutinising gamer identity through data collection. To examine a few examples here: sociologist Bertan Buyukozturk explored how gamers used identity talk to gender themselves; concluding that women emphasised communal play and narrative, whereas male players emphasised the importance of competitive play and technicality – "participants constituted themselves in gendered ways without overtly claiming a gender identity."[239] Kivijärvi and Katila, whose work both explores the gendering of space, examined performative constructions of a gendered gamer. Their study, looking at women in the Finnish gaming industry, found that whilst the study participants did subvert the hardcore gamer label through their own identity and/or irony, they nevertheless were "tempted to join the discourse [of the masculinized, hardcore gamer] […] to emphasize their belonging [sic]."[240] We can understand engaging with these kinds of masculinise discourses as a kind of gamer performance, which whilst not inherently about gender has gendered implications.

However, a lot of work around gamer and gender does not explicitly explore the intersection of the constructed gamer's masculinity *and* whiteness.[241] For example, Laine Nooney is a media scholar who specialises in videogame histories, economics, and cultures. In her work on (de)constructing gaming's gendered history, she writes "the only people we have made historically visible

[238] Gallagher, *Videogames, Identity, and Digital Subjectivity*, 9.
[239] Buyukozturk, 'Gendering Identity Talk: Gamers' Gendered Constructions of Gamer Identity', 185.
[240] Kivijärvi and Katila, 'Becoming a Gamer', 475.
[241] Buyukozturk, 'Gendering Identity Talk: Gamers' Gendered Constructions of Gamer Identity'; Cote, 'Writing "Gamers": The Gendered Construction of Gamer Identity in Nintendo Power (1994–1999)'; Kivijärvi and Katila, 'Becoming a Gamer'.

are those we have organized ourselves to see [sic]."[242] We can see this issue realised in the NVM's own cabinet shelves. The NVM had a "representation" shelf in one of its cabinets, but it only featured objects to do with women in games and female players.[243] Identities such as race or disability are not made visible on the "representation" shelf, partly because the game industry did not initially make efforts to appeal to them so explicitly, so the NVM has no objects to display. The visibility issue Nooney highlights is important but must apply to and beyond gender to consider race, (dis)ability and queerness. The nuance of this issue beyond gender can be something game research does not explore, or sometimes even acknowledge as a research gap. A gamer's masculinity is not the only identity signifier being negotiated, it is also his race, his seeming heteronormativity (sometimes emphasised by the objectification of the female form) and his apparently abled body. All these facets of gamer, not just his maleness, are integral to the foundational norm's premise. Some researchers, such as Lori Kendall, do look at the intersection of race, gender and "nerdiness." Kendall is a sociologist who studies online communities and identities. She argues that the identity of the white nerd is contradictory in that it requires gatekeeping to function, for example with nerdcore rap artists using self-deprecation to avoid accusations of racism or sexism.[244] Technology scholar Ron Eglash has explored the racial and gendered aspects of nerd identities and techno subcultures as well. He stresses the importance of gatekeeping, highlighting ways those outside techno cultural norms can circumvent such "gateways" but that the nerd's "unmarked signifiers of whiteness and maleness" mean that those outside such a norm simultaneously "both succeed and fail."[245] Whilst both vital works, Eglash and Kendall are looking at geeky and nerdy identities, which are parallel to, but not entirely the same as, gamer identities. I will prise apart the interrelation between gamer identity and geeky masculinities more in the next chapter, when I consider the boy in the basement as a specific gamer trope. For now, in this chapter, their relevance lies in the geeky/gamer intersection of whiteness and maleness, and the way his identity functions as contradictory; such contradictions partly maintaining its white and male façade.

Most research that does explore the interaction between whiteness and maleness looks at the interrelation between the alt-right and gaming specifically. One example of this research area is Kristin MS Bezio, whose work

[242] Laine Nooney, 'A Pedestal, A Table, A Love Letter: Archaeologies of Gender in Videogame History', *Game Studies* 13, no. 2 (December 2013), http://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/nooney.

[243] This cabinet shelf was like this on my visit 29/07/22, and has since been changed as part of my placement with the National Videogame Museum, which I will address in *Chapter 7: Conclusion*.

[244] L. Kendall, 'White and Nerdy": Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype', *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44, no. 3 (2011): 505–24.

[245] Ron Eglash, 'Race, Sex, and Nerds: FROM BLACK GEEKS TO ASIAN AMERICAN HIPSTERS', *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (71) (1 June 2002): 60.

explores the intersection of popular media and citizenship. As she points out, the assumed audience of gaming (white, male, heteronormative) is also the demographic the alt-right seeks to appeal to.[246] Whilst Bezio does acknowledge the significance of gaming's history, for example she discusses the role of the 1980s videogame crash, her work on the intersection of whiteness and maleness focuses more so on Gamergate and the alt-right.[247] Other relevant work here includes that of Carly A Kocurek, a cultural historian who specialises in new media and videogames. Her research on the media's depiction of white shooters examines how videogames are more likely to be brought up if the shooter is white in order to excuse (or at least explain) his behaviour. She writes:

> I argue that the mythical […] figure of the gamer in play in the popular discourse around mass shooting events in the United States rests on white supremacy and in particular on the white supremacist myth of innocence.[248]

Vitally, Kocurek argues, white supremacy can find expression in videogame culture and games but does not originate from gaming; the deployment of the violent-videogame-excuse working to "obscure the role of white supremacy both in mass shootings and in popular culture including games."[249] Insidious identity work is being negotiated within the boundaries of whiteness and maleness, and gaming discourse – or rather, discourse *around* videogames – is being deployed to obscure responsibility and construct a kind of victimhood. This concept ties back to the construction of the nerd or geek archetype I discussed above and will be built upon more in the next chapter, when I consider how the boy in the basement perceives attacks on his personhood. My research, whilst concerned with these issues, is additionally concerned with gaming beyond the problems surrounding the alt-right, white supremacy and Gamergate. In an article I produced around how we talk about, or rather do not talk about, events like Gamergate or issues of toxicity in gaming I argued for the importance of proximity and acknowledgement in ostensibly "normal" gaming spaces. In this piece of work I argued that: "To reach for the far-right, to successfully throw it out, requires touch and proximity."[250] I am still doing that here, acknowledging the proximation of far-right issues when necessary, but am interested in how gamer as an identity can be traced historically considering

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[246] Bezio, 'Ctrl-Alt-Del: GamerGate as a Precursor to the Rise of the Alt-Right', 559.
[247] Mortensen, 'Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate'; Bertan Buyukozturk, Shawn Gaulden, and Benjamin Dowd-Arrow, 'Contestation on Reddit, Gamergate, and Movement Barriers', *Social Movement Studies* 17, no. 5 (2018): 592–609; Massanari, '#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures'; Michael Salter, 'From Geek Masculinity to Gamergate: The Technological Rationality of Online Abuse', *Crime Media Culture* 14, no. 2 (2018): 247–64.
[248] Carly A. Kocurek, 'The Man with the Gun Is a Boy Who Plays Games: Video Games, White Innocence, and Mass Shootings in the U.S.', *Journal of Games Criticism* 5, no. A (2022): 3.
[249] Kocurek, 1.
[250] Kaufman, 'Silence, Distance and Disclosure. The Bleed between the Far-Right and Gaming', 30.

its whiteness and maleness beyond explicitly toxic framings, such as the event of Gamergate itself.

In the 1980s/90s the game industry shifted to exclusively catering to a white male audience as its economic approach changed post the 1980s videogame market crash. Graeme Kirkpatrick works at the intersections of media technologies, human sensoria, and narrative practice and Amanda C Cote is a games researcher whose work focuses on gender, identity, and representation. Both Kirkpatrick and Cote scrutinise gaming magazines and their depictions of gaming culture, especially concerning constructions of gender and of gamers.[251] In my analysis below, I will be looking at a gaming magazine too. Kirkpatrick argues that "computer gaming was not born sexist," linking the codifying of games as exclusively masculine to the US games industry crash in 1982.[252] Whilst he acknowledges that sexist games existed prior to the 1982 crash, he stresses that there *was* a more diverse range of games in circulation in the period before, and that afterwards companies became more risk averse alongside a new generation of consoles in 1987, as games production became increasingly industrialised and moved away from more experimental games.[253] Instead, the focus shifted to turning a profit, and the masculine codification of games led to the male market becoming the obvious and safer choice.[254] Kirkpatrick observes changes in language which indicate the audience shift, for example, an advert for *Strip Poker* (1988) which read "SEX! Right, that's got your attention hasn't it?", contrasting against the huge variance of games that came in the period before, such as *Wacky Waiters* (1983) and a game version of *The Bible* (1982).[255] Cote concurs with Kirkpatrick that the crash led to a more risk adverse industry, telling us they went from anticipating the family as an audience to only the male child.[256] Cote looks at editions of *Nintendo Power* (*NP*) from 1994-1999, during the period of the Girls Games Movement which (mostly) failed, with many female-player-orientated studios opening and closing in this period, such as *Purple Moon*. This failure, no doubt, further put off an already risk adverse industry to a female audience.[257] Within *NP*

[251] Kirkpatrick, 'How Gaming Became Sexist: A Study of UK Gaming Magazines 1981–1995'; Cote, 'Writing "Gamers": The Gendered Construction of Gamer Identity in Nintendo Power (1994–1999)'.
[252] Kirkpatrick, 453.
[253] Kirkpatrick, 459–60.
[254] Kirkpatrick.
[255] Kirkpatrick, 462. Kirkpatrick does acknowledge that misogynistic games still came out in 1983-85, but the huge variance in types of games meant that they did not dominant the gaming landscape in the same ways they would come to by the end of the decade.
[256] Cote, 'Writing "Gamers": The Gendered Construction of Gamer Identity in Nintendo Power (1994–1999)', 482.
[257] Cote, 483. In the 1990s, especially after the immense success of Barbie Fashion Designer (1996) which outsold both Doom (1993) and Quake (1996), games companies suddenly saw profits in the female market and made moves to make more games to appeal to women, but none ever repeated the success of BFD. Purple Moon was a game studio made with the

magazines she notes an oversaturation of male imagery, with female representation mostly relegated to the "fan sections" or behind/second to male characters and protagonists.[258] For example, women feature more in the envelope art section of *NP*, suggesting they were associated with fandom, or the emotional fan, versus technical expertise.[259] Whilst the time periods studied by Kirkpatrick and Cote only overlap by a year, they demonstrate the ways in which gaming magazines (and gaming media more broadly) established and implied an assumed gamer audience through language, imagery and advertising choices/intent.

When attempting to uncover gaming histories and examine gaming objects, are limited by what games culture and history has been preserved and additionally put on display or made accessible. This means that the source material for constructions of gamer across the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s will inherently veer towards the gamer who the market constructs and imagines, not individual personal gamer identities. And, as Kirkpatrick argues, the 1980s was a key period for the formation of videogame culture, including today's. He writes, when discussing UK gaming magazines, that:

> Gaming discourse acquired a gender-exclusive inflection, so that by the time we get to the early 1990s the magazines are explicit in their focus on a young male readership.[260]

We can observe this inflection in the objects I discuss below. For example *Ms.Pac-Man* (1982), betrays a desire to appeal to female gamers whilst deriding their legitimacy through the title character's odd sexualised depictions. As Kirkpatrick writes, such "contradictions and specific ways of managing them [female players] defined gaming culture in its formative period."[261] Most of what the NVM has preserved from this period are products of the gaming industry - games and marketing material – which are implicitly made for the assumed gamer (not necessarily the demographics which actually played their games). Whilst I acknowledge that gamer is often more (or sometimes less) than the audience the industry anticipates, and hence constructs, we can trace moments and ideas in games culture that exist today, ideas that (re)surfaced in Gamergate, to the very same ideas that were depicted on videogame covers and in magazines in the 1980s-90s.[262] Regardless of its accuracy, the gamer the market constructs – through game design choices, through magazine covers,

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intention of making more story and decision focused games, which were intended to appeal to the female player or at least a player who wanted less combat/violence focused games, but lived a short life span from 1996-1999.

[258] Cote.

[259] Cote, 494.

[260] Graeme Kirkpatrick, *The Formation of Gaming Culture: UK Gaming Magazines, 1981-1995*, (Palgrave Pivot, 2015), 3.

[261] Kirkpatrick, 4.

[262] Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*, 35.

through language and imagery – makes up a part of gamer's circulation. Those who choose to ignore or actively define against market assumptions are still engaging with the gamer who "counts", even if only to undermine the premise said counting rests upon.

When engaging the archive, and the museum's exhibits, these were questions I centred in my research; how do these objects, and exhibits, negotiate, preserve, construct gamer identity? Focusing on exhibits that addressed gamer identity, either explicitly (e.g. the "representation shelf") or implicitly (e.g. *Ms. Pac-Man*), and archival objects that were deemed inappropriate for display, this chapter engages gamer identity both where it has emerged and been refused emergence.

Historicising gamer

Object 1: *Ms.Pac-Man* (1982)

Figure 4, Ms. Pac-Man, 1982.

Figure 5, Ms. Pac-Man front facing art.

Figure 6, Ms. Pac-Man buttons.

The NVM houses and displays (for viewers to touch and play) the *Ms. Pac-Man* (1982) arcade game [see *Figures 4-6*].[263] *Ms. Pac-Man* was a significant success, seeing 125,000 cabinets sold and was generally praised for better gameplay than the original *Pac-Man* (1980).[264] Her release in 1982 was on the cusp of the US market crash and evokes efforts to attract more female players, as well as constructing an imagined gamer through the sexualisation of Ms. Pac-Man's form. Ms. Pac-Man is depicted in a pink bow, pink heels, lipstick, and full lashes. Her pose across the arcade machine is suggestive. The way she leans back over the 'M' in the title is evocative of a pin-up. Her gaze is forward facing, as is her body language, with her arm cocked [*Figure 4*]. Her cheeks are full and dark, almost as if she were blushing or flushed, the latter of which has a postcoital suggestibility. Even the small images of her next to the buttons (indicating the choice of playing with one or two players) feel intentionally evocative of touch; the button you press right next to her open-armed form, where she lays back with a seemingly blissful expression on her face [*Figure 6*].

[263] General Computer Corporation Midway. *Ms. Pac-Man*. Midway. Arcade. 1982.
[264] Jaz Rignall, "Tip 10 Highest-Grossing Arcade Games of All Time," *USGamer.Net,* 1st January 2016. https://www.usgamer.net/articles/top-10-biggest-grossing-arcade-games-of-all-time.

The sexualisation of *Ms. Pac-Man* both undermines and proves necessary to her other purpose: to appeal to a female audience. The duality of *Ms. Pac-Man*, as an arcade game that both seemingly appeals to female players while objectifying a cartoonish version of their bodies, is reflective of the tensions within the videogame industry at the time. She reflects an awareness of, and a desire to appeal to, a female audience but her sexualised depictions on the arcade case suggest that catering to a male audience, in addition, cannot be entirely bypassed. This contradiction can be readily observed in the 1990s, with the iconic female videogame character Lara Croft, too. Originally depicted in *Tomb Raider* (1996), Lara was one of the first female gaming protagonists to reach icon status.[265] Game scholar Helen Kennedy writes that in game studies Lara is often reduced to the question of "whether she is a positive role model for young girls or just that perfect combination of eye and thumb candy for the boys."[266] However, she goes on to point out that this duality is intentional, with her developers hoping that Lara would appeal to the 1990s "girlpower" moment whilst catering to both male and female players.[267] Building on this, Esther MacCallum-Stewart has pointed out that Lara's sexuality has been "constructed as a problem" within feminist gaming critique, arguing that her female body is what triggers increased scrutiny around her sexuality and form.

Figure 7, Ms. Pac-Man boardgame, 1982.

[265] Core Design, *Tomb Raider*, Eidos Interactive, PlayStation, Sega Saturn, 1996.
[266] Helen Kennedy, 'Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?', *Game Studies* 2, no. 2 (December 2002), https://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/.
[267] Kennedy, 'Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?'.

MacCallum-Stewart asserts that an over-emphasis on Lara's sexuality limits our understanding of her as a gaming avatar and icon: ""Lara is to-be-looked-at, and always has been, but she is also to-be-played."[268] Whilst released fourteen years prior to Lara Croft's first title game, we can observe similar contradictions and tensions within *Ms. Pac-Man*. And it is key, as MacCullum-Stewart argues, to not let her sexuality erode her significance as a videogame avatar. Ms. Pac-Man's sexuality, whilst arguably contradicting *Ms. Pac-Man's* efforts to appeal to a female player base, must be examined alongside her playability. Ms. Pac-Man exists in the same paradoxical characterisation that Lara does. For example the use of 'Ms.' is evocative of how *Ms. Pac-Man* exists in this kind of in-between space, neither explicitly single nor taken, even though technically as Pac-Man's wife one might expect her to be 'Mrs.' Whilst the use of Ms. versus Mrs. could suggest liberation from patriarchal terms, it simultaneously suggests her availability; which is further emphasised by her sexy pose and open arms.

The NVM also displays the boardgame *Ms. Pac-Man*, which is far less sexualised than the arcade game [*Figure 7*]. Game scholar Ian Bogost describes *Ms. Pac-Man* as both traditional and progressive, and such incongruencies are evident when contrasting the arcade and analogue adaptations.[269] Released in the same year, the boardgame depicts a Ms. Pac-Man in motion, running across the front of the box with the ghosts surrounding her, instead of gazing up at her [*Figure 5* and *Figure 7*]. Her cheeks are less red and exaggerated, as are her eyelashes, and she wears a slightly more practical set of boots. Their differences must be understood geographically; the boardgame was surely meant to be played in the home, in private, whereas the arcade sits on public display. The audience for the boardgame was presumably the family, and inherently demanded more communal play, requiring 2-4 players. The public nature of the arcade version of *Ms. Pac-Man* means it does more work when constructing gamer, as it is not only seen by the player and other people in their home, but by anyone that passed by the machine. The arcade version is an actual videogame whereas, whilst the boardgame does feature a videogame character, it is not a videogame itself – therefore it is questionable how much work it can do to construct gamer identity. The existence of the boardgame, however, does highlight conscious choices that were made in the arcade version in their presentation of *Ms. Pac-Man.* The sexualisation in the arcade version becomes performative; not necessary for the game world or narrative but signalling certain ideas (intentionally or not) about the role/purpose of women's bodies in gaming spaces. This is reflective of the simultaneous success/failure of transgression beyond the white, male baseline that Eglash

[268] Esther MacCallum-Stewart, '"Take That, Bitches!" Refiguring Lara Croft in Feminist Game Narratives', *Game Studies* 14, no. 2 (December 2014), https://gamestudies.org/1402/articles/maccallumstewart/.
[269] Ian Bogost, *How to Talk about Videogames* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 40.

highlights when talking about whiteness and nerdy identity.[270] And furthermore, here we can examine the game industry's tension within/against the implicit expectations of the *foundational norm*. Female characters can be protagonists, but if they were (are) to be seen then they should also be sexy. This is demonstrative of gamer functioning as both contradictory and cyclical. The depiction of a female protagonist undermines that videogames are only for men, but her sexualisation confirms the former undermined point; such tensions then continue to inform, erode, and collapse into one another.

Object 2: Fernandez Must Die (1988)

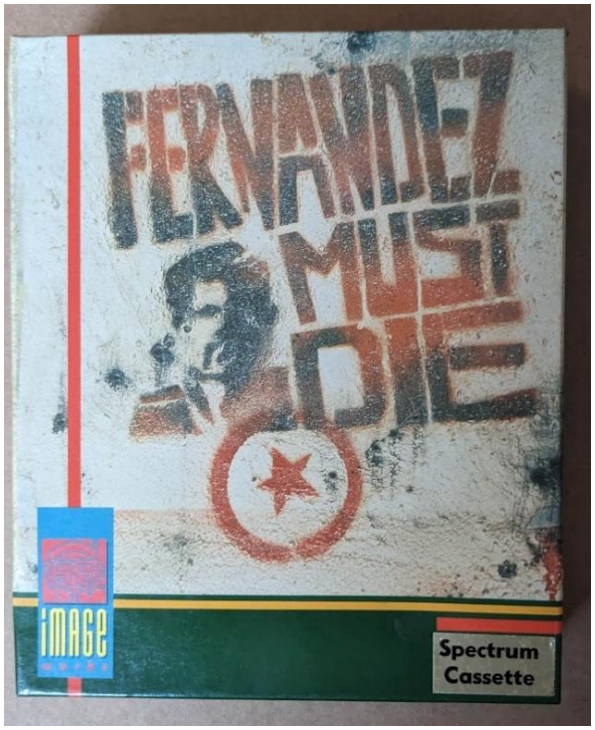

Figure 8, Fernandez Must Die, 1988.

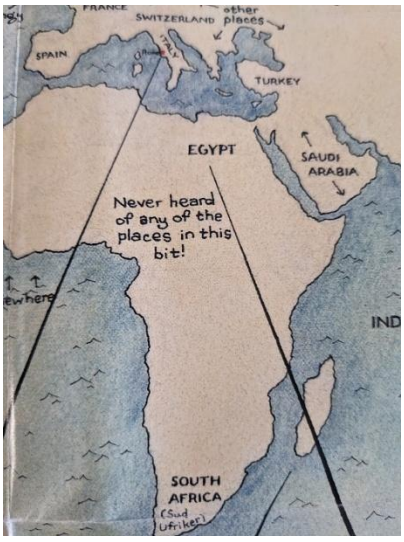

Figure 9, Fernandez Must Die, 1988, poster.

[270] Eglash, 'Race, Sex, and Nerds: FROM BLACK GEEKS TO ASIAN AMERICAN HIPSTERS', 60.

Figure 10, Fernandez Must Die, 1988, poster.

The second object I am going to discuss is the politically charged 1988 action videogame *Fernandez Must Die* [*Figure 8*]. The object is in the NVM's archive, not on display in the museum, and in its catalogue description it reads:

> The fold-out maze, and to a lesser extent the poster, contain outdated, stereotypical depictions of people of various races and cultures which are likely to cause offence.

This is a reference to fold-outs the videogame comes with. On its poster which (supposedly) tells stories of different failed revolutions, it has a very racist depiction of a Black person [*Figure 10*] and in its map of the world states "Never heard of any of the places in this bit!" in the continent of Africa, framing western geographical ignorance as humour [*Figure 9*]. Whilst these aspects of the map are supposed to be jokes, said jokes work to implicitly construct an assumed gamer or player – the kind of gamer who would, or who could, find this content funny. The racist humour and imagery on display here, especially the joke about not being able to name almost any country in Africa, works to construct the gamer as western and white. The "never heard of any of the places in this bit" joke folds into the identity work Kendall highlighted in nerdcore rap; that artists would "use ironic self-deprecation to avoid the appearance of racism."[271] The fact that the creator(s) geographical knowledge is so poor is *almost* self-deprecating, but it also performs the racist work of normalising such weak knowledge about the rest of the world (especially the global south) and finding humour in such ignorance. Humour which then works, as Kendall argues, to "avoid the appearance of racism" in the first place.

Fernandez Must Die's gameplay itself is stereotypically masculine and violent in design. Set in a fictional country in Central America, the game description reads:

[271] Kendall, 'White and Nerdy": Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype', 519.

> In the distant jungles of Central America, revolution is in the air. The government of the Democratic Republic of El Diablo has been brutally overthrown and the evil despot known only as Fernandez rules […] summoned by the exiled leaders of your homeland, you must free your people from the oppressive yoke of the Dictator.[272]

Whilst the themes of the game – revolution, struggle against oppressive powers – feels potentially meaningful, this sincerity is not reflected in the game's map/poster, which talks about revolutions with a very cynical (as well as problematic) tone. The part of the map that depicts Central/Southern America also only labels it as "Brazil" with the following joke "where the nuts come from" underneath. The creators do not even treat their own game's source material seriously. The gameplay itself mostly consists of shooting at Fernandez's army and is briefly interspersed with moments of driving. The only audio in the game is essentially gunfire, grunts of pain/death and occasional explosions; in other words, sounds of violence. Whilst there is nothing inherently wrong with violent videogames, even violent videogames that do not explicitly engage with their political undertones, this game design still folds into the wider issues I discussed in the previous paragraph; in which serious histories, geographies and life experiences are not tangibly engaged with, despite being central to the game's premise and themes.

It is significant the NVM has opted not to display a videogame like this on the gallery floor, especially considering the nature of the fold-outs the game comes with. It would arguably be productive for the NVM to engage more explicitly with these kinds of gaming objects – ones which so overtly display the comfort with which gaming products and language were racist in the 1980s – but the refusal to display objects which, as the catalogue reads, "are likely to cause offense" is also doing work to construct a gamer identity which does not normalise this kind of humour or imagery. If objects like this were to be displayed, it would have to be with great care and sensitivity. However, displayed or not, *Fernandez Must Die* is still doing/did the work of constructing a gamer identity in the 1980s which, as Kirkpatrick argues, influences greatly the gaming culture of today.[273] Ahmed, when writing about the possibilities of backgrounds and race – specifically, whiteness and how it spatially operates within/through its systematic privileges – writes that "If race is behind what we do, then it is what we do."[274] This is important because *Fernandez Must Die* is relegated to the most "behind" space in the NVM, in that it sits in the archive and is (currently) deemed inappropriate for display. It will likely never come into view, but it is vitally, as Ahmed highlights, still "behind what we do." In other words, even the decision to keep the game archived only is still a racialised

[272] Antony Crowther, David Bishop, *Fernandez Must Die*, Image Works, Atari ST, Amiga, 1998.
[273] Kirkpatrick, *The Formation of Gaming Culture: UK Gaming Magazines, 1981-1995*, 2.
[274] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 131.

action, made all the more overt by the game's racist depictions. To keep it archived is, even if the object is never displayed, to preserve the evidence of gaming's more problematic histories, which narratives surrounding events like Gamergate seek to minimise or entirely overlook.

Object 3: MTV's Beavis and Butt-Head in Little Thingies (1996)

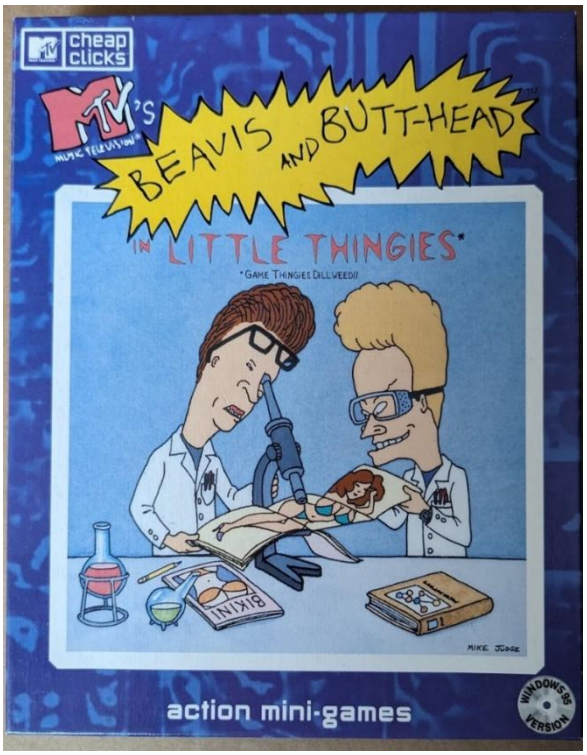

Figure 11, MTV's Beavis and Butt-Head in Little Thingies, 1996.

The third object I am going to discuss is also from the NVM's archive. *MTV's Beavis and Butthead in Little Thingies* is a spin off from the television show *Beavis and Butt-Head* (1993-1997), an American adult comedy about two rather unpleasant teenage boys.[275] The gameplay itself consists of a series of minigames, including one in which either Beavis or Butt-head must successfully spit at people from their high school's roof (complete with loud spitting sounds). What is significant about the *MTV's Beavis and Butthead in Little*

[275] Viacom New Media, *MTV's Beavis and Butt-Head in Little Thingies*, Viacom New Media, Windows, 1996.

Thingies game is the game package's front cover and its fold-out. As the catalogue description reads:

> Box lid art features the characters of Beavis and Butthead using a microscope to inspect a fold-out illustration of a sexualised woman in a bikini along with another magazine cover with the torso of a woman in a bikini on it. These images may be potentially offensive due to their objectification of women's bodies and should be displayed with caution.

Here, I am going to focus on the box cover art specifically [*Figure 11*]. The game came out in 1996, bringing us into the 1990s, the period in which according to Kirkpatrick "gaming discourse acquired a gender-exclusive inflection."[276] Whilst Kirkpatrick is focused on gaming magazines in his analysis, his point is still relevant for gaming culture as a whole and its historical development, particularly in terms of language. This is a game that evidently objectifies women, doing so on the cover through a literally image of a woman (no real women are depicted) and two white, seemingly nerdy men peering at her with scientific equipment (goggles and a microscope). The depiction of the two men here is evocative of geeky masculine stereotypes: white, slight men in glasses with exaggerated facial features and in lab coats. The scientific equipment they are using/wearing signals to the spaces that were the first to house computers in the latter half of the 20th century, like the science lab, and the maths classroom, which in turn worked to ensure those more confident with computers were more likely to be young men and boys. Cote has argued that women's early contributions to technological and computer developments have been erased, partly due to the socially constructed gendering of said technologies – which we can clearly see in practise here.[277] The woman on the fold-out image the two men are looking at is in a tiny bikini, posed as she pushes her hair up and in high heels. She is clearly, as the catalogue notes, sexualised; the magazine with "bikini" written on it is paralleled against the book about atoms, reducing her objectification to an intellectualised art form. This videogame object in particular works to depict what the foundational norm establishes and normalises; geeky, white men at the forefront of videogames and women relegated to literal images and in skimpy underwear.

If *Ms. Pac Man* worked to undermine and vilify the female gamer, and *Fernandez Must Die* worked to imply he was white, western and could engage in edgy humour, then *Beavis and Butt-Head* arguably works to combine this identity work within a geeky masculine assemblage. Whilst the characters on the box art are from a TV show, and not exclusively designed for a videogame, it is still interesting the videogame was made and considered viable, and that

[276] Kirkpatrick, *The Formation of Gaming Culture: UK Gaming Magazines, 1981-1995*, 3.
[277] Cote, 'Writing "Gamers": The Gendered Construction of Gamer Identity in Nintendo Power (1994–1999)', 481–82.

their geeky, white masculine characterisations fold so neatly into gaming stereotypes, and the target audience of the game industry shift post the 1980s market crash. Akin to *Fernandez Must Die*, the catalogue warns against displaying *Beavis and Butt-Head* – "should be displayed with caution."

Object 4: Pokémon Master Guide, Collector's Edition (1999)

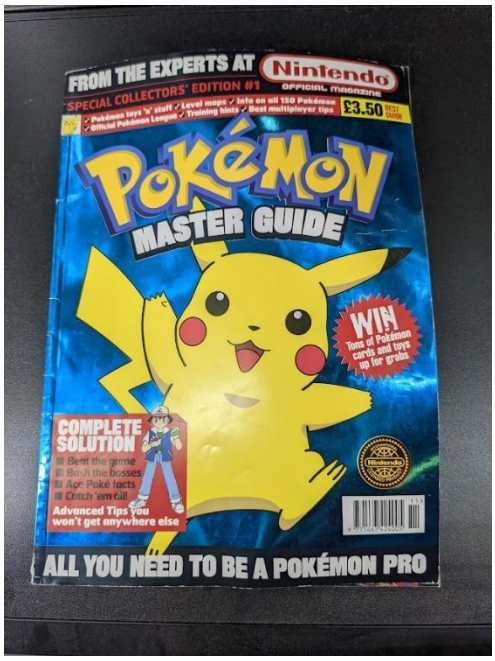

Figure 12, Pokémon Master Guide, Collector's Edition #1, 1999. Front Cover.

Figure 13, Pokémon Master Guide, Collector's Edition #1, 1999. Back over.

Amanda Cote's research, who we discussed above, looks at *Nintendo Power* magazines between 1994-1999. When writing on how mainstream gaming mostly ignored female consumers through masculinised language and imagery, she tells us: "How a group is represented becomes part of the cultural knowledge that people draw on, both consciously and unconsciously."[278] Whilst not a *Nintendo Power* magazine, the NVM has a different Nintendo publication on display on the gallery floor: the *Pokémon Master Guide* (*PMG*), which reflects the issue of appealing to an imagined, exclusive male audience that Cote discusses. The NVM's copy is the *Special Collector's Edition #1*, 1999, and particularly works to negotiate the gender of the constructed gamer through an advertisement on its back. What is significant is that whilst the *PMG* is on

[278] Cote, 489.

display, the arguably misogynistic advert on its back is turned away to the wall, so visitors cannot see it.

The front of the magazine depicts Pikachu as ungendered (in some depictions Pikachu is clearly male, e.g. when he is "Detective Pikachu" and has a male voice but here he could be any Pikachu of any gender), and its bright shiny colour clearly intends to appeal to Pokémon's majority children's market [*Figure 12*]. The choice of blue for the background could be read as masculinising. The back of the magazine depicts a *Dr Pepper* advertisement which is heavily gendered, and racialised [*Figure 13*]. A young, thin, white man is depicted alongside a curvy, blonde, white woman. The suggestive headline "impress her with a big one" is an obvious innuendo [*Figure 13*]. Game scholar Rob Gallagher writes that "gaming culture's key defining trait is its intimate but awkward relationship with the figure of the 'geeky' white, middle-class male."[279] Intimate yet awkward feels like an accurate description of this back page advert; the pair are awkwardly pressed together on the seat, the woman's eyes directed across the man and to the large *Dr Pepper* bottle in his hand. The joke itself feels intimate, as does the empty cinema seats surrounding them; their vacancy exaggerating the press of their bodies together – even the cup holder that should sit between them has been removed. This is reflective of Kendall's work on the "white and nerdy" stereotype, which was becoming increasingly visible in the 2000s, especially in its relation to computing. Kendall describes the development of nerdcore, and certain clothing almost becoming a uniform: "two essential items: the short-sleeved white dress shirt worn with a tie. Thick rimmed glasses and pocket protectors full of pens are optional."[280] The man is dressed in too-big clothes, white, thin, and slouched a little. Whilst he is missing a tie, and his optional pocket pens, his style feels intentionally evocative of that very stereotype; his loose clothing directly contrasts with the woman's tight-fitting dress and high heeled shoes. Kirkpatrick describes gaming as increasingly being "identified as a masculine virtue" but highlights a level of ironic humour, and even ridicule, that developed alongside this codification.[281] We can observe this in the advert's text; underneath the image it reads "Because let's face it matey, size does matter" [*Figure 13*]. The *Dr Pepper* bottle works, not only as phallic imagery, but to simultaneously emasculate the man holding it. The woman does not admire him, but the size of the soft drink in his hand; he only benefits by proxy. Here, this imagery not only (re)establishes the white male as the gamer and as the reader of the magazine, and the woman only as a trophy to be won but suggests the gamer/nerd/geek exists as a kind of underdog. Kendall quotes nerdcore rapper Monzy, who explains it best, "us nerds are the

[279] Gallagher, *Videogames, Identity, and Digital Subjectivity*, 6.
[280] Kendall, 'White and Nerdy": Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype', 507.
[281] Kirkpatrick, 'How Gaming Became Sexist: A Study of UK Gaming Magazines 1981–1995', 464.

oppressed and the downtrodden."[282] This advert reflects another contradiction of gamer; the man in the picture both presents an ideal (he has an attractive date, and the seemingly desirable bottle of *Dr Pepper*) and yet undermines the validity of his masculinity. The gamer's masculinity is not only codified but given economic implications too; something to be obtained through proxy to the right objects, and purchases.

The representational issues happening in *PMG's* advertisement, both gendered and racial, can be connected to wider representational issues in the *Pokémon* videogames. Although *Pokémon* would release its first title with both a female and male player option with *Pokémon Crystal* (2001) in a few years there is no suggestion of such gendered diversification in its magazine or advertisement content here.[283] This issue provides information and play tips about *Pokémon Red* and *Pokémon Blue*, games where the player must play as a non-Black avatar. Regarding racial representation, Pokémon would only see its first avatar options for Black players in the *Pokémon X* and *Y* series in 2013, twelve years after female *and* male player options were implemented.[284] In-game limitations like these demonstrate how games, and wider gaming media, can cyclically reinforce representational issues; collapsing into one another and normalising hegemonic representation – which in turn normalises the gamer such representational limitation anticipates. In other words, this cycle normalises and reinforces the gamer as assumed male and not Black.

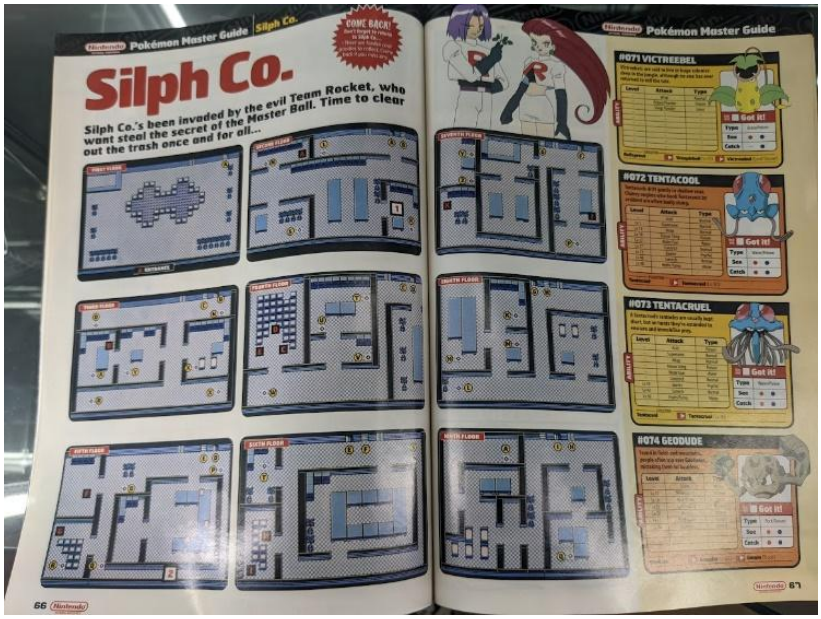

Figure 14, Pokémon Master Guide, Collector's Edition #1, 1999. PP. 66-67.

[282] Kendall, 'White and Nerdy": Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype', 517.
[283] Game Freak, *Pokémon Crystal*, Nintendo, Game Boy Colour, 2001.
[284] Game Freak, *Pokémon X and Y*, Nintendo, Nintendo 3DS, 2013.

The nature of *PMG's* display in the NVM is significant too. The inner pages that are displayed in the exhibition cabinet are a guide for the *Silph Co.* level in *Pokémon Red* and *Pokémon Blue* [*Figure 14*]. It has no explicit connection to the advert on the back. In the NVM this magazine is displayed with its pages open, the *Silph Co.* map on display and nothing else. The advert is literally hidden, sitting underneath the content that is consciously displayed (the advert and front cover face a wall, and cannot be seen by visitors). The advert acts, in Ahmed's words, as a condition of emergence. Advertising must be bought for the magazine to appear and be published, and this advert literally sits *behind* the magazine on its back page. Ahmed writes that "In the face of what appears, we must ask what disappears."[285] The disappearing here occurs on two levels. The advert literally disappears in the NVM's display, as it is turned away from visitor eyes. And in the act of reaffirming the gamer stereotype, other types of gamers/readers potentially disappeared from the magazine and its anticipated readership. The fact that the magazine is exhibited, but the back is not shown for visitors to see, feels important. The advert is relegated to the background, doing background work, but what this work is doing – constructing an implicit white, nerdy, heterosexual gamer – is not acknowledged. This is demonstrative of how the foundational norm, or rather, the discourses it operates in and through can exist in silence, in non-space, but still *work*. To reiterate a point of Ahmed's I shared at the start of this chapter, heterosexuality – another powerful, normalising, and potentially oppressive force – can be something we orient around "even if it disappears from view."[286]

Figure 15, Wii Console.

[285] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 90.
[286] Ahmed, 91.

Figure 16, Nintendo 64 controller, 1996.

Object 5: Nintendo Wii (2006)

Object 5, the Nintendo Wii console, takes us into the 2000s [*Figure 15*].[287] The Wii was a huge success, with over 100 million units sold.[288] Game scholar Jesper Juul stresses the importance of the Wii in, what he terms, the "casual revolution" of gaming: a shift in which everyone could seemingly be a videogame player, and games were no longer exclusively made for a specific hard-core audience. Whilst Juul fails to prise apart the diversification issues present in the concept of "everyone could be a player" he does highlight the importance of flexibility in new hardware such as the Wii.[289]

The NVM rarely deploys the word gamer in its exhibitions but does so twice in the cabinet that contains the Wii console. The small paragraph written next to it reads:

> Many things contributed to the Wii's success. Its advertising focused on people who were not typically seen as gamers. This included families across different generations and solo mothers. Adverts featured diverse groups of people enjoying the Wii, showing Nintendo's intent to appeal to a wide audience. Promoting the use of motion controls and multiplayer games made the console feel accessible for more people.[290]

What the NVM describes here reflects a significant market shift: "advertising focused on [those] […] not typically seen as gamers." This marks a change from the advertisement above in *PMG* depicted seven years prior, although it is important to acknowledge the *PMG* advert was marketing *through* games

[287] Nintendo. *Wii Console*. 2006.
[288] Nintendo, "Dedicated Videogame Sales Units," *Nintendo*, last modified 30th June, 2022. https://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/en/finance/hard_soft/.
[289] Juul, *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players*.
[290] NVM display cabinet featuring the Wii and *Wii Sports* [29/07/22].

culture, versus being an actual advert for a console/videogame.[291] The diversification in marketing was, according to the NVM, mirrored in the hardware; the Wii's control system making it "feel more accessible." The Wii remote itself is easy to grasp and move around, both light in weight and comfortable in most sized hands [*Figure 15*, on the right-hand side]. The Wii controller contrasts with other types of controllers that the NVM has on display (for visitors to view, touch and play games on) such as the Nintendo 64 controller (1996), which has large points striking down from the main button touch pad [*Figure 16*]. This makes it hard to hold comfortably in smaller hands, such as children's or (often) women's hands. Appealing to more diverse audiences, intentionally, was also reflected in the Wii's software. *Wii Sports* (2006), the game displayed alongside the *Wii* in the cabinet, was released alongside the Wii console and featured player customisation options through the implementation of player designed avatars (Miis) from the Mii Channel feature on the Wii itself.[292] Customisation options included gender, age, and skin colour, allowing players to pick their hairstyle and eye colour as well as their tops/trousers. *Wii Sports* itself was a huge success, selling over eighty-two million units, demonstrating that inclusivity in-play was certainly not an issue in the market; if anything it proved the opposite.[293] The immense success of the Wii and its opening title, *Wii Sports*, only proves the hardcore, masculine assumed gamer as false and contradictory all over again; there were other kinds of players out there and appealing to them worked.

It is important to remember that the Wii is, in Juul's words, part of a wider framework of casualisation in gaming. And casual games, or games perceived as casual, can be read as "meaningfully gendered" and feminised.[294] Whilst the Wii's success surely undermines the market's past implementations of gamer in the 80s and 90s, it simultaneously provides a site in which, to repeat Soderman, the masculine hardcore game can be upheld by the devolution and feminisation of casual games.[295] The Wii did not eclipse consoles and titles more readily associated with the hardcore player, such as the Xbox or PlayStation, but was released alongside them. The Wii also works with more stereotypically hardcore titles, like *Call of Duty*. The NVM has *Call of Duty 3* (2006) in its catalogue, but it is not out for visitors to play on the gallery floor.[296] *CoD 3* was released the same year as the Wii and *Wii Sports,* and saw great success, selling

[291] Shaw, 'On Not Becoming Gamers: Moving Beyond the Constructed Audience'.
[292] Nintendo EAD, *Wii Sports*, Nintendo, Wii, 2006.
[293] Nintendo, "Top Selling Title Sales Units," *Nintendo*, last modified 31st March, 2022. https://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/en/finance/software/wii.html.
[294] Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*, 100.
[295] Soderman, 'No Time to Dream: Killing times, Casual Games, and Gender', 39.
[296] This is most likely because the NVM caters to families and children and *Call of Duty 3* has a Teen ESRB rating for blood, language and violence. Treyarch, *Call of Duty 3*, Activision, PlayStation 2, Xbox, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Wii, 2006.

7.2 million global units.[297] It was released on the Wii console, and additionally on PlayStation 2, Xbox, Xbox 360, and PlayStation 3.[298] It's success is dwarfed by *Wii Sport's* sales figures, although *Wii Sport's* sales numbers were, in part, artificially raised by the selling of the Wii and *Wii Sport's* together as a bundle. *CoD 3* sits in stark contrast to a game like *Wii Sports*, where the player can partake in tennis or bowling, as a first-person shooter which featured twenty different weapons.[299] *CoD 3* is a game set during WWII, saturated with white, male representation; all player options at the start being white male soldiers from different allied countries. Later games in the series have made some attempts to improve player options. For example, *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* (2020) allows the player to select a third gender option: either male, female or "classified."[300] However, as Participant 8 points out, this very choice is undermined by the game's own narrative:

> P8: I think it's called COD Cold War […] the whole trailer was just hey look here's everyone's favourite person Ronald Reagan and how look how cool he is Look how nice he's being to these spies and it's like Ronald Regan was a horrible person who did horrible things for the queer community and […] the trailer is like hey look you can be friends with Ronald and […] there's a lot of like just being bros and like violence is always the answer […] I bet every now and again when you die it will flash up hey you died for your country said John F Kennedy erm it's all very like surface level exploration which I think games can and should do more[301]

This demonstrates how gestures from the gaming industry to indicate "anyone can be a gamer" can be superficial and easily undermined by narrative and design choices; just as *Ms. Pac-Man's* seeming appeal to a female gamer was inherently undermined by her absurd sexualisation. The efforts to diversify representation in later *CoD* titles become, as Participant 8 points out, "surface level." This is demonstrative of the tension, the resurgence/resistance cycle, in gaming's ecosystem; the game industry seemingly always snapping back to the

[297] Ziff Davis, "Call of Duty: A short history," *IGN*, n.d. https://microsites.ign.com/call-of-duty-a-short-history/index.html.
[298] Davis, "Call of Duty: A short history."
[299] Davis, "Call of Duty: A short history."
[300] Treyach and Raven Software, Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War, Activision, PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5, Windows, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, 2020.
[301] Participant 8, 2-3.

foundational norm despite many efforts to seemingly move past it – which the success of the Wii represented.

Chapter 3: Conclusion

Across a time period of over two decades, from the 1980s market crash to the 2000s casual revolution, these five gaming objects from the NVM provide examples of how gamer identity was in a constant state of (re)construction and (re)negotiation. Rather than establishing a concrete gamer identity here, I have demonstrated its malleability. Gamer is contradicted through its inconsistent figurations, like *Ms. Pac Man's* design undermining her supposed purpose. Within such contradictory instances, however, gamer persists. Over and over again the gaming industry appears to return to the same baseline of making games (both implicitly and explicitly) for an imagined white, male, heterosexual player – which works, in tandem, to establish gamer identity as a white, male, and heterosexual possibility. In other words, the gaming industry appears to cyclically reinvest in the beliefs the foundational norm props up. This not only demonstrates the malleability of gamer identity, but the ideas and beliefs it functions in and through; the foundational norm itself. As I argued earlier, the foundational norm is elastic, capable of stretching across decades in gaming histories, and facets of gaming culture that cannot so obviously be traced back to hegemony. Whilst I refer to the norm as "foundational" this is to capture its rhetorical operation, normalising white, male hegemony as foundational to gaming history and culture, rather than speaking to its constitutional nature.

The malleability of gamer identity, and the foundational norm by extension, can observed when we can trace changes over this time period. For example, moves to improve hardware accessibility with the Wii console, and the development of *Ms. Pac-Man* when female-character-led games were rare, evidence how issues of resurgence seem to perpetuate simultaneously; with the superficial gestures towards inclusivity in games like *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* feeling evocative of the tone-deaf humour we can observe in games like *Fernandez Must Die* made almost thirty years prior – in that both games made gestures beyond the white, male, heterosexual player but stayed firmly rooted in the imagined white, male, heterosexual player's point of view.

All objects I discussed here are from the National Videogame Museum or were discussed in relation to objects from the museum (as I did when I discussed *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War*). Whilst the museum does not present them explicitly in relation to gamer identity (sans the Wii console), all objects hold relevance for the implicit construction of gamer from the 20th into the 21st

century. The binary of archive vs exhibit is blurred by objects like the *PMG* magazine, which is displayed but, significantly, has its more problematic aspects turned away from visitors. In general, the NVM avoids using the word gamer in their displays, and throughout the museum, but the objects it chooses to display and not display are still doing background identity work in historicising gamer, and communicating to visitors about who gamer was, and who gamer can be. Part of this implicit work is in the objects deemed inappropriate for display, more of which exist than I had space to discuss here. I will prise out the spatiality of the NVM and the identity work it implicitly partakes in more in *Chapter 5: Gamer Counter-Spaces*, where I consider what the space of the NVM is doing and disrupts. Here, I have focused on objects which have helped me to substantiate the foundational norm as a concept across almost half a century of gaming history, setting the groundwork for the thesis as a whole.

As I mentioned in the chapter introduction, the work I have done to historicise gamer is part of establishing the foundational norm; the foundation of gaming's house or home. This house is understood as gaming's ecosystem, a series of rooms and spaces that represent the overlapping spaces and systems which make up gaming's culture. Extra rooms can be built on the house, spaces can be amended or reimagined, but the house's foundation – what it is built upon – cannot budge. The spatial metaphor of a house or home will be key in the thesis, not only as I discuss the basement the boy in the basement lives within in the next chapter, but because it represents what is at stake when I scrutinise how videogames matter; inhabitancy, or feeling at home. Ahmed writes about the concept of home, or feeling at home, in *Queer Phenomenology* when she prises out modalities for how we understand the ways in which bodies orient in spaces: "how space is dependent on bodily inhabitance."[302] She argues that home is not a static place but far more conceptual, that being at home is about how we inhabit a space, how feeling at home is about familiarity; how spaces press upon bodies, and how bodies experience this press in turn.[303] Ahmed writes that:

> Loving one's home is not about being fixed into a place, but rather it is about becoming part of a space where one has expanded one's body, saturating the space with bodily matter.[304]

How we position ourselves, orient towards (or away), or interact with gaming culture determines how we feel at home with it; our ability to inhabit it. As I discussed in the previous chapter, how we orient towards/away from gamer as an identity is affective, is emotional; just as "loving one's home" is. How we love, or do not love, videogames is also how we come to inhabit them, how they allow us to "expand" through and beyond play. And part of this expanding

[302] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 5–6.
[303] Ahmed, 7–8.
[304] Ahmed, 11.

is what we can perform, whether gamer identity is a spatial possibility we can successfully extend into. As I articulated before, to historicise gamer is to unpack its background; the NVM's gaming objects, and the subjectivities they have helped to solidify or disturb, have facilitated this historicising because they make up gaming pasts – gaming backgrounds – that press on gaming's present. And, As Ahmed points out, backgrounds are not literally just what is "behind" us but something that orients us in turn; a pressure and a promise.[305] Because this thesis is concerned with gamer identity, and more broadly gaming subjectivities, these objects are vital contextualisation.

A pressure and a promise is a good way of understanding the functionality of the foundational norm. It creates pressure in that the history of gaming – its objectification of female players, its normalisation of racism and racist humour, its depiction of the white, geeky stereotype – are *pressing* on the gaming present; a proximity we can ignore, consciously lean into or away from or explicitly turn around and face. Its promise rests in its ability to resurge, to consistently keep that pressure, pressure that can sometimes overflow. Events like Gamergate exemplified this best, but objects like *Beavis and Butthead* demonstrate the problems Gamergate brought to the forefront are not new and can be traced back decades in gaming history.

The objects I have discussed here are games and media that are derived from industry and therefore made for profit. Whilst this analysis potentially folds into issues Adrienne Shaw highlights about becoming invested in debates about "who counts" as a gamer according to industry, it also highlights an important aspect of gamer identity; that it is a consumerist one. To buy, interact with, and even make videogames almost always has a financial cost, and a lot of industry practice has wider influence on gaming culture as a whole – not only literally making the games we play and talk about, but normalising or preventing certain behaviours in gaming spaces, like "report abuse" voice chat functions. For example, if a player is banned for using a racial slur in an online game, this sets a precedent that racial slurs are not appropriate in said game, and broader gaming spaces by extension. If a player is reported for doing so, but receives no punishment, this sets a precedent that said behaviour is permissible.

Here, I have discussed gaming objects across almost half a century but, as I have argued, the same problems keep emerging, even as the industry seemingly moves to intentionally broaden its audience. And this broadening, building more rooms on the house that is gaming's ecosystem to make space for new bodies, new possibilities, does not undo the foundational norm. Rather, it confirms anxieties the foundational norm helps generate and maintain. We will explore these concepts more in the next chapter, when I consider the boy in

[305] Ahmed, 90.

the basement as part of gaming culture mythos, and how his world feels like it is ending.

Chapter 4

A Certain Kind of Gamer: The Boy in the Basement

"They don't want stuff to change and change is a part of life."

– *Participant 2, 18.*

The stereotype, or myth, of the boy in the basement is that of an overweight white boy, who is almost always heterosexual and cisgender. He resides in his parent's basement, playing videogames and generally not doing much with his life. The basement is dark, illuminated by poor or luminescent lighting, and always by the light of a TV or computer screen; he swears angrily at this screen, yelling slurs when his teammate misses a headshot. When he gets really angry, he might snap the controller in his hands, causing the plastic to shatter. And when he takes it into the second-hand electronics store in his neighbourhood to replace it, he laughs as he shows it to the shop assistant, as if it were a normal, happenstance thing. The shop assistant, who can only imagine what kind of anger can break such a solid object so cleanly, takes the broken plastic and brings out another. There is mess around the desk he sits at; crisp packets; an overfilled cigarette tray; a tangle of wires (half of which he can't remember what they do). He has not changed his t-shirt, which has some graphic design sprawled across its chest, for a few days. He is not interested in politics, but thinks white men are being left behind – being blamed for everything – and that videogames are being "ruined" by "forced diversity." But the ruination is all *here*, in his basement, a foundational kind of rot.

This boy is not real, yet he entirely is. Even if we cannot point to a single *boy* we can point to the longevity of his stereotype, his persistence across time and media. He is known for playing a lot of (often online) videogames in a basement, not taking care of himself or his space, and for being angry. He is usually imagined in baggy, sometimes unclean, clothing and has conservative (if not reactionary) political views, though he may describe himself as apolitical or even complain that everything is "too political." Despite being referenced as a boy, and as a teenager, in the interview quotes below this boy is often an adult. The term boy in the "a boy in the basement" stereotype reflects his infantilism, his immaturity and exacerbates his inability to properly care for himself. Here I refer to him as a "boy" because participants do but acknowledge that the term boy is doing rhetorical work in defining and maintaining the boy in the basement stereotype, rather than being a wholly accurate description. This chapter utilises pop cultural depictions of the boy in the basement, alongside interview data, to prise apart this stereotype and its wider implications for gaming culture. The intent of the following analysis is not to take the boy in the basement as entirely real (nor entirely incorporeal) but to understand him as a stereotype which both embodies, and is embodied through, gaming culture.

He is a "stereotype" in that he can exist without being real, communicated through popular media and imagery (which will be unpacked through examples below) and orally through stories we tell ourselves and each other. Without prompting, across four interviews, participants brought up the stereotype of the boy in the basement. In this section I not only question why he is still around – still being talked about – but consider the stereotype of the boy in the basement as a spatial frame for extrapolating the foundational norm - established in *Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer*. To this end, I will consider the wider implications this stereotype has for gamer identities, for how white masculine bodies relate to gaming space and for ideological discourse(s) within gaming spaces.

This section begins with exploring relevant work and ideas surrounding the concept of geek masculinities, and then analyses the stereotype of the boy in the basement across two parts: the boy and the basement. The first part will pay special attention to the interview quotes, cross analysing participant responses with examples, and subversions of the trope, from popular media. The second part will address the basement as a spatial frame for the foundational norm; understanding the basement as hidden, yet foundational, to the house it is attached to. The basement will be explored through the frame of a prepper's bunker, somewhere safe from the end of the world.

Geek Masculinities

A lot of work surrounding geek masculinities and nerdy stereotypes pulls on Raewyn Connell's seminal work *Masculinities*. Connell is an Australia-based sociologist whose work explores masculinities, men's studies, class, and international pathways of knowledge, especially in her book *Southern Theory*. Beyond research, Connell has been involved in the Australian labour movement and Australian left. She conceptualised that masculinities are "configurations of practice structured by gender relations."[306] In particular, her work, stresses masculinity's relationality and bodily significance: "gender is an embodied-social politics."[307] Especially influential in geek masculinity research is Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity as "a 'currently accepted' strategy."[308] In other words:

> Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.[309]

Significant here is that Connell articulates hegemonic masculinity as adaptive, responding to the "currently accepted answer" to the problem of patriarchal legitimacy, which is especially important when we examine geek masculinities; masculinities which are constructed, in part, by their relation to "geeky" subcultures and hobbies that are in a constant state of negotiation within/against wider cultural capital. Connell goes on to reference the "geek", as well as the "nerd", "pushover" and "four-eyes," when talking about subordinated masculinities, which other works looking at geek masculinity expand upon. Sociologist T. L. Taylor, who specialises in game culture and communities, writes that geek masculinity is not simply marginal to hegemonic masculinity but "cycles through several stances in relation to [it]."[310] For example, the notorious depiction of women in underwear or skimpy armour, in games such as *World of Warcraft* (2004), is an expression of misogynistic game design, but the platform itself (the game) means this expression takes place in a geek-aligned space. Lori Kendall, also a sociologist, who looks at personal archiving, online community, and identity, adds that the nerd identity has reconfigured "hegemonic masculinity to incorporate some aspects of the

[306] Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*, Second Edition (Polity Press, 2005), 44.
[307] Connell, 37, 66.
[308] Connell, 77.
[309] Connell, 77.
[310] T. L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* (MIT Press, 2012), 112.

previously subjugated nerd identity."[311] The nerdy identity then, not only reconfigures in relation to hegemonic masculinity but reconfigures hegemonic masculinity in turn. When looking at representations of "Geek Entrepreneurs" such as Mark Zuckerberg (*The Social Network*, 2012*)* and Tony Stark (*Iron Man*, 2008), Mendick et al. build on the above ideas to argue that "the geek entrepreneur should today not be viewed as a threat to or an inflection of earlier hegemonic formations but as their successor."[312] For Mendick et al, a key part of this succession is the authority geeks negotiate "through their supposed marginality," arguing that the geek's relationship to the hegemonic is "sustained through its contradictions rather than despite them."[313] The contradiction they are referring to being that geek masculinity rejects many traditional masculine traits while embracing others. For example, Adrienne Massanari, whose research interests include digital culture and online communities, writes about geek masculinity as "both liminal and performative," embracing masculine traits such as rationality whilst rejecting athleticism.[314] It is helpful to understand geek masculinity's relationship to hegemonic masculinity, as something that plays into but subverts, and potentially transforms, the hegemonic. Geek masculinity becomes not just a negotiation of existing power structures, but a reframing of previously marginal experiences which allows nerds to both situate themselves as the "geek" or "pushover" whilst benefiting from dominant gender relations.

Mastery of technology – the videogame, the computer, the console – is integral to expressions of geek masculinity. For example, Gamergate was a moment of technological expression, which saw waves of gendered abuse and harassment occurring online in the name of "defending" videogames. Stressing the relevance of technology during Gamergate Andrea Braithwaite, whose research explores gendered discourse and belonging in pop culture, describes it as "an articulation of technology, privilege, and power."[315] Technology and online spaces provided the stage in which Gamergate took place, but technology's connection to geek masculinity holds relevance before (and beyond) Gamergate. Connell tracks this development herself, arguing that the technological developments of the 20th century, which transformed labour markets and information industries, saw "technical expertise" emerge as gendered practice; calling attention to the fact that "Currently one of the two richest persons in the United States is a specialist in computer programming."[316]

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[311] Lori Kendall, '"The Nerd Within": Mass Media and the Negotiation of Identity among Computer-Using Men', *The Journal of Men's Studies* 7, no. 3 (1999): 356; Connell, *Masculinities*, 79.

[312] Heather Mendick et al., 'Geek Entrepreneurs: The Social Network, Iron Man and the Reconfiguration of Hegemonic Masculinity', *Journal of Gender Studies* 37, no. 3 (2023): 284.

[313] Mendick et al., 288-292.

[314] Massanari, '#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures', 4.

[315] Braithwaite, 'It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity', 1.

[316] Connell, *Masculinities*, 193-194. First edition was published in 1995.

Michael Salter, whose work includes looking at technologically facilitated abuse, concurs that stereotypically associating technology with masculinity can be traced back to the 20th century, despite the early recruitment of women in programming.[317] Whilst the masculinisation of programming was "never total" Salter describes that during the 1980s, a period in which computers and networked technology gained prominence, the "conflation of masculinity with computing was amplified" through advertising, software, education, pop culture, professions etc: "a singular message emanated: computers were for boys and men."[318] Into the 21st century technology and the geek identity remained intimately intertwined, especially with the rising popularity of videogames and their associated hardware. When writing on the significance of man caves, male-only spaces (that are in basements or isolated from the wider home) and laden with tech, Taylor and Adler describe the act of ""posting your setup" to a community of fellow cave-men."[319] Making the "setup" itself is a display of technological knowledge, and simultaneously the ability to afford such tech. The act of posting it online, in often geek-codified spaces, demonstrates the construction of masculinity as *relational*, to becoming a part of and interacting with "community." Masculinity and technology are bound up together in cultural memory, the configurations of masculinity within/against tech affecting the ways men relate to tech itself – and how they express themselves through it.

Whilst it (Gamergate) occasionally bled out into the "real world" through online threats or moments of in-person harassment, Gamergate itself was a primarily online event. Massanari stresses, when focusing on the role of technology within Gamergate, the importance of platform design when looking at Reddit, and how platform designs themselves can "reflect a particular kind of geek masculinity – one that is laden with problematic assumptions."[320] For example, as Massanari explores, "The Fappening" (2014) was an event that occurred within Reddit subcultures, where nudes of female celebrities were illegally acquired and shared, reflecting both technical mastery and misogynistic abuse.[321] Reddit being the site where this abuse successfully occurred demonstrates how a platform's design can reflect and enable certain values and behaviours. Salter concurs that platform design can reflect underlying ideals; "the aggressive and competitive qualities of geek masculinity […] a worldview that is simultaneously encoded into, and privileged by, online

[317] Salter, 'From Geek Masculinity to Gamergate: The Technological Rationality of Online Abuse', 249.
[318] Salter, 249.
[319] Taylor and Adler, 'Man Caves and the Fantasy of Homosocial Escape', 2.
[320] Massanari, '#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures', 14.
[321] Massanari, 329.

platforms."[322] The fact that the platforms and forums which set the stages for Gamergate were made predominantly by white men, geeky white masculine men, feels significant. For example, if I look up who made sites such as 4Chan, Reddit and Twitter I see only white men (8 to be exact).[323] We can observe the emergence of this phenomenon within platform design through Mendick et al.'s concept of the "geek entrepreneur", a particular kind of masculine geek who:

> Presents the very mechanisms of capitalism and the power of the super-rich not as a symbol of global inequality but as the solution to it. The geek entrepreneur represents a masculinity whose vulnerability and pain are a source of power. He embodies not business managerialism but anti-establishment disruption. This is a masculinity that is simultaneously in crisis and our promise of salvation.[324]

Within the article themselves, Mendick et al. mention Elon Musk. Elon Musk is one of the richest men in the world, whose success is attributed to technological development (and presumably mastery) as well as the cushioning of significant familial wealth. In 2022, Musk purchased Twitter, enacting many controversial changes on the platform, including those around hate speech which saw antisemitic posts increasing by 61%, slurs against Black Americans by 33% and slurs against gay men by 63%.[325] *The New York Times* article that states the figures quotes Musk having said he is a "free speech absolutist."[326] This is reflective of how a geeky white man's values bleed into the platforms he makes or owns and further has implications for who such spaces are accommodating to. Whilst the boy in the basement is not a Gamergate imagining, in fact, he is much older (as can be seen in the consolidation of the geeky stereotype, and masculine codification of games, in the 1980s in *Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer*), it is important to understand how the masculinisation of tech, its mastery and history, facilitated much of the abuse that occurred. This abuse is bound up in the configurations of masculinity, a way in which the dominance of masculinity was, and is still being, performed. Salter writes it best: "the cultural and technological conditions that gave rise to Gamergate remain intact."[327]

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[322] Salter, 'From Geek Masculinity to Gamergate: The Technological Rationality of Online Abuse', 256.
[323] 4Chan: Christophe Poole. Reddit: Steve Huffman, Aaron Swartz and Alexis Ohanian. Twitter: Jack Dorsey, Evan Williams, Biz Stone and Noah Glass.
[324] Mendick et al., 'Geek Entrepreneurs: The Social Network, Iron Man and the Reconfiguration of Hegemonic Masculinity', 292.
[325] Sheera Frenkal and Kate Conger, "Hate speech's rise on Twitter is unprecedented, researchers find," *The New York Times*, 2nd December 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/02/technology/twitter-hate-speech.html.
[326] Frenkal and Conger, "Hate speech's rise on Twitter is unprecedented, researchers find."
[327] Salter, 'From Geek Masculinity to Gamergate: The Technological Rationality of Online Abuse', 255.

Outside of game studies explicitly, the man cave or den has been explored more thoroughly. Researchers Moisio and Beruchashvili conducted 49 interviews with different suburban American men to explore how male spaces in the home "contribute to construction[s] of masculinity."[328] One aspect of the cave that emerged in their data was the importance of possessions to "legitimise male spaces […] masculine possessions endowed with powerful phallic symbolism."[329] They connected said objects to productivity and ventures, such as building a shelf.[330] To make your own PC set up, or console collection, is a kind of production or venture – displaying your own technical skill – which the consistent masculine codification of tech facilitates in turn. The *making* is not just a masculine act but the thing being made; the PC itself a stable "masculine possession." Bryce and Rutter, when looking at the gendering of gaming space, stress the importance of games "taking up room in people's homes", and point out the historical legacy of many gaming sites as gendered, calling back to the *Space Invader* arcade at the pub.[331] This materiality stresses the role of consumerism too, which is reflected in the back page of the *Nintendo Power* magazine explored in *Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer*, demonstrating how a geek's masculinity can be purchased, as well as performed, through the right possessions. Importantly, the setup, or the PC, not only work as objects through which the geek can assert masculinity but work to simultaneously masculinise the room – the space they sit within.

Geek masculinity's fragility, as discussed above, is bound up in its maintenance and success. To repeat Mendick et al., his vulnerability and pain are a "source of power." This power partly manifests through their ability to present themselves as marginal whilst benefiting from wider, dominant gendered relations. We can see observe a parallel vulnerability in gamer identity – or specifically a Gamergater – when we turn to Gamergate. Braithwaite connects a gamer's fragility to consumerism, connecting "Gamergater's" feelings of being under attack to changes in the games industry: "For Gamergaters, more diverse and inclusive games can only come at the expense of their own sense of identity."[332] But their fragility goes beyond fears of the gaming market leaving them behind. Massanari points out that their interests are often marked as odd or weird by wider society, and Salter and Blodgett specifically call back to the commonly shared story of being bullied in school.[333] Importantly, the suffering

[328] Risto Moisio and Mariam Beruchashvili, 'Mancaves and Masculinity', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 16, no. 3 (2016): 656.
[329] Moisio and Beruchashvili, 663.
[330] Moisio and Beruchashvili, 664.
[331] Bryce and J Rutter, 'The Gendering of Computer Gaming: Experience and Space', in *Leisure Cultures: Investigations in Sport, Media and Technology*, ed. S. Fleming and I. Jones (Leisure Studies Association, 2003), 4–12.
[332] Braithwaite, 'It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity', 6.
[333] Massanari, '#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures', 4; Blodgett and Salter, 'Ghostbusters Is For Boys: Understanding Geek Masculinity's Role in the Alt-Right', 137.

(whatever form it takes) that characterises the geek or gamer as marginalised disappears the "structural inequalities of race, gender, social class and sexuality and his privileged position within those structures."[334] Lori Kendall, whose work was also explored in *Chapter 3*, looks at nerdy depictions in *The Revenge of the Nerd* movies. When looking at how the fictional nerdy white frat house engages with another Black frat house on campus, Kendall describes how nerds can position their own marginality to ignore the experiences of, in this instance, people of colour: "nerds become an oppressed straight white male identity that then stands in for other oppressed groups, waylaying critiques of hegemonic masculinity while only slightly expanding its definition."[335] The power in geek masculinity's fragility is not only to justify their victim status, but to blanket over and further marginalise actual marginal groups grievances.[336] And we can specifically observe this with gamer identity too. As explored in *Chapter 2: Gamer as Affect*, the gamer's sense of victimhood (of feeling under attack) is a powerful activating force, encouraging those invested in its machinations to rise to its defence in both passive and active ways. In other words, as well as lending it power, geek masculinity's fragility provides its maintenance; as it allows him (the geek/the gamer) to perpetually lean into an quasi-corporeal victim status whilst benefiting from hegemonic systems which valorise whiteness and maleness.

I will briefly focus on the geek's grievances, which are partly tied up in white masculine anxieties. Shared grievances can provide affective recruitment opportunities for right-wing groups, such as the Proud Boys who've gained prominence since their conceptualisation in 2016.[337] Whilst I am not arguing that every basement boy is an outright fascist, it is vital to understand that their anxieties often overlap with the ideological underpinnings of far-right groups. Abby Ferber, a sociologist whose research focuses on women's and ethnic studies, examined the mythopoetic men's movement of the 1980s/1990s and their shared foundational beliefs with the contemporary white supremacist movement. Their significant overlap lay in beliefs which reinforced wider reactionary discourses: that men were in need of protection (white supremacists believing only white men); that masculinity is in crisis and at risk; (white) men are the new minority and that (especially in the mythopoetic movement's case) their pain absolves them of the responsibility to confront their privilege.[338] Whilst Ferber does stress the movements' differences, their

[334] Mendick et al., 'Geek Entrepreneurs: The Social Network, Iron Man and the Reconfiguration of Hegemonic Masculinity', 288.
[335] Kendall, '"The Nerd Within": Mass Media and the Negotiation of Identity among Computer-Using Men', 368.
[336] Kimmel, *Angry White Men*.
[337] Samantha Kutner, 'Swiping Right: The Allure of Hyper Masculinity and Cryptofascism for Men Who Join the Proud Boys', *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* (2020), 23.
[338] A. L. Ferber, 'Racial Warriors and Weekend Warriors: The Construction of Masculinity in Mythopoetic and White Supremacist Discourse', *Men and Masculinities* 3, no. 1 (2012): 30–56.

similarities "suggest that male anxiety and fear over changing gendered expectations are widespread."[339] In other words, they demonstrate the ability of far-right ideological beliefs to circulate in more mainstream movements and communities. These mainstream movements (Gamergate), and communities (e.g. Discord, Reddit, Twitch) are vaster and more disparate than movements such as the men's mythopoetic movement. However, the ideological underpinnings of Gamergate, of geek masculinity, *do* share a lot of the rhetoric that Ferber describes when discussing white supremacy; games need protecting from moves to diversify them (movements of change); the games industry is in crisis and games are at risk; gamers are the "real victims", and their pain absolves them of accountability.

Geek masculinity is ultimately a negotiation of fragility and dominance within heteropatriarchal and racialised structures. This negotiation is performed through his relationship to technology, through consumerism (purchasing or proximity to the right things), and through his isolation (perhaps a *historical* isolation, i.e. bullying at school). Geek masculinities are a wider umbrella under which gamer masculinities, particularly the iteration of the boy in the basement we are concerned with here, folds neatly inside. Gamer masculinities can be understood as a kind of geeky masculinity which invests in videogame technologies and culture specifically, which in turn brings additionally performative possibilities. For example, to play a videogame well, or to play the "right" videogame, as explored in *Chapter 2: Gamer as Affect*, has implications for a player's performance of gamer identity. Importantly, these performances are relational, undermining *whilst also* consolidating the gamer's isolation in his man cave, through his ability to connect with others through technological affordance; through posting his "setup" and talking with others online. Whilst technology affords all these connective possibilities, it also perpetuates the gamer's lack of connection and exposure to the outside world, and to cultures and communities outside his own. The stages for such performances are often spaces shaped, made, or maintained by white men – by geek masculinity – meaning said performances are read as naturalised through repetition and code (both the literal code that constructs websites, and the codes geek masculinity functions through). Significantly, as I will go on to argue, the boy's own grievances, legitimate or not, seem to only ground him further in his basement, rather than facilitating empathy with others. The boy promises salvation, or rather buys into the promise *of* salvation, but does not question the root of the crisis he sits within.

[339] Ferber, 32–33.

The Boy

The first half of this chapter considers the "boy" in the basement. Guided by the interview data, with analysis supplemented by depictions of the basement boy trope across media from the 2000s-2020s, this section will examine the core aspects of the boy in the basement stereotype. Four participants discussed the stereotype of the boy in the basement, without prompting (mentioning of the boy in the basement beforehand):

> When asked about what the term gamer means to them:
>
> P6: it [the term gamer] gets associated […] with Gamergate and that notion of what a gamer is which is not I mean […] it's nonsense right the reality is that people who play games are incredibly varied […] there's not that stereotype […] **it's just some teenage boy playing alone in the basement is bollocks** like we know that […] but it does **conjure up that teenage boy playing in the basement and having issues with you know female protagonists** in games and things like that so it it's the connotations it's not really anything concrete (Emphasis added).[340]
>
> P7: it's that typical[…] when let's say someone in their 40s or 50s thinks of a gamer they probably think of the sort **stereotypical pale teenager in their parents basement playing a video game kind of thing** maybe that was the origin of the term and it's now been reclaimed and elevated to be this kind of I'm so passionate about this medium that I want to define myself purely by this term erm but for me that's kind of inseparable from that[…] small minded erm but that very sort of conservative gatekeepery gamer identity stuff (Emphasis added).[341]
>
> P9: I think that a big shift happened […] with Gamergate…where that [gamer identity] became something which was somewhat ideologically neutral erm sometimes used in a disparaging way this term gamer er was used to kind of say **oh you're a bit**

[340] Participant 6, 8.
[341] Participant 7, 16.

> **of a loner** ohh yeah yeah **you live with your parents' in a basement flat and they don't ever go out for sunlight and you're pasty and pale and you're overweight** or whatever erm that was I think a common commonly held idea but obviously having been a player myself and having various things I never really thought of gamers like that […] but I think Gamergate […] almost radicalised this idea of what a game[r] was supposed to be the the people took it on as a primary identity (Emphasis added).[342]

After mentioning Gamergate first, Participant 11 was asked what his understanding of it was:

> P11: it seems like a load of right wing sort of gamery people or like people on er 4Chan or equivalents […] I don't know to be honest probably now […] you're asking me to define the thing I feel massively unequipped to describe it [laughs] um like - I dunno know they'r[e] just are like a [sighs] like a miss **misogynist um sort of movement** […] of **little nerdy boys who live in their moms' basements telling girls that they shouldn't play games and threatening them and telling them they should go kill themselves** and stuff like that but really really going for it […] really harassing sending stuff to peoples' houses leaking addresses posting stuff really nasty long term abuse (Emphasis added).[343]

Across these four quotes, core elements of the basement boy stereotype emerge. Three participants specifically describe the basement boy living/playing videogames in his parents' basement, and when Participant 6 refers to him as "teenager" this implies he still lives at home. This suggests the boy is infantile, perhaps literally due to his young age, but also due to him still living with his parents. Participants articulate the boy as having "issues" with female protagonists and female players, which infers that the boy struggles romantically with women, and perhaps suffers a lack of real-life connections, not just romantic ones. Building on this, participants refer to him as "loner" and "alone", emphasising his isolation by referencing his lack of going outside – not

[342] Participant 9, 13.
[343] Participant 11, 11-12.

just through constant references to the basement – but when Participant 9 says: "they don't ever go out for sunlight." In analysis below, I will unpack each core aspect of the basement boy, using the viewings to supplement analysis.

The boy in the basement is depicted in countless imageries across film and TV, but the three examples I examine below all highlight different iterations. The three examples I selected were, drawing from the stereotype of the basement boy the participants described, selected in order to capture the widest range possible of basement boy tropes and archetypes. All three examples are drawn from American media, and this is partly due to the fact that most examples of the "basement dweller" trope are from American TV shows and films. This geographical departure from the UK also signals to the fact that Gamergate, an event three out of the four participant responses specifically reference when discussing the boy in a basement stereotype, is an event that, whilst having internal reach across videogame culture, was grounded in the USA and American politics, as can be seen via its connections to the QAnon and to the 2016 American election cycle, as described in *Gamergate: A brief summary* in the *Introduction*. Before engaging with the analysis in-depth, I will first introduce the basement boy examples.

To start with, The Trio (who are villains from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) represent the classic nerdy, white, skinny guy who is very into tech, geeky merch and is misogynistic towards women, as well as clearly struggling romantically with women.[344] The Trio also embody the trope of still living in your parents' house, as they hang out in one of The Trio's, Warren's, Mum's basement, and are subject to her parental authority. Batman in the *Lego Batman* film represents technological mastery and deep isolation, part of Batman's arc in the film exploring his loneliness, and his inability to connect with his peers.[345] He lives in his (deceased) parents' basement, or rather cave, and Alfred (his butler) embodies a maternal role. Bill from *The Last of Us* TV show is the strongest subversion of the stereotype of the boy in the basement, as a queer prepper who survived the apocalypse by cordoning off a whole town.[346] Bill is not young or in his parents' house, but he is isolated, displays technological skill and lives in a basement to avoid the authorities taking him away, resisting control from a higher power. Bill's character is from *The Last of Us* (2013) videogame, but in the TV show he is depicted as explicitly queer (versus implicitly in the game) and is shown with his husband (who in the game he is only implied to be partnered with). This shift to more explicit representation received considerable backlash online, despite Ellie (the game's main character), also

[344] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Season 6, Episode 4, "Flooded," Doug Petrie, Jane Espenson, October 16th 2001, The WB, TV Show.
[345] *The Lego Batman Movie*, directed by Chris McKay (Warner Group Animation et al., 2017), 104 minutes.
[346] *The Last of Us*, Season 1, Episode 3, "Long, Long Time," Peter Hoar, Craig Mazin, 29th January 2023. HBO, TV Show.

being queer in both *The Last of Us* games.[347] Bill, through this transformation, literally embodies the boy in the basement's anxieties (which will be further unpacked below) that games are becoming more diverse, specifically more queer in this instance, and that they will no longer effectively cater to a cis, heterosexual, white male audience. Bill's queerness reflects the elasticity of the the boy in the basement stereotype, as we can read several basement boy characteristics onto him despite him not being heterosexual or young. The Trio, Batman and Bill all embody different aspects of the boy in the basement. The Trio represent the monstrosity; they are the antagonists of their *Buffy* season arc and they openly display desire to be sexually violent towards women, as well as wanting to destroy an entire town. Bill represents a prepper, or a survivalist, someone who believes his world is ending (and isolated himself away due to this belief). And Batman represents a hero, how the boy in the basement views himself, someone fighting back against an opposing force.

Figure 17, The Trio from Buffy the Vampire Slayer, 2001-2002.

Example 1: The Trio, from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2001-2002) Season 6, are three white, nerdy men [*Figure 17*]. They stand in their new "lair" and excitedly play with the new gadgets and gizmos they've obtained. This lair has been acquired through tricking a demon into robbing a bank for them, and with all their money they have got action figures, new tech, a periscope and even a

[347] For example, Episode 3 was negatively review bombed. See: Ray Ampoloquio, "Review-bombers complain that Episode 3 "ruined" The Last of Us," 4th February 2023, *XFire.* Accessed here: https://www.xfire.com/complain-episode-3-the-last-of-us/ [05/04/2023].

flamethrower. They are all adult men, post-graduation at least, yet Andrew announces: “We did it, we can do anything […] we can stay up all night if we wanna.” At the start of the episode, they had been bickering in Warren’s mum’s basement, a space which doesn’t look all so different from the “lair” they have now. Warren told us as much to win an argument: “since this is my mum’s house, I think what I say goes.” Their original to do list, written up on a whiteboard, included goals such as “control the weather”, “conjure fake I.Ds” and “girls”, the last of which is listed twice. Near the end of their first episode appearance, which instigates their antagonist arc for Season 6, one of them jokes about making Buffy (the show’s protagonist) their “willing sex bunny” if she comes after them. Another chimes in: “I’m putting that on the list.”

Figure 18, Bill from The Last of Us, 2023.

Example 2: *The Last of Us* (2023) TV series is a show inspired by *The Last of Us* (2013) videogame, a story set during a zombie pandemic caused by the cordyceps fungus. Episode three, “Long, long time,”, diverts from the main plot to tell the story of Bill [*Figure 18*]. At the start of the outbreak in Lincoln, Massachusetts, Bill watches computer screens from his basement – a kind of secret bunker – as he monitors the evacuation above him and evades being escorted out of town by the authorities. As they search his house, their boots creaking above, he reaches for his gun and listens carefully; we hear Bill mutter to himself “not today, you new world order jackboot fucks.” Once the authorities are gone, taking the last of the town’s people as they drive past a mandatory evacuation sign, Bill puts on a gas mask, a chain of ammunition, a leg holster, and takes a rifle to check outside. Assured the coast is clear, Bill pulls off his gas mask, revealing the face of a middle-aged white man, and slightly overgrown, soft brown hair. Bill proceeds to make the town his own space; creating a defensive perimeter and traps to keep out zombies and indulging in

small luxuries, such as home cooked foods like rabbit and jam. He spends the next four years in utter isolation until his future husband, Frank, falls into a trap and Bill takes him in for the night. Thirteen years later, once Bill and Frank have passed away, Ellie finds a letter Bill wrote to Joel (Ellie's counterpart). In it he wrote: "I used to hate the world, and I was happy when everyone died. But I was wrong because there was one person worth saving."

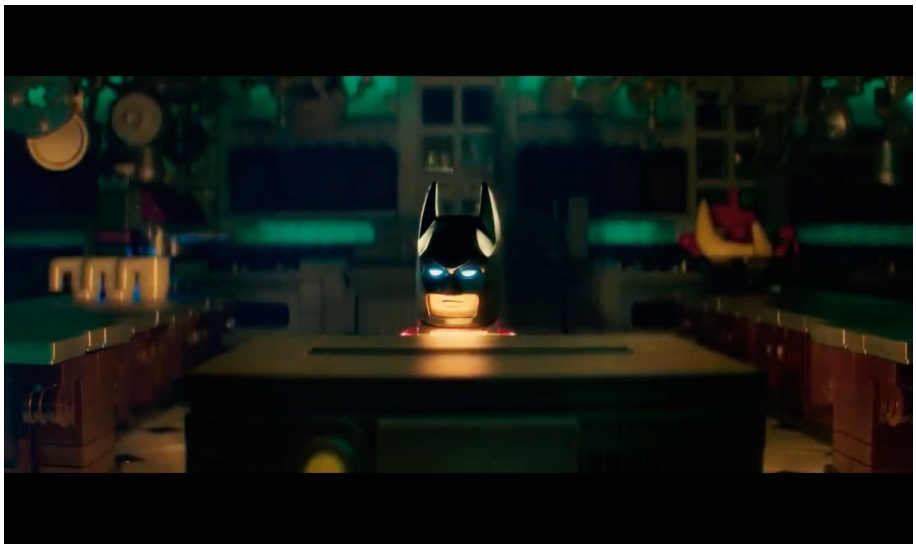

Figure 19, Batman in Lego Batman, 2017, heating his food up in the microwave.

Example 3: The beginning of *Lego Batman* (2017) starts with Batman intervening in another of Joker's attempts to take over Gotham city. After defeating an impressive line-up of villains, and singing his own song featuring lines such as "Who has the coolest gadgets? BATMAN!", the city rallies around Batman in celebration. One man from the crowd yells: "Batman, I love you more than my kids!" Batman flies off with the crowd cheering behind him, the bright purplish and pink lights of the city twinkling as he heads home to Wayne manor. The noise of the city is immediately contrasted by the quiet, vastness of the batcave as he lands. Batman says "Hey computer, I'm home." The words reverberate around the cave, panning further out with each echo. Batman heads inside along an intricate set of moving platforms. The computer, after informing him about the 4 pieces of mail that arrived while he was gone (two bills, a penny saver, and a coupon), tells him that Alfred left him lobster thermidor in the fridge. After changing out of his suit, we see Batman fetch the food and pop it into the microwave. He sets the timer and watches the food spin around as it cooks; the yellowish light from the microwave bouncing off Batman's face and the dark empty kitchen behind him. We watch Batman from the microwave's point of view, as he mumbles, makes noises with his mouth, and looks around a little [*Figure 19*].

All these examples demonstrate different iterations of the boy in the basement stereotype; his infantilism, or (in the case of Bill) specifically resentment against a more dominant power; his inability to connect with the real world; his isolation, his loneliness or (in the case of The Trio) their inability to date girls; his white body; his mastery of technology, most evidenced by Batman's line in his own song; and dark, underground spaces that might offer safety, but guarantee isolation from the wider world. Now I turn to the analysis of participant descriptions of the in the basement trope, utilising the above examples to contextualise and illustrate different iterations of the boy in a basement stereotype.

The fact that he is a teenager and in his parents' house is reflective of his infantilism. Participant 7, Participant 9, and Participant 11 all reference the basement he is in being his parent's house. This directly mirrors the situation we are first introduced to The Trio in, sat on bean bags, with a game in the background, in Warren's mum's house [*Figure 17*, Warren sits on the right]. Participant 6 and Participant 7 specifically reference him being a teenager, implying he is literally a child, but if this were always the case – if he were always a child – the basement feels less significant. Living in your parent's house usually only becomes a notable attribute once you are an adult, maybe with a job, and the expectation is that you would have moved out. The boy can be further infantilised by his parents. Batman (who does live in his parent's house, having inherited it when they died) gets told by the computer that Alfred (the family's old butler) put his dinner in the fridge when he gets home at the start of the movie. Batman expresses delight and announces that lobster is his "favourite," meaning Alfred chose and organised dinner for him. Warren, from The Trio, declaring "we can stay up all night if we wanna", also implies that when Warren lived in his mum's house he could not stay up as long as he wanted – despite being an adult. Perhaps this means that the boy in the basement is subordinate to those who live above him. Even Bill, who demonstrates expert survival skills when he successfully cordons off a whole town, is afraid of the authorities finding him in his basement. The term "boy" is infantilising in of itself, and Participant 11 uses it without qualifying he imagines a teenager; this boy, at least in some cases, is actually a *man*. The boy in the basement's infantilism is indicative of a kind of subordination, a subordination which comes with perks too (after all, Batman comes home to lobster thermidor) but ultimately helps to cement his status as someone who is *looked after* in some way, even if (as in Bill's or Warren's case) he resists or resents this.

The boy's inability to connect with, or fear of, the real world feels subtly tangible in interview responses. When Participant 6 talks about him having problems with female protagonists, or Participant 11 describes the boy telling people [girls] to kill themselves, this suggests anxiety about change (in this case, change regarding the player-base), revealing the insecurities of geek masculinity that many scholars reiterate, including Salter, Mendick et al. and

Kendall.[352] Women make up about half of the real world (and often half or more of gaming worlds) yet their very presence is enough to instigate verbal abuse. Blodgett and Salter, when looking at the response to the trailer of the (notably all female/gender-reversed) *Ghostbusters* (2016) remake, argue that white male entitlement within geek cultures can be embodied through, "online trolling" and "gendered harassment."[353] We can observe different iterations of disconnection and insecurities in our media examples. The Trio desire to change Sunnyville, to harm it, and to harm women through the desire to realise their fantasies; fantasies which, perhaps, reflect their inability to connect with women in the first place. Batman wants to connect with his peers (Superman, Wonderwoman etc.) and his city, but doesn't manage to. For example, during the film he visits Superman to discover all the other superheroes are having a party and didn't invite him. Bill is seemingly quite happy in his isolation until he meets Frank, the "one person worth saving," but this new connection comes with vulnerability. Several years into their relationship, Frank surprises Bill with a strawberry patch which makes him cry, and Bill explains: "I was never afraid before you showed up." All these narratives, and the modalities of harassment the participants describe, are expressions of loss, or the threat of loss. Extreme reactions to female players are a kind of spatial policing, policing against the loss of space, protecting the "new frontier."[354] To see the world as something not promised by the dogma of geek (and white) masculinity, as something the boy in the basement imagined, is to understand and experience loss – the death of a fantasy. The anger he (the boy) expresses towards women is not just indicative of his entitlement, his loss, but his disconnection (not just with others) but from reality.

This boy is lonely. He is, as participants describe, "playing alone" and "a bit of a loner." Salter connects the stereotype of the lonely geek to early characterisations of programmers as "awkward but brilliant."[355] We can trace this idea into the twenty first century with Tony Stark in *Iron Man*; "inventing and testing technology usually alone in his workshop."[356] This workshop is, until it's destroyed in *Iron Man 3*, notably underground in Stark's mansion. The boy's relationship with technology can bring him into contact with others. As Participant 11 describes, he harasses people and doxes them: "telling girls that they shouldn't play […] sending stuff to peoples' houses." However, The Trio's

[352] Kendall, '"The Nerd Within": Mass Media and the Negotiation of Identity among Computer-Using Men'; Salter, 'From Geek Masculinity to Gamergate: The Technological Rationality of Online Abuse'; Mendick et al., 'Geek Entrepreneurs: The Social Network, Iron Man and the Reconfiguration of Hegemonic Masculinity'.
[353] Blodgett and Salter, 'Ghostbusters Is For Boys: Understanding Geek Masculinity's Role in the Alt-Right', 133.
[354] Kimmel, *Angry White Men*, 20.
[355] Salter, 'From Geek Masculinity to Gamergate: The Technological Rationality of Online Abuse', 250.
[356] Mendick et al., 'Geek Entrepreneurs: The Social Network, Iron Man and the Reconfiguration of Hegemonic Masculinity', 289.

friendship demonstrates that this contact does not always have to be abusive (although their comradeship does facilitate violence towards the town they try to takeover, Sunnyville). The boy's technological mastery is importantly what facilitates his connections (whether it be a shared interest, or a literal modality of contact). As Salter and Blodgett write, when looking at hypermasculinity in gaming publics, "mastery of social media enabled them (geeks) to form and control their own gaming publics […] to turn their isolation into a powerful social network."[357] So when participants imagine the boy in the basement as lonely, it is a physical, literal, material loneliness. We can observe this with The Trio, Batman, and Bill. Whilst The Trio have each other, they are evidently failing to get girls. Batman is alone in his batcave, emphasised by the echo of his voice in the vast space and that Alfred is cleaning seventeen floors above him when he arrives home. Bill is utterly alone for years, but the existence of his secret prepper's bunker and lack of relationship experience (he tells Frank he's only been with a girl once, a long time ago) implies he was lonely before the apocalypse. It might be more accurate, then, to imagine the boy in the basement as alone, but not always lonely. For example, Batman's technological mastery, his gadgets and tech that facilitate his heroism, momentarily disrupt his isolation when the city rallies to celebrate him. But, importantly, when we turn to Bill, his mastery of technology facilitated his isolation from society, as it allowed him to hide away in his town; demonstrating how technology can ease avoidance with others in material space; how it can allow us to avoid intimate interactions.

Figure 20, Bill removing his gas mask.

Participants tell us the boy is "pasty" and "pale." This paleness denotes whiteness, as does the whiteness of the wider media stereotype he alludes to.

[357] Salter and Blodgett, 'Hypermasculinity & Dickwolves: The Contentious Role of Women in the New Gaming Public', 412.

The boy's pastiness reflects his lack of going outside, of being in sunlight. Braithwaite calls to this idea of sunlight when she considers how we can tackle the challenges Gamergate presents: "By bringing "gamer" out of the basement and into the light, we can see more clearly the challenges we face as we work toward more inclusive communities."[358] The boy's pastiness becomes evocative of exclusivity, of hiding away the issues that were expressed through Gamergate (this latter aspect will be explored when considering the Basement). His lack of sunlight is indicative of his lack of exposure. The Trio hide away in their lair/basement, causing havoc in the town. Batman, as well as stowing away in his cave, literally hides his face under his bat mask. And Bill hides away from the rest of the world, as well as briefly under a gas mask [*Figure 20*]. When Participant 9 describes him as "overweight" this suggests the boy is perhaps not looking after himself or a lack of stereotypical desirability. Connell stresses the importance of the body in social practice, bodies are not neutral modalities but "inescapable in the construction of masculinity," though she stresses "what is inescapable is not fixed."[359] However, the technological affordances of play and tech – controlling an avatar, designing a character, typing into a text channel – do allow temporary escape of the body's significations. Participant 1, describes:

> P1: I find it incredibly awkward erm speaking to people face to face […] but when I'm online I can I could be more myself I can be more comfortable you could be sat there and wearing absolutely nothing and you know what I mean [laughs] you can just be sat there in in your boxers and a t-shirt feeling comfortable whereas if you're in er an […] social erm setting you have the the clothes that you're wearing you're comparing yourself to other people[360]

This is one of the ways geek masculinities are so effective at maintenance and reproduction, as technology (temporarily) escapes the inescapable; it (gaming, being online) allows Participant 1 to "be more [him]self" as he describes escaping his literal body and clothes. This performance is wrapped up in possibilities of technological mastery but is, importantly, what maintains the boy's paleness – his lack of need to go outside. The boy is, in Participant 1's words, "comfortable." Braithwaite does not suggest how we might bring the gamer out of the basement and "into the light." This is an expansive,

[358] Braithwaite, 'It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity', 7.
[359] Connell, *Masculinities*, 54–64.
[360] Participant 1, 3.

ideologically loaded (but necessary) aim that does not yet have a clear answer, or answers. However, we can turn to Bill for the possibilities of the near after: "I used to hate the world, and I was happy when everyone died. But I was wrong." Frank appeared in one of his traps, the responsibility of another life (if Bill had not helped him, he would have died) literally dragged him outside and "into the light."

Mastery of technology is less evident in the interview answers above but is implicit through their association with the term gamer. As other participants have expressed, Participant 1 tells us a gamer is someone who spends a "majority of [their] time" gaming (explicitly more than once a week), and Participant 13, whilst echoing the time-spent expectation, adds that she feels gamers are expected to keep up to date with the latest consoles, games, and industry shifts.[361] So the gamer from interview data, at least a specific imagining of them, has heavy involvement with games – and might have expertise surrounding them. Participant 7, Participant 6, and Participant 9 all connect the boy in the basement stereotype to ideas of gamer (and Participant 11 to Gamergate specifically). Therefore, we can infer that even if he is not a master at technology (an expert) he is surrounded by it. That (gaming) is what he does *down there*. Mastery of technology, as previously argued, is not just a means of connectivity but a modality for expressing a certain kind of masculinity; a geek, or gamer, masculinity. As Slater writes, the gendered history of computing saw technological mastery form "the basis of masculine esteem and status."[362] The use of technology is what allows Bill to avoid the authorities, and to keep his town safe (we see him watching a zombie fall into a trap through his CCTV and chuckling), and later even his husband safe; all protective, masculine, expressions of technological expertise. The basement, or cave, itself extends the possibility of masculine expression and performance.

Across all interview segments, the boy is in a basement. In the next section, I will expand on the possibilities of the basement; what it signifies, how it operates in/against the wider home. Here, I want to consider what the basement means for the boy specifically. The basement is a space where men can "carve out their own territory where masculine identity can be made."[363] For example, after the microwave scene, we see Batman lounging in his batcave as he eats his lobster thermidor, surrounded by large vehicles and boats as he floats on a water jet [*Figure 21*]. He is surrounded by his gadgets, evidence of his technical mastery and immense wealth. The space becomes part of the performance, and integrally, part of his isolation. To play in the living room, or a shared space, would see family or household members wandering in and out;

[361] Participant 1, 3. Participant 13, 4.
[362] Salter, 'From Geek Masculinity to Gamergate: The Technological Rationality of Online Abuse', 248.
[363] Moisio and Beruchashvili, 'Mancaves and Masculinity', 658.

interpersonal moments of connection and gameplay.[364] Whilst the basement can be a site for male bonding, as we see with The Trio, this bonding will often happen online – in gaming spaces.[365] Taylor and Adler describe how the act of "posting your set up" online enacts a "fantasy of shared play" through, for example, the depicting of couches with multiple controllers laid out.[366] Importantly, this fantasy is virtual, not inherently realised. They connect the fantasy the man cave manifests, (a space separate to the domestic home, or the idea of only encountering women through digital media) to the fantasy of "prolonged boyhood", relating back to the idea of the boy in the basement as infantile or immature.[367] Taylor and Adler stress that this fantasy is not just about belonging, about homosocial connections, but equally about escape. We can observe fear from the real world across our examples: The Trio are afraid of the demon that comes down to their basement (from the "real world") to demand payment for the bank robbery; Batman is afraid of rejection from people outside his batcave (the peers who threw a party without him); Bill is afraid of losing Frank (the person who gave him a reason to give up his isolation). The basement becomes protective. Not just maintaining masculinity, but an avoidance of loss or pain. When Bill tells Frank, "I was never afraid before you showed up," when he tells Joel and Ellie "I was wrong," these are expressions of vulnerability, of the harm (and risk) real life connections bring. This is why a female protagonist or player can be world ending, can threaten loss, because the fantasy must be maintained to facilitate effective escape.

Figure 21, Batman eating his lobster surrounded by various ships and vehicles, as he floats on a water jet.

[364] Thornham, *Ethnographies of the Videogame: Gender, Narrative and Praxis*, 13.
[365] Moisio and Beruchashvili, 'Mancaves and Masculinity', 667.
[366] Taylor and Adler, 'Man Caves and the Fantasy of Homosocial Escape', 2.
[367] Taylor and Adler, 2.

The website *TV Tropes* lists over 150 examples from digital media that depict the "Basement-Dweller" stereotype.[368] Different iterations of the boy in the basement are numerous, too much to quantify in a single chapter, yet we can identify possible manifestations of him across the media examples explored above; he is three nerdy boys plotting to take over the world, in the hope of getting girls; he is a techno savvy billionaire with no real friends; he is the survivalist prepper who hates the world. He is "not really anything" yet we, myself, my participants, are talking (writing) about him; he is easy to locate and identify in popular media, and in our own imaginations. The boy is "stereotypical," he is "not […] concrete," he is "nonsense", he is an "idea." Across the three answers addressing gamer identity specifically, it is evident that the boy is not entirely real, just as our examples from media are not. They are fictional. Within this framing, the boy becomes not just fantastical but wrapped up in wider narratives; narratives about geekiness, masculinity and technology. What does the narrative of the boy in the basement tell us? What is the significance of him still being around, given his origins can be traced back to the 1980s (*Chapter 3*: *Historicising Gamer*)? Participants did not just describe the boy in the basement but identified how he has changed. He is associated with Gamergate (now); he was a stereotype from older generations which is now "inseparable" from conservative views; he was part of a big ideological "shift" that coincided with Gamergate where he morphed from a disparaged idea to a "radicalised" identity; he is enacting serious abuse (again through or due to Gamergate). Whilst his origins, and ideological codifications (whiteness, masculinity, geekiness) can be historicised confidently the fact that he is, according to Participant 6, "not really anything concrete" perhaps explains his ideological malleability. We can observe this slippage with the *Ghostbusters* movie (2016), which was a remake of an originally male-centric franchise that saw a lot of backlash online due to its female re-cast, the trailer on YouTube accruing 647,600 dislikes in 2016.[369] When looking at the responses to the *Ghostbusters* trailer, Blodgett and Salter examine how the comments section became an opportunity for alt-right recruitment, "cement[ing]" the link between the alt-right and gaming through their ideological overlap; networked misogyny and a persecution mindset.[370] This not only shows how one can fall from a toxic Gamergater identity into an explicitly alt-right one, but demonstrates how the narrative strands which make up the boy in the basement can express wider ideological world views, and have serious consequences for contemporary political movements. The interview participant quotes tell us he is "conservative," "gatekeepery," "radical," and

[368] *TV: TROPES*, "Basement-Dweller," *TV:TROPES,* n.d. https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BasementDweller.
[369] *BBC NEWS*, "Ghostbusters trailer 'most disliked' on YouTube," *BBC News,* 3rd May 2016. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-36191146.
[370] Blodgett and Salter, 'Ghostbusters Is For Boys: Understanding Geek Masculinity's Role in the Alt-Right'.

"right wing." He is, ultimately, an expression of the foundational norm in gaming (established in *Historicising Gamer*); the codification of the white, masculine, hardcore gamer realised. He becomes a body onto which we can project legitimate anxieties about gaming, gamer identity and Gamergate, whilst embodying geek masculine concerns; a body which we can situate underground in the basement, and out of sight.

The Basement

The basement can be understood as a masculine space; a space that is both masculinised (by the tech in it, and the boy that sits there) and as a space that masculinises what it contains; maintaining and reproducing masculinity. Part of this maintenance is bound up in its contrast to the house above, the domestic and, presumably, feminine sphere. Considering the "domestic" feminine is not intended to recreate essentialised gender boundaries but to engage with the "complexity of everyday life and technology's place within its dynamics, rituals, rules, routines and patterns."[371] Gendered performances are bound up in these "dynamics, rituals," and "rules." For example, when Warren says "we can stay up as long as we want" once they've moved out of his mum's this suggests she set a bedtime curfew (despite him being an adult); a "rule." This rule, whilst infantilising, establishes the mum as the caregiver and organiser of the home – as well betraying the bleed between the basement/domestic boundary, exposing the basement boy's fantasies as paradox all over again. Exposing that the basement, in fact, never was a space safe from female encroachment across both digital and real boundaries. David Morley, an interdisciplinary scholar whose relevant work here considers media and technology, stresses the significance of gendered anxieties in the home: "however much the masculine-coded perspective of modernism attempts to present itself as universal, it can never quite banish its own shadows, especially in [the] domestic realm."[372] And the basement is full of shadows; a stereotypically poorly lit place which is dark and unwelcoming.

Whilst the basement is understood as a consistently masculinised space, this space is not inherently (or inescapably) masculine but part of constant ongoing construction work.[373] We can observe this "work" through Taylor and Adler's research, when they describe the escapism of posting your setup as partly

[371] Thomas Berker et al., *Domestication of Media and Technology* (McGraw-Hill Education, 2005), 1.
[372] David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity* (Routledge, 2000), 59.
[373] Raewyn Connell, 'Masculinities in Global Perspective: Hegemony, Contestation and Changing Structures of Power', *Theory and Society* 45, no. 4 (2016): 303.

bound up in escaping "domestic relations that limit his play time, from the supposedly feminized domain of the home [sic]."[374] This "escape" is paralleled against the improvements in inclusion in gaming space, and importantly establishes the basement as not only a masculine space but one that evades the feminine associations of domesticity and home labour. Even if home labour is occurring in the basement, e.g. maybe the washing machine lives down there too, we can assume the boy is not helping with it. As well as masculinising the basement space, cementing it *as* a site of masculine reproduction, this gendered work feminises the home above. As Moiso and Beruchashvili write:

> Game rooms, dens, workshops, and garages appear to be the most commonly claimed masculine spaces. **Some spaces are blocked out from the feminine areas of the home**. For instance, the basement is one such area for Toby, a stay-at-home dad, who emphasizes the importance of having his own space [sic] (Emphasis added).[375]

This blocking feels significant. The basement provides a boundary through which the feminine domestic of the home does not seemingly bleed, asserting the basement as a masculine space all over again. The basement quite literally "blocks" light too, usually being a space where light (at least natural light) cannot reach. The basement becomes an extra step removed from the wider world in which the home is situated; the street or the road; sunlight or nature. The basement blocks out the wider material world, as well as the feminine domestic. Technology facilitates the practicalities of this isolation through providing community online, which works to masculinise the space and the boundary *again* through its male codification.[376] Whilst the boy can be understood to escape the domestic through his bunkering down, this is importantly not an escape from gendered practice but an expression, and consolidation, of it.

The basement is not just an expression of hegemonic, or toxic, masculinities but a space that can offer transformative and holistic potential. Moiso and Beruchashvili argue that the man cave facilitates men's "identity work", providing "therapeutic, integrative spaces" not "just the retrograde expressions of masculine ethos premised on escaping the influence of the female and feminine domesticity."[377] However, as Moiso and Beruchashvili write, they are not *just* spaces of masculine ethos; meaning their therapeutic, intrapersonal potential does not erode the traditional masculinity work they also hold potential for.[378] This is reflective of the ways online networks can both facilitate

[374] Taylor and Adler, 'Man Caves and the Fantasy of Homosocial Escape', 2.
[375] Moisio and Beruchashvili, 'Mancaves and Masculinity', 663.
[376] Salter and Blodgett, 'Hypermasculinity & Dickwolves: The Contentious Role of Women in the New Gaming Public', 412; Salter, 'From Geek Masculinity to Gamergate: The Technological Rationality of Online Abuse'; Connell, *Masculinities*, 194.
[377] Moisio and Beruchashvili, 674-675.
[378] Moisio and Beruchashvili, 667.

connection and community and simultaneously misogyny and bigotry; a potentially holistic space which holds the capacity to collapse into hegemonic maintenance and expression. Sometimes the therapeutic potential of such space is bound up in its potential for expressions of hegemonic masculine, or geek masculinity's succession of such, structures.[379] For example, Moiso and Beruchashvili describe how some "men can safely unleash their inner, authentic man" through misogyny, such as sexualising comments about women to other men; the safety the man cave affords facilitating masculine expressions of bigotry (and by implication: spatial identity policing). [380] Bryce and Rutter write, gaming space has the potential to "blur boundaries between domestic and public leisure."[381] At time of writing, the integration of tech into the home as a leisure activity was a more contemporary phenomenon but Bryce and Rutter's point about "blurring" still feels significant. The basement integrates the gamer, and/or gaming, into the home but across a (supposedly) stable boundary against the feminist domestic; it both bounds the basement from the home, and the wider world outside, whilst technologically affording interactions with boundless online and gaming publics; it holds therapeutic, community-making potential whilst cementing toxic masculine expression and providing a site for community policing and abuse.

The Bunker

Now, I am going to examine the basement through the theme of a prepper's bunker. Focusing on this framework, which we can especially connect back to Bill in *The Last of Us*, will allow us to understand how the boy perceives himself to be in crisis, and to consider the material role and functionality of the basement, as well as it what it ideologically props up. The two other frames from the previous subsection, the boy in the basement being his own hero (*Batman*), or being a monster (*The Trio*), risk either reproducing the basement boy's underdog narratives, or demonising the boy in a potentially unproductive framing that, whilst fair, will not help us confront the issues the boy in the basement presents.

The prepper's bunker is a space to stowaway from the apocalypse, or end times. Through this frame, the bunker becomes a reaction to the wider world, a consolidation and response to anxieties about the oncoming end. It is associated with survivalist mindsets, and prepper communities, as well as

[379] Mendick et al., 'Geek Entrepreneurs: The Social Network, Iron Man and the Reconfiguration of Hegemonic Masculinity', 284.
[380] Moisio and Beruchashvili, 'Mancaves and Masculinity', 670.
[381] Bryce and Rutter, 'The Gendering of Computer Gaming: Experience and Space', 3.

conspiracy theories. These conspiracy theories can range from the (mostly) harmless and bizarre, such as the Gen Z Conspiracy that "Birds aren't real," and the more explicitly political and dangerous, such as Jews control the world and have orchestrated movements like Black Lives Matter and Trans Liberation to undermine Christian Judeo values in the west. The bunker is also expensive. Building a bunker, especially a comprehensive one, is very costly. The private bunker industry itself was valued at $7.5 billion annually (2023) and is projected to grow by 15$ billion by 2032.[382] Important to remember too, when participants were being interviewed (primarily in 2021), the world had experienced (and is continuing to at time of writing) a global pandemic. The world as we knew it had ended, or at least, permanently changed in some way. The bunker is not inherently irrational, but often a response to very real anxieties about the world. However, it is always isolationist, an expression of privilege (having the money and the time) and prioritises self-preservation at often extreme cost to the individuals who partake in it.

We can first understand the bunker through a frame of persecution, of feeling under attack. Ferber explores this mindset when talking about the ideological overlap between the men's mythopoetic movement and white supremacy: "Both movements appeal to similar constituencies of white males who feel vulnerable, victimized, and uncertain about the meaning of masculinity in contemporary society. [sic]"[383] Importantly, this feeling of vulnerability becomes connective tissue, part of what, as Ferber argues, allows the movements to present themselves as "necessary to protect men […] who are depicted as under attack."[384] And we can observe similar phenomena in gaming. When writing on Gamergate Braithwaite describes how gamers "situate themselves as the "real" victims, oppressed by calls for diversity and at risk of losing "their" games to more inclusive ones."[385] Mortensen echoes this, when describing the series of journalistic articles that came out during Gamergate that purported the "death of the gamer," meaning that they (Gamergaters) "firmly believed in their own status as victims."[386] The articles in question "confirmed […] attacks on their entire culture."[387] This victimhood also situates certain games and communities as "necessary," further justifying any attacks or moves to seemingly defend or consolidate them. It is only natural, if the gamer feels persecuted, for him to want to take protective action and to feel safe; what

[382] Bradlet Garrett, "Generation prep and the rise of the private bunker industry," *Red Pepper,* 8th January 2023. https://www.redpepper.org.uk/generation-prep-private-bunker-industry-disaster-prepping-nuclear-war-climate-change/#:~:text=Already%20valued%20at%20%247.5%20billion,another%20%2415%20billion%20by%202032.

[383] Ferber, 'Racial Warriors and Weekend Warriors: The Construction of Masculinity in Mythopoetic and White Supremacist Discourse', 37.

[384]. Ferber, 41.

[385] Braithwaite, 'It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity', 1.

[386] Mortensen, 'Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate', 11.

[387] Mortensen, 11.

the basement then protects the boy from becomes bound up with contemporary gendered anxieties and changes in the games industry.

There are important differences in the different kinds of "attack" the boy, or gamer, perceives; some are more grounded than others. As Participant 2 pointed out: "for years gaming's […] been the scape goat of the press and people saying on you know videogames cause violence, videogames are anti-social, videogames are considered evil."[388] This is evocative of the media being sensationalist towards gaming and game culture, which we can observe, for example, when *The Sun* (a right-leaning British tabloid newspaper), ran the headline "Playing games as addictive as heroin" in 2014.[389] However, the idea of gaming being "lost" to more inclusive narratives or representation is a more contentious complaint. As several participants described when imagining the boy, he is a stereotypical gamer who has problems with female protagonists and female players. Participant 4 gives us a direct example of this when she describes getting in-game harassment just at the sound of her voice.[390] This reflects, as Massanari describes, how Gamergate was a backlash against women "and their use of technology and participation in public life."[391] This backlash often manifests as silencing, harassment, objectification and sexualisation. For Taylor and Adler, the mancave itself extends such discourses:

> If the aim of the bachelor pad was the objectification of women via novel manipulations of representational media, the aim of the man cave is arguably to erase their physical presence altogether, to encounter them only through digital media.[392]

The female player's, or protagonist's, presence is so troubling because her very existence challenges the fantasy many games promise: women as sex objects and/or invisible.[393] An example of this is the sex workers in *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), who can be picked up or murdered on a whim but don't often have personality or backstory beyond their sex worker role; usually standing in the backgrounds of scenes.[394] It is not so much that the bunker can protect the boy from the reality of women existing, or even sensationalist news media – they both exist in countless online publics and space, and they (women specifically)

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[388] Participant 2, 16.

[389] Lee Price, "Playing games as addictive as heroin," *The Sun*, 8th July, 2014 (Updated 6th April, 2016). https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/news/962643/playing-games-as-addictive-as-heroin/.

[390] Participant 4, 13.

[391] Massanari, '#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures', 2.

[392] Taylor and Adler, 'Man Caves and the Fantasy of Homosocial Escape', 2.

[393] Salter and Blodgett, 'Hypermasculinity & Dickwolves: The Contentious Role of Women in the New Gaming Public', 411; Braithwaite, 'It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity', 6.

[394] Rockstar North, *Grand Theft Auto V*, Rockstar Games, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Windows, PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, 2013.

move through games too, even above him in the house (maybe they even come down into the basement to tell the boy to tidy up) – but it (the basement) can entertain the fantasy of a space without women; of homosocial perpetuity. Regardless of how grounded various narratives of victimisation are they feel real, the affect of persecution that female encroachment triggers bringing "fantasy to life."[395]

Another core association of the bunker, or rather the prepper we imagine inside, is that of online conspiracy theories. Conspiracies can be tied up in persecution narratives, as gamers "consider themselves victims of a large-scale global conspiracy to suppress them."[396] However, the conspiracy is not just linked to news media through Gamergate's concerns about "ethics in journalism" but to gaming research. As Shaw points out, her own government-funded project was "raised as evidence of a larger government conspiracy" when a community of Gamergaters came across a collaborative google doc made following a DiGRA conference fishbowl.[397] Participant 6, who works in gaming education, parallels this when he talks about being blocked on Twitter through a "social justice warrior" mass blocking tool.[398] He tells us it was "one of the gamergaters that […] developed the plug."[399] Chess and Shaw go on to connect part of this conspiracy to fear of loss through Sargon of Akkad, a prominent right-wing YouTuber named Carl Benjamin (also discussed in the *Introduction's* Gamergate summary), who produced a video connecting the less sexy but more recent depictions of Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* as evidence of academic, leftist encroachment.[400] This ties back to the expectation of women as objects who can be readily sexualised; the more practical, "less sexy" depiction of Lara in later games not only demonstrating a woman taking up male space but erosion of male desire. This "desire is linked to something taken away—something that once was."[401] When looking at masculinities in the Manosphere, and its tangential Incel culture, Debbie Ging is concerned with geeky (or hybrid) masculinities and their central politics as expressed through the "red pill."[402] The red pill "purports to awaken men to feminism's misandry

[395] Sara Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 118.
Ahmed is specifically talking about the emotion of hate here, which she importantly tells us constitutes "the ordinary as in crisis, and the ordinary person as the real victim." Discourses which comfortably parallel that of Gamergate discourses.
[396] Mortensen, 'Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate', 798.
[397] Chess and Shaw, 'A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity', 212–13.
[398] Participant 6, 8-9.
[399] Participant 6, 8.
[400] Chess and Shaw, 'A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity', 216.
[401] Chess and Shaw, 216.
[402] The Manosphere refers to a collection of online communities and spaces who all purport a specific view of masculinity, and by extension the world, which almost always (re)produce misogynistic discourses. The Manosphere has many different subcommunities, such as those

and brainwashing, and is the key concept that unites all of these communities."[403] Communities who, importantly, include gamer and/or geeky elements (especially regarding "beta" masculinities). Ging, akin to Chess and Shaw, connects this conspiracy to loss: "White male suffering has become a dominant trope […] a deliberate strategy to reinstate the normalcy of white male privilege through the articulation of its loss."[404] Queer possibilities of resistance in and through loss will be explored when looking at participants' experiences of endings in *Chapter 6: A Gamer Apocalypse.* But here, as explored when looking at the boy in the previous section, his experience of loss is reflective of his inability to connect with the real world; paralleling the isolation readily associated with the prepper. His loss is an articulation of resurgence; unrealistic expectations of gaming which Gamergate legitimised, which are partly rationalised through conspiratorial thinking. The bunker evokes a conspiracy theorist who believes his world is ending, and regarding the boy this is, in some ways, true; the death of his desire, of his hegemony, is realised and easily identifiable through his lens. Whilst I concur with Ging that it is difficult to take their claims of marginalisation "seriously," such claims do express real anxieties which can further legitimise him sheltering himself from the world; a world he believes is working against him.[405]

Briefly, I want to examine his loss (imagined or otherwise) through an explicitly apocalyptic lens. The gamer's world ending does not literally mean the world but *his* world, a gaming world. Bo Ruberg, when looking at *San Andreas Deer Cam* through a queer post humanist lens, examines how games such as *Deer Cam* (a hack of *San Andreas* that defies many gaming conventions) present a post-apocalyptic vision of games themselves, not just of the world.[406] They write:

> It refuses to 'work' in the ways that an animal in a video game is supposed to […] to work as a set piece in a world designed for the human players of a video game that epitomizes the dominant norms of AAA video games and their imagined straight, cisgender, male audience. If this is a videogame, it is a video game after the

who follow pick up artistry (or "game"). INCEL and Manosphere communities can, and do, intersect. INCEL stands for "involuntary celibate" and refers to online communities of supposed INCELs who are usually, but not always, men. They subscribe to ideas such as "the red pill," becoming aware of the "truth" about women and gender relations, which actually means subscribing to sexist ideas which essentialise gender and gendered behaviour. INCEL communities are also known for their alpha/beta/sigma masculinities, and racial essentialism.

[403] Debbie Ging, 'Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere', *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 4 (2019): 640.

[404] Ging, 648.

[405] Ging, 651.

[406] Bo Ruberg, 'After Agency: The Queer Posthumanism of Video Games That Cannot Be Played', *Convergence* 28, no. 2 (1 April 2022): 413–30.

> collapse of video game culture: a vision of a time when deer roam the parts of the earth that once belonged to humans [sic].[407]

The deer's centrality, quietness, and agency (contrasted against the player who can only watch the deer roam through the streets of *San Andreas*) embodies many of the gamer's concerns about inclusivity; that popular, violent games like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004) will transition to "walking simulators." As Ruberg explains: "If video games are a medium defined by agency, this is agency's end."[408] Importantly, this "end" can also be a beginning; as the deer gains their own agency and possibility in a previously human (and player) dominated space. We can observe finding agency through endings, and apocalypses, with The Trio (*Buffy)* and Bill (*The Last of Us*); The Trio seek to actively destroy Sunnyville to enact their own desires; Bill tells us he was happy when the world around him ended, and this end brought his masculine-coded prepper fantasies of survival and mastery to life. In this sense, the apocalypse becomes something that provides a means to an end, which we can observe in Rachel Wagner's work. Wagner, whose research centres on religion and culture, explores how an apocalypse can be viewed as the "*ultimate game"* (emphasis her own).[409] She describes how an apocalypse brings with it a sense of urgency, it is an "inevitable end […] The question is: will you win?"[410] This "dramatic inevitability" secures our emotional investment, which is partly exacerbated (as Wagner writes) by the "certainty" games offer in their portrayals of morality and choice which respond to "the loss of control and purpose" both players and apocalypticists can experience.[411] The apocalypse the boy in the basement has bunkered down from, then, becomes not only the source of such anxieties but salvation from them; the answer. It offers him certainty, something he can "win." He experiences a gamer apocalypse, and this apocalypse is enticing because it offers him exactly what is under threat of being taken away; control and purpose – what the stereotypical boy in the basement inherently lacks.

The prepper's bunker is somewhere safe and secure. It is stocked full of supplies, some of them meticulously collected and created, like pickled vegetables and canned goods. These goods are necessary for survival, survival which is partly necessitated by the bunkering down; by being cut off from the wider world (which may or may not exist). In a way, the boy's games and technology are his survival tools; affording his ability to bunker down there, especially in the long term. Even the food stuffs he might consume have been similarly male-codified through gaming language and intentional marketing,

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[407] Ruberg, 427.
[408] Ruberg, 427.
[409] Rachel Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 190.
[410] Wagner, 195.
[411] Wagner, 203.

such as the energy drink *G-Fuel*, "The best gaming and esports energy drink."[412] Significantly, none of what is hoarded away down there is driven by the same attitudes of men like Bill, who are stereotypically libertarian and actively try to live independently. The boy, or gamer, is, as I argued in *Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer*, really a kind of consumer identity (games are often products to be consumed).[413] And a lot of his anxieties, about the media or women in games, are ultimately about the games industry itself and the threat of change; concerns that the products which said industry produces will no longer be "for him."[414] Geek and gaming cultures are, after all, "largely defined by consumer goods."[415] Consumer goods which can readily fill up a basement, not just controllers and screens but geeky merch like *Funko Pops*, figurines and memorabilia. Exactly the kind of stuff that The Trio use their stolen bank money to obtain, as well as more elaborate items like a flamethrower. I can observe the gamer-consumer identity in the interview with Participant 11:

> I: It's okay if you don't have an answer to this but as you say yourself as a white man what do you think helps you go in this direction [more open minded, more stereotypically left-leaning] rather than be bought in by the kind of arguments that did you see in Gamergate which were designed to appeal to white men
>
> P10: I think part of it was I wasn't that invested in […] a MMO called Two Worlds there was some problematic design in there and so I […] was not invested in that I did not feel personally attacked when stuff like that was mentioned and it was kind of like that kind of erm detachment from the corporate identity[416]

Participant 10 directly associates Gamergate with a "corporate identity," one which means that "mentions" (presumably criticism) of games feel like a "personal attack." He parallels the corporate gamer with the idea of "investment," which has both emotional and monetary implications. Importantly, he highlights that *Two World's* (2007) criticism was in response to

[412] Find their website here: *G Fuel*, "G Guel," *G Guel*, n.d. https://gfuel.com/en-gb.
[413] Of course, some indie games are made and distributed for free (or at cost) but most games are made, and sold, for a profit.
[414] Braithwaite, 'It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity', 5–7; Mortensen, 'Anger, Fear, and Games: The Long Event of #GamerGate', 787.
[415] Kayla McCarthy, 'Remember Things: Consumerism, Nostalgia, and Geek Culture in Stranger Things', *The Journal of Popular Culture* 52, no. 3 (2019): 664.
[416] Participant 10, 11.

"problematic design," echoing the typical Gamergate narrative that gaming critics are "too sensitive." I have no doubt that many of my participants own gaming paraphernalia as well as literal games and consoles, but Participant 10 makes clear that his relationship to these objects is not so intense that criticism feels like a "personal attack" – he does not consider himself to have a "corporate identity." These objects, that the boy stows away in his basement (which he is deeply invested in), such as games, models, and special edition controllers, are bound up in his performance of geek masculinity; perhaps explaining why attacks on games could feel like an attack on his person (as such objects prop up his own perception of self). A survivalist stores food in their basement in case the apocalypse destroys natural resources; they are tools of survival and maintenance; they allow you to bunker down before you must brave whatever is *out there*. The boy's objects are survivalist necessities, as they maintain gaming masculinities through the codification of masculinity and technology, allowing his isolation (his not going "out there") through technological communication and play, and facilitating the fantasy of homosocial gaming space and its exclusivity (which is constantly under threat, e.g. as with the "de-sexualisation" of Lara Croft). Through this frame, videogames are not just a medium to be enjoyed or explored but fundamental to the boy's every day; if he does not leave the bunker, the supplies not only maintain, but become, his world.

In a YouTube video about flateartherism, leftist and gaming content creator Hbomberguy (Harris Brewis) explores flat earth culture and conspiracy theories surrounding it, noting (importantly) its partial crossover with white supremacist beliefs.[417] Brewis describes how conspiracy theorists:

> Seek these solutions because they perceive, on some level a problem and […] They're right! Something is wrong with the world right now. The world is figuratively on fire!

Brewis discusses climate change, financial instability, noting "Even on a globe earth, the edge is coming fast!" If the boy's basement is a bunker, and he has bunkered away from the world, he is not entirely irrational in his feeling that the world is ending. It *is* ending, it is (as Brewis points out) "LITERALLY on fire!"[418] He goes on to say: "Of course people are gonna try and find something that helps them cope or […] seems like a solution." Maybe his bunker, or basement, is his way of coping. In *Chapter 6: A Gamer Apocalypse* we will see how interview participants, in contrast, confront and sit with loss in painful yet more productive ways, rather than bunkering down away from it.

[417] Harris Brewis, "Flat Earth: A Measured Response," *YouTube*, 31st December, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gFsOoKAHZg.
[418] Brewis, "Flat Earth: A Measured Response."

The boy feels under attack because he perceives his world (a masculine, gaming world) to be under attack, an attack that disturbs (as well as maintaining) the fantasy of homosocial perpetuity where women can be encountered only through digital and/or object form. The perceived attack can be understood as part of a wider conspiracy; conspiracies about ethics in games journalism, female protagonists or the "real" gaming market being left behind. This conspiracy against gamers then works to legitimise the boy in the basement. Such beliefs and actions (the bunkering down, the harassing of female players) are all articulations of loss, or protection against perceived potential loss; they are *protective* against the wider conspiracy (or attack) he perceives. Part of the basement's protectiveness is wrapped up in what it stores and houses; not only the boy, who is stowed away from the wider world, but his games, objects and things which simultaneously act as amplifiers of a specific kind of gaming identity, as well as storing away what is under threat of loss. The basement becomes a site of preservation, alongside its protectiveness; an archive of what he feels entitled to, of what he might lose.

Throughout this chapter I have often referred to the boy in the basement's concerns or fears as illegitimate, and they *are* illegitimate (women are not ruining games, for example), but his feeling (or fear) that something is working against him is not entirely false. As Brewis says at the end of the video, "You're right to feel that something is wrong." But the wrong thing is not "walking simulators" or "ethics in gaming journalism," it is (in the boy's case) white supremacy; the promises such ideological worldviews afford (but can never deliver on), the belief systems which simultaneously set him up for (and offer a false solution to) his loss. To briefly return to Bill, from *The Last of Us*, he was technically right to bunker away – the world *did* end – and his bunker facilitated his survival. However, he still tells us: "I was wrong." For whatever reason Bill believed the world would end, it didn't make him right for bunkering down away from it. As Brewis says, "believing these things isn't a solution." The bunker houses not just the boy and his stuff, but his beliefs; it perpetuates and affords its own maintenance, its own legitimacy. To bunker down is to both give up and dig in; to entrench oneself further into whatever the boy becomes when he's *down there*.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In *Chapter 2* I explored how innocuous language, around gamer identity and concepts of fun, can subtly allude to and communicate identity policing and gaming norms. In contrast, the basement and the boy are explicitly accounted for by participants as they describe him. Whilst they downplay his significance,

telling us he's "nonsense" or a "little nerd boy" they still bring him into the conversation of their own gaming experiences. Through this framing, the basement becomes a spatial frame for engagement; we can imagine the boy, project our anxieties onto and through him, and yet situate him safely beneath.

Queer historian Heather Love, when writing about the risk of reconstructing the past and ruination, tells us that the core challenge of contending with traumatic histories "is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it."[419] Interview participants have, consciously or not, distanced themselves from the boy in the basement, from *that* kind of gamer, from Gamergate, whilst highlighting the problem(s) he represents. In effect, they are feeling forward (away from the boy's toxicity and isolation) whilst reaching back and putting him away down there. Braithwaite tells us that when (or if) we bring the gamer out of the basement "we can see more clearly the challenges we face as we work toward more inclusive communities."[420] The stereotype of the boy in the basement however, particularly how my participants talk around him, allows us to observe and consider him – what he represents, what he does, what he has potential for – whilst situating him safely underneath. There is no need to drag him out. The boy becomes a rhetorical device through his embodiment of contemporary gaming anxieties; a modality for engagement that is easily recognised and communicated through his machinations within pop culture. My interview participants contend without being overwhelmed or "destroyed."

However, engaging with painful pasts is not the final goal, it is only the first step in contending with the issues the boy in the basement both represents and performs, such as gaming's problem with gendered harassment. Whilst the stereotype of the boy in the basement disempowers him by engaging with infantilising narratives, it does not directly combat his world views by itself – if it did, the boy and his beliefs would already be undone. In my paper "Silence, Distance, Disclosure," I advocate for proximity and touch when engaging with toxic discourses in gaming. The four participants quoted at the start of this chapter explicitly reference Gamergate, they discuss the "pseudo right wing reactionary gamer type," how gamer is "a primary identity […] a conservative label," and call attention to "right wing sort of gamery people."[421] They are intimately confronting the wider implications of gamer and of the boy in the basement. As Participant 6 tells us:

> P6: there are certain connotations with that term [gamer] that I just feel a bit icky about um which

[419] Love, *Feeling Backward*, 1.
[420] Braithwaite, 'It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity', 7.
[421] Participant 7, 16. Participant 9, 13. Participant 11, 11.

> isn't really terribly academic or scientific but there it is[422]

"There it is." The boy becomes icky, as does the identity gamer (which prompted discussion of the boy initially), and through this ickiness he becomes identifiable. There *he* is. He becomes identifiable through a feeling, not "academic or scientific" thought. Part of Participant 6's relationship to gamer, then, becomes affective through this feeling; demonstrating (as explored in *Chapter 2: Gamer as Affect*, and established in *Chapter 1: Research Methods*) how affects can orient us to and away from identities and spaces. The "icky" feeling orients Participant 6 away from the boy in the basement, and as a result, what he represents.

My interview participants do not just distance themselves from him but deny the boy agency through their own descriptions. The boy in the basement himself lacks agency, from his presumed lack of a job (or his lack of going outside), lack of tangible friends or connections and his lack of authority in the home. In other words, his lack of agency in real life, which in turn exacerbates his need for agency in play; for a white, cis, male audience to be continually catered to. The boy in the basement becomes not just a mode of engagement but a resistant narrative, one which denies the boy in the basement integrity and legitimacy, which denies the boy his own arguments. The problem is not "games […] increasingly reflecting the progress of society."[423] It's him and everything he represents; his lack, and his loss.

The boy in the basement holds wider implications for gamer identities. Gamer, as we've already explored, can communicate many disparate ideas and meanings, such as a collective, gaming community; temporal expectations of play; or (as we've further drawn out here) associations with Gamergate and toxicity. It is very significant that the boy in the basement mostly came up when participants were asked about gamer, and what it means to them. The boy in the basement is integrally, in its gaming context, an iteration of gamer. The boy, then, further works to code gamer as white and male through his own white, male codification. The fact that the boy in the basement, or the "basement dweller" stereotype, can be located out of gaming spaces (such as *Lego Batman* and *Buffy*) demonstrates that aspects of the boy, and by extension gamer, can be found in broader pop cultural media. Unlike gamer, which can be seen as positive and empowering, the boy in the basement consistently appears to be associated with toxicity or, at least, unhappiness. In this sense, the boy in the basement works to tidy up gamer – as we can project gamer's more negative associations (a loner, abusive, does not go outside much) onto the boy. This

[422] Participant 6, 8.
[423] Participant 9, 13.

allows us to fragment gamer's more unappealing qualities (harassment, toxicity) onto the basement boy and therefore refute claims about gamer's own issues; presenting gamer as joyful and inclusive more convincingly. And then we can assure ourselves it (the basement boy) is "bollocks […] not really anything concrete."[424] The boy demonstrates, as previously explored, gamer's elasticity; its ability to house disparate ideas and degrees of inclusivity. The boy props up said elasticity through his ability to tidy up gamer, and through his underneath-ness; how he can be hidden out of sight (and potentially out of mind?) Importantly, even if hidden or forgotten about, the boy remains foundational; embodying and inherently perpetuating the foundational norm *(Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer).*

The basement is a space which houses rot, it represents the permanence of difficult gaming histories and uncomfortable stereotypes. However, the house that I've speculated on here, that makes up gaming culture, is not just a binary of *house* and *basement* but a more complex structure. It has varying levels and rooms, and the basement is just one of them. I now turn to consider other gaming spaces; counter-spaces *(Chapter 5: Gamer Counter-Spaces*). Counter-spaces which, whilst it may be impossible to entirely erode the rot, function to undermine the integrity of the basement and undo the boy in the basement's gamer identity work. Spaces which *resist*.

[424] Participant 6, 8.

Chapter 5

Gamer Counter-spaces

"I was there when Gamergate started … it was properly horrible … [so] when I went to the video game industry I want[ed] to be involved with that in combating that [Gamergate]."

– *Participant 10, 3.*

Lots of old videogames line dusty shop shelves, mostly Xbox and PlayStation discs, which all have various price stickers slapped on. One sticker on top of the other, on top of the other, on top of the other. Lots of customers file in and out from the busy London street outside, and lots of them are friendly and polite. But, some of them are not. Some of them harass the shop assistant behind the counter if they spot her, trapping her into conversation for hours (except it's not conversation, because only one side does the talking). They'll sometimes peer in through the windows to ascertain if it is even worth going in. In other words, if she is in there. The manager is understanding and lets this bothered shop assistant hide under the counter when they come in. But not all the other staff members she shares space with are so nice. One of them groped her female supervisor, another manager did a sieg heil salute with his colleagues because it was funny and another ranted on and on about trans rights being dangerous, and a threat to "real women," despite knowing (or perhaps because of knowing) this shop assistant is queer. This is a space where bigotry and harassment are normalised, expected, at both sides of the counter. The shop assistant, who is tired of sitting on a pile of disused Wii U Nintendo Balance Boards when she hides from the men who come inside to look for her, knows she must leave. And she does.

This chapter begins our turn toward narratives of resistance within my interview data and is concerned with gamer counter-spaces; the spaces that participants describe, create, and maintain that counter the foundational norm in gaming (which was established in *Resurgence*). To briefly summarise, the foundational norm is the normalisation of hegemonic whiteness and maleness in gaming domains (as well as identity markers beyond them, such as heteronormativity), which has both historical roots in gaming histories (*Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer*) and relevance to more contemporary anxieties and events (*Chapter 4: A Certain Kind of Gamer*). Alongside analysis of interview data, this chapter will use the National Videogame Museum (NVM) and visual data gathered there as an analytical lens.

The NVM does more than just offering a rich case study for examining gamer counter-spaces, however. The NVM is not just a counter-space, it is *my* counter-space – the space that I entered to escape the one I described above. I only managed to leave London, and that space, because I got a job at the NVM as gallery crew. And my time in London, informed a lot of my perceptions of gaming culture, which I've since taken with me into my PhD (as well as my current gaming practises). This thesis work is a further extension of the NVM as counter-space – not only does it provide a research space in which what the NVM is doing both explicitly and implicitly is examined, it (the work) is only made possible by my escape and subsequent recovery from gaming spaces which exposed me to harassment and harm in the first place. This is another way in which my research is intersubjective, not just drawing on interviews which are inherently interactions between myself and interview participants but informed by the intersubjective relationship between the NVM and myself. The nature of the collaborative doctoral award meant that the museum was always going to influential within this project, but my personal experience with the museum means it has been additionally influential on me, as both a researcher and person.

Here, I am specifically interested in exploring gaming counter-spaces in physical settings. This is partly to ground analysis firmly in the UK (all spaces discussed are UK based) and because participants more readily had conversations about consciously designing and maintaining physical space with issues such as inclusivity in mind. These conversations about physical gaming spaces, which participants either work within or are responsible for, emerged as a pattern throughout my interview data as participants discussed their experiences of the gaming industry as a workspace, the space of the NVM, and (as we will see across three interviews below), gaming cultural spaces including a café and a theatre production, as well as discussion of educational gaming spaces. There was some discussion of virtual spaces too. For example, Participant 4, who is a game developer did talk about design concerns and accessibility when

discussing character creation.[425] And Participant 8, whose responses we will further dissect later, described what a safe space in gaming means to him in a digital context, when talking about his friend coming out to him and other friends as trans whilst playing *Left 4 Dead* (2008): "[it's] a place where erm everyone is free to be themselves […] no hatred no bigotry […] a place where people can just relax and feel free to be erm among people who respect them and love them."[426] However, overall management of (and concerns surrounding) digital spaces came up infrequently throughout interview data versus discussion of physical spaces. The physicality of gamer space holds significance as participants consistently brought it up when telling their gaming stories and describing their gaming lives. Gamer, or gaming, spaces are understood as spaces about, or tangential to, videogames, such as the National Videogame Museum, and other spaces like gaming cafes and gaming research conferences, as well as potentially pubs or bars (places where gamers might meet). Importantly these spaces hold implications for gamer identities, implicitly and explicitly.

This chapter is concerned with how spaces can do the work of identity making and maintenance. Part of this making/maintenance is how we design physical spaces – museums, theatres, cafes – physical spaces which similarly mirror the spaces games themselves (digitally) make; in other words, this chapter is concerned with the implicit identity making and policing gaming spaces continuously perform. This can be performed through aesthetics (how spaces look), objects (what those spaces hold; what we can access in them), and bodies (what kind of bodies is this space more readily welcoming to; and how those bodies perform/behave in said space). The identity being made (or maintained or undone) in question here is that of gamer but other identities do inherently come into play, such as ethnicity and gender. Ultimately, I want to understand how the spaces we construct in physical space can do resistance work against resurgences of toxicity in gaming space, emphasising the significance of their physicality (materiality) and exploring their ability to disrupt cycles of harm which more readily reproduce themselves in the ephemerality of digital space.

This chapter will begin by breaking down how we are understanding the operations of gaming space, using Sara Ahmed's work on queer space and affective bodies, as well as scholarship on controllers, a physical thing we hold whilst we play, to set up an analytical framework. I will then turn to analysis of interview data alongside visual data gathered at the NVM, exploring counter-space across two themes: active inclusivity and guarding against gatekeeping. Finally, I will conclude by reconsidering counter-space within the wider context of the thesis (for example: how does counter-space function within the house

[425] Participant 4, 4-5.
[426] Participant 8, 9.

the boy and the basement reside in?) and its implications for the following thesis chapter.

Controllers as a case study: How space works

A controller, rather than being a physical space we enter, is a physical *thing* we wrap ourselves around to (usually) experience a virtual space of some kind. We must successfully use the controller to enter and play the game. The controller, while often something small we hold in our hands, is a gaming object loaded with spatial possibilities from which we can extrapolate out wider spatial concerns. It is regularly the only material part of a game we interact with, as we can now remotely turn on consoles through a button press on the controller itself and digitally download games (so fiddling around with discs has become a possibility, but not the rule). Examining the spatial operations of the controller will establish a conceptual framework for understanding gaming spaces; as spaces which blur virtual and material boundaries, and often require objects to use/access (e.g. controllers, keyboards). Whilst providing a framework for this chapter to draw on, its vital to understand that the controller is simultaneously loaded with its own concerns and complexities; something that holds meaning as we attempt to *hold it*.

This chapter, akin to earlier sections, is deeply informed by Sara Ahmed's affective, queer theories of the operations of spaces, bodies and objects, primarily using her work *Queer Phenomenology* but also incorporates aspects of her feminist, affective work more broadly. Within *Queer Phenomenology* Ahmed, a queer feminist affect scholar, is especially concerned with ideas of inhabitance and orientation – how we/bodies/objects inhabit space and are oriented within/away from spaces. Within such negotiations Ahmed examines how objects are "not only shaped by work, but […] take the shape of the work they do."[427] This understanding of objects as integrative modalities within processes has great relevance for the controller, as a thing which not only facilitates play – access to the game – but also as an object which is shaped by the work it does, by the play it allows. As the player presses buttons on the handheld device, perhaps controlling their avatar in game, the press *goes both ways*; not only does the act of play result in gradual wear and tear, but the videogame itself (how is it made; who is it made for; who can afford it; who does it appeal to?) presses back. Below, I unpack the complex ways the controller engages with player subjectivity from literal material design to the subconscious skill it demands. As Ahmed writes "objects, as well as spaces, are

[427] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 44.

made for some kinds of bodies more than others."[428] The controller, how it is made, feels, and operates has implications for who it is made for, and who it is not.

The controller is, as cognitive semiotics researcher Johan Blomberg writes, "a type of tool."[429] A tool that allows the player to experience virtual spaces (videogames). And this tool may fit better, and be more accessible to, certain types of players' hands over others – for example, almost all controller designs anticipate the player will have two hands. Game scholar Brendan Keogh, in his work *A Play of Bodies: How we Perceive Videogames*, writes about the interplay between the player and game, tracking developments between controllers/players against histories of gaming surrounding the codification of the male gamer, "real games" discourses and the emergence of the hacker identity. When discussing the controller as a "tool," Keogh describes it as "the tether, the umbilical through which I am capable of poking the virtual world."[430] The controller becomes about extension in this framing, not just an object which can hold degrees of fitting and comfort – maybe it's too big for your hands, or maybe it's *just right* – it becomes about access. To successfully "tether" between the real world and the gaming world (not that the distinction is always so clean) is to successfully use it as a tool, to *extend into* that gaming world. The controller, as a tool, tethers us to game space which allows us to extend into it; but the limits of this extension are implicated by the identity work the controller's design is doing.

Feminist game designer and writer Jess Marcotte has pointed out how the physical shape of the controller has gendered inferences, in particular its joysticks have been associated with phallic imagery and the male, assumed gamer archetype.[431] This gendering has implications for extension; who feels drawn to the controller, does it have a more stereotypically masculine design, fit a more stereotypically masculine hand? Ahmed writes a lot about the issue of extension in *Queer Phenomenology*, about how to orient successfully in a space is to extend, or (in other words) is to successfully follow, or be "in", line. When Ahmed writes about lines she is writing about alignment (what spaces, people, or communities do we become aligned with?), perception (what does following this line bring into view, obscure or put behind us?), and opportunity (what does following a line allow us to extend toward, to reach?). For example, a white, male player might be drawn to online first-person-shooters because his friends play them and find community through that game. He might then gain the perception that online first-person-shooters are the norm, or "proper"

[428] Ahmed, 51.
[429] Johan Blomberg, 'The Semiotics of the Game Controller', *Game Studies* 18, no. 2 (September 2018), https://gamestudies.org/1802/articles/blomberg.
[430] Brendan Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames* (MIT Press, 2018), 77.
[431] Jess Marcotte, 'Queering Control(Lers) Through Reflective Game Design Practices', *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018), https://www.gamestudies.org/1803/articles/marcotte.

games, as other games, such as story-based experiences, might not enter his periphery as play possibilities. Following this line may allow him to extend into male dominated gaming spaces more readily, potentially even Gamergate adjacent spaces, but it may also not allow him to reach more diverse types of games, or even the understanding that diverse representation in gaming does not equate to white, male harm. If he dropped off from first-person-shooters, or left his online gaming communities, we might say he failed to "follow" this line but in that failing he might veer off into a different line; different choices and possibilities. To continue Ahmed's framework, she writes that "Being "in line" allows bodies to extend into spaces that, as it were, have already taken their shape."[432] In other words, the white, male gamer is "in line" with the stereotypical, online first-person-shooter, and can more easily extend into it, because said genre of games are often made with his demographic in mind. But let us return to the controller. Through this framing, where the lines we follow also determine our shape, the controller becomes not only an extension tool, but a tool that shapes; not only game space (materially shaping our interactions with it as our modality of control) but gaming identity. For example, Keogh has traced the historical emergence of a dominant gamepad design alongside the young, male market gamer in the 1980s/90s.[433] Controllers are usually, but not always, muted colours (especially when looking at standard PlayStation and Xbox models) and even the triggers on the right and left of many models are supposed to imitate triggers of a gun (a weapon more readily associated with masculine coded AAA games). Understanding the controller as a tool for extension is inherently tied up with alignment (what communities does the controller more readily appeal to?), perception (what does successfully picking up the controller allow us to feel, experience and see?), and opportunity (what worlds and spaces does it allow us to enter, or identities to grasp?). The controller's subjectivity is not just determined through its physical design intentions, however, but through anticipated knowledge.

Controllers require familiarity and skill. Even if a controller feels comfortable in your hands, if it *fits*, you might not know what to do with it; how to play the game you picked up the controller for. Ahmed might call this experience "disorientation," which "occurs when extension fails."[434] For Ahmed, orientation is about "making the strange familiar" and disorientation is when this familiarity fails to take hold, or to be followed.[435] Keogh builds on this idea of familiarity, when he argues that games require "embodied literacy." In other words, how "the ability to experience a videogame must be learned by a body."[436] Our bodies must become *familiar* with it. We can observe this in

[432] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 15.
[433] Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How we Perceive Videogames*, 92.
[434] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 11.
[435] Ahmed, 11.
[436] Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How we Perceive Videogames*, 79.

Participant 6's interview, when he talks about nostalgia and the *Mass Effect* series: "um yeah familiarity it's that you know I know if I pick it up I'll instantly understand the systems and just get into the game."[437] The knowledge we require to play must be *embodied* within us, and this knowledge is more readily embodied within certain types of bodies. This could happen, for example, due to the codification of AAA videogames as masculine; therefore young boys are more likely to have first-person-shooters or large RPG games bought for them by parents, family members or guardians, so they are more likely to become familiar with their standardised controls; and such standardised controls can become embodied knowledge. As digital communications researcher M. D. Schmalzer writes, when looking at the possibilities of intentionally "janky" controls, "videogames create a standard videogame playing body" through their standardisation of controls.[438] They define janky controls as controls that "can leave the player self-consciously on the outside of the [game] system."[439] Schmalzer argues that janky controls disrupt seemingly smooth or immersive play, therefore dismantling "the myth of the "standard videogame player.""[440] Through this framing, the controller becomes part of mythos construction work; naturalising the "standard" player through who it is designed around, and who finds it seamless. To know how to move around in an open world game, twisting and turning two joy cons (controller sticks) at once – one for direction, one for movement – may come naturally to some, and be impossible to others. For example, Participant 13 says she struggles with open world games due to motion sickness, a non-standard bodily experience which makes seamless play for her more challenging.[441] In other words, to be in line, to successfully extend with the controller in hand, would require more labour for Participant 13, as she must overcome her own bodily reaction(s) to play. This has implications, not just for videogame play, but for identification – as she expresses in the interview not being sure if she would be a "fraud[ulent]" gamer because of her

[437] Participant 6, 4.

[438] M. D. Schmalzer, 'Janky Controls and Embodied Play: Disrupting the Cybernetic Gameplay Circuit', *Game Studies* 20, no. 3 (September 2020), https://gamestudies.org/2003/articles/schmalzer.

"Janky" controls can be understood as playing with controls that feel incongruent to the play experience. Some jank can be intentional, e.g. a videogame character being hard to control when injured, which happens several times in the *Mass Effect* trilogy, or jank can be due to faulty design, for example a joycon with joycon drift can make steering a horse in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017) more challenging. More info on joycon drift here:

Chaim Gartenberg, "The Nintendo Switch's Joy-Con drift problem, explained/ What the issue is and how to get your controllers fixed," *The Verge,* 13th July, 2021. https://www.theverge.com/21504741/nintendo-switch-joy-con-drift-problem-explained.

[439] Schmalzer.

[440] Schmalzer.

[441] Participant 13, 3.

game play choices (among other things).[442] This is reflective of how to fail to have embodied literacy, at least consistently or comfortably, not only affects what game worlds are within reach but gamer identity. In other words, "bodies are shaped by what is reachable."[443] The controller *presses back* in that it can hold implications for how, or if, we relate to a gamer identity.

Over time controllers have become more complex, and less accessible (excluding developments in specifically accessible controllers), which means the skill-gap is widening between those familiar and those unfamiliar.[444] And for players like Participant 13, the act of becoming "familiar" is even more demanding than it is for the standardised player, who is assumed to be able bodied. As Keogh points out, young men were, and are, the dominant target of the gaming industry so are more likely to have competency with controllers, keyboards, and mice, and this "encroaching complexity" only works to worsen and perpetuate existing hegemony.[445] As Ahmed writes, "lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created."[446] The spatial relationship between object and subject is cyclical and under constant (re)negotiation and maintenance. The repetition of lines is a part of how hegemony is constructed, and even emboldened, as we can see with the controller's "encroaching complexity" that works to worsen videogame access and affirm the skill of those who have literacy with them. The opportunities for building up controller competency go beyond the marketed gamer and videogame market too. Historically, in the 1980s and 1990s especially, young white men were more readily exposed to spaces in which they encountered technical expertise:

> As computers became increasingly significant devices they became […] embedded in those parts of society already inscribed as masculine: the science lab, the math classroom, and, in the home, the son's bedroom.[447]

Familiarity with computers, where videogames are often played, can provide embodied literacy with videogame controls; controllers can also be plugged into computers, and used to play games on them, meaning computer-based videogame play can provide familiarity with tech beyond the keyboard alone. Therefore, young men are more likely to arrive at the controller and have the required knowledge to play smoothly without "jank", to have "embodied literacy." To pick up the controller and have literacy with it can be understood through considering the controller's "background," the orientation you have, the line you have followed, to arrive at the controller with competency. When

[442] Participant 13, 4.
[443] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 55.
[444] Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How we Perceive Videogames*, 107; Schmalzer, 'Janky Controls and Embodied Play'.
[445] Keogh, 78 and 107.
[446] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 16.
[447] Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How we Perceive Videogames*, 176.

we follow a line we have a *background*, whatever came before what we now tend toward. A background "explains the conditions of emergence," and a gamer's background is not just their own play experiences and opportunities, but is more broadly entangled with the masculine codification of the videogame and the controller, and the wider masculinisation of technical spaces and certain classrooms.[448] In *Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer*, we explored the gaming market's shift from catering to the whole family, to just young (presumed heterosexual) men and boys. One example from that chapter, the back page of a *Nintendo Power* magazine which depicted a busty woman pressed up against a nerdy man over a bottle of pop, demonstrates how even content aimed at children and teenagers was working to naturalise misogynistic, implicitly heterosexual, humour and imagery within gaming's ecosystem post the 1980s market shift. The advert is on the back page, almost a *background* of its own, and the money from advertisements will have helped to make the magazine viable – for it to have emerged. Importantly, backgrounds do not have to come into view to work. The advert has ramifications for whoever feels drawn to pick up the *Nintendo Power* issue, whether they flip over the magazine and look at the back page or not. Tangentially, Ahmed writes about heterosexuality and how it can be understood as a kind of "background." When writing about how being the only gay couple at a holiday resort might be uncomfortable, she describes how being a visibly gay couple is "being out of line" and how some directions (which we can understand as ways of being) can feel compulsory.[449] This is derived from, what Ahmed describes as, "the fantasy of natural orientation […] that organizes the world around the form of the heterosexual couple, as if it were from this "point" that the world unfolds [sic]."[450] This naturalising relegates heterosexuality to the background; it [heterosexuality] functions through "behind actions that are repeated over time and with force, and that insofar as it is behind does not come into view."[451] These "behind actions," whether that be the naturalisation of the heterosexual couple at the resort or the gaming market's use of misogynistic humour to appeal to young men, importantly do not have to come into view to have impact. Knowledge cannot literally be seen on the controller. Sometimes it is, as I will explore in the next paragraph, not even consciously felt but the implicit knowledge required still determines how readily we can feel at home with the controller in our hands, and whether we might pick it up in the first place.[452]

Part of what makes the controller significant, both in its shape and possibility, is that it can often not be felt or noticed. When writing about how whiteness can become habitual in space, insofar that white bodies do not have to face

[448] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 38.
[449] Ahmed, 82–85.
[450] Ahmed, 85.
[451] Ahmed, 87.
[452] Ahmed, 62.

their own whiteness, Ahmed writes about comfort as a non-feeling and how comfort affects our experience of the space that surrounds us: "To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins."[453] Significantly, background is an important part of how Ahmed articulates white comfort. She writes that "white bodies do not have to face their whiteness" as whiteness lags behind. This is because most environments orient around whiteness, consequently whiteness does not have to be confronted or encountered by white bodies, therefore it "lags" and is already in line, and does not have to be faced; it sits behind and becomes background.[454] Now let us return to the controller. To be comfortable with the controller in our hands, is to extend into the videogame without the disquieting tug of borders – without the feeling of jank, of "severing […] input and output."[455] And this comfort does not demand we look back; our embodied literacy sits behind us, a result of interlinking subjectivities and personal experience, insofar that it can be unconscious and not come into view. Blomberg writes that the controller is both "necessary and forgotten" and Keogh echoes this when he recounts a story of trying to teach his housemate to play a game and realising a lot of his knowledge was subconscious: ""I" consciously did not know what to do at all […]The knowledge was in my hands."[456] So, to be made for the controller (or rather, have the controller made *for you*), to feel comfortable with its touch and operation, is often not to feel it at all. This non-feeling folds into the naturalisation narratives Keogh highlights, which in turn normalises the hegemonic dispositions controllers effectively (re)produce.[457] The histories, subjectivities and opportunities which contribute to how literate we are "lag" behind. Those most at home with the controller are those least likely to feel it, and therefore might not feel or notice how the controller can just as easily disrupt, as well as facilitate, seamless play.

From an analytical point of view, as gaming objects which are sold and distributed through the gaming market, controllers cannot be separated from their financial significance. The hegemonic and exclusionary possibilities of the controller are interconnected to wider market influences, betraying the ways gaming space is often shaped by broader capitalist values. Capitalism becomes part of the background, part of how we inhabit game space. When talking about the historical development of arcades, cultural historian Carly A. Kocurek, writes about how the cost of playing in the arcade "imposed distinct limits on who could game" and this cost is "particularly pronounced for inexperienced

[453] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 174; Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 134.
[454] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 132.
[455] Schmalzer, 'Janky Controls and Embodied Play'.
[456] Blomberg, 'The Semiotics of the Game Controller'; Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How we Perceive Videogames*, 77.
[457] Keogh, 78.

players" who would get less playtime for their money.[458] To have the financial means to access the game is the first barrier, and the added cost of inexperience (essentially: needing more goes at the game) would have only exacerbated the exclusionary function of the arcade's initial cost. Whilst not writing on controllers explicitly but arcades (although many arcade machine controls are similar to controllers), Kocurek's point demonstrates that access to play (and therefore access to play experience and skill) are tied up with financial opportunity and means. Even now, more accessible controllers are more expensive than the base gamepad, with the Xbox Adaptive Controller costing £74.99 versus the average controller costing around £55 (with some variation).[459] A lack of experience, or a "non-standardised body", can often worsen financial barriers to play. And the initial development of said barriers is also tied up with the market. Keogh writes about how the QWERTY layout for the keyboard became standard through the dominance of certain types of typewriters in the industry: "It is the standard because it is the standard, and because it is the standard, alternative modes of computer input are not the standard."[460] This is reflective of how, as Ahmed writes, subjects can promise returns, they "*reproduce the lines that they follow.*"[461] Subjects take up and use controllers to play videogames, controllers which are standardised through market economics and hegemonic controller design, and the line of this activity (of picking up and using the controller) is what reproduces the controller in tandem. The standardisation of hegemonic controllers and keyboards is cyclical, (re)producing and naturalising itself in perpetuity, partly because success in the market simultaneously allows and demands it.

When considering market influence it is vital to remember that the market assumed gamer was (and still is) a young, white male and therefore market trends (intentionally or not) saw games begin to function as, as Tanner Higgin writes, "stewards of White masculine hegemony."[462] Higgin is a white game scholar who now works in content editing and strategy whose most prominent work is around videogames and their depiction of race, where he examines the "disappearance of blackness from virtual fantasy worlds."[463] Despite, as Higgin

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[458] Carly A. Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 10–20.
[459] See more here: *Microsoft,* "Xbox Adaptive Controller," *Microsoft,* n.d. https://www.microsoft.com/en-gb/d/xbox-adaptive-controller/8NSDBHZ1N3D8/0002?source=googleshopping&ef_id=_k_CjwKCAjw1YCkBhAOEiwA5aN4AXpfG9qDolkXbI8mhmgqplGt1TOwQJ0Dr5gjwg90zdsiwFjaPOXeNhoCN3YQAvD_BwE_k_&OCID=AIDcmmko2wx7k7_SEM__k_CjwKCAjw1YCkBhAOEiwA5aN4AXpfG9qDolkXbI8mhmgqplGt1TOwQJ0Dr5gjwg90zdsiwFjaPOXeNhoCN3YQAvD_BwE_k_&gclid=CjwKCAjw1YCkBhAOEiwA5aN4AXpfG9qDolkXbI8mhmgqplGt1TOwQJ0Dr5gjwg90zdsiwFjaPOXeNhoCN3YQAvD_BwE.
[460] Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How we Perceive Videogames*, 85.
[461] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 17.
[462] T. Higgin, 'Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games', *Games and Culture* 4, no. 1 (2009): 4.
[463] Higgin, 3.

points out, fantasy games not usually containing real nationalities or ethnicities "these game spaces still inter-face allegorically with racial identity formations in the physical world."[464] Due to fantasy games often being saturated with whiteness, and the depiction of Blackness often being a "aesthetic choice" which conflates "blackness with colorization suppress[ing] political complications of difference [sic]," Higgin points out that games become almost exclusively white worlds which (he stresses) "can then be learned and exported into the physical world."[465] Whilst talking about racial depictions in a game, and not the shape or accessibility of a controller, Higgin's point about gaming spaces (in this instance: a virtual world) having implications for the physical, for the *material*, still feels very relevant. The controller more evidently inter-faces with the player, with the world, as a "crucial sit[e] of touch and entanglement," and its design has implications for the kind of gamer it imagines, that it better *fits.*[466] The controller, the physical space we interact with to access videogames, becomes wrapped up in broader possibilities of identity work just as we repeatedly attempt to (successfully or not) wrap ourselves around it.

So, what are the implications of understanding the controller as a gaming object loaded with spatial possibilities across both material and virtual spaces; as an integral component of many gaming spaces? Gaming spaces can be designed for certain types of bodies implicitly. This implicit anticipation has implications for inhabitance and extension; do we readily align with the controller, do we perceive what is possible, do we have the opportunity to grasp it? The type of body which gaming spaces more readily anticipate, in other words: a white, heterosexual male body, cannot always notice the privilege such prioritising affords, as the comfort of *fitting* – whether that be through a literal design fitting into your hands better or having the literacy required for the controller you are trying to use – can manifest as non-feeling. This non-feeling can be a result of background work, as many of the subjectivities which afford seamless play (whiteness, maleness, capitalism) make up the conditions of emergence – how we arrived at the controller – and do not sit within view. Part of this non-feeling is reflected in the embodied ways we often play, the knowledge of game controls often instinctive and subconscious, allowing us to extend into gaming spaces seamlessly. Said knowledge can be tied up in narratives of historical exclusivity, regarding both certain spaces (the lab, the computer room) and certain identities (whiteness and maleness). The hegemonic developments which dictated how controllers and keyboards looked cannot be separated from wider financial pressures either, with game companies becoming especially risk adverse after the 1980s videogame market crash and the increasing standardisation of gamepad designs, e.g. companies like Sony hoped to appeal

[464] Higgin, 5.
[465] Higgin, 11–12.
[466] Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*, 46.

to players who already liked Nintendo's hardware/gamepad designs.[467] Now, as I move into the first section of analysis to explore *Active Inclusivity*, I want to extrapolate these spatial concerns beyond the controller to physical game space. Ultimately, however, I am still concerned with inhabitance – not literally being *in* a space but being familiar with it. As Ahmed writes, when considering inhabitance and intimacy: "Loving one's home is not about being fixed into a place, but rather it is about becoming part of a space where one has expanded one's body."[468] Expansion, extension, then are not just directional but habitual; the habit of play.

Active Inclusivity

The first theme I am going to explore, when considering the concept of gamer counter-space, is that of *Active Inclusivity*. The "active" aspect of this spatial frame is especially important, emphasising the actions those responsible for the space(s) have taken to make those outside the standard gamer norm feel included, or welcome. Ahmed herself emphasises action when she writes: "The question of action is a question […] of how we inhabit space."[469] To draw out the habitual is to scrutinise action.

We can first observe this with Participant 8, who talks about the importance of having a diverse cast when putting on his videogame themed theatrical productions. These are plays themed around videogames/videogame franchises, and here he is discussing a production about the *Super Mario* universe which he refers to as "the Mario musical":

> P8: all my shows have as much representation in them as possible like the show the Mario musical that we're currently rehearsing like it is all about sort of Peach sort of breaking of free of that kind of like damsel in distress narrative so it's about female empowerment it has an LGBTQ+ romance within it erm it as like nonbinary representation it has trans we have a transgender [person] in the cast playing Yoshi erm and I think it's important to me that that representation is shown within a gaming space I almost feel like I

[467] Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How we Perceive Videogames*, 92.
[468] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 11.
[469] Ahmed, 52.

> have not necessarily to prove that erm - gaming can house all these forms of representations but it would feel off to me if it didn't it's almost like comes as read that these characters should be a diverse set of people even if you don't necessarily get that from playing Mario Golf erm I think it is important that our cast in a Hamilton kind of sense that are cast reflects our audience so particularly as it is a gaming space.[470]

For Participant 8, diversity and representation in videogames is seemingly a multi-faceted challenge which he considers across several modalities, including cast, story, and audience. Firstly, Participant 8 seems to describe representation as an issue that exists beyond the characters in the play alone – with LGBTQ+ romance (as an example) – but also incorporates the actors ("we have a transgender [person] in the cast) and the audience themselves ("[a] cast [that] reflects our audience"). He stresses the importance of this "within a gaming space" and goes on to add "I almost feel like I have [to] not necessarily to prove […] gaming can house all these forms of representations but it would feel off to me if it didn't." The use of the word "prove" could be potentially traced back earlier in his interview, when Participant 8 talks about white men in gaming who get angry at representation beyond their own demographic: "they just don't want to share that space […] they've sort of carved out a little niche for themselves," but Participant 8 does not draw out this explicit connection.[471] Whilst he assures us his desire for diverse representation is not about proving a toxic other wrong, "it would feel off to me if it didn't," it is compelling that part of his representational concerns become potentially oppositional, challenging the white men who (in Participant 8's own words) "don't want to share that space." It is vital to acknowledge that this is Participant 8's own point of view of his theatrical production, and that just because he perceives the (for example) narrative to be transgressive of traditional damsel in distress archetypes does not mean that it is to others. However, through his actions (trying to "have as much representation […] as possible") Participant 8 is inhabiting gaming space with intentional representational concerns. And it is not just Participant 8's body inhabiting gaming space in such a way, but the bodies his production choices seemingly invite onto the stage (in this instance, a transgender body) and the bodies a more diverse production could potentially encourage to attend. In *Queer Phenomenology* Ahmed writes about how:

[470] Participant 8, 9.
[471] Participant 8, 3-4.

> When bodies take up spaces that they were not intended to inhabit, something other than the reproduction of the facts of the matter happens.[472]

Here, Ahmed is writing about how a space, even if occupied by a body or shaped for a particular type of body, can be taken by someone else; the "matter" here referring to the materiality of the space and the body, and the work they can potentially do – in this case, the work of acting and directing a theatre production in which bodies intentionally take up space on stage to perform a role. Participant 8's incorporation of queer characters, actors, and direct acknowledgement of audience diversity then, becomes not just potentially oppositional, but potentially transformational. I would argue that the way he describes transforming gaming content, "breaking free of that […] damsel in distress narrative," and building on games in the *Super Mario* universe (1985-2023), "even if you don't necessarily get that from playing *Mario Golf*," describes a process in which he is transforming the characters of the very games he has been inspired by, as with (for example) "nonbinary representation" in the play.[473] More subversive narratives taking the place of existing *Super Mario* stories, incorporating less mainstream sexualities and gender tropes, means a diversion from "the facts of the matter." The spaces that those characters inhabit, such as Yoshi, now inhabit queer, trans stories, something they were "not intended to inhabit" initially, something *new.* Building on her earlier point about bodies arriving in spaces in which they are not already at home, Ahmed writes that "the "new" is what is possible when […] our background, does not […] keep us in place, but allows us to move and allows us to follow something other than the lines we have already taken."[474] The "new" here can be understood as facilitating counter-space, facilitating something other than reproducing the foundational norm in gaming (the *facts of the matter*). *Super Mario*, the game characters and narrative, sit as the "background," as do wider gaming histories, for Participant 8's production but he creates something "new" by following new lines, by inhabiting game space in a way that conceivably shifts what is in view, developing different interpretations of characters and their stories and (in the process) directly countering the narratives of the white men he discusses earlier in the interview. Importantly, Participant 8's own explanation for why he makes these choices is loaded with affect – "It would feel off to me if it didn't" – reflecting how the way we inhabit space can be emotional. Ahmed explores in *The Promise of*

[472] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 62.
[473] In *Super Mario Bros. 2* (1988) the game does describe Birdo as trans, in the instruction manual, through the wording: "He thinks he is a girl and he spits eggs from his mouth. He'd rather be called "birdetta." Most players are not made aware of this when interacting with more current games, and this information about Birdo was only stated in the manual, in addition to a storyline with trans elements in a non-Mario Bros title game *Captain Rainbow* (2008), which was only released in Japan.
[474] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 62.

Happiness how affect is entangled with orientation, building on her earlier spatial analysis in *Queer Phenomenology*, where she argues that happiness is a form of world making and to feel pleasure is to become "aligned […] facing the right way."[475] And the way Participant 8 faces, or at least, positions himself *as facing*, opens new habitual possibilities.

The way Participant 8 hopes his production will "reflect" the audience has important implications for gamer as an identity, especially how the stereotypical, market constructed gamer (the boy in the basement from *Chapter 4* being one iteration of this stereotype) can differ from reality. When looking at the constructed market gamer (white, male, and usually young) game scholar Adrienne Shaw writes that "being targeted as a gamer, however, does not a gamer make" and argues for researchers to stop investing in debates about who "counts" as a gamer and should instead concern themselves more with the construction of the category by the market (though she acknowledges this construction does "shape people's relationship with the category").[476] Participant 8, by focusing on reflecting the audience when talking about representation, in effect de-emphasises the importance of the marketed gamer/the audience the *Mario Bros* franchise might seem to cater to on the surface. Earlier in the interview, Participant 8 does talk about the gamer the market tends towards and the resulting anxieties around potential market shifts from the early 2000s to now:

> P8: the PS2 era where every game was marketed towards the teenage boy um and I think they are now there is like a bit of upset and panic that they're not being as exclusively catered to as they used to be erm which probably um threatens their belief that they are like number one.[477]

I would argue that in Participant 8's earlier description of his production and representational choices, he embodies some of the anxieties he highlights here in which teenage boys are "not exclusively being catered to." When Participant 8 concerns himself more with the real-life audience than mirroring the representation of the game content itself, building a cast that "reflects [the] audience" instead, he implicitly challenges the exclusivity of a lot of videogame representation, by refusing to reproduce it. The anxieties Participant 8 describes can be connected to wider changes in gaming's ecosystem which indicate a potential shift away from gaming's foundational norm, in other

[475] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 2 and 41.
[476] Shaw, 'Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity', 28–33.
[477] Participant 8, 4.

words: a shift away from exclusively catering videogames to white, heterosexual men. We can even trace this "panic" from the early 2000s, as Participant 8 references, into the 2010s with much of Gamergate's abusive rhetoric in 2014 connected to anxieties about gaming changing, and, in particular, becoming more diverse. If we understand Participant 8's production choices as having implications for gamer identity – which I would contend they do, as a gaming space which negotiates gaming subjectivities – the shift to reflecting the audience in the content itself feels important, feels like counter-space. The teenage boy is not being "exclusively catered to" and the production space is being inhabited by potentially non-normative bodies across not just the audience, but actors and narrative. This is demonstrative of how spaces can do explicit, as well as implicit, identity work, which we can also observe with the NVM and its Sonic statue.

Figure 22, Sonic Statue facing forward.

Figure 23, Sonic Statue from behind with pride flag on his back.

Within the National Videogame Museum, they have the Sonic statue; a fixture of the museum that has been in place since before it moved from The National Videogame Arcade in Nottingham in 2018. The Sonic statue had a progress pride flag put on it for February's LGBTQ+ history month yet was still wearing the flag during my visit in April 2023 [*Figure 22, Figure 23*]. Sonic is regularly adorned with if not one, sometimes several, pride flags during both UK pride month (June) and UK LGBTQ+ history month (February) and has even been photographed in Nottingham with a flag on when he was at the NVA in

Nottingham.[478] Akin to Peach or Yoshi in Participant 8's theatrical production, Sonic is an established videogame character with his own lore, stories, and design. The pride flags draped around Sonic are potentially transformative, mirroring the styling of a superhero cape, visibly making Sonic into a possible LGBTQ+ icon (or ally). The reason this is transformative is because in all his game content, Sonic is not depicted as explicitly queer or LGBTQ+. Akin to Participant 8's theatrical production, the NVM space is bringing queerness to a game space that is otherwise seemingly devoid of it. The very visible and obvious nature of the flags – Sonic is a big statue, the only one of its kind in the NVM, and families and visitors often take photos with him – has implications for the space that surrounds him. How Sonic inhabits the space holds meaning for how we might inhabit the space in turn. As Ahmed writes, "spatial relations between subjects and others are produced through actions, which make some things available to be reached."[479] To have the option of taking a photo with Sonic, when he is wearing a progress pride flag, is to potentially experience explicit queerness in a gaming space. It offers visitors the opportunity to *reach* for that. Ahmed goes on to write: "The question of action is a question then of how we inhabit space."[480] The action of taking a photo with Sonic in a pride flag, the action of a museum staff member bringing in the pride flags to be stored in the back room, the action of a member of museum staff *putting the flag around him*, affect how we (visitors, staff, gamers) can inhabit the space of the NVM – a space which visually extends itself to a queer visitor. Whilst it is very possible that anyone queer could come and take a photo with Sonic sans pride flags, just as any player could (in theory) pick up a controller and give it a go, to make Sonic explicitly queer signifying is to open up less laborious habitual possibilities for queer visitors; to allow bodies to escape the "labor [sic]" of arriving in "spaces where they are not already at home."[481] In both instances, Participant 8 and the NVM, the explicit identity work surrounding queerness, which in turn has implications for how queerness might inhabit space, does implicit identity work for gamer too.

Our second example of *Active Inclusivity* is from Participant 2, who owns a gaming café. After he brings up people potentially gatekeeping gaming in his café (which he asserts as a bad thing), we have the following exchange:

> I: So when you think about making a space and kind of consciously trying to make it accepting erm […] to kind of prevent gatekeeping behaviour is there

[478] For example, see here, where Sonic has a pride and trans flag on him: Commandersnacks. "This is one of my favorite images ever [sic]." *Twitter.* 3rd June, 2018. https://twitter.com/commandersnacks/status/1003186101777883136?s=20.
[479] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 52.
[480] Ahmed, 52.
[481] Ahmed, 62.

> anything you do like kind of proactively or anticipate doing in order to try and help keep it accepting
>
> P2: I try and make everyone feel as welcome as possible regardless of of what they're their interests is […] we try and give a wider range of games as possible so within all the consoles I'll go out of my way to make sure that we don't have the same type of the game on five or six different consoles we give as much variety as we can so if somebody comes in and says oh I only play Minecraft or I only Fortnite or Mass Effect have you got anything for me I'll say yeah we've got it on that console it's not er well we don't have Minecraft because we don't like it we don't have Fifa cause I don't like it I mean personally I don't like Fifa but that doesn't mean other people can't enjoy it so I'll make sure we've got it somewhere on one or two of the consoles and it's that big thing of just saying yeah we've got this thing to try and make everyone feel as welcome and not try and judge people on what they enjoy and I hope with that that kind of helps build erm a more accepting group of people who don't judge each other on what they enjoy […] if we create a welcoming and accepting space then people are gonna be more welcoming and accepting of others I find if that makes sense.[482]

For Participant 2, making his café "as welcome[ing] as possible" is connected to creating literal gaming possibilities – "we give as much variety as we can." Variety across different types of videogames is not an apolitical offering that, as Jesper Juul writes, "depends on what games you have played, your personal tastes" and time available but has implications for your own subjectivities; what games are made for people like you, what games are you able to play, what sorts of games do you have experience with?[483] Akin to the controller, having literal experience playing certain games (or with certain controllers), already grounds you as more likely the type of body the game is made for. In his book *A Casual Revolution* Juul writes about how, when discussing the idea of a player not feeling a "pull" toward a game: "I understand the frustration of not knowing which buttons to push [...] of being reluctant to invest hours, days, and weeks

[482] Participant 2, 10-11.
[483] Juul, *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players*, 4.

into playing this game, of being indifferent to the fiction of the game."[484] What Juul does not prise out here is that the "frustration of not knowing which buttons to push" goes beyond potentially aggravating play experiences, but is tangled up in where that knowledge is circulated, and who to; not knowing what button to press can be how the controller *presses back*. Having the time available for play, as well, is a privilege not afforded to many, such as single parents or those who must hold down multiple jobs (something we explored in *Chapter 2: Gamer as Affect*). Participant 2 is actively designing the café against this kind of feeling (frustration, alienation) to a game, going as far to tell us he has *Fifa* (1993-2022) in his café even though he tells us "I don't like it" to provide different options. Although, he cannot make his café more accessible to those who do not have time to visit (these issues are entangled with wider capitalist and oppressive structures), increasing game play choice is a practical change he can make. Offering a wide "variety" of game play choices is an actively inclusive choice, even if we cannot guarantee its success (Participant 2 cannot have every type of game, and some might find the games he chooses to host alienating), it is still demonstrative of how Participant 2 inhabits the space and hopes his space (the caf) will be inhabited in turn: "make everyone feel as welcome as possible." Ahmed writes, in her work *The Promise of Happiness*, about how alignment towards certain objects (especially those attributed as good or positive) has implications for community building:

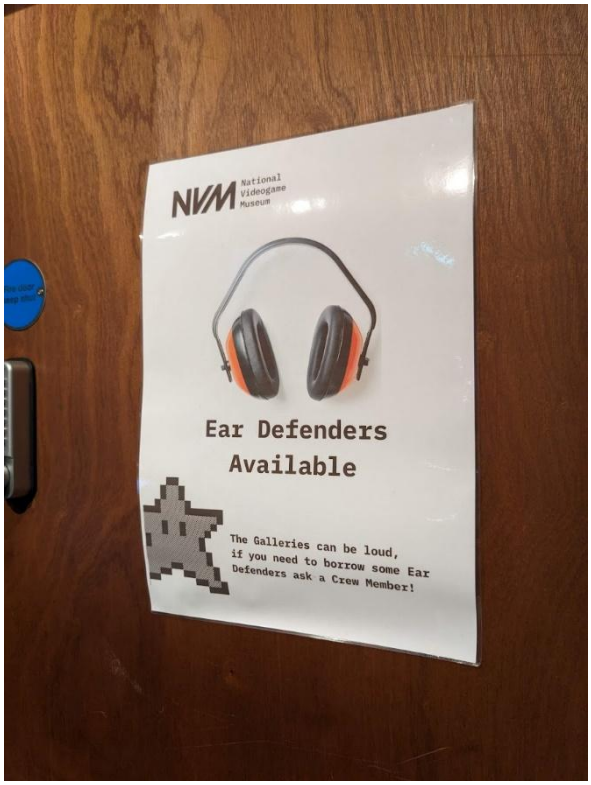
> When we feel pleasure from such objects, we are aligned; we are facing the right way. We become alienated – out of line with an affective community – when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are attributed as being good.[485]

Participant 2 is trying to circumvent the act of "attributing" objects as good, telling us he "[tries not to] judge people on what they enjoy and I hope with that that kind of helps build erm a more accepting group." And importantly, we can observe Participant 2 as actively performing this non-judgement – as he tells us in the interview he does not like certain games, such as *Fifa*. It is not that Participant 2 does not have judgements about videogames, he clearly does, but that he is not allowing those judgements to affect how he constructs the café space (and by extension: its community). Of course, Participant 2's internalised biases could affect the café space in ways he does not voice here, but he certainly positions himself as trying to not allow personal biases to affect play choices. Returning to Ahmed's point, the community Participant 2 is trying to "build" is one where people do not become "alienated […] out of line" by avoiding attributing certain games as "good" over others. If we connect Ahmed's idea of alienation and being "out of line" to her idea of disorientation in *Queer Phenomenology*, we can understand being "out of line" as a failure to

[484] Juul, 4.
[485] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 41.

extend, of being unfamiliar. Or, as she writes, “some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others.”[486] Here, Participant 2 is evidently positioning himself as someone who *does* leave room, the room in this instance being a table or two in the café being set up with *Fifa.* As he tells us himself, “it’s a big thing” to be able to “just say […] yeah we’ve got this thing.”

Figure 24, "Ear Defenders Available" poster.



In the NVM there are a lot of different types of videogames available, but here I want to focus on a sign up on a door behind the welcome desk area (*Figure 24*). Akin to Participant 2’s desire to make “everyone feel welcome as possible,” this sign indicates a readiness on behalf of the NVM to make the gallery more accessible to those who might find its noise overwhelming or upsetting. Ahmed writes that “objects extend bodies” and this is an example of a possible extension, the headphones making it possible for visitors to come inside and experience the live exhibits who might not otherwise be able to.[487] For some visitors, the sensory experience of the NVM – it being a very loud space, with lots of conflicting, overlapping game sounds all playing at once – could be potentially overwhelming or disruptive, meaning that ear defenders would hopefully improve the accessibility of the space for those affected. Akin to Participant 2, this is providing an option to a visitor that they may need, providing space by allowing a possible extension (for those who would find the

[486] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 11.
[487] Ahmed, 110.

noise of the NVM inaccessible otherwise). The visibility of the sign feels important too. It is not just that the NVM has ear defenders, and if you ask, they'll offer you one, they clearly have the sign up behind the desk. If we return to the idea of a background as a condition of emergence (which does not often come into view), this sign works to disrupt standard videogame space by bringing into view the issue of sensory accessibility in play; it brings forward "what is lost by following that line" – *that line* in this context referring to the foundational norm in gaming (*Chapter 3 & 4*), a line which does not want, or perhaps cannot, bring accessibility issues into view.[488] When writing about "what is lost" here, Ahmed is writing about queerness and the concept of being "bent" as a spatially loaded term, in which queerness might lead us "astray" and in the process "shows us what is lost by following that [straight] line."[489] Whilst this sign is about accessibility in terms of (mostly) disability and neurodivergence, and not queer identity, it is demonstrative that following new lines is not just about opening up new extension possibilities, but can simultaneously reveal what is lost by *not* following those lines, by not making your space inclusive in such a way.

Guarding against Gatekeeping

The next theme I am going to explore is that of explicitly guarding against gatekeeping, and toxicity more generally, in gaming space. The significance of guarding against gatekeeping as an action, or habit, is that it demands an awareness of the issue that gatekeeping in gaming presents in the first place, versus the active inclusivity of draping a pride flag over Sonic (this action is overtly welcoming, rather than overtly challenging those *who are unwelcoming*). I am going to start this section by sticking with Participant 2 and building on his previous discussion of wanting to create an inclusive space. Let's revisit part of what he tells us (with some extra parts of his answer left in):

> P2: I mean personally I don't like Fifa but that doesn't mean other people can't enjoy it so I'll make sure we've got it somewhere on one or two of the consoles and it's that big thing of just saying yeah we've got this thing to try and make everyone feel as welcome and not try and judge people on what they enjoy and I hope […] that kind of helps

[488] Ahmed, 79.
[489] Ahmed, 67–79.

> build erm a more accepting group of people who don't judge each other on what they enjoy at least not in like a derogatory nasty way […] you're always gonna get somebody who turns around and says oh you like you know you like Minecraft what do you like that for this is a much better game and you can get that bit of friendly banter sort of thing but we try and find that if we create a welcoming and accepting space then people are gonna be more welcoming and accepting of others I find if that makes sense.[490]

Participant 2 draws a line between "derogatory nasty" behaviour and "friendly banter" when discussing how others judge each other on their gaming choices. Significantly he tells us that some kind of gatekeeping is inevitable: "you're always gonna get somebody who turns around and says oh […] you like Minecraft what do you like that for." When he describes this as "friendly" that implies such conversations are humorous, or at least not nasty. The comment that there are "better game[s]" than *Minecraft* could reflect a desire to educate or to broaden someone's gaming taste, rather than trying to disparage them. Participant 2's choice of *Minecraft* (2009) in this example is interesting, with it having over 200 million sales throughout its lifetime and 93 million active monthly users in 2021.[491] *Minecraft* is a *very* popular game, so it is unlikely (though not impossible!) that someone would deride another for playing it in a gaming café. The notion that an element of gatekeeping is inevitable, that you are "always gonna get somebody who turns around and says [X]" also feels very important. Within Participant 2's narrative an element of interpersonal judgement towards play choice is seemingly a permanent fixture. We might be able to better understand how Participant 2 perceives gatekeeping (and its seeming inevitability) where, slightly earlier in the interview, he connects gatekeeping game choice to the issue of "counting" as a gamer. Earlier in the interview Participant 2 is asked (after discussing what gamer means to him):

> I: Do you think that you kind of inherently then feel community with other people who would describe themselves as gamers in some way
>
> P2: Yeah yeah erm again going back to […] the caf and stuff one of the main things I was looking for when we started this was to build a community

[490] Participant 2, 11.
[491] David Curry, "Minecraft revenue and Usage Statistics (2023)," in *BusinessofApps*, 9th January 2023. https://www.businessofapps.com/data/minecraft-statistics/.

> around that of like minded people who have got this kind of enjoyment and love and passion of videogames and are accepting of everyone else who has that same passion you know people wanna come in play videogames even if it's different videogames they can talk about it with each other and get along and just enjoy the experience of videogames themselves without any kind of like gatekeeping or saying one or you don't count as a gamer because you like this game or or you only play mobile games or whatever it's one of those that if you enjoy videogames then you're welcome in this community sort of thing.[492]

Participant 2 explicitly uses the phrase "gatekeeping" and associates it with, not just game choice, but issues around identifying as a gamer, to people saying "you don't count." This possibility is directly mirrored in Participant 13's interview when she describes feeling that people might say she is a "fraud" when talking about the word gamer because she plays narrative style games and does not spend a considerable amount of free time playing them.[493] Participant 2 himself connects the gatekeeping of game choice to "mobile games" which are stereotypically associated with femininity and casual play.[494] Participant 9 discusses the tensions between mobile gaming and gamer identity in their interview too, when they discuss a colleague's mother who has "played literally hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of hours of *FarmVille* […] yet she is a hardcore gamer."[495] Though they go on to point out that the kind of people who invest their time specifically in mobile games, highlighting that their colleague's mother is post-retirement age and middle-class, would not "always identif[y] as gamers."[496] This fracture in gamer definition directly contradicts Participant 13's own concerns about temporality and gamer identity, that she does not play enough, connecting back to the arguments we explored in *Chapter 2: Gamer as Affect* in which we examined how gamer identity is paradoxical and does not always make sense. The way Participant 2, and other participants, tell us narratives about the perception of mobile games (and in Participant 9 and Participant 13's case, also play time spent), reflect the circulation of discourses the **foundational gaming norm** functions in and through; the interconnection between gamer identity and game choice. When writing about casual games, feminist, affect and game scholar Aubrey Anable

[492] Participant 2, 9-10.
[493] Participant 13, 4.
[494] Soderman, 'No Time to Dream: Killing Times, Casual Games, and Gender', 38–56.
[495] Participant 9, 12.
[496] Participant 9, 12.

tells us they are "meaningfully gendered."[497] Building on this, game scholar Braxton Soderman has argued that the gendering of casual games is connected to the gendering of leisure time itself, in which women are subject to constant interruption (casual games being easier to pick up and put down on a whim).[498] For Soderman, the feminisation and devolution of casual games simultaneously upholds the more masculine, AAA, hard-core titles – it is not simply about putting feminine games down, but valorising more masculine games and genres.[499] These are the discourses Participant 2 alludes to, intentionally or not, when he mentions someone not counting as a gamer because they "only play mobile games." This idea, this narrative, came from somewhere. To return to Participant 2 and the café specifically, the idea that he gestures to – that game choice is a site in which gamer identity is policed – has further implications for his café as counter-space. He is not just trying to broaden gameplay options, but the accessibility of gamer identity by extension. The way Participant 2 describes his café "without gatekeeping" has implications, beyond the literal space of the café, for the intrapersonal space of identity making, and maintenance.

Participant 2's concerns about gatekeeping hold relevance for the earlier point I made about the "caf" – that he is trying to build a community without alienation, without people falling "out of line" due to their gaming tastes. However, there is a limit to Participant 2's "accept[ance] of everyone" even if he does not voice it out loud, one type of potential visitor is designed against; those who would not find "pleasure" in his inclusive design intentions. As Participant 2 tells us himself:

> P2: if we create a welcoming and accepting space then people are gonna be more welcoming and accepting of others I find if that makes sense.[500]

Here, Participant 2 connects the environment he constructs, "a welcoming and accepting space," to the behaviour of people who come to his café, "people are gonna be more welcoming and accepting." This is reflective of how Ahmed describes spatial relations between bodies and space as cyclical: "Space acquires "direction" through how bodies inhabit it, just as bodies acquire direction in this inhabitance."[501] Remember, when Ahmed writes "direction" and orientation she is not only talking about "how we find our way" but how

[497] Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*, 100.
[498] Soderman, 'No Time to Dream: Killing Times, Casual Games, and Gender', 40-43.
[499] Soderman, 39.
[500] Participant 2, 11.
[501] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 12.

we come to "feel at home."[502] In other words, how customers feel at home (or not) in the café space has implications for how they do (or do not) inhabit it and this (in)habitance has implications for those bodies in turn; their direction – which lines they do or do not follow. Participant 2's intention to make a "welcoming and accepting space" might not only put off people who are not "welcoming and accepting" but may encourage that behaviour when it is lacking. As Ahmed writes, "depending on which way one turns, different worlds might even come into view. If such turns are repeated over time, then bodies acquire the very shape of such direction."[503] Participant 2's café, as a welcoming game space, might bring such play possibilities into "view" and encourage customers to "turn" in a more "welcoming and accepting" direction. In other words, akin to Participant 8's theatre productions, the café becomes a potentially *transformational* space. Ahmed writes about how spaces implicate those who enter them, how bodies "are shaped by their dwellings and take shape by dwelling."[504] Participant 2's emphasis on love and enjoyment throughout his answers feels important, his own emphasis is *affective*. I would argue that Participant 2 is, essentially, trying to cultivate an "affective community" which shares passion and love for games, without inter-community policing of that very passion and love. Participant 2's café is not only counter-space because it challenges narratives about game choice, and by extension legitimate gamer identities, but because it provides *space.* Through space making, there is opportunity to not only foster "love" for games but to begin to heal some of the damage – the *rot* – that more toxic subcultures and belief systems still perpetuate.

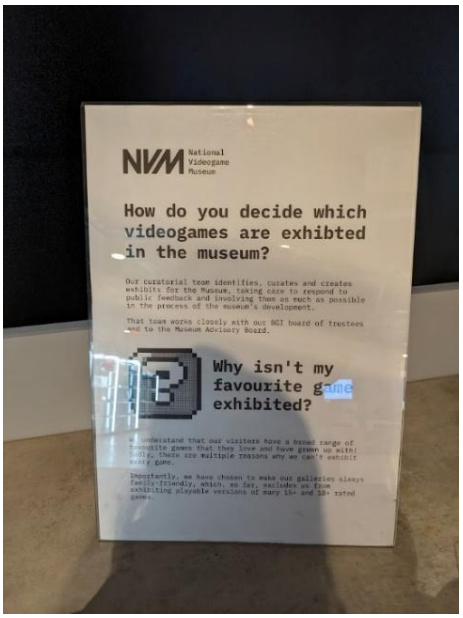


Figure 25, A sign out on a table on the gallery floor, which explains how they decide which games to exhibit, and why some might not be.

[502] Ahmed, 7.
[503] Ahmed, 15.
[504] Ahmed, 9.

The NVM as game space negotiates the issue of who, and what, to provide space for. The museum displays a lot of different types of games, ranging from the arcade game *Dancing Stage Fusion* (2004), to the locally made party game *Gang Beasts* (2017) to the typing adventure game *Epistory – Typing Chronicles* (2016). In the museum they have a small sign up on a table on the gallery floor explaining exhibition choices as well as answering the question "Why isn't my favourite game exhibited?" [*Figure 25*]. Under this question it reads:

> We understand that our visitors have a broad range of favourite games that they love and have grown up with! Sadly, there are multiple reasons why we can't exhibit every game.
>
> Importantly, we have chosen to make our galleries always family-friendly, which, so far, excludes us from exhibiting playable versions of many 15+ and 18+ rated games. [*Figure 25*].

Another sign which can be seen from the gallery floor states in large text "Videogames for everyone. Forever." [*Figure 26*]. The latter sign implies that the NVM is invested in fostering a perception of gaming that is accessible and open. The other sign [*Figure 25*] is this investment in practice, as by not exhibiting 15+ games they do not have to turn visitors away due to their age. The NVM make it clear they extend this openness to game creation and careers when they write: "You play them and make them […] You can discover careers" [*Figure 26*]. The NVM is inviting visitors to not only play but to consider how they could take part in the creation of the medium itself. This aspect of counter-space begins to address the historical issues within game development (which we can see with the masculine codification of tech, and therefore game development, in *Chapters 3 & 4*), in which the tech industry became increasingly dominated by middle-class white men. When writing on the role of a museum and well-being, Rose and Daniel Cull write that: "to feel included it is crucial to see yourself. Whether that's disability, race, gender, sexuality, class or anything else."[505] The challenge of ensuring visitors can see themselves is partly tied up with the game industry itself; who is producing games, who is able to become a game developer, who will fund your game? This challenge is notably partly impacted by the choice to make the museum accessible for families as, for example, some queer indie games inherently feature explicit stories and imagery as part of exploring queer narratives.[506] The operation of the NVM as potential counter-space here is multifaceted, attempting to counter aspects of gatekeeping through not only making game choice accessible (though as they acknowledge themselves they cannot have "every game"); but through their exhibits that

[505] Rose Cull, *Museums and Well-Being*, Routledge Guides to Practice in Museums, Galleries and Heritage (Routledge, 2022), 20.

[506] For example, artist, writer, and game developer Robert Yang's games explore queer histories, experiences and desire, and often feature explicit context. Like his game: *Rinse and Repeat* (2015, remastered 2018). More information can be found here: https://debacle.us/.

encourage visitors to consider careers in, and demystifying, the game industry itself; and emphasising that games are "for everyone." In parallel to Participant 2, by making the museum more open – through game choice and age-friendly games – they are extending the possibility of learning about (and entering?) game development space, just as Participant 2 extends the possibility of gamer identification and gaming community. In both the café and the museum, game choice is acknowledged as a potentially exclusionary modality, reflecting how videogames (and the spaces they provide) can more broadly do implicit identity work. And part of this identity work is inherently tied up with the *space* videogames provide, both within them (as virtual worlds we interact with), and the wider physical spaces they sit within; as they open up extensional and habitual possibilities in broader gaming space.

Figure 26, A large, bright yellow sign that can be seen from the gallery floor which explains the NVM's ethos surrounding videogames.

The second example of guarding against gatekeeping is provided by Participant 6, a games educator. Following on from the discussion of a student kicking off in his classroom about how videogames are being "ruined" (which was explored earlier in *Chapter 2*) I ask Participant 6 the following question:

> I: When you think about…your classroom as a gaming [space][…] where people will suddenly come out and say things that are maybe harmful to other people in the room is there anything you do or think about when you are managing or creating those spaces?
>
> P6: Yeah I so it doesn't come naturally to a sort of you know middle age Irish guy to go all touchy feely at the start and say this is safe space and stuff like that I appreciate people who do that but [what] I like to do is establish that in writing beforehand you know in the materials or something just sort of […] you can establish that just by your tone and your language at the start of your […] class […] you know little things like um making gender inclusive statements and just just tweaking your language a little bit it sets the tone and sends a signal to people who sometimes are at you know the wrong end of that kind of response from people it sets that tone without coming out and saying at the start this is a safe space yada yada so do you know what I mean […] it's more about the tone but I had never described myself as a feminist to that class or anything but everyone […] just from the way I conducted myself […] that's probably the if its sides that's the side I would come down on […] GamerGate you know so it's more about how you conduct yourself um we all make mistakes like I mean especially around gender and stuff like I you know I I have occasionally misgendered students without realising it or just out of habit or someone has transitioned and I I you know I slip up I beat myself up for that but I think most people see that I am at least trying and it's just about how you how you present yourself it's more like by example rather than stating these are the rules.[507]

[507] Participant 6, 11.

Akin to how Participant 2 has described the importance of the café's environment in shaping peoples' behaviour, Participant 6 describes the importance of his role as an educator in the spaces he teaches in, in terms of making it a "safe space." Rather than saying at the start "this is a safe space" Participant 6 tells us several ways he tries to signal that it is one, such as "tone" and "language." He tells us that even when he makes a mistake, for example getting a trans student's pronouns wrong, he thinks "most people see that I am at least trying." Participant 6's description here, of how he hopes he "present[s himself]" helps to implicitly make evident "the rules" (versus literally stating them), demonstrates that counter-space is not just about intentional design (whether that be the design of the café space, or the cast in your play) but that it is also *performative*. When writing about gender as "performatively constituted" through "expressions," seminal feminist gender and queer theorist Judith Butler writes about how the body is:

> not […] a ready surface awaiting signification, but […] a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained.[508]

Here, Butler is articulating how the gendered body is performed through individual, social and political boundaries (for example, Participant 6 trying to present himself as welcoming to his students), and these performances are integral to its constitution; in other words, these performances become bound up in the material body itself. And, if we understand the space and body as relationally constitutive, this has implications for how we understand counter-space. I would contend that what Participant 6 articulates here is trying to signify and establish boundaries in his classroom, which he sometimes struggles (but tries) to maintain. Obviously, Participant 6 is not talking about gender here – about how he performs his own gender – but his performance does have gendered implications (for example, he is trying to make sure he gets students' pronouns right). And if we extrapolate Butler's bodily theory beyond gender, we can observe how the body's performance and expressions have political, social significations – significations which have *performative implications* for counter-space – for (as Participant 6 tells us) "the way I conduct myself." The importance of performance is reflective of the cyclical relation between bodies and spaces Ahmed articulates. Spaces do not just affect the bodies within them (or those without – who have not entered) but are "dependent on bodily inhabitance."[509]

[508] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34–46.
[509] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 6.

Emphasising this cyclical interrelation himself, Participant 6 describes how this performance is affected by the environment he is teaching within, as he describes moving from working in the Arts to the Sciences:

> P6: the context matters so much like I say I moved from the College of Arts to science and engineering into computing science and it's a different environment you know it's it's I have to dial it back a little bit sometimes and just take baby steps in terms of making sure there's that kind of inclusivity um and there was one instance in my classroom a year two years ago where I mean I'm you've detected my language already I know I don't mind a bit of salty language and I don't mind er they're all adults my students right so I don't really mind that kind of language used in the classroom as long as it's not disrespectful but I overheard something that was across the line and […] was going to upset other people in the room and I I intervened I I came down on him fairly hard privately but I […] tried to educate that person as to why what they were saying was hurtful um do you know what I mean it's a fine line but because I'm a bit you know a bit lax sometimes I think that can set a tone for people that they misinterpret.[510]

As Participant 6 tells us: "the context matters so much." And the context here is a spatial one. The sciences, specifically computing science, are (as Participant 6 tells us) "a different environment" and this difference means he must "dial it back" in terms of "making sure there's […] inclusivity." In other words, the space (the context) affects how he must signify and maintain the "rules." This is another way in which counter-space is complex; what is the history of that space; what kinds of bodies does it house more readily? How Participant 6 describes computer science being a less inclusive space links to what Keogh argued when writing about the development of computing, in which women were initially heavily involved with and then excluded from – this exclusion then being reinforced through the masculine codification of maths and science in schools and universities, as examined in more depth in *Chapter 3*.[511] The performance cannot escape the environment, the "context," it happens within. This is demonstrative of the fact that not only "for bodies to arrive in spaces

[510] Participant 6, 11-12.
[511] Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How we Perceive Videogames*, 175–77.

where they are not already at home […] involves painstaking labour," but that to successfully perform in such a way to encourage spaces to be more welcoming also requires *more labour*.[512] Put differently, the labour is shared across bodies. This is evocative of how counter-space is a shared, community endeavour – Participant 6's performance has implications for his students, just as their behaviour can affect his own.

We can observe how student behaviour influences Participant 6's own, when his performance is not always successfully read; a facet of counter-space as performance which emerged in both quotes above. But it is in the latter in which this failure (to be read successfully) has more serious ramifications for the classroom space. Sometimes his performance is not always successfully read as it is not always successfully *performed*, as Participant 6 highlights himself, due to "mistakes" in his own practice, but sometimes others in the space *misinterpret* what he is trying to communicate – the "rules" Participant 6 references (but never outright states). Participant 6 himself describes students misinterpreting his "salty language" and one of them saying something that was "across the line." Lines within Ahmed's theoretical frame, as we have explored above, are about negotiating orientation and motion, they are "created by being followed and followed by being created."[513] The student thought, as Participant 6 describes, he was mirroring Participant 6 – his "salty language" – he misinterpreted the line(s) Participant 6 is attempting to take. Ahmed writes about how being out of line can be "uncomfortable," and we can observe this discomfort here not just spatially but interpersonally.[514] Whilst Participant 6 does not tell us what this student said, he tells us he "came down on him fairly hard privately" presumably after the class and tried to "educate that person as to why what they were saying was hurtful." This is a clear example of Participant 6 guarding against gatekeeping (or at least, we can only infer, some kind of hostility) in the classroom. Participant 6 tries to maintain his performance (or rather the desired effect of it: setting the right "tone") by going out of his way to confront the issue of "hurtful" things being said due to his performance not being read successfully (the struggle partly being the context of a science department) – he takes responsibility for the space. In the *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed writes:

> Being against something is also being for something, but something that has yet to be articulated.[515]

Being "against" his student saying something "across the line" is simultaneously being "for something," for a kind of space; a space which Participant 6 does not really articulate in the interview. He, again, performs it through gestural

[512] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 62.
[513] Ahmed, 16.
[514] Ahmed, 82.
[515] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 176.

expressions: “gender inclusive statements,” “safe space,” “inclusivity.” Perhaps this is reflective of the squishy, messiness of counter-space – it is about “how you present yourself” versus “stating these are the rules” (in Participant 6’s words). Butler describes gender construction as a process with no origin nor end.[516] If we understand counter-space as partly performative, then perhaps this alludes to counter-space as being under constant construction (and maintenance, as we’ve seen with Participant 6); a negotiation of significations and “tweaks” in which performances are not, or cannot, always be successfully read and therefore must always be maintained. We must, as Participant 6 describes, keep “trying.”

Figure 27, Super Snowball Fight Party (2016) informational sheet.

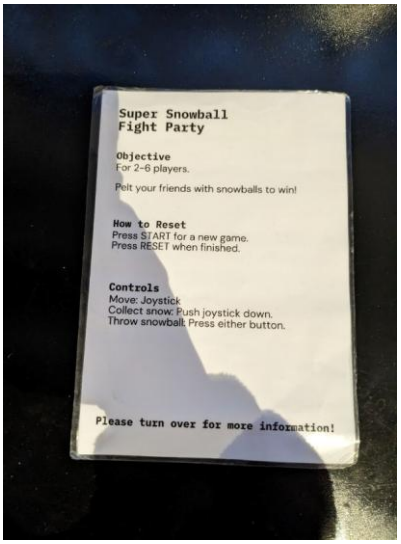


Figure 28, The instructions for how to play Super Snowball Fight Party (2016), on the other side of the informational

[516] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 45.

Figure 29, The Micro Machines V3 (1997) game set up with a bench and 8 PlayStation 1 controllers for visitors to use.

The NVM is a space in which boundless performances are negotiated: crew member, visitor, gamer (to name a few). There is one performance almost every person who walks through/works in/visits the NVM does engage with, however, and that is the act of play. The NVM is an interactive museum, in that most of its exhibits are in the form of videogames which are intended for visitors to play. Every single game is accompanied by an A5, laminated information sheet – one side providing some background on the game, and the other explaining how to play [*Figure 27, Figure 28*]. There are many games which are for several people to play at once which is demonstrated, even when the museum is empty, by the controllers gathered in front of multiplayer games [*Figure 29*]. Game scholar Ian Bogost writes that when we play "we explore the possibility space its [the game] rules afford by manipulating the game's controls."[517] I want to focus in on the phrase "possibility space." In this chapter, I have written a lot about possibility *and* space and how space often affords possibility; the possibility of taking up space. Play becomes part of this negotiation, as we have seen with Participant 2 providing literal play choices in his café. To bring it back to Participant 6 specifically, I want to prise out the idea of play as performance in game space. Play is often referred to as a performance, one which is negotiated within the rules/virtual game space.[518] But play in the NVM is *also* a

[517] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (MIT Press, 2007), 43.
[518] Newman, *Videogames*, 104; Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, 168; Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Videogames*, 121.

performance within the physical space of the museum, not just within the games you can choose to interact with. The instructions alongside said games make the possibility of play more accessible, and the multitude of multiplayer games means that this performance is often communal. Even if playing a single player game, the controls can often be shared across multiple hands or other visitors can watch the event of play take place. The provision of instructions

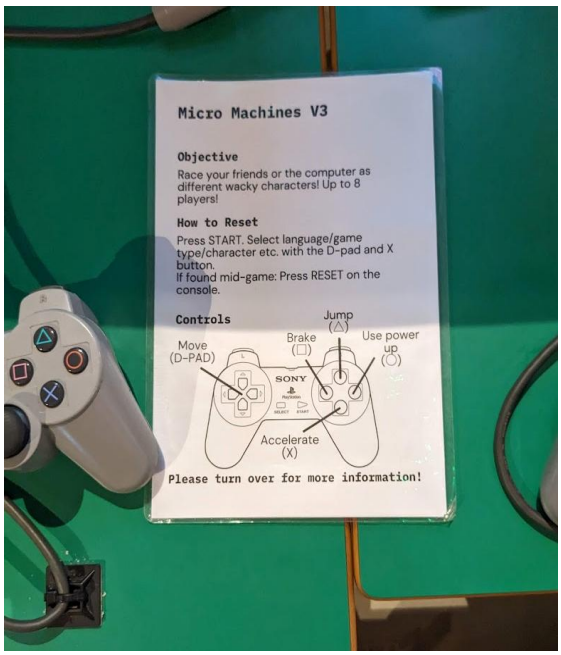


Figure 30, The instructions for Micro Machines V3 (1997), with the PlayStation 1 controller mapped out.

means that, to return to Brendan Keogh's term we explored earlier on, the museum is not demanding "embodied literacy" from visitors.[519] When games require interacting with controllers, the different buttons are even mapped out for visitors [*Figure 30*]. Of course, some visitors may still find the games inaccessible for a multitude of reasons (for example, when I visited in April 2023 there were no games with accessibility controllers) but the NVM is still trying to take some steps to make the act of play more accessible to those unfamiliar. If we imagine a performance of play in the NVM as akin to Participant 6's performance as an educator, something which sets the "tone," they (the myriad of potential play performances which occur in the museum every day) can implicitly shape how the space can potentially be understood (though, as we have established, performances are messy and can also be *misunderstood*). The play is, importantly, repetitive too. When talking about gender as construction Butler writes that it can be understood through a "*stylised repetition of acts*"

[519] Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How we Perceive Videogames*, 77.

(their emphasis).[520] The repetition of play, and the style of play (as accessible and shared), *styles* the space of the NVM and by (potential) extension that of gamer. As Butler goes on to write, "the doer is constructed through the deed."[521] In other words, the controller(s) press back.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Modalities of resistance are soft and malleable; in that they can drift in and between, and across, the narratives told in interviews without explicitly being identified as such. Rather than softness meaning said resistant moments are ineffectual or weak, it demonstrates how resistance can circulate in gaming discourses – in the gaming stories we tell each other, that my interview participants have told me – in subtle, yet significant, ways. One could argue that their softness is wrapped up in this very significance, reflecting the importance of kindness and compassion when countering issues like harassment and toxicity in gaming space.

Counter-space here has been understood as space which resists the foundational norm established in *Resurgence,* across chapters 3 and 4, a norm which reflects the constant naturalisation (and arguable valorisation) of the white, male, heterosexual gamer. The gamer we historicised in *Chapter 3*. The resistance that counter-space performs does not have to be, or perhaps never could be, complete but it is the act of trying – something both Participant 6 and Participant 2 emphasise in their own interviews (the *trying*) – which counts. Which *counters*. As argued previously, the foundational norm is cyclical, and fantastic at reproducing, maintaining, and naturalising its own discourses in gaming spaces. And, as explored in this chapter, counter-space is understood as a space in a constant state of construction and (re)negotiation in tandem; counter-space is an inherently never-ending project as the foundational norm cannot be eradicated outright. The background, the foundational norm, can "lag" behind, as gaming environments so often seamlessly orient around an imagined white, male gamer. But the foundational norm, even if it lags behind insofar that games culture rarely has to encounter it (in other words: it is not in view), cannot be undone; the previous lines gaming has taken unwritten. We must contend with its legacy, across gaming past and present. We resist, it resurges, and we resist this resurgence in turn. This is the promise of counterspace.

[520] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.
[521] Butler, 195.

I should note what has lagged behind in this chapter, and in my interview data, which has significant relevance for counter-space. In my interviews more generally race and ethnicity often "lagged" in that they rarely came up in conversation, and they did not come up in these conversations about counter-space. I also did not encounter explicit discussions around race and ethnicity at the National Videogame Museum when I visited in April 2023 either. I should note, I mean I specifically did not encounter such discussions in the exhibition material (me and another member of crew did in fact end up discussing issues of race and racism in videogames when I was there). The absence of discussions which wrangle with race and racial issues in my data, and as a result this chapter, is reflective of what Higgin writes, that "race continues to be considered a non-issue within cyberspace and gaming."[522] I hope the lack of data here stresses the extent to which it *is* an issue, as it simultaneously betrays how counter-space is a constant process of trying and failing, and then trying again.

Within this framing, in which counter-space is a cycle of trying and failing, the construction of it might seem like a fatalistic endeavour. We can build more rooms in the house that the boy in the basement from *Chapter 4* resides in, we can create more inclusive spaces in videogaming's ecosystem which more readily take steps to combat gatekeeping in turn, but we cannot erode what the basement represents; the rot, the foundational norm. In fact, if we build more rooms, we might only solidify the boy in the basement's fears. As we explored in *Chapter 4: The Boy in the Basement*, creation of more inclusive and diverse videogames only *realises* his anxieties, the reason he bunkered down there in the first place. That videogames are increasingly being made for people not like him. His concerns literally materialise. If we understand counter-space as challenging the boy in the basement's joy, or at least the fantasies he predicates it on, we can more readily scrutinise the duality of counter-space. As Ahmed writes, to kill joy is also to make space, to make room for life and for "possibility."[523] Whilst perhaps not directly killing his joy, the existence of counter-space certainly disrupts (resists) the fantasy the boy in the basement invests in, that videogames are exclusively for people like him. Counter-space provides space and habitual possibilities, but it kills space and possibility too, by not providing space for those who would disrupt its inclusive intentions. A space which both guards and gives. You press the controller, the controller presses back.

Negotiating such unforgiving parameters feels almost paralysing, but there is a way out. When we discussed the boy in the basement in the previous chapter we analysed him through the frame of a prepper, and the basement through

[522] Higgin, 'Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games', 22.
[523] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 20.

the frame of a bunker. He is someone who anticipates the end of his (gaming) world. It is wrangling with this tension that we turn to our final content chapter, *Chapter 6: A Gamer Apocalypse: Resistant narratives in how we end things.* What if he is right? What if gaming, and gamer identity by extension, is dead or dying? So what? Maybe this death is our space making, our new possibility. We cannot provide counter-space without realising the boy in the basement's fears, without folding into cycles of resurgence and resistance in gaming space. One of Participant 6's stories from his classroom, explored in *Chapter 4*, was about a student who decried that "women are ruining games."[524] I ask again, so what? Maybe they are ruined. And maybe this is a good thing.

[524] Participant 6, 9.

Chapter 6

A Gamer Apocalypse: Resistant narratives in how we end things

"Well it's [Getting Over it] incredibly rage inducing, it makes you so angry because you make one slight mistake and you have to start from the beginning again and just after - imagine failing something for eight hours consistently and then finally getting it, that feeling … you're on top of the world [laughs] you just feel so happy that you've finally done it."

- *Participant 1, 5.*

I first read about the game *Gay Sniper* (2009) in 2019. I had moved back home from London and was researching for my masters dissertation about transgender representation in videogames. *Gay Sniper* is a game made by Anna Anthropy, an American videogame and RPG designer and educator. In her seminal work, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, Anthropy outlines the problems videogame culture faces (and produces), the issues of the industry itself, highlighting the value (and necessity) of game making as participatory practice. As the book's sub heading reads: *How freaks, normals, amateurs, artists, dreamers, dropouts, queers, housewives, and people like you are taking back an art form.*[525]

In "Making the Games", Chapter 6 of her book, Anthropy describes her game *Gay Sniper* and the process of creating it. She made it in about an hour, for a two-hour game design contest, inspired by the organisation *West Virginia 4*

[525] Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* (Seven Stories Press, 2012).

Marriage who "do not want queers to gain the right to legally marry."[526] Influenced by their promotional/propagandistic video about the traditional, nuclear family being under attack, in which a rifle scope zooms on a silhouette of said ideal family, Anthropy says she felt like it (the video) was akin to a videogame. So, she "decided it *should* be a game: about a gay sniper who assassinates long-held American values" (her emphasis).[527]

Anthropy goes on to describe how the simple gameplay pans out: "The player sees the ideal family from the video through a crosshair […] The voice-over from the video – "marriage between a man and a woman is held up as the ideal in all of civilised society" – plays. When the player left-clicks the mouse over the family – to pull the trigger – a gunshot is heard, and the game changes to a screen that displays the text "America is destroyed" over a picture of the contiguous United States cracking in half" [*Figure 31*].[528]

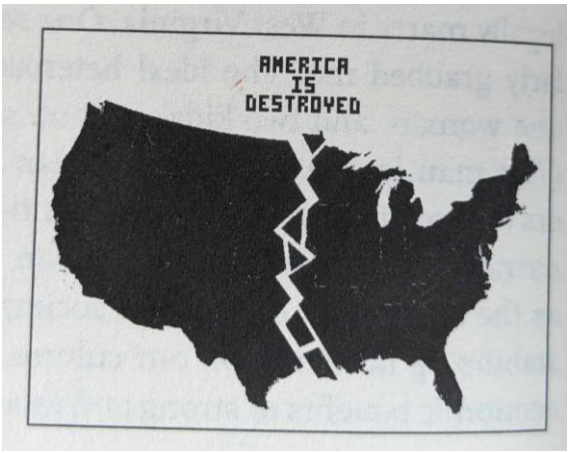


Figure 31, A screenshot from Gay Sniper (2009). *Photo taken from* Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, p. 118.*

Gay Sniper is an overtly resistant videogame in that it takes the voice over and imagery from a homophobic, promotional video and warps it into a game which both parodies and embraces the supposedly destructive potential we (queers) hold over the United States and/or the West. It parallels the death of a family (the family you point the crosshair at and shoot) with the death of an idea, of a nation, and through doing so calls attention to the irrational absurdity of such hateful belief systems through its *own* slightly absurdist humour. The crack that shatters America is undeniably amusing, depicting a reality in which some people being authentically queer and happy could seemingly ruin everything, including the geographical foundations of the United States.

Death exists in different ways in *Gay Sniper*. The traditional family supposedly dies, as does America, or at least *West Virgina 4 Marriage's* idea of America, and with both America and the family dead something *else* dies too. "The ideal […] of all civilised society." This is a naturalising statement which, as explored in the previous chapter, presents heterosexuality as the "natural orientation […] as if it were from this "point" that the world unfolds."[529] *Gay Sniper* does not

[526] Anthropy, 117.
[527] Anthropy, 118.
[528] Anthropy, 118.
[529] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 85.

necessarily work to undo this fantastical organisation, in which heterosexuality is natural rather than *naturalised*, but instead destroys it, cracks it in two. When the game screen reads "America is destroyed" what is this if not embracing ruination, death, and destruction? This, as a game design choice, feels reminiscent of what Bo Ruberg and Amanda Philips write about in their introduction to the *Game Studies* special issue: *Queerness and Videogames*, when they explain their article title "Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games."

> "We draw […] "Not Gay as in Happy," from a rallying cry of queer culture: "Not gay as in happy, but **queer as in fuck you**."" (Emphasis my own).[530]

Establishing death, endings, and resistance

This chapter embraces the idea of an apocalypse in gaming, of videogames being ruined, by exploring the resistant narratives from participants' about how videogames end and facilitate endings (in all manner of ways). This chapter draws on participant testimony – which contends with endings and loss in videogames – to highlight productive and meaningful ways we (game researchers, players, gamers) could contend with the apocalypse the gamer fantasises. In other words, it identifies ways to contend with the stereotypical gamer, or boy in the basement's, fatalistic world view.

Through this untangling, I hope to prise apart the ideological knots that the thesis has so far uncovered; how gamer operates as both inclusive and exclusive; how gaming markets attempt to extend beyond, while continuously falling back on, the beliefs the **foundational norm** props up (the re-naturalisation of the white, heterosexual gamer); how the boy in the basement's fears are illegitimate yet simultaneously realised. These almost paradoxical challenges can feel no-win scenarios, in which gamer and gaming can never be truly reclaimed or revitalised from issues of toxicity in videogames, which events such as Gamergate made overt. This is why this chapter seeks to find power and possibility in ideas surrounding death, fatalism, and dissolution; in situations where we lose, end, or fail. Through close interview analysis, I will scrutinise the resistant possibilities in the ways participants talk about loss, endings, and death and consider what we can learn from them when contending with the gamer's apocalypse.

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[530] Bo Ruberg Amanda Phillips, 'Special Issue -- Queerness and Video Games -- Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games (Introduction)', *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (December 2018), https://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg.

The word apocalypse intentionally signals to the basement boy's bunker in *Chapter 4*, where I understood the boy's basement as a place that both props up the narrative that videogames are ending whilst providing salvation from that perceived end. Please note, an apocalypse is not just understood here as the end of a world (whether that be a whole world, a gaming world, or a person's world) but, through the word's Greek Latin and theological routes, something that uncovers or reveals. Whilst apocalypticism has roots in Judaism, Islam and Christianity, it is notable that as a belief or anxiety apocalypticism is especially prevalent in the 21st century amongst far-right Christian beliefs and white supremacy groups. These anxieties often manifest around the extinction of the white race.[531] When looking at the online rhetoric of hate groups, specially the "Christian Identity theology", Apple and Messner argue that "paranoia and paradox are integral components of [their] apocalyptic discourse."[532] As described in *Chapter 4*, the basement boy's fears about videogames are simultaneously illogical (people who are not white men have always played videogames) yet realised (people who are not white men are playing videogames). The term "gamer apocalypse" encapsulates these anxieties about videogames and their culture, as the basement boy perceives it, "ending" via paradoxical beliefs that perpetuate, rather than addressing, his paranoia.

Whilst this chapter will include substantial discussion of play and games themselves, I am still concerned with gamer subjectivities and the negotiation of gaming subjects (players, characters, game developers), and by extension, gamer identities. In particular, I am invested in how we contend with the stereotypical toxic gamer articulated in *Chapter 2: Gamer as Affect*, who attaches his sense of self very strongly to videogames and is anxious about their ruination. In this chapter, I examine how we can resist the narratives this gamer stereotype functions in and through; the belief systems that the foundational norm props up; how we can resist hegemonic discourses in gaming which normalise the white, male gamer as the default subject and player. This resistance requires us to engage with the paradoxical beliefs the toxic gamer, and/or basement boy, reinvests in; to resist his gamer apocalypse.

When I examine participant responses which allow us to scrutinise resistant possibilities, I examine instances beyond explicit resistance against issues of toxic resurgence in videogame culture. However, even when discussing resistant play possibilities outside an explicitly political frame, this chapter's analysis is rooted in a concern for the thesis understanding of *Resistance* as an

[531] For example, please see: Chip Berlet, 'Christian identity: the apocalyptic style, political religion, palingenesis and neo-fascism,' *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 5, no. 3 (2004): 469-506. Chetan Batt, 'White Extinction: Metaphysical Elements of Contemporary Western Fascism,' *Theory Culture & Society* 38, no. 1 (2021): 27-52.

[532] Angela L. Apple and Beth A. Messner, 'Paranoia and Paradox: The Apocalyptic Rhetoric of Christian Identity', *Western Journal of Communication* 65, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 206.

opposing force against the issue of *Resurgence* in videogame culture and discourse. The politics of *Resistance* can be understood as fundamentally opposed to the foundational norm – feminist, anti-racist and actively inclusive – with the understanding that (as argued in *Chapter Gamer Counter-Spaces*) resisting hegemonic belief systems and their operations is a constant, imperfect, ongoing project rather something one can "finish" or "complete." Next, I will briefly explore different modalities of resistance relevant to this chapter's analysis.

The instances of resistance this chapter examines can be enacted through, or against, videogames. As Ruberg and Philips write:

> Video games offer opportunities for resistance. At the same time, it is crucial to resist games themselves, at least as we know them today: the ways they have been traditionally imagined, the communities they have commonly hailed, the problematic politics and values they often embody.[533]

Resistant play is a complex possibility. For example, it could mean playing against an intended game system, or playing a game story that literally facilitates acts of resistance or rebellion (like *Detroit: Become Human* (2018)). It could mean hacking or modding a game to change its original design. It could mean resisting play in its entirety, by putting down or refusing to buy a certain game. Tomkinson and Harper have explored this possibility by looking at how games culture itself can resist game companies, through community organisation and market influence.[534] Resistance can be physical, material, too; we might break the controller in our hands if we get angry or frustrated, or we might close our eyes and refuse to look if we are playing through a frightening cut scene. Of course, acts like snapping a controller in our hands can slip into resurgent, instead of resistant, possibilities.

To snap a controller because a game makes us angry can be an articulation of aggressive rage; to fold oneself into behaviours that valorise geeky masculine expressions of play. Even acts like modding, where players go out of their way to make extra, or rewrite, game content can be resurgent too. For example, mods exist to rewrite the RPG *Dragon Age Inquisition's* (2014) male gay character Dorian Pavus to be sexually attracted to women.[535] Whilst the mod could have practically changed Dorian's sexuality to make him bisexual, due to coding limitations he can then only romance a female player character instead of both. DAI has binary gender options, and Dorian is programmed to only like one gender – so the modder must choose: men *or* women. This means the mod

[533] Ruberg and Philips.
[534] Sian Tomkinson and Tauel Harper, 'Cultural Production of Video Games: Conditions of Control and Resistance', *Gamevironments*, no. 17 (22 December 2022): 99-140.
[535] BioWare, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, Electronic Arts, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Windows, Xbox 360, Xbox One, 2014.

effectively erases his queerness. This erasure is made more disorientating by the side plot which follows Dorian's tumultuous relationship with his family, due to his queerness and their rejection of him for it, in the story of the game, where it is revealed that Dorian's father tried to "cure" his queerness with magic (essentially a kind of magically charged conversion therapy). The mod to make Dorian functionally straight does not resist gaming norms but actively reasserts them, recreating the homophobic abuse the character received from his parents in game (forcing Dorian to be heterosexual), except this time it works. This mod effectively envelops heteropatriarchal expectations of play, which we can even observe in the wider *Dragon Age* series itself; both previous games only containing straight or bisexual characters, the latter whose queerness is rarely acknowledged.[536] To rewrite Dorian as straight *resists* the explicitly gay representation the game depicts. Importantly, this resistance does not resist the foundational norm but rather perpetuates it.[537] Part of what makes resistant play complex is context; what, or who, are we resisting?

To clarify, whilst I am interested in instances of resistance here beyond overtly political moments and possibilities, this chapter is invested in unpacking how participants talk about resistant play can *inform* how we might resist issues of toxic, cyclical resurgence in game culture; what it means to resist in a post-Gamergate landscape. It is within the resistant play experiences that participants described that instances of death and endings kept emerging. When I went back to collate all my interview quotes about occurrences of resistant play (which almost every participant talked about in some respect) I realised a lot of them were about death and endings. How participants experienced them, interacted with them, and felt about them. Most games discussed here are AAA mainstream titles, but there is discussion of a few indie games as well. When examining AAA mainstream games, it is important to consider how these games make up, can maintain, or even disrupt gaming norms, and that the norms AAA games can perpetuate, e.g. violence as cool and without consequence or games are apolitical entities, partly reinforce hegemonic game culture in turn – the same culture I have previously articulated as intrinsic to gaming's foundational norm.

Death and endings are a complex, inconsistent experience in my interview data. Death can be a literal death of a game character, or a death of how we perceive

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[536] Participant 9 actually discusses the bisexual representation in *Dragon Age* in their interview, saying: "to have bisexuality but not talk about bisexuality to not talk about biphobia to talk not talk about bisexual erasure from social discourses from particularly queer discourse as well it almost diminishes the sense that is actually an urgent conversation that we need to have." Participant 9, 22.

[537] See mod here: Atherisz. "Dorian Romance for female Inquisitor." *NexusMods.* 29th June, 2015. *https*://www.nexusmods.com/dragonageinquisition/mods/616/.

Please note, DA I also featured the series' first lesbian character/female character who only likes who women, called Sera.

them, the character, to be. Deaths can be narratively permanent or be something a player does over and over again – most often an expression of failure in gaming. The game itself can die when it is not how we imagine, or hoped, it would be. Death can be not just a feature or prominent in the game, but the very point of the game itself. This aspect of death and games is most clearly exemplified by autobiographical games like *That Dragon, Cancer* (2016), which explores the story of a young 4-year-old boy named Joel, who is diagnosed with terminal cancer, made by a small team including Joel's own parents.[538] *That Dragon, Cancer* has been written about in game scholarship as a game that denies player agency and (re)adapts traditional gameplay mechanics to express one of the most difficult experiences a parent can go through.[539] For example, in a scene called *Drowning* Ryan (Joel's father) is treading water at sea and the player can help him by pressing a button to swim and keep him afloat but the game never progresses beyond this point; with Ryan treading water and the player pressing the button. In fact, "the only way to progress is by letting him sink, surrendering to despair."[540]

Not every death in a videogame is an ending, or at least, a permanent one. Deaths can often be learning experiences, allowing us to continue through "trial-and-error situations where the player might fail several times before finally succeeding at a task and being allowed to progress."[541] Here, game scholar Tobi Smethurst is writing about *Limbo* (2010), a black and white style game in which the player leads a small boy through several different dangerous landscapes, where he is attacked by people, monsters and machines alike.[542] Deaths can often happen suddenly, from dangers near impossible to predict without having played through it (and died) already. For Smethurst, the way the game utilises this (dying to progress) is emotive in a way that parallels traumatic experience:

> Before being allowed to reload from the most recent checkpoint and make another attempt, the player is forced to sit through the death sequence for several seconds, watching the life drain from the boy as his glowing white eyes go hauntingly dark.[543]

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[538] Numinous Games, *That Dragon, Cancer,* Numinous Games, Windows, Mac OS X, Ouya, iOS, Android, 2016.
[539] Robert A Gallagher, 'Humanising Gaming? The Politics of Posthuman Agency in Autobiographical Videogames', *Convergence* 28, no. 2, Special Issue: Politicising Agency in Digital Play After Humanism (2022): 359–73; Gareth R. Schott, 'Physical Death, Digital Life, and Post-Self: That Dragon, Cancer as a Digital Memorial' 2, no. 1 (2020): 85–103.
[540] Gallagher, 365.
[541] Tobi Smethurst, 'Playing Dead in Videogames: Trauma in Limbo', *The Journal of Popular Culture* 48, no. 5 (2015): 818.
[542] Playdead, *Limbo*, Microsoft Game Studios. Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Windows, Mac OS X, Linux, Xbox One, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Nintendo Switch, iOS, Android, 2010.
[543] Smethurst, 'Playing Dead in Videogames: Trauma in Limbo', 824.

But deaths often are endings, and endings often feature death. Games such as *Bioshock* (2007), which we will explore more in analysis down below, can even have their endings *decided by* death.[544] For example, *Bioshock* is a narrative game whose ending is determined by how many Little Sisters the player chooses to sacrifice in their playthrough – X number of deaths is literally attributed to a "bad" and "good" ending. Another game I will discuss is the *Marvel's Avengers* (2020) game, an action game which will have its server cut off from support, maintenance and updates in September 2023 due to poor performance of the game and excessive microtransactions, meaning only limited gameplay experiences are left available.[545] The game will end as players know it, through the death of a service rather than the death of an actual character or death in the game itself.

Games can be spaces which allow us to resist confronting death, endings, and wider real-life concerns. In work I produced alongside Velvet Spors, using data from workshops and group interviews about games, mental health and self-care, we explored how games can work as "emotional buffers […] creat[ing] meaningful distance with their [the player's] lives outside the game, or/and to transfer meaning between the two; by drawing parallels with their own life, both consciously and accidentally."[546] I want to focus specifically on the idea of "meaningful distance," bringing in Nicholas Taylor and Katreena Adler's work on the man caves and gamer dens, which we also explored in *Chapter 4: A Certain Kind of Gamer.* Taylor and Adler write that the man cave can become entangled in the fantasy of prolonged boyhood, partly due to its ability to allow them (the boy) to escape the domestic labour of the home and to only encounter women through digital media.[547] This means to disrupt, or potentially destroy, the man cave, the basement – the fantasy of prolonged boyhood – is a death of innocence, of youth. Jarod Roselló, an interdisciplinary arts researcher who uses art-making as method, in his article "I'm not afraid: Zombies, video games, and life after death," explores how playing *Dead Rising* (2006) with his 4 year-old daughter allows her to engage with death/dying in the fantastical setting of the game.[548] He writes:

> One day, she too will feel the unbearable weight of our universe, our nation, our culture, our time. She will live the way we all live, in a place with dangerous demagogues, international tragedies, natural disasters, personal heartbreak, and loss. The world has

[544] 2K Boston, 2K Australia, *Bioshock*, 2K, Windows, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Mac OS X, iOS, 2007.
[545] Crystal Dynamics, *Marvel's Avengers,* Square Enix, Crystal Dynamics. PlayStation 4, Google Stadia, Windows, Xbox One, PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, 2020.
[546] Spors and Kaufman, 'Respawn, Reload, Relate: Exploring the Self-Care Possibilities for Mental Health in Games through a Humanistic Lens', 13.
[547] Taylor and Adler, 'Man Caves and the Fantasy of Homosocial Escape', 2.
[548] Capcom Production Studio 1*, Dead Rising*, Capcom, Xbox 360, PlayStation 4, Windows, Xbox One, 2006.

> plenty for us to be afraid of, but right now, in this moment, she has a world where dogs go to heaven, where clouds are people, and when we die we will walk this earth together as zombies.[549]

If we understand a possible gamer apocalypse as a literal end of *gamer*: a death of gamer as an identity or what gamer represents – games being a hobby exclusively for a white, male, heterosexual player, a fantasy of prolonged boyhood – it is not just the boy in the basement's perception of gaming that dies, but everything else this idea of gaming allows him to hold or avoid holding. Play, in this framing, works to prolong avoiding endings despite being laden with endings and deaths itself. This is another way play often *resists*, through the "meaningful distance," it can afford, how they [videogames] allow us to avoid endings despite being full of them. For example, in the work I mentioned earlier alongside Spors, a participant describes how the game *Dragon Age* creates a buffer for real life problems when making big or important decisions in-game: it "offers them [the participant] a space to intensely focus on "someone else's problems", as embodied by the characters in game, as a meaningful distraction. The participant is able to escape their own anxieties temporarily, using their responsibilities in-game as a mediator."[550] Whilst here the participant is talking about big decisions, not endings specifically, there is still a parallel; avoiding significant, real-life challenges we all must contend with is something videogame play can, at least temporarily, afford.

The following analysis will be structured into three parts, each lead by two different participant quotes about endings in games. The first section will look at character death, the literal death of characters in games and how a player/participant responds to them. The second section will look at game death, when a game itself dies. For example, one of the quotes discusses the *Marvel's Avengers* game and how Participant 1 (the participant in question) was unable to finish it. The final section will look at narrative death, or to put it more simply; how a game's story ends and how those endings can sometimes be multifaceted, and end in more ways than one. Finally, this chapter will conclude by considering one final quote from Participant 4, where she recalls the ending of a game called *Journey* (2012) and why it stuck with her. Within this final discussion, I will wrangle with the concept and importance of loss – not just within this chapter, but for the thesis as a whole.

[549] Jarod Roselló, 'I'm Not Afraid: Zombies, Video Games, and Life after Death', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 18, no. 2 (1 June 2017): 160.
[550] Spors and Kaufman, 'Respawn, Reload, Relate: Exploring the Self-Care Possibilities for Mental Health in Games through a Humanistic Lens', 14.

Contending with the Gamer Apocalypse

Character Death

The Last of Us II (2020) is a roleplaying adventure game with critical acclaim, nominated for 13 BAFTAs in 2021 and winning 3. It is the sequel to *The Last of Us* (2013), a game which has won more gaming awards than I could practically list here. Both instalments are narrative heavy, set in a post-apocalyptic United States where a fungal virus has led to a global zombie outbreak, and the subsequent collapse of humanity. The first game follows the story of Joel, an adult man in his forties, and Ellie, a teenage girl who is immune to the fungal infection.

The Halo Series (2001-2021) is a series of games set in a sci-fi future where the human race fights for survival in alien warfare. "Master Chief" is one of the main, and often player, characters who is one of the few remaining Spartans left fighting for human survival. Most games are third/first person shooters, but a few are also real-time strategy games. Many *Halo* games have won countless awards, several of them including *Game of the Year*.

Both Participant 11 and Participant 12 describe very different instances of character death. Participant 11 talks about the death of Joel in *The Last of Us II* (2020). After following the harrowing story of Joel and Ellie in the first game, the second game begins when Ellie is 18 and with Joel's brutal, on-screen death, in which the player (and Ellie) are forced to watch him be tortured and killed by a group of strangers.

Participant 12 talks about Master Chief from the *Halo* (2001 – 2021) games but does not specify a particular title from the series.[551] He describes an instance where the player, who controls Master Chief (the player character and protagonist of the series), might accidentally shoot a member of their own team (a non-player-character) and reload the save in response, even though the game does not react (through mechanics or narrative) to you having done this. In other words, it is an instance of character death the game barely acknowledges on its own, aside from the visual onscreen. This is a significant contrast to Joel's death in *The Last of Us II*, where the game forces the player to watch Joel's death, play through Ellie's reaction to it, and in addition play as the woman who killed Joel in the second half of the game, who is named Abby.

Let's start with Participant 12's quote:

> P12: if you're playing Halo and you accidentally shoot a friendly soldier in the back of the head

[551] 343 Industries, Bungie, Creative Assembly, Ensemble Studios, *The Halo Series*, Xbox Game Studios, Xbox, Windows, MacOS, Xbox 360, Windows Phone, iOS, Xbox One, Arcade, Xbox Series X/S, 2001-2021.

and he dies that nothing happens but I have definitely seen people go no and reload because their value is that person is alive and I'm not going to do that that's not who the Master Chief is but the game it doesn't care the game doesn't even if it tracks that it doesn't there is no value attached to it that is your you bring that to the game

I: […] that Master Chief thing is so interesting cause I do the exact same type thing [laughs]

P12: Yeah it's like it's weird isn't it they don't exist like

I: [laughs] You've gone

P12: Yeah exactly it yeah it's fascinating that you put a face on some or a voice and your brain is like nope just not doing it and like yeah but the game is comp you know even if the script is watching and says minus one point the game is has no care there is no such thing as a game caring it doesn't that you bring it to the game basically[552]

Now let's turn to Participant 11:

P11: she's [Ellie] [is] on this like crusade of revenge from it you I feel like you're totally with her […] you're like yeah she's gonna die that Abby I don't give a shit fuck her [laughs] and then you you get to that point and it flips and you become Abby and you're already like you feel like you've done the game and you're like what I'm Abby […] I don't wanna [be] Abby fuck this and then you you're like Abby and I'm like oh I I don't wanna be Abby but why am I her and you're frustrated […] because you like feel so wronged by her originally and then as you start it and it shows you her flashback[s] of like her and her dad and you're like her dad was the doctor oh my god and she she was she was just as wronged as Ellie…she did something awful in terms of Joel but it's a mad world and everything and she felt hurt as Ellie feels hurt […] it really cleverly plays with your you just

[552] Participant 12, 14-15.

> felt so hurt as a player I think to be playing as Abby I think in the first instance you were like this is like betraying Ellie like no I don't wanna like this is unfair and then you were like ooh she's had the same situation this is not fair - like it was brilliant I think it I think it played with those notions really well of like what what's right and wrong erm and your inability to have a say in that you know you didn't you weren't placed to have your your say because this is their lives I think not having you know like press A to save Joel would have been a massively inappropriate it was their story so that was a better call but it made those decisions hurt but you know hurt the right way I suppose [laughs][553]

Participant 12's quote epitomises player agency whilst betraying its limitations. The player can turn off the game, reload the save and undo their own/Master Chief's actions. Whilst the turning off and restarting is an expression of player agency – shaping how the game constructs Master Chief – the player cannot make the game, or even Master Chief, care within the game's own context or play. As Participant 12 tells us, "the game […] doesn't care" the player he describes reloads the save because of "their value[s] […] that's not who the Master Chief is." The player cares but cannot insert care into the game itself. They can only create a save file which reflects their Master Chief, a save file in which he does not commit friendly fire. As Participant 12 goes on to aptly construe, "you [the player] bring it [the care] to the game" but there is "no such thing as a game caring." The values the player brings to the game directly counteract that of the game design itself, which seemingly does not care about an accidental NPC death. To reload the game because of a player's value about who Master Chief is means to understand you have limited control *within* the game about who Master Chief is. There is no grieve or resurrect mechanic one can use to try and interact with an NPC downed by friendly fire. To reload the game is both to exercise player control whilst acknowledging a very lack of it. We can also see player concerns about a character's values (how they perceive them to be) through the interview with Participant 2, when he describes deleting his save file of the *Fall Out 4: Nuka-World DLC* (2016) in order to preserve (how he perceives) his avatar's character: "I just set up a separate save did the whole thing and then I went back to my original save anyways as if to say well in affect I've done it but it didn't really happen in the story."[554]

[553] Participant 11, 9-10.

[554] Participant 2, 4-5. Bethesda Game Studios, *Fall out 4: Nuka-World*, Bethesda Softworks, Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, 2016.

Participant 2 draws an interesting distinction between what "happened" and the "story" of his game, a parallel we can map onto Participant 12's quote too; this player acknowledges the friendly fire happened by their very reloading, but alters the "story" of the game by going out of their way to reload and thus rewrite it. This framing positions the player as roleplaying their player character, writing their story within the fabric of the game; a system of rules and mechanics they must negotiate, and sometimes entirely undo.

In contrast, Participant 11's description of *The Last of Us II* and Joel's death emphasises the complete lack of player agency and control in the scene in question. As Participant 11 says: "having […] press A to save Joel would have been massively inappropriate." If the player were to reload the save, back before Joel died, this would not save him anyway. He would just die again. The game, as Schott writes when talking about *That Dragon, Cancer* and meaningful depictions of death, "den[ies] the player agency and control over the final outcome."[555] The story is already decided for the player, and for Joel, by the game writers and developers. For Participant 11, part of the hurt of Joel's death is being forced to play as Abby – the young woman who kills him, and he goes on to describe how playing through her story fosters understanding of why she did what she did. His reaction to playing as Abby at the beginning of her arc, however, is very strong: "I don't wanna [be] Abby fuck this." The game not only forces you to witness Joel's murder, but to play as his murderer. When writing on death beyond failure in videogames, Sabine Harrer discusses the death of a popular *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) character and how "a game's key affordance of profound loss […] [is that] the pain is not that you lose, the pain is that you must continue."[556] Being forced to continue as Abby is an exemplification of loss, not just the loss of Joel (a beloved videogame character of 7 years) but of player agency and control. As Participant 11 describes: "it played with those notions really well […] your inability to have a say."

Both responses talk a lot about affect and emotion; bringing care into a game, to a character, and being forced to play as a character that hurt another character that the player cared deeply about. Participant 12's description of the player bringing "care" into a game for a nameless NPC feels especially important. When writing on post-human agency and death in games, Rob Gallagher highlights "gaming's role in maintaining understandings of who counts as human and who it is permissible to kill or let die."[557] *Halo*, through its lack of mechanical or narrative input, arguably communicates the random soldier's death is permissible. It is evocative of how, as Anna Anthropy writes,

[555] Schott, 'Physical Death, Digital Life, and Post-Self: That Dragon, Cancer as a Digital Memorial', 87.
[556] Sabine Harrer, 'From Losing to Loss: Exploring the Expressive Capacities of Videogames Beyond Death as Failure', *Culture Unbound* 5, no. 4 (12 December 2013): 618.
[557] Gallagher, 'Humanising Gaming? The Politics of Posthuman Agency in Autobiographical Videogames', 370.

"Mostly, videogames are about men shooting men in the face."[558] The play experience Participant 12 articulates demonstrates how affect – our emotional response to play – can be resistant to dominant narratives in game culture. To care about the NPC soldier is not just to resist the game design itself and the values embedded within it (that his death does not matter), but in turn resists wider discourses in game space that were exemplified by Gamergate; that games are not political, and the violence in them is innocuous, not loaded with values and meaningful possibilities. The player decides that NPC's death *does* matter. The affective response Participant 11 has towards Joel's death in *The Last of Us II*, in contrast, is an intentional game design choice, though something the player still brings to the play experience. By forcing the player to play as both Ellie *and* Abby, the game engages with more complex subjectivities. As Participant 11 tells us:

> P11: in the first instance you were like this is like betraying Ellie like no I don't wanna like this is unfair and then you were like ooh she's [Abby] had the same situation this is not fair - like it was brilliant I think it I think it played with those notions really well of like what what's right and wrong[559]

When Participant 11 says the "same situation" he is referring to flashbacks in the game which reveal that in *The Last of Us* Joel killed Abby's father, when rescuing Ellie from a surgery intended to extract the fungal virus cure (which would have also killed her).[560] In the original first game, the player can indiscriminately kill characters (without seeming consequence) in sequences of combat, including humans, not just zombies – one of these sequences being the end of the game, when Joel rescues Ellie and kills Abby's father. However, in the second game *The Last of Us II*, human NPCs will react to the deaths of their friends more explicitly.[561] For example, if they find their bodies NPCs will often cry out in upset and yell a person's name. This scene sits in stark contrast to *Halo,* where Master Chief seemingly shoots one of his own men and there is no reaction on screen. Through this contrasting mechanic, *TLoU II* arguably scrutinises how, in many games like *Halo*, death of NPCs is often treated as permissible and acceptable. The game humanises NPCs by exploring how they

[558] Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, 3.
[559] Participant 11, 10.
[560] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us*, Sony Computer Entertainment, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, 2013.
[561] A remastered version has since been released of *The Last of Us* with updated NPC AI, so if reader wanted to go back and experience this discrepancy, they would have to play the original *The Last of Us*, otherwise they would find the gameplay more similar to *The Last of Us II.*

might experience loss; not only in the shouts and yells of random NPC responses, but in how Abby experienced a loss you the player/Joel inflicted in the first game. The second game makes it evident that when Joel rescued Ellie from surgery, and killed all those people, he did something terrible – which inherently resists the premise of many violent AAA adventure games, in which a man killing his enemies and saving his child can only be framed as heroic and good.

Death in games can be synonymous with failure and/or game progression, sometimes we even must die in order to progress.[562] Both quotes here have implications for how we might unpack the interrelation of death and progression. In *Halo* the death of a soldier through friendly fire is not necessary to progress, it does not affect your progress, but progress can be thwarted if a player decides to undo that death and reload as Participant 12 describes (they will surely have to replay, at least part, of the game). In *The Last of Us II*, when the player snaps to Abby's perspective halfway through the game they are also snapped back to the near beginning of the game – just after Joel's murder. As Participant 11 laments, "you feel like you've done the game" and yet the game makes you replay through the past days you just played as Ellie. This means reliving your actions as Ellie, that the player has just taken, through Abby's eyes, including the deaths of many of Abby's friends as Ellie goes on a rampage to try and find Abby and take revenge. Whilst this game design could arguably read as quite clumsy moralising (at one point the game makes you play fetch with a dog as Abby you know Ellie will kill later), it is quite rare for AAA games to focus so explicitly on the people you kill and hurt, and the impact you/the player's actions have had on them. Though, I should note, *The Last of Us II* never actually gives the player choices – you are forced to play out Ellie and Abby's actions. For example, in one scene Ellie beats a woman to death with a metal pipe and the player is forced to watch this scene from Ellie's perspective: focusing on her face, her anguish, with each swing of the pipe. Sometimes games make us progress in ways we (the player) *might not want to*, for the sake of storytelling, and the discomfort this upset affords might be the very point.

Heather Love, a queer historian whose landmark work *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* considers how we (queers) can engage with traumatic and difficult pasts "without being destroyed" by them, writes about how feeling backward can evoke "embracing loss, risking abjection."[563] *The Last of Us II,* as well as forcing the player to stop and pause, forces them to *feel backward* – to replay through hours and hours of the game as Abby, the woman you "feel so wrong by." And to feel backward even further too, to the first

[562] Smethurst, 'Playing Dead in Videogames: Trauma in Limbo', 825; Harrer, 'From Losing to Loss: Exploring the Expressive Capacities of Videogames Beyond Death as Failure', 609; Gallagher, 'Humanising Gaming? The Politics of Posthuman Agency in Autobiographical Videogames', 365.
[563] Love, *Feeling Backward*, 1, 30.

instalment of the game 7 years prior and confront Joel's actions from then through a different perspective. To feel backward, to play as Abby, to revisit what Joel did, is to experience loss; loss of game progress (it makes you go back in time), loss of agency (you might not want to play as her) but also to understand Abby and her own subjective experiences, how she experiences the loss Ellie/Joel (and the player by extension) enacted upon her. As Participant 11 describes it, he clearly resisted playing as Abby in the first instance, "fuck this," but as he tells us in the end "[it] hurt the right way." This "hurt" could be considered an instance of the controller pressing back, as discussed in the previous chapter, as Participant 11 has his own affective reaction to the game – "fuck this" – but also experiences "hurt" from the game itself. The idea of right and wrong hurt is interesting – did the player Participant 12 speculate about reloading *Halo* because killing an NPC hurt in the "wrong" way? The act of reloading acknowledges hurt that the game does not care about, and it still causes *hurt* in the first instance, even if the player then goes out of their way to undo it. Surely not reloading and not caring about the nameless soldier would sidestep said hurt entirely? Maybe embracing or risking such negative feelings is resisting in its own way, to acknowledge the value and meaning in sometimes feeling badly. Maybe allowing the NPC soldier to die would have been the wrong kind of hurt. Bo Ruberg writes about how "no fun", masochistic play is laden with potential: "No-fun is […] a challenge to the status quo and a challenge to ourselves."[564] Issues of toxic resurgence in game culture, the naturalisation of the white, male gamer that we can trace back from the 1980s into gaming present, are not fun to reach back to – it is not pleasant to acknowledge the longevity and permanence of such issues, to acknowledge their constant and successful resurgence, to acknowledge *our lack of progress* beyond such issues. But as Ruberg themselves writes, no fun and machoism can be a "challenge," they can resist in their own way. To reload *Halo* to save an NPC or be forced to replay a game as the woman you hate and have been trying to kill, is to reach back and embrace loss, to acknowledge the hurt, to risk abjection. But it is also to engage, to care, even if it hurts.

When looking at *The Last of Us* it is important to acknowledge that whilst both games embed values in gameplay, some values reflect implicit biases in game design and are not explicitly recognised. *The Last of Us* does not treat all its named character's deaths with the same weight. Game scholar Treanndrea M Russworm has pointed out, in her chapter on "Dystopian Blackness and the Limits of Racial Empathy," every named Black character in the first game, of which there are four, die. And their deaths are tied up in white agency and

[564] Ruberg, 'No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games That Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt', 122.

progressing white character's storylines.[565] Within this framing, how stories progress can be tied up with resurgent issues in gaming; issues in which named Black characters are far rarer, especially in the AAA sphere, and can often die to progress white stories. When thinking about story, player and character progression it is important to consider *whose* progression are we talking about and how the urgency with which we might resist character deaths is tied up with wider discourses of power, within which every player brings their own subjective experiences and positionality to play. To resist a character's death is not always revolutionary, but a game's very intended purpose.

Game Death

Marvel's Avengers (2020) is an action-adventure game based on Marvel Comics and inspired by the Marvel Cinematic Universe. It features single player and co-op play and was laden with micro transactions – which many attribute to the game's eventual commercial failure. By the end of 2023, the game was removed from digital storefronts and its servers shut down, with limited play left available after.

Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell series (2002-2013) The *Splinter Cell* series are stealth-action-adventure games based on novels, following an elite recon unit of operatives referred to as "Splinter Cell." In 2021 Ubisoft confirmed they were working on a remake of the original game.

By "game death" I mean the death of a game from a participant's point of view, when the game – what it means or meant to them – is permanently changed in some way that results in them no longer engaging with or playing it. Here, I examine responses from Participant 1 and Participant 11, who also discussed *The Last of Us II* and Joel's death above. As mentioned in the introduction, *Marvel's Avengers* (2020) is being discussed here, alongside a potential future game from the *Splinter Cell* series (2002-2013) which Participant 11 speculates about (but does not yet exist).[566]

After they had discussed the game studio Ubisoft, describing it as "terrible" due to their handling of the *Splinter Cell* franchise and more serious issues, such as

[565] Treanndrea M. Russworm, 'Dystopian Blackness and the Limits of Racial Empathy in The Walking Dead and The Last of Us', in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, ed. T. Russworm and J. Malkowski (Indiana University Press, 2017), 113.
[566] Ubisoft Misc., Gameloft, Red Storm Entertainment, *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell Series*, Xbox, Windows, PlayStation 2, GameCube, Game Boy Advance, Mobile, N-Gage, Mac OS X, Nintendo DS, PlayStation Portable, Xbox 360, Wii, PlayStation 3, iOS, Nintendo 3DS, Android, Windows Phone, Wii U, Oculus Quest, Oculus Rift, 2002-2013.

sexual abuse allegations ("there's clearly a culture of neglect and abuse"), I ask Participant 11 the following question:[567]

> I: Would you feel conflicted at all if they did release a new Splinter Cell in buying the game
>
> P11: Yeah probably a little bit but I'm […] fairly able I think to er stay firm I mean hm I definitely would be a little conflicted but they would need to tick off like every tick going because the last one they did they got rid of the long term voice actor and it was a pretty generic game so if they just did that again I'd be like I'm I'm not bothered but if it was Michael Ironside if it was like perfect if it was a perfect Splinter Cell game for me I'd be like oh no what do I do but if it was um but if it was um oh no I have a fix maybe I could oh no I've got digital PS5 I don't know what to do was gonna say I'd buy it a CEX can't even do it um I don't know but there's a singer that I love called Ryan Adams not Brian Ryan a big Bryan Adams fan I'm making that clear for the tape um Ryan Adams although this doesn't make it any better because Ryan Adams was accused of loads of um sexual abuse allegations about maybe two years ago now off erm Phoebe Bridges in particular er but more than just her um and I have like can you see these behind me like half of one of these is just Ryan Adams like I love Ryan Adams like his music has meant an awful lot to me and I have probably not listened to more than three songs since then and I used to listen to him probably everyday erm so like and I've not he's released 2 albums since then I've not listened to them and I've definitely not bought them and I've bought everything he's ever put out so you know that was quite a big deal for me to do but erm you know I listened to what was going on I'm very much of the stance of like believe women because you know why I don't really understand the stance of like why would you make it up or whatever cause crappy men suggest that like it must be really hard to say all that stuff and – it it it's just it's just an awful situation so like yeah but I haven't got rid of it I haven't listened to it since I got I I feel

[567] Participant 11, 12.

> like a conflicting sense of like I don't know what to do with it but I haven't got rid of it but I need to have I listened but so yeah if they if they did do that I'd certainly look into it I'd read about it I'd watch what it's about but I'd be pretty hesitant to er give Ubisoft any money[568]

In contrast, Participant 1's issue with *Marvels Avenger's* (2020) is more so about the game itself (but the conversation does connect some of these issues to wider industry problems):

> P1: [I] bought the Avengers game premium edition and I'm the biggest Marvel fan in the world I love it so much so I'm like if this game is not good I'm going to cry and it just wasn't good
>
> I: What about the Avengers game wasn't good
>
> P1: It was extremely repetitive er um I feel like that were the character progression wasn't great erm I just feel like you couldn't connect to the characters like you could do in the movies
>
> I: Can you put your finger on why you couldn't connect with them like was there a mechanic that was missing or something
>
> P1: Hm it's hard to say what was missing exactly but it's just I dunno it just didn't like the same way the movies felt when obviously when you you can connect to characters you've shared situations stuff like that but with the but with the game it just felt a bit hollow like something was missing but I can't say exactly what was[569]

It is possible for a game to die because of its own content and design. Participant 1 tells us the Avengers game "wasn't good", it was "repetitive," did not have good "character progression" and that he struggled to connect to the characters. He even calls the game "a bit hollow," and says it felt "like something was missing." When I ask Participant 1 more about the game itself, he says:

[568] Participant 11, 13.
[569] Participant 1, 7-8.

> P1: didn't get much time with the characters I didn't like the fact that you you're in a big ship and you chose the missions and the missions didn't seem to last very long and it was always a let's go to this place let's smash few bad guys and then we'll leave on the ship again it just seemed like that over and over again and there weren't really much of the story there were little bits and bobs which could have been great but I just don't know I'd I never completed it because I just got really bored and I started playing multiplayer and once the the shininess died down I I put it I stopped playing it[570]

We can see the repetitive and hollow issues Participant 1 describes laid out here clearly; with constant, short missions and not much time dedicated to characters or story. This play experience led to Participant 1 not completing it, both in story and multiplayer modes. The game dies a sad death, where Participant 1 cannot bring himself to finish it even though he is the "biggest" Marvel fan. This is a quiet, slow moment of resistant play as Participant 1's play gradually tapers off (giving up on story mode first, then stopping altogether). He refuses the ending of the game by never making it to it and instead creates his own end; one in which the "hollow" sense of the game led to him being "bored" and then stopping playing altogether. Whilst Participant 1 does not allude to it himself, I would still argue this instance of "no fun", in other words boredom, is revolutionary, resistant, or rather: *revealing*. Later in the interview when I ask Participant 1 about his perception of the game industry he tells me "there's a lot of money in it" and I follow up by asking about the AAA game production environment and *Marvel's Avengers* (2020). Participant 1 alludes to the fact that the industry is very risk averse (something we discussed in *Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer*) and hence *Marvel's Avengers* had a predictable, repetitive storyline.[571] Whilst Participant 1 does not make this connection himself in any way, the state of the industry, it being risk averse and profit driven (the desire for profit above all else is also related to its problem with micro transactions – but Participant 1 does not bring this up), is inherently connected to the way *Marvel's Avengers* (2020) died for him. And it is not only the literal game that "died" but Participant 1's expectations and hopes for it. This is where we can return to Ruberg and Philip's contention, that "video games offer opportunities for resistance. At the same time, it is crucial to resist games themselves, at least as we know them today." Part of this necessity, they go on

[570] Participant 1, 8.
[571] Participant 1, 13.

to argue, is tied up with the industry's alignment with hegemony and empire.[572] Participant 1, in his refusal to play, resists not only the game, but the wider powers in motion which determined its state, though this second instance of resistance is involuntary – not something Participant 1 attributes to himself in anyway.

As Participant 11 is talking about a hypothetical game, a future *Splinter Cell* instalment that does not yet exist, the "conflict" he verbalises, whether he would or would not buy it due to his feelings about Ubisoft as a company, is also hypothetical. Participant 11 tells us that "if it was a perfect Splinter Cell game for me," which includes having the "long term voice actor" he might buy it but says "they would need to tick off like every [box]." He realises that because he has a digital PlayStation 5 (which does not take physical discs) he could not buy the game second hand if he wanted to, which would avoid directly giving Ubisoft money. This is evocative of how affect and strong feelings, such as nostalgia, can disrupt as well as facilitate resistance. Afterall, if Participant 1 had not disliked the play of *Marvel's Avengers* would he not still have played it, despite its risk averse and profit orientated industry issues? Participant 11 repeatedly tells us he would be "conflicted" and "hesitant" but cannot say for sure whether he would buy the new game (that, at time of writing, does still not exist). The hypothetical situation Participant 11 discusses here can be realised in the 2023 controversy surrounding the release of *Hogwart's Legacy* (2023), which sparked a lot of discussion online as to whether it should be played (if there was an acceptable way to play it), and the limits and struggles of allyship. *Hogwart's Legacy* attracted a lot of controversy due to two significant issues: the increasingly public and prevalent transphobia and propagation of far-right views by Harry Potter's original author, J. K Rowling, and the representational issues within the game.[573] One justification for playing the

[572] Ruberg and Philips, 'Special Issue -- Queerness and Video Games Not Gay as in Happy'.

[573] A comprehensive breakdown of J K Rowling's timeline regarding transphobia up to February 2023: McKee, Jake and Emily Chudy, "What has JK Rowling said about trans people? The story of the Harry Potter author's views," *PinkNews.* 10th February, 2023, *https*://www.thepinknews.com/2023/02/10/what-has-jk-rowling-said-about-transgender-people/.

A video outlining J K Rowling's connection to the TERF movement and the far-right as a result: Shaun, "JK Rowling's New Friends," *YouTube,* 14th October, 2022. *https*://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ou_xvXJJk7k.

An article that summarises most of the antisemitic representations in *Hogwarts Legacy*, although it fails to mention the inclusion of a blood libel storyline (a dangerous myth that Jews steal children, particularly propagated by the Nazis) and that the shofar (Jewish horn) the article discusses was stuffed with non-kosher cheese in the game (this is notable because most cheese *is* kosher):
Celia Edell, "How 'Hogwarts Legacy' video game reinforces antisemitic scapegoating with goblins," *The Conversation,* 4th April, 2023. https://theconversation.com/how-hogwarts-legacy-video-game-reinforces-antisemitic-scapegoating-with-goblins-202710.

game that people gave, despite the many issues tangled up with it, was that of nostalgia. I can almost observe nostalgia in Participant 11's answer – he wants to see Michael Ironside in the game, the original voice actor. However, Participant 11 does give us his own realised example with the singer Ryan Adams, who he was a big fan of (owns several of his albums) but has opted to not support due to allegations the singer has faced. Despite the music being "quite a big deal" for him, and that he used to listen to him every day, he has not listened "to more than three songs since" the allegations surfaced. Whilst Participant 11 might doubt his resolve, the very real example he gives is demonstrative of how moral conflicts have disrupted his ability to enjoy media he previously clearly loved. The affective response – in this instance specifically nostalgia – does the resistant work but sometimes the feeling itself, the nostalgia, requires resisting in tandem. To care in of itself is not an automatically resistant act, we all care about gaming. The boy in the basement we discussed in *Chapter 4* arguably cares about gaming too much, or too far in certain directions – the kind of directions that lead to his isolationist lifestyle, and his bunkering away. To "care", then, is not automatically resistant.

Both Participant 1 and Participant 11 discuss similar issues regarding the idea of financial resistance, in other words: refusing to buy something or withdrawing patronage. Refusing a purchase to stand by a value or make a point, comes up in Participant 11's answer, whereas Participant 1 *has* bought the game he discusses. Participant 1's inability to finish the game suggests he is unhappy with the product he decided to purchase, and his stopping playing the game had financial implications for *Marvel's Avengers* as a primarily online game, which requires regular player base numbers to stay viable (which it did not). Both Participant 1 and Participant 11 discuss the game from the point of view of a customer. What Participant 11 considers, refusing to buy the game all together, akin to how he has not purchased a musician's new albums, is reflective of what Tomkinson and Harper write about when considering the "conditions of control and resistance" within the game industry. They write that game cultures are "able to use digital tools and platforms to organise as a community."[574] One example they give is of a "satirical meme" which fans circulated to make fun of the in-game purchase options in *Star Wars: Battlefront II* (2017). As a result of this humorous campaign, which criticised excessive monetisation, EA (the game publisher) did subsequently reduce the cost of some heroes, and general sales were poorer than predicted/its predecessor.[575] Although we cannot confidently connect the latter to fan reactions entirely, Tomkinson and Harper's example – alongside Participant 1

There was also some criticism surrounding the game's trans character, named "Sirona Ryan," a female name which seemingly contains both a male name (Ryan) and the male title (Sir).

[574] Tomkinson and Harper, 'Cultural Production of Video Games: Conditions of Control and Resistance', 101.

[575] Tomkinson and Harper, 118.

and Participant's 11 testimony – demonstrates how financial resistance can have consequences for the game industry, and implicitly resist harmful industry practises.

The fate of games like *Marvel's Avengers*, which are having their servers cut off from support/updates, are indicative of how to resist a game might be to bring about its failure. The interrelation between failure and capitalism, is something queer studies scholar Jack Halberstam has examined in his work *The Queer Art of Failure*. On finding power and possibility in narratives of failure, he writes:

> The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being.[576]

I would argue that for Participant 1, *Marvel's Avengers* died quietly, as he slowly tapered off from playing it; and all the problems he had with the game – lack of care and consideration for characters, repetitiveness – are reflective of a risk-averse, profit driven industry. They are reflective of a game industry trying (and often failing) to flourish in a late-capitalist economy. And the functional death of the game's server in September 2023 is demonstrative of Participant 1 not being the only player who feels this way. The game was partly ruined by the hegemonic structures the game industry, especially the AAA sphere, is embedded within – at least as Participant 1 articulates; he described the game's issue with hollow, repetitive gameplay and highlights that the game industry is becoming increasingly risk adverse. This is partly why game scholar Adrienne Shaw advocates for reclaiming and reimagining gamer outside of market categorisations and not investing ourselves in debates about who counts.[577] When Shaw makes this argument she is encouraging us to question the category of gamer rather than trying to broaden it to fit more types of bodies; encouraging us not to invest in, even implicitly, the broader capitalist structures that gamer is often constructed within. All the objects we looked at in *Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer*, such as the *Nintendo Power* magazine, were all about appealing to a certain kind of market, as well as working to define and maintain gamer identity. Even objects that arguably worked to broaden gamer, like the Wii console, exist within capitalist, market structures; they are made to be sold. This is, I think, the conflict Participant 11 essentially wrangles with when he discusses *Splinter Cell* and Ubisoft; how to engage with games *and* their context of production.

The power in death, endings and embracing negative feelings is something we can find within indie game *Ritual of the Moon* (2019).[578] In an article which explores the creative process of making the game, considering the importance

[576] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 88.
[577] Shaw, 'On Not Becoming Gamers: Moving Beyond the Constructed Audience'.
[578] Kara Stone, R*itual of the Moon*, Ice Water Games, Windows, Mac OS, Android, 2019.

of reparative game design, game scholar Kara Stone writes about the daily choice it gives the player. *Ritual of the Moon* is played across 5-minute instalments over 28 days, following the story of a queer witch banished to the moon who every day is given the choice to destroy or protect the Earth (an Earth which has rejected her – hence her being on the moon).[579] Stone writes that:

> The daily decision of protecting or destroying the earth seems like an easy choice. Protection and healing is always better than destruction, right? But something that has been reaffirmed over the political landscape of 2016 and 2017 is that some things need to be destroyed. We need to wipe some things out and sweep away their ashes before we have the space for something else.[580]

The game death I have explored here, a death of what a game literally is or what it means to someone, is not only born out of participants' resistance to those games, whether that resistance be due to poor game design/play or conflicting values with a game publisher; a resistance which led to them (importantly) walking away from or rejecting a game. The game dies for them, in that moment, and its true ending is never reached (or in the case of *Splinter Cell,* made reachable). But the game death *itself* also resists in that it exposes the ruination already in play, the rot. The problems with Ubisoft, or with Square Annex (the publisher who made *Marvel's Avengers*), persisted before these games were made and will persist after. To embrace the negative feelings here, to pull away from the game or game company, to stop playing the game and dwindle a game's player base, is a resistant act. Maybe, as Stone writes, "some things need to be destroyed […] before we have the space for something else."

[579] Kara Stone, 'Time and Reparative Game Design: Queerness, Disability, and Affect', *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (December 2018), https://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/stone.
[580] Stone.

Narrative death

Bioshock (2007) is first-person-shooter set in the 1960s which follows Jack (the player character) who discovers the underwater city of *Rapture*. Jack attempts to escape the city, fighting resident's who've lost their minds isolated under the sea, and "Big Daddies" – huge, genetically engineered people that protect "Little Sisters" – little girls who harvest ADAM (the game's magical, mysterious resource) from the dead, and whom the player can choose harvest ADAM from in turn. Whether the player chooses to harvest the Little Sisters, or set them free, throughout the game dramatically changes the ending.

Oxenfree (2016) is an indie, story heavy game about a group of teenagers on a small island, who discover ghosts and supernatural disturbances they can connect to through a radio. The game has a unique, real-time dialogue mechanic and player choices can affect the game's final outcome.

The final kind of death I want to explore is that of narrative death. This does not mean a game narrative that itself features death (although it may well do) but how a narrative ends. The games discussed before, which both Participant 1 and Participant 11 walked away from (or anticipated doing so), have also narratively died in a way, as their stories are denied or left incomplete. But the discussions surrounding *Marvel's Avengers* and a potential *Splinter Cell* game were additionally concerned with wider industry contexts as well as story elements (Participant 1 complained about *Marvel's Avengers* being "hollow" and Participant 11 speculated about voice actors). Here, I am specifically concerned with game narrative and how it makes players feel, not how the narrative (or lack thereof) came to fruition. The quotes shared below both have implications for player agency, and specifically how games map player actions onto game story outcomes. In another sense: sometimes the way we end things is not the way we (the player) mean to.

First let's start with Participant 7's quote about the indie game *Oxenfree* (2016)[581]

> P7: it's about a group of American teenagers […] [on an] island [that] ends up being haunted and they have to escape […] your friends kind of wander around with you erm and they'll just kind of be having a conversation and you will be presented with a number of dialogue options that you can [press] in response to something somebody said […] [it] happens in real time you can kind of interject into the conversation erm as and when you like […]

[581] Night School Studio, *Oxenfree,* Night School Studio, Mac OS X, Windows, Xbox One, PlayStation 4, Linux, iOS, Android, Nintendo Switch, 2016.

a lot of dialogue based games will stop and wait for you to pick your dialogue thing and then the dialogue will pick up again so you get this weird stilted thing where a character will make a statement everybody essentially looks at the screen…[until] you choose something […] you can also not say anything…characters will be having a conversation when your character is able to respond you'll kinda get 3 speech bubbles that pop up each assigned to a button so you can choose how she responds erm but also the speech bubbles will fade out over a period of time and if you just let them fade out then she doesn't say anything erm and the dialogue will kind of adapt around that so you know if it's just people chatting and you can choose to interject […] but not saying anything it doesn't really matter they'll just keep on having their conversation versus you interrupting and maybe changing the direction of the conversation whereas if someone asks you a direct question and you just ignore them then they'll get a bit pissed off and they'll be the game will respond to that and go okay no you probably should say something […] I need to actually play around with it and see how much you can break it cause it's a very clever dialogue system um I want to kind of push the limits of it a bit erm but it makes those kind of things that are fairly common in narrative games feel a bit more natural erm it feels more like a flow of conversation that you're participating in rather than a stage play where you have a role and it won't carry on until you've said your lines […] it's the kind of game where you can get several different types of ending depending on what you chose to do um but the endings are […] it always kind of ended the same way you always escape the ghost I think one of the characters can die if you don't save them but everybody else will get off the island it doesn't make it super clear that that is the case when you're playing the game but when you escape the island what the characters go and do afterwards will change depending on the things you talked to them about erm while you were on the island erm and again it never explicitly tells you this you're not kind of picking a path and it's kind of going okay if we say this to this character

> they go over there and do this erm it just kind of responds at the end of the game…this is what these characters are doing now […] [it] just lets you speak your mind as you want to erm and […] the story itself responds to that in what feels like quite a naturalistic way which is very hard to do erm [laughs] to make kind of dialogue feel natural and also make it feel meaningful in a way that's not choose ending ABC with dramatically different consequences it's more this is the story we've told and this is the impact you had on it[582]

And then we have a quote from Participant 8, about the ending of the game *Bioshock* (2007):

> P8: I thought [Bioshock] was gonna be incredible and didn't end up in that way so in Bioshock […] there's these two narrative voices and one of them tells you oh these young girls are beyond saving you need to put them out of their misery and then there's this other voice slightly more erm person that you don't trust as much erm and […] they are like actually they can be saved but you erm so […] I followed the voice that I trusted the most and I erm I harvested I believe the game terms it all these little sisters and then you get to the whole the famous would you kindly part of the game where who you think is the main villain reveals that you've been under like control this whole time and the person who you trusted that you has lied and it turns out you've been doing their bidding all along and erm I was like oh like I never felt like […] that's the big twist that worked for me and I was like oh okay and so from that point on I decided to save the girls instead of harvesting them […] I started off being manipulated but I found my own voice this is great you get to the end and you do the big boss battle and because I harvested too many as the games on it gave me the bad ending where it turns out suddenly you were evil all along you didn't have that big moment of realisation oops erm so the initial reveal was incredibly well done and it questioned everything

[582] Participant 7, 8-9.

> I thought I knew about the game initially but then the ending reverted that promise of […] freedom that I'd just like the game told me I'd broken free of this like evil control and then the ending because it wasn't like equipped to deal with the narrative choice was like no actually you were evil sorry here's the credits erm yeah[583]
>
> [slightly later in the interview]
>
> I: In Bioshock when it kind of failed to follow through with the kind of choices and journey that you previously had experience[d] how did that feel
>
> P8: It felt like erm - it felt like I was reading a really good book and at the last second someone had cut out the last chapter and replaced it with a note and then you were evil the end it felt it was deeply unsatisfying er and it felt like it didn't feel like an ending to the story I'd experienced[584]

Both these quotes have significant implications for player agency – not just our ability to make choices, but the impact these choices have on game narrative and (most importantly) the game's ending. In other words: what Participant 7 and Participant 8 discuss has implications for impactful choices in play. The two choices discussed across Participant 8 and Participant 7's quotes here are the dialogue choices in *Oxenfree*, represented by small bubbles that appear above the player character, and the very visceral choice made repeatedly in *Bioshock* as the player progresses, whether to harvest or save the Little Sisters the player character comes across.[585] The *Oxenfree* dialogue choices can range from significant to innocuous; making light conversation as you walk, picking or defusing fights and even deciding which characters split up and go where. In contrast, in *Bioshock* the player must defeat a Big Daddy, a very difficult enemy in the game, and only then are they presented with a choice when they discover the Little Sister the Big Daddy was protecting. The player is given the option to *rescue* or *harvest* them (the Little Sister). As Participant 7 describes, *Oxenfree* never makes it evident that you are making choices about your friend's futures through conversations (or at least influencing them). He says "it doesn't make

[583] Participant 8, 6.
[584] Participant 8, 7.
[585] Little Sisters are young girls who can harvest, and carry around ADAM, one of the game's central resources. Little Sisters are almost always accompanied by Big Daddies, a challenging combat encounter. If defeated, the player can choose to harvest or rescue the Little Sister – this choice affects the game's ending.

it super clear […] but when you escape the island what the characters go and do afterwards will change depending on the things you talked to them about erm while you were on the island." This mechanic is a soft, subtle expression of character agency. Whereas hegemonic AAA RPG design can often depict endings abruptly, as Participant 7 himself describes when he says, you can "choose ending ABC with dramatically different consequences." This could be a reference to games like the *Mass Effect trilogy* (2007-2012), where at the end of a very dramatic story line the player character is given two very different choices which are both available regardless of the decisions the player has made throughout all three games (despite *Mass Effect* emphasising the importance of such decisions throughout its playthrough). Halberstam, when writing on the queer potential of failure, stresses the importance of the "the small, the inconsequential, the antimonumental, the micro, the irrelevant."[586] And we can observe this in *Oxenfree,* and its delicate approach to story. Most of the conversations the characters have are not about ghosts, but about their families, lives, friends, and school. This is evocative of how game design itself can resist mainstream expectations, how *Oxenfree's* ending resists by giving the small impact; by creating a narrative in which the everyday conversations we have with each other can change our lives. The game stresses the importance and value in the "inconsequential" in how it articulates its ending. *Bioshock*, on the other hand, almost allows Participant 8 to make impactful choices but does not provide a story outcome which seemingly fits his experience of the narrative. There was a big twist in the story which Participant 8 tells us, "worked for me," and then he stopped harvesting the Little Sisters – but for the game this was already too late. If player harvests more than just one Little Sister, they get the "bad ending." This outcome did not align with the narrative journey Participant 8 describes; the ending disjointed from the rest of his playthrough, in which his choices lacked impact whilst simultaneously having too much.

How we feel about endings is important. A lot of *Chapter 4: A Certain Kind of Gamer* essentially contended with endings, even if only perceived (not realised); the ending of white, male privilege; the ending of hegemonic videogames, the kind of videogames Gamergate as a movement seemingly sought to protect. How we feel about endings can be tied up with how we read resistant possibilities into them. For example, to try and articulate what his playthrough of *Bioshock* felt like Participant 8 tells us: "it felt like I was reading a really good book, and someone had cut out the last chapter and replaced it with a note that said: you were evil, the end." Being told "you were evil, the end" almost reads like the moral nuance the game tried to play with became arbitrary, reducing X number of deaths to a "bad" or "good" ending which simultaneously determined if you/the player character were a "bad" or "good" person. The game story did not engage with the potential emotional complexities of play, at least as Participant 8 describes it. Participant 8 goes on

[586] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 21.

to tell us that *Bioshock's* ending was "deeply unsatisfying" and "didn't feel like an ending to the story I'd experienced." He resists the game ending, he does not accept it, and he offers us a powerful metaphor to help us understand it: a simple note, in lieu of a book chapter. In contrast, *Oxenfree's* ending feels quieter and gentler, akin to its implementation of player impact on story outcome. To reiterate, Participant 7 tells us the dialogue "felt natural and meaningful in a way that's not choose ending ABC with dramatically different consequences, it's more this is the story we've told and this is the impact you had on it." Participant 7 describes *Oxenfree* as asserting the game developer's agency ("this is the story we've told") alongside the players ("this is the impact you had on it"). This sits in strong contrast to Participant 8's description of "you were evil, the end." Despite being laden with choices, *Bioshock* is seemingly denying Participant 8 agency when it counts. And this denial disrupts his experience of the game narrative. Importantly, when *Bioshock* ends it is not just literally the game narrative that finishes, but the game also ends in its own way. Participant 8 tells us it "was gonna be incredible and it didn't end up in that way." This is another instance of game death, the theme we explored prior to this one. The game is no longer incredible, because of how it ended.

For both Participant 7 and Participant 8 there is a strong sense that the way a game ends has implications for the rest of the game, for the whole. The reason *Bioshock* was seemingly ruined for Participant 8 was the ending, and Participant 7 stresses the importance of *Oxenfree's* ending in how the game handled dialogue choices. Despite arguing for the power in failure, loss and endings in *A Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam writes that "sometimes an end is not a new beginning: an end is an end is an end."[587] *Bioshock* is "an end is an end is an end" because it ends in so many ways for Participant 8; affectively – his emotional experience (the surprising twist!) – his reading of the game is refuted by the "bad ending," the game itself literally ends, and the game dies – at least how Participant 8 hoped it would be or imagined it. But it is importantly the narrative ending, the "you were evil, the end," that triggers the other deaths; the other endings. If there is a more elaborate end game story, Participant 8 does not tell us it. Whereas in *Oxenfree* the end almost is its own beginning, the point from which the rest of the characters' lives unfold; the player's impact apart of *how* they unfold and what choices the game characters decide to make. It is also a new beginning because Participant 7 describes wanting to replay the game too: "I need to actually play around with it and see how much you can break it cause it's a very clever dialogue system and I want to kind of push the limits."[588] The idea of "breaking" a dialogue system, of seeking limits, is not only an expression of player agency – the idea that Participant 7 could "break" the game – but demonstrates how we can seek out endings, or the limits, of a game narrative as a part of play itself: "I need to play around with it." And maybe if

[587] Halberstam, 118.
[588] Participant 7, 8.

he finds a "limit" this will be another ending that will change how Participant 7 feels about *Oxenfree* as a whole. Whereas with Participant 8, we know the ending of *Bioshock* was disorienting and disruptive, but his telling us as much – that the ending did not fit with his whole game experience, that it did not realise his player agency – was to reassert his player agency in turn. By telling us "it didn't feel like an ending to the story I'd experienced" he tells us, implicitly, what the story should have been.

The idea that how we feel about an ending can change how we feel about the *thing* that's ending feels especially important when we extrapolate beyond the videogame to gaming as a whole. If there is a gamer apocalypse, if gaming culture, or gamer identity, is ending, then does this change how we feel about, experience and perceive the whole? Part of the beginning of Gamergate's narrative was a series of journalistic articles about how gamers are dead or over, including Leigh Alexander's "'Gamers' don't have to be your audience. 'Gamers' are over" article.[589] Gamergate, as well as being a response to increasing minority representation and criticism of/within videogames, was partly a response to this discourse, to the idea that gamers are over and the anxiety this idea generated. Almost paradoxically, Gamergate itself ensured gamer as a term was not going anywhere, as the following (ongoing) discussions it triggered made sure it (gamer) remained both firmly in gaming's and game studies' zeitgeist. We can see this in the interview data that makes up this thesis too, with many participants associating a gamer identity with Gamergate. Whilst, ironically, gamers being "over" is a destructive sentiment, it was also a very productive one – sparking discourses in and beyond Gamergate about what gamer as a term does or does not signify. The fact that Participant 8 brought up *Bioshock*, despite not liking the ending, is arguably an example of this very phenomena; its emphasis in his interview derived by the way it ended, and the way it died. And when Participant 8 tells us about *Bioshock* and how its narrative died for him, he simultaneously tells us about another game, a *Bioshock* with an ending that did not feel so disjointed, a game that he missed out on playing. Gamer's permanence and circulation in gaming discourses is not only evidence of its relevancy but an articulation of its loss; the idea of a gamer identity dying securing a new kind of relevance, ensuring constant reconfigurations as we (those in gaming spaces) seek to redefine it in a post-Gamergate world.

[589] Leigh, "'Gamers' don't have to be your audience. 'Gamers' are over."

Chapter 6: Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, I wrote that when I use the term apocalypse, I do not mean just a literal end of a world, but a phenomenon which reveals or exposes. What does a gamer apocalypse reveal about gamer, as an identity, word, community, connective tissue, that was perhaps always there? At the beginning of the thesis, I reframed gamer through an affective lens; as an identity loaded with emotional implications, baggage, and possibilities. And affect has come up a lot here too; how we feel about endings, how endings make us feel and how our feelings can end things. Death has emerged in this data as a personal, subjective experience; a site within which gaming subjectivities can be negotiated, tested, and reformed.

To finish this chapter, I am going to share a final quote from Participant 4 about the ending of the game *Journey* (2012) and use this to consider how what has been revealed here can help us untangle the ideological intricacies that I have drawn out of my interview data. *Journey* is an adventure game, where the player explores ancient ruins in a desert. The game allows online co-op play, but the player you play with cannot speak or communicate with you by conventional means:

> P4: So at the very end of Journey […] there's like this corridor that you go down and it's quite clear when you get to it is the end of the game and so I was there like with this other person and we played the whole game it's not very long I think it only takes a few hours to play through […] I just played through basically the whole game with this random other person and you can like beep at them so you're like beep beep beep there's like no way of talking to them but it's just like a signifier that you talking to them we both just stood there like waiting to go through the gate […] we've just gone through this whole thing together and that was such a nice feeling where we're just like oh my god we're just gonna wait here a minute and just like absorbed the fact that we've played this whole game together and then we just walked through the little ending bit together and it was so nice I was just like oh I love that and we just walked through at the same time during the little beeping thing and that was just such a nice thing I think that will stick with me stuff like that I think is where you do have connections with the players but there's only like positive

> way to connect I think that's a way that multiplayer can be done really well and yeah that was that was super nice and I still think about that now and then trying to think of any others like that but um yeah it's just stuff like that where you just sit and you put the controller [down] and you're like all oh my god that was wow that was really awesome and I felt that when I played Journey – think that was like a year or two ago now[590]

This quote is, I would argue, about lingering and letting go; it is about embracing moments of hurt, sitting in them, and then moving through them. Participant 4 tells us they just "waited here a minute and just absorbed the fact that we've played this whole game together." They then "walked through the little ending bit together" too. Their communication was not just in the beeps, which Participant 4 clearly attributes as meaningful, but the act of lingering itself – that they *both did not leave* and just lingered, beeping at each other all the while. "We both just stood there […] waiting to go through the gate." The waiting feels so important. This idea of lingering, sitting in something painful, then moving *on through*, will be drawn out more in the *Conclusion*; where I advocate for the importance of making contact with difficult ideas, and the affects they (can) generate, in order to move past them. Whilst Participant 4 did move through *Journey*, in that she completed it, it still lingered in her gaming memory; she tells us in her interview: "I think that will stick with me." In *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed writes about how objects can become "sticky […] with affect."[591] If we understand *Journey* the videogame as an object, we can see here how it is sticky, how it *sticks*, in Participant 4's mind; because of how it ended, and how they (her and the other player) did not want it to end, and then it did.

I use the term gamer apocalypse to encapsulate the anxieties I have uncovered throughout the thesis. The anxieties participants themselves hold about what gamer means, about where videogames are going. And the anxieties they have attributed to others; also about what gamer means, and their idea of what gamers are, what they want, and what they (might) do. If we call back to the idea of an ending changing the whole, how a gamer apocalypse might change gamer integrally, I argue that it characterises gamer as perpetually over, perpetually in crisis. What is the difference between an ending and an end? Queer theorist Eve Sedgwick writes about paranoia as anticipatory affect, that:

[590] Participant 4, 15-16.
[591] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 11.

"paranoia requires that bad news be always already known."[592] This is the difference. An ending requires vigilance, paranoia, for us/them to already have it all figured out. An ending is lingering in a paranoid anticipation of the *end*, rather than reaching it. Maybe this is how the boy in the basement is still around, still being talked about, because he perpetually anticipates ruination, but is never quite consumed by it. The action of sitting in it, bunkering down, sits in stark contrast to Participant 4 who, whilst she does linger, does eventually move through and finish the game, letting it end.

Queer historian Love writes that to reconstruct the past is to "build on ruins."[593] I do not want to reconstruct the boy in the basement, gamer, and geek histories, and I could not if I wanted to. I do not want to build on ruins, I want to reach backward into them, *feel backward* into them, through the interview data I have gathered. By considering how my participants wrangle with endings in and about videogames, I have uncovered new ways of meaning making within crisis, within death and within hurt: I will more explicitly prise out these meaningful implications in the *Conclusion*. What has emerged across all quotes here, including Participant 4's, is how much we care; about characters, about stories, and games we love, and how much it can hurt to lose them. The player Participant 12 speculates about cares a lot about *Halo,* so much so they go out of their way and *against* the intended gameplay, eroding game progress in the process, to save a nameless NPC who the game system does not (and will never) acknowledge.

In a way, reloading the game and eroding progress is to linger too, lingering in that game moment a little longer. To remember a game for how its ending made you feel, to reject it or reminisce, to be forced to play through a game again from the point of view of the person you have hurt, to slowly taper off from a game that was not quite what you wanted, to imagine a game you want but can never have … a lot of this chapter has been about lingering affect; how affect lingers with us, how it helps us linger. Lingering is about embracing pain even though it hurts, beeping at each other even though we (they) must leave. This hurt is affective, it hurts because we feel it, and because we feel it, we linger just a little longer.

Let us briefly return to the boy in the basement, and the house he sits within. The bad news is already known for this boy; that videogames are over, that there are women and people of colour and queer people in them, both playing them and in the game's representation, and this is evidence of ruination, why he has bunkered down away and underground. In other words: progress is being made in game space that has (in his perception) implications for his agency as a gamer, perhaps his agency to enjoy games, or to say what he wants.

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[592] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), 130.
[593] Love, *Feeling Backward*, 21.

Counter-spaces exist and thrive in tandem against the boy's basement and what it represents, as explored in *Chapter 5*, but we know that said spaces – and the systems they both sit within and interact with – are cyclical, tangled up in cycles of resistance and resurgence. The construction of more inclusive, radical rooms in the house, making space for those historically ostracised in gaming, whilst providing important and invaluable *space* cannot simultaneously escape realising the boy in the basement's fears; the reason he bunkered down there. Stone writes that recovery is a process, not a solid fixed thing we can reach for: "It is always healing rather than healed. There is no end point because there is always something that is draining."[594] The boy in the basement, or rather, what he represents is always draining, dragging down the rest of the house that sits above him despite videogame culture's constant attempts at recovery from everything he represents. The boy in the basement always *hurts*; he is hurting and the anxieties he manifests hurt gaming culture, and other bodies within it, in turn.

A lot of this chapter has been about how we refuse or resist death; sometimes outside of the system it has taken place within, sometimes affectively when we assert this death or end *does not fit*, and sometimes we resist death by playing through it; by sitting, lingering, then moving through. This resisting accepts the loss; not resisting it in perpetuity like the boy in the basement but instead embracing its inevitability even as we resist how it made us feel, or how it came about. To accept loss is often to accept hurt, whether it be loss of a character, a story, a game, or our own agency as players. But, as Participant 11 tells us, maybe "it hurts the right way." [595] This is a productive, meaningful, resistant kind of hurt. Earlier in this chapter I argued that the circulation of and cultural anxieties surrounding gamer are an articulation of its loss. Within this framing, gamer occupies a liminal space; in crisis, under threat and yet connective, innocuous *and yet* a signifier of the far-right, of Gamergate and of harm. I articulated how gamer can exist under such strenuous conditions in *Chapter 2*, where I explored gamer as affective, and I think this is what it comes back to again and again. Affect; how gaming does and does not make us feel.

To shoot the typical heterosexual family in *Gay Sniper* is to accept loss, it is to accept the painful realities of homophobia and wider political movements which seek to cause queers harm, but it is also to find power through it. To point the gun at their silhouettes is, as Love writes, to reach backwards into ruination and to acknowledge the rot; to shoot it in a productive, destructive crack. Halberstam tells us, in losing, we "will find another way of making meaning."[596] We lose, but it hurts the right way, and we find meaning through it.

[594] Stone, 'Time and Reparative Game Design: Queerness, Disability, and Affect'.
[595] Participant 11, 10.
[596] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 25.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

"I didn't like the tutorial didn't like the game I'm not gonna play [it] anymore [laughs] I wanna do the voice again to make you laugh [laughs very hard] ahh

I: [struggling not to laugh] It's banned you're not allowed to um

P: [laughs]"

– *Participant 11, 6.*

I have always had a lot of nerdy, male friends and my undergraduate years at university were no exception. Of course, most of these men played videogames – we all did. There were queers and women in this friendship group, but it was predominantly white, nerdy, heterosexual men. We used to play a card game called *Secret Hitler*, a game in which liberals in Weimar Germany must try to weed out the fascists hidden amongst their ranks. The fascists are selected at the start using secret cards, and every player is then asked to close their eyes. Once done, the fascists are asked to open their eyes to make themselves known to each other. It was at this point in the game, some of my friends would joke about doing a "secret hand gesture" which we all knew was a sieg heil salute. Sometimes, this was just a joke, but sometimes people actually did the salute (if I was also a fascist, I would sometimes see this as I also had my eyes open), which I suppose they also saw as a joke.

Being the only Jew in this game (most of the time, occasionally other Jews also played) was sometimes a little awkward, but I often still had fun (to be clear, the salutes were never part of this fun). I did not mind the premise of the game (it depicts the fascists as silly cartoon lizards, after all) and in essence it is rather stupid, it is enjoyable. But I never liked the salutes, or the jokes about the salutes. They felt a little too real. The salutes did not feel like part of the game. But I never

said anything about them, I did not complain, that I can remember. I had already been derided by a few of the men for being a feminist who complains a lot (I am happy to say I am no longer in contact with any of these particular men) and I was worried about being dubbed a complainer – the kind of woman Sara Ahmed articulates in her seminal piece *Feminist Killjoy*. This is not the only time I have seen seig heil salutes from nerdy men under the guise of humour, either. It happened to me in secondary school, and in my work at a game store in London, when my area manager and co-workers decided to do them for a joke. In both instances it was seemingly funny because I am Jewish.

At Halloween in 2022, I had several of these friends (the ones I have stayed in contact with) around for a party and we played *Secret Hitler.*[597] Cards were passed out, eyes were closed, and one of my friends made the same joke about the hand gesture. It had been over 4 years since I had left my undergraduate studies at that point. And I just told my friend something along the lines of: "No. You're not doing that in my house." My friend was confused and commented that I had never spoken up against it before. I explained I had always hated it and it had always made me uncomfortable. And then … it was fine. We played the game, with no salutes or jokes about salutes, and we had fun. I had spoken up, but I had not, in fact, killed the joy. Everything was okay. Nothing was ruined. But something had changed.

To finish this thesis, I want to look forward, to think about change outside the confides of ruination and anxiety. A lot of this work has been about reaching backward. Reaching backward into gaming histories, through oral histories, The National Videogame Museum's archive, and the museum itself; reaching backward into personal videogame experiences and subjectivities, through intimate interviews and my own personal self-reflections. In this conclusion, I want to feel forward – tentatively, carefully, confidently – towards a gaming future that can exist and thrive within cycles of resurgence and resistance without being consumed by them. As Heather Love has argued, it is vital for us to work out ways to contend with painful pasts without being destroyed. Part of the urgency of reaching backward is not only to unearth and acknowledge

[597] Please note: I love these friends very dearly, and I am glad that we can have difficult conversations.

historical harm but, as Love writes, to gesture "toward alternative trajectories for the future."[598]

The National Videogame Museum is a part of this gesture, this feeling forward. The museum as an institution is not just invested in preserving and remembering videogames and videogame culture, but in cultivating a more inclusive and accessible gaming future. I explored this when I discussed the museum as a counter-space, and the different ways it counters issues of toxicity, which can often be historically traced back in gaming culture. Of course, no counter-space can perfectly counter resurgent issues in videogame culture. But this is okay. To accept failure, to engage with it (the failing) without fatalism, to find power in the trying and trying again, is tangential to what I discussed in *Chapter 6: A Gamer Apocalypse*. To fail can still be productive and meaningful in its own way; as Participant 11 described in the previous chapter, it can "hurt the right way."[599] I want to do two things pertaining to the NVM in this thesis conclusion; acknowledge how the NVM currently counters issues of resurgence in game space and recommend ways in which it might engage – or counter them – more meaningfully. These recommendations are intended to critically engage with the trying and trying again of counter-space.

The NVM demonstrates that museums, cultural spaces of memory, can engage with issues adjacent to events like Gamergate without directly making contact.[600] In other words, without circulating Gamergate narratives (e.g. videogames are for boys and always have been), the museum still finds ways to erode the arguments said narratives rest upon. What the NVM is doing through its work – making game making accessible, celebrating diverse games, challenging the medium and purpose of videogames – implicitly erodes resurgent ideological discourses in gaming spaces. Whilst in other work I have produced, titled "Silence, Distance and Disclosure: The Bleed between the Far-Right and Gaming", I have argued for the importance of proximity when tackling Gamergate and the far-right in gaming, here I want to acknowledge the power in refusal.[601] To refuse to look, to refuse to give space, can sometimes mean to deny discourses their legitimacy. And to refuse to give them space can be to refuse to circulate them. However, refusal alone cannot begin to repair the harm; if movements like Gamergate needed legitimacy to work, to circulate, they would not have happened in the first place.

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[598] Love, *Feeling Backward*, 29.

[599] Participant 11, 10.

[600] There was a small part of an exhibit which did explain Gamergate, consisting of a few sentences, which sat in the cabinet I went on to reimagine as part of my placement (as I explain in the next paragraph). However, the description is short and in general the museum does not explicitly go out of its way to talk about issues like, for example, harassment in gaming, perhaps partly because talking about these issues in depth is challenging when catering to a family friendly audience.

[601] Kaufman, 'Silence, Distance and Disclosure. The Bleed between the Far-Right and Gaming'.

I should note that my research and the NVM have already interacted, as part of my collaborative doctorate award. My research has informed some of the NVM's exhibits, and the NVM has become a part of my thesis work. During my placement with The National Videogame Museum as a Visiting Researcher, I produced an exhibit titled "Videogames for Everyone. Forever.", a phrase consistently used in signage (*Chapter 5: Gamer Counter-spaces*), that represents the museum's mission statement as an institution. This exhibit consisted of five cabinets; each one representing a decade spanning the 1970s to the 2010s. Rather than focusing on hardware and/or objects alone, the exhibit prioritised telling stories about videogame culture, emphasising the importance of individuals – the makers, and the players. For example, in the 2010s cabinet, I expanded on the small amount of information that had been about #Gamergate in the cabinet's old iteration, explaining what happened in more depth and bringing in the personal story of Zoë Quinn and *Depression Quest* (2013). The new display is an example of productive engagement with challenges gaming is facing, challenges I laid out at the very beginning of this thesis when I summarised what I mean by *Resurgence*, such as the masculine codification of games or the naturalisation of harmful practises in the industry like overtime, or "crunch." For example, the cabinet explores the 1980s gaming market crash and the consequent market swing to a male assumed gamer, the Girl Games movement of the 1990s, the 2000s emergence of online gaming and the more formalised split of hardcore versus casualised games, which are readily gendered. It makes references to Game Jams and other modalities of democratising game development (like accessible controllers), to gaming unions, and the rise of microtransactions. The cabinet resists the foundational norm implicitly in the ideas it tells visitors, in that it counters resurgent narratives (e.g. that videogames have always naturally been for men and boys), without out right stating them. In other words, the cabinet erodes the narratives resurgent gaming issues function through, without circulating those narratives. It (the cabinet) does not tell the story of gamers who think themselves a "vocal minority" under attack.

The cabinet celebrates gaming histories, but also encouraged visitors to think critically about them. For example, a label read:

> Marketing can tell us about who games companies made games for – or at least imagined they made games for. Whilst not overemphasising the industry's role, it's important we acknowledge the influence advertising had (and has) in gaming culture, and who it might, or might not, have appealed to.

The cabinet attempts to provide tools visitors can take away with them; tools for critical thinking and engagement. And this display, importantly, did not just draw from my own research but was heavily inspired by what the NVM already strives to represent: the belief that videogames are for everyone, forever.

The label I shared above sits next to a magazine advert in the cabinet. The advert is for a war-based videogame and depicts women in bikinis prancing around a pink tank (in the game, the tanks are not pink). This visual storytelling, a reductive, misogynistic advert next to a label about representation, is demonstrative of the ways the cabinet intends to encourage critical thinking. However, this was not the magazine I originally planned to incorporate into the cabinet. The original magazine was the *Nintendo Power* issue I looked at in *Chapter 3: Historicising Gamer.* The *Nintendo Power* magazine had been out on the museum floor when I was working as gallery crew years ago, and because back then you could walk behind the cabinet, you could see the misogynist advert I write about in *Chapter 3*, which depicts a nerdy man and a busty woman pressed up against him, in a cinema. However, in the new exhibition cabinet "Videogames are for Everyone. Forever." the back of the magazine was deemed too inappropriate for display, partly because the NVM is a family friendly venue. A less lurid example of this kind of phenomena, in which women are sexualised to sell videogames and/or associated products in an Official PlayStation Magazine, took its place to make the same point about advertising. The change of magazine in the cabinet was the right one, making the display more appropriate for visitors (the new advert now in there also ties more explicitly into gaming culture, as an advert for an actual videogame) but the negotiation of subjectivities; the display, the visitor, the magazine that was on display for years … demonstrates the trying, failing, and trying again negotiation that is key to counter-space. The cabinet display is better, more accessible, for the change but it no longer reaches back and acknowledges an aspect of the gallery space that existed for years prior; this reaching back would be an uncomfortable, difficult endeavour. I recommend that the museum might attempt such endeavours in its future – engaging with its own past reflexively, as well gaming histories.

Individuals are just as important as institutions when thinking about the construction and recovery of gaming histories. People in gaming spaces, the people I spoke to for this piece of research, make up and maintain gaming spaces as they simultaneously exist within them. The conversations I had with people not only generated more gaming spaces – each interview is arguably its own gaming space – but created a moment of reflection and generative discussion, not just for participants but for myself; as the things participants talked about could not help but have implications for how I look back on my own gaming experiences, and therefore the analysis I have done here. Most importantly, we heard one another; I heard them and listened; we sat and lingered together. And we laughed, a lot. In every interview at some point, there was laughter. Whilst the focus of my thesis has been on discourses in gaming spaces; what we talk about, what we do not talk about, how we talk around things as well as about them, the laughter feels important too; how we embodied the interviews and expressed this embodiment in turn. One

participant made me laugh so hard I could not get out questions. All of this is data. It is not just the words spoken, or not spoken, but how the interviews made us – me, participants – feel. To echo Gidding's and Kennedy's sentiment when writing on the interplay(s) of human and non-human agency in gameplay, specifically looking at *Lego Star Wars*, the "ripples of pleasure [that] run through" gameplay are evidenced by the player's laughter.[602] They write: "persistent laugher is the audio track to the game event."[603] Here, it was the audio track to the gaming interview. To laugh, to find joy or amusement, is so important. Just as important as the hurt, disgust or weariness that emerged when participants discussed gamer in a negative light, Gamergate and the far-right in gaming. In the listening there was acknowledgment too, acknowledgement of Gamergate, gamer as a contentious word, and the challenges facing gaming. This allowed us to sit in the bad, the negative, but then to move through it. These topics, whilst important, never overtook and consumed the whole interview. There was always still positive, meaningful discussion before and after; there was always laughter.

The meaningfulness of gaming was, no doubt, emphasised by the fact that most interviews took place in 2021, the second year of COVID-19 and the global pandemic. Videogames had become part of peoples' community in ways they had not before, with participants describing online games as their main modality for hanging out with friends and chatting with others. Whilst this research was not explicitly about COVID-19, the interview data was influenced by COVID-19, as the data was gathered during a time when the pandemic was significantly still affecting the UK. And much of the work of this thesis was completed during the global pandemic. Whilst a lot of what people talked about was pre-pandemic, as interviews covered peoples' gaming lives which almost always stretched back to their childhoods, the pandemic influenced the data by clearly shifting what participants thought was important to talk about (versus talking about COVID-19 itself). It was almost ironic to have been writing about the mythos of a boy in the basement, who has bunkered down away from an imagined end-of-the-world, whilst the world as we knew it was literally ending, permanently changed in some way.

This piece of work was finished in 2024, the ten-year anniversary of Gamergate. Whilst Gamergate might feel like a distant gaming past, the foundations it was built upon – the white, masculinisation of gaming, geeky masculinities in crisis, the industry's prioritisation of profit and risk-adverse approach, wider anxieties about geopolitical change – are all still here. The basement the boy sits within is still here, or rather what the basement embodies, is. Akin to how this

[602] Seth Giddings and Helen W. Kennedy, 'Little Jesuses and Fuck-off Robots: On Aesthetics, Cybernetics, and Not Being Very Good at Lego Star Wars', in *The Pleasures of Computer Gaming: Essays on Cultural History, Theory and Aesthetics*, by Melanie Swalwell and Jason Wilson (McFarland & Co, 2008), 13–32.
[603] Giddings and Kennedy.

research was not explicitly about COVID-19 and yet unavoidably partly was, this thesis has been about Gamergate and capturing a post-Gamergate experience of gaming. Whilst I did not go out of my way to bring up Gamergate in my interviews, its influence haunted the interview data. Talked about or not, issues like the identity of gamers, the toxic or vocal minority, what does or does not count as a proper videogame or good videogame play, emerged in interviews. Gamergate lingered; in the words said, and unsaid.

This work has been about unpacking cycles of resurgence and resistance in gaming culture, and gaming spaces. In other words: it has been about cycles of, and reaction to, change. Often this change is minimal or imagined. When the boy in the basement imagines that games are no longer for him because there are more female protagonists (male protagonists are still firmly in the majority), he fantasises a loss that is, frankly, ridiculous.[604] But it *feels* real. I have focused a lot on affect here, not only because gamer can be understood in all its various machinations through an affective frame, but because so much of what participants talked about was affective; how videogames make them feel. Our feelings, the affects gaming affords, can do so much work; to orient us away from or towards certain spaces, people, or games; to justify or activate certain beliefs or world views. An important operation of affect is that it does not have to make sense to work, or to maintain itself. The boy in the basement's beliefs about gaming, about the world, can be continually challenged with evidence but this would not undo them alone. If it would, he would already have been undone. The far-right and its adjacent belief systems cannot be rationalised out of existence; their very irrationality allowing them to persist. And this is what allows such cycles of resurgence and resistance to exist in perpetuity; the discourses which they cycle through are rooted in affect and can therefore withstand such paradoxical living conditions. They are quite literally *foundational*. Within these circumstances, completely escaping cycles of toxic resurgence in game culture can feel impossible, and it might well be. Learning how to live with failure, live through and laugh with, is a vital survival mechanism. Part of reaching forward into a gaming future, one in which we might deal with our post-Gamergate anxieties a little more explicitly, is understanding the limit of our reach; what we can and cannot touch.

I cannot reach out and grasp the boy in the basement. Partly because he is not real, he is imagined, and mythologised; an amalgamation of our anxieties about gaming. But there are some things that I can touch and can change. When I said, "No. You're not doing that in my house." I made contact with "that" even if I did not name it. My journey as a game scholar throughout the thesis has given me confidence to make contact, to understand that when I do make

[604] Britney Lin, "Diversity in Gaming Report: An Analysis of Diversity in Video Game Characters," *Diamond Lobby*, last updated 22nd February, 2023. https://diamondlobby.com/geeky-stuff/diversity-in-gaming/.

contact or even name "it" that it is not all consuming. It has allowed me to make contact, to name "it" even when participants could not or chose not to. And by "it" I mean resurgence; issues of toxicity and harm in gaming which can sometimes fold into wider geopolitical movements of white supremacy and far-right belief systems. Beyond this research, I wrote about my discomfort with antisemitism in game research when I discussed the boardgame *Train* (2008) and how the casual ways game scholars discussed it, and its themes, disturbed me as a Jewish game researcher.[605] The reading notes I wrote about in the article were some of the first notes I ever made for my thesis research, in the early months of my PhD when I was exploring core gaming texts. *Train* and the scholarly discussion surrounding it had disturbed me in that I felt out of place, alienated from game research in a way I struggled to verbalise, to even write down, but eventually I got there – I made contact. And just like the game of *Secret Hitler* at Halloween nothing was ruined, but something had changed.

So here I am, feeling forward into a gaming future that is rather unknown and precarious. And it is not only gaming's future. As I am writing this, the planet is heating up to increasingly unsafe levels, late-stage capitalism is wearing all of us down, the United Kingdom is currently (at time of writing) grappling with a cost-of-living crisis, and we are still living with and recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, which may well remain a permanent fixture in our lives. Gaming, as well as being a possible respite from all this uncertainty, is tangled up within it. The games industry is making moves to unionise like never before, but in the face of this and wider issues of precarity, game developers and other people who make games are experiencing waves of layoffs and even more employment uncertainty, as game development companies make moves to prioritise profit and excessively monetise play.[606] I cannot know exactly what direction videogames and gaming culture are heading in because I cannot know where *everything else* is heading. I do know that there is a growing problem of far-right recruitment of young boys online, exacerbated by notorious figure heads like Andrew Tate, a man who made his online fortune selling repackaged misogyny and patriarchy; a man who has since been charged for crimes including sex trafficking. Research has shown that Tate being deplatformed from mainstream media has actually only strengthened his fanbase, who are

[605] Imo Kaufman, 'To the (Fictional) Concentration Camp: Wrestling with Jewish Pain and Emptiness in Brenda Romero's Train', *Game Studies* 23, no. 1 (March 2023), https://gamestudies.org/2301/articles/kaufman.

[606] Eddie Velasquez, "Workers in the game industry turn to unions for protection from rampant layoffs," *Prism*, 19th March, 2024. https://prismreports.org/2024/03/19/video-game-workers-unionize-protection-layoffs/. Andrew Kersley, "Video game developers union membership in UK soars after thousands laid off," *The Guardian*, 20th January, 2024. https://theguardian.com/politics/2024/jan/20/video-game-developers-union-membership-in-uk-soars-after-thousands-laid-off. Clive Thomspon, "Capitalism Is Ruining Video Games," *Mother Jones*, May + June 2023. https://www.motherjones.com/media/2023/04/asphalt-video-games-microtransactions-loot-boxes-in-game-purchases-capitalism/.

especially likely to be young men.[607] Whilst this issue may seem worlds away from videogame culture it is not; the subversive, underdog masculinities Tate and men like him appeal to comfortably align themselves with geeky masculine experiences where men feel, and are, subordinated within patriarchal, hegemonic structures.[608] And the issues surrounding geek masculinity are interwoven into a wider problem: the geopolitical rise of the far-right, which we must resist if we are to meaningfully survive it.[609] So many white and male mass shooters, especially in the US (and even in the UK), can be connected back to gaming spaces online, or adjacent online communities; like the manosphere or incel communities.[610] As game studies historian Carly A Kocurek writes: "if video gaming culture is making a safe place for white supremacy to flourish, then we must dismantle that, too."[611] She stresses the problem is larger than videogames themselves, and in fact the deployment of videogames in discourses around white nationalist attacks often obscures the real root of the problem – how embedded white supremacist discourses are within society – but because videogames have become so tangled up in the problem, they must be part of the solution.[612] Videogames house histories of exclusion, set the stages in which women and minorities can be objectified and worse, and normalise cultures of harassment and abuse, but one thing that emerged in the interview data over and over, whether participants liked or used the word gamer, whatever kind of games they played, is that videogames mattered to the people I spoke to. Whilst videogames have become tangled up with the problem, I would concur that they are not just part of the solution; but that they must be.

To meaningfully reach forward requires touch, it requires contact. I suggest that institutions like The National Videogame Museum, which preserve and shape gaming histories and futures, could sometimes make more explicit contact with the parts of gaming culture we find untenable; something I strove to do with the cabinet's redesign in my placement. Whilst there is power in refusal, there is power in proximity; perhaps a more productive kind of power. As a gaming institution which so readily celebrates videogames and their culture, there is very little danger of the museum being consumed by it; consumed by issues of resurgence in gaming culture and space. For example, acknowledging a

[607] Frans Sayogie et al., 'Patriarchal Ideology, Andrew Tate, and Rumble's Podcasts', *Journal of Language Teaching, Linguistics, and Literature* 29, no. 2 (2023): 1–12.
[608] Massanari, '#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures', 332; Taylor and Voorhees, *Masculinities in Play*, 16; Connell, *Masculinities*, 37.
[609] Kutner, 'Swiping Right: The Allure of Hyper Masculinity and Cryptofascism for Men Who Join the Proud Boys'; Salter, 'From Geek Masculinity to Gamergate: The Technological Rationality of Online Abuse'.
[610] Kocurek, 'The Man with the Gun Is a Boy Who Plays Games: Video Games, White Innocence, and Mass Shootings in the U.S.'
[611] Kocurek, 3.
[612] Kocurek.

problem like crunch in the industry – maybe through an exhibit piece, a blog post, or even in written interpretation – in a way that raises awareness of the issue (perhaps it flags popular games that utilised crunch) and lays out its problems (toxic work culture, health risks, worker exploitation etc.). This would aim to educate visitors in several ways. Firstly, it would potentially make them more conscientious consumers within gaming (like Participant 11, who is hesitant to support Ubisoft). Secondly, it would warn anyone who is interested in working in the industry to look out for this kind of practice. Whilst contending with such live issues would be challenging for the NVM, it could also be productive. Importantly, addressing these kinds of ideas requires proximity – to say the quiet part out loud (the videogame industry has a problem with crunch, and this is bad). These challenges exist whether the NVM contends with them or not. Crunch is the background work of some, especially AAA, videogame production. When I write that there is power in proximity, more specifically I often mean *acknowledging* proximity, as the issue – in this example, crunch – is already proximate. The decision, for institutions like the NVM, is whether they can, or want, to acknowledge it. And if they do, how they do. But it is not only institutions who have make these decisions.

When thinking about making contact with resurgent issues in game space, the risk for individuals is higher. We have our own survival mechanisms, coping strategies and sometimes they work but sometimes they do not. We cannot always make contact, speak out, without risk. When my old manager and colleagues did a sieg heil salute and I said nothing, I survived but I did not resist. To not feel backward into this kind of pain, the pain my interview subjects also articulated – men yelling about women ruining games in classrooms, issues of in-game and online harassment, the overlap between the vocal minority in gaming and the far-right online – would not allow us to meaningfully move past it. As Love writes in *Feeling Backward:* "the desire to forget may itself be a symptom of haunting."[613] The fact that so many interviewees went out of their way to be overtly positive about games, or to dismiss issues of harassment or problems surrounding industry malpractice, is just as significant as the interviewees who felt the need to bring up Gamergate, and how gamer identity can be connected to problematic world views. We are all haunted by the legacy of gaming histories and of Gamergate, and the issues it brought to light which we can trace back to the foundation of gaming and its industry. We may desire to forget them, ignore them, dismiss them but, as Love argues, this is just a further extension of their legacy.

In my interview with Participant 13 we talked around gamer identity a lot, how being a gamer was policed through game choice, time spent and expertise and yet was someone who just liked games. The paradoxical, eroding meaning of gamer emerged here clearly; gamer was both someone who liked games and

[613] Love, *Feeling Backward*, 1.

yet could come with all these other expectations, that have further implications for who can or cannot be a gamer. Participant 13 went as far to say that she was "ambivalent" about being a gamer and that some people might consider her a "fraud" if she claimed to be one.[614] At the end of the interview, I brought this up again, probably overstepping my bounds as an interviewer into something else, and we had the following exchange:

> I: I think that you are very good at games cause you clearly know what you enjoy in games and you can […] clearly identify what you don't enjoy about games and also I would say that Breath of the Wild and Hades are both very difficult games in very different ways […] you do play complicated games even in a narrative sense like I think emotional [difficulty] is something that a lot of players do struggle with […] why do you feel like you don't have skill at games when you you also work with games you've literally made games you […] evidently from my point of view you do
>
> P: Er that's nice to hear [laughs]
>
> I: [laughs]
>
> P: It's great to hear erm I do feel I don't know I do feel more capable of claiming maybe a space in around gaming and games than I was erm maybe three or four years ago erm I think it really was dependent on the fact that I was able to find what I like […] but yeah I dunno I feel like yeah I do feel a bit more capable of saying like oh yeah I do like games and I play games and that's fine but I sometimes I do still have people being like oh have you played this and I'm like oh actually no I haven't played it and then they're like oh then you're not a gamer well [laughs] I'm sorry [615]

A healthy living gaming history is a history that can reach backwards as it feels forward; a history that can contend with hurt, with injury, without being overwhelmed; a history that can engage with the histories we have *lived*, whilst it keeps living. I do not think Participant 13 is actually "sorry" about not being a gamer. She laughs as she tells us this; laughs in the face of gamer identity being

[614] Participant 13, 4.
[615] Participant 13, 11.

so perpetually yet ineffectually policed. She tells us “I feel more capable of claiming […] a space.” And she goes on to say: “I like games and I play games.” And whilst there is the policing, the *resurgence*, when she still gets people questioning her about certain games, she just laughs in response; and we laugh together in the interview. We resist. We acknowledge it, sit with it, then we laugh and move on through.

It is fitting to end this thesis with a participant’s voice, as a piece of research led by, and concerned with, oral history. The nature of this thesis, it being a piece of work grounded in deeply personal and meaningful data, means it has been deeply personal and meaningful to research and write too.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Question Protocol

Opening statement

Thank you for joining me today to talk about videogames. Before we get started, I would just like to remind you that you can stop the interview anytime by saying 'stop' or using the [reference to the stop gesture established in the pre-interview]. After today's interview, in about a week's time, I will email you about a postscript you can submit, which is a small piece of writing about any after-thoughts following today's discussion or anything else you would like to add or correct. This postscript is completely optional. And you will also have an opportunity to request the transcript before you produce it. Do you have any questions before we begin? [Start recording after any questions are answered].

General rules of practise

- Avoid asking questions with bias. Do not be afraid of open questions.
- Do not ask the participant about personal details, e.g. specific usernames or work addresses.
- Ask short, concise and confident questions.
- Give the participant time to process and answer questions.
- Assure the participant if they are ever unsure and help keep them at ease.
- Stop the interview straight away if the participant requests it or there are any concerns from the researcher, regarding participant or researcher welfare and comfort.
- Keep the participant the focus of the interview; it is about their views and perspectives.

Starting question:

- Would you like to start by telling me a bit about yourself and how you got into games?

Follow up question if initial answer short or question not answered:

- What kind of games do you like to play?
- What kind of genres of games do you play?
- When did you start playing videogames, do you remember?
- What do you like, or not like, about playing videogames?

<u>More specific topical questions:</u>

Play

- What types of gameplay style do you enjoy, what do you enjoy about them?

Can you think of one videogame that stands out to you? Maybe because of the characters in it, or because of a moment in the game that meant something to you?

- Why do you think it meant something to you?
- How did it make you feel? How would you describe this feeling?
- Do you remember where you were when you played this game, or how old? What else do you remember about it? How would you describe your surroundings?

- Why do you play videogames? Are there different reasons at different times?
- Why do you think other people play videogames?
- Do you think there is a 'wrong' or a 'right' way to play videogames? If so, how would you explain this?
- What do you think people enjoy about playing videogames? Do you think there are reasons for playing them outside of enjoyment?

Genre

- How would you describe this genre of game? What is unique about it?
- What do you enjoy about that specific genre of games?

Is there any mechanics that stick out to you?

- What do you enjoy, or not enjoy, about this mechanic?
- What do you think this mechanic represents in game?
- Why do you think developers choose to use this mechanic?

- How has your taste in different genres changed over time?
- What do you think your taste in genre says about you as a person?

Characters

- What sort of characters appeal to you in videogames?

Do you ever relate to characters in videogames?

- How do you relate to characters in games?

        - How important to you that they share aspects of your own identity?
        - How important is it that they look like you?
        - How important is it to you if they make the same decisions that you would?

- What's the relationship between the types of characters people like and what they are like themselves?
- What particular character stands out to you in a videogame and why?

Choices

- What kind of choices do you make when you play videogames?
- What do the choices you make in videogames say about you as a person?
- Do you like when videogames give you more, or less, choices? Why do you think this is?
- Do you think there is 'right' or 'wrong' choices you can make in games?
- How would you feel if you made a choice you feel is right, but the videogame's story seems to suggest it is immoral or wrong in some way?

Identity

- How would you describe your identity?
- What relationship do you think videogames have with your identity?

How would you describe a 'gamer'?

        - How accurate do you think it would be if you described yourself as a gamer?
        - How would you describe a 'gamer'?
        - What do you think other people imagine when they hear the word 'gamer'?
        - How do you think people perceive gamers in wider society?

- How do you think your identity changes the way you interact with videogames?
- How important is it to you that your identity is represented in videogames?

Values

- What kind of values are important to you as a person?

Explanation of values if asked: parts of life a lot to you or you think are important, such as kindness, equality or working hard. Values usually say something about the way someone sees the world.

Do you think that values are represented in videogames? Can you think of an example that stands out to you?

- If yes, how do you they think they are represented?
- How can a videogame's mechanics can represent values?
- How can a videogame reflect the values of the people who made it?
- How would you feel if you played a game which had values which you felt did not align with your own?

- What do the types of videogames someone likes say about them as a person?
- How do videogames reproduce certain values?
- Would you like videogames to show values in different ways?

Online gaming

- What online games do you play?
- How would you describe the difference between offline and online games when you're playing them?
- What types of people do you imagine when you imagine people playing online games?
- What do you like about online games? What do you not like?

Do you ever interact with other people who play games when you play online games?

- What are those interactions like?
- How do these interactions make you feel when you play videogames?

Online communities

- Are you apart of any online communities to do with or around videogame topics?
- What do those communities mean to you?
- Are there any parts of the community that you don't like? If yes, how does it make you feel?
- How welcome do you feel in online gaming communities?
- What political ideas do you see in videogame communities?

- Do you remember what Gamergate was? Do you think you could try to describe it? (Only brought up if participant mentioned Gamergate first).

Childhood

- What games do you remember playing when you were young? Do you remember the first videogame you ever played?
- Do you remember the first console you played a videogame on? What was it like?
- How do you think the games you played when you were young shaped how you interact or feel about games today?
- How nostalgic do you feel about certain videogame franchises or characters?

The games industry

- What's your current perception of the videogame industry?
- What is your understanding of the practise in crunch in the videogame industry?
- How well do you think the videogame industry caters to its audience?

End of interview

- Ask the participant if there is anything else they wish I had asked, or if there is anything they'd like to add.