WORLDBUILDING IN FEMINIST GAME STUDIES: TOWARD A METHODOLOGY OF DISRUPTION

by

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For Keena

for whom I want to build feminist worlds

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ABSTRACT

Author: Batti, Bianca, L. PhD
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This project engages in an intersectional and interdisciplinary tracing of the emerging field of feminist game studies and the epistemologies and methodologies that exist within this field. Through such tracing, this project asks—what are feminist game studies' epistemological goals and frameworks? What methodologies can the field draw from in order to achieve these epistemological goals? Ultimately, this project argues that feminist game studies enacts an epistemology of feminist worldbuilding—that is, an inclusive, embodied, space-claiming mode of producing knowledge—and achieves this worldbuilding through methodologies of intersectional disruption in order to perform disruptive feminist interventions into video game culture.

In the first chapter of this project, I make use of a methodology of narrative autoethnography to discuss my experience with online harassment as an inroad into interrogating the bodies at risk in gaming spaces in order to make a case for the need for feminist interventions to disrupt the violent structures within video game culture. The second chapter traces the ways hegemonic, patriarchal frameworks in game studies epistemologically deprivilege material, representational analyses of bodies and culture in the study of games and, instead, argues for the implementation of intersectional approaches to video game culture. The third chapter maps the intersectional feminist methodologies that can be implemented in feminist game studies in order to perform generative and disruptive interventions into video game culture and build feminist worlds.

In the fourth chapter, I apply some of these methodologies of disruption to the alienation of mothers in the gaming industry's workplace culture and representations of mothers in the games *Among the Sleep* and *Horizon Zero Dawn* in order to intervene into video game culture's prejudicial attitudes regarding labor, mothers, and women. The final chapter continues my autoethnographic work through the connection of my experiences with online harassment to previous experiences with gendered violence and trauma in order to underscore the stakes of

feminist game studies praxis. In all these ways, I argue that feminist game studies builds worlds by performing interventions into video game culture through intersectional and pluralistic methodologies of disruption, for such methodologies imagine new, inclusive models of existence and futurity in video game culture.

CHAPTER 1.   BODIES AT RISK: THE VIOLENCE OF THE PERIPHERY IN VIDEO GAME CULTURE AND GAME STUDIES

1.1   Becoming Biana: Encounters with Online Hate in Video Game Culture

I began writing for the feminist game studies site *Not Your Mama's Gamer* (*NYMG*) in April 2015, and during my time there I blogged about a host of topics—from feminist analyses of representations of motherhood in video games to ruminations on the ways video games tell stories. In October 2015, Supermassive Games released a video game called *Until Dawn*, a horror game that makes use of branching narratives and choice-based mechanics to construct its game space. I was struck by *Until Dawn*'s narrative structure and game mechanics, as well as by this structure's perpetuation of the kinds of problematic gendered and racial stereotypes that the horror genre often reifies, albeit, in the case of *Until Dawn*, in the multimodal form of a video game. I decided to blog about the game for *NYMG*, writing a blog post on September 7, 2015 entitled "*Until Dawn*: On Representation, the Horror Genre, and the Illusion of Choice." On September 18, this post was included in a list of recommended articles on the popular video game site, *Kotaku*.

It seems that my mention in this list resulted in my being included in another article on *Kotaku*—one in which Patrick Klepek writes about The Game Awards and the fact that the awards' advisory board and invited judges are comprised primarily of men. In his critique of the award committee's gendered misrepresentation of video game audiences, Klepek mentions several women who analyze games that warrant inclusion in such a committee, and he includes me in this list:

> There are numerous insightful women critiquing games now. Off the top of my head: *The Mary Sue*'s Maddy Myers; *Offworld*'s Leigh Alexander and Laura Hudson; *Feminist Frequency*'s Anita Sarkeesian; *GameSpot*'s Alexa Ray Corriea; *Not Your Mamma*'s [sic] *Gamer*'s Bianca Batti; the list goes on and on. Having more women help crown the game of the year would seem, to me at least, a worthwhile goal.

I was notified of my being mentioned in Klepek's article via the *NYMG* group Facebook chat, where my colleagues celebrated my inclusion (and made jokes about the fact that my name was misspelled in the article when it was first published, though it was later corrected). At first, I was

surprised and thrilled, not having expected my writing to receive such exposure or praise. I say "at first" here because, unfortunately, with this exposure came a torrent of attention—some of it good, much of it bad, and none of which I was prepared for.

As soon as *Kotaku* linked to my *Until Dawn* article, my article on *NYMG* began to receive hundreds of views and more comments than any of my previous pasts had garnered. Many of these comments challenged the validity of my arguments regarding gender, cultural appropriation, and game mechanics, but none of these comments, at least, were openly hostile. Instead, the more hostile reactions to my work occurred after Klepek mentioned me in his article on The Game Awards. These troubling conversations occurred on Reddit, in a particular subreddit called Kotaku in Action (KiA), which is known for its campaigns of harassment and threatening tactics aimed at women in video games. The tone of the *NYMG* group chat changed in the space of mere minutes from celebratory to concerned as soon as KiA began discussing me.

In our group chat, one of my colleagues shared the link to the KiA page about my post. When I clicked on the link, I read through the chain of anonymous commenters speculating about me. Many of these commenters wondered who I was and how a relatively unknown writer like me could warrant inclusion in an article on *Kotaku*. They began to search for me, googling me and mining through my previous blog posts to see if they could discover any personal information. Part of their confusion, it seems, stemmed from the fact that my name was misspelled as "Biana Batti" in the *Kotaku* article, but this confusion only catalyzed their efforts to dig deeper. I scrolled through the KiA chain, watching these anonymous commenters talk about how they attempted to view my social media pages but could not because they were all (thankfully) set to private. I also watched as they dug deeper, finding a brief mention in a blog post from weeks prior of a Victorian literature class I was taking that semester. This "research" caused the commenters to collectively conclude that, because I attended Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, and because Patrick Klepek lived in Chicago, a city approximately one hundred twenty-two miles north of Purdue, I must have a personal relationship with him, one most likely sexual in nature.

On the advice of and in consultation with the *NYMG* editors, I spent the next several hours taking precautionary and preventative measures to secure my personal information and digital presence, in case these anonymous commenters decided to escalate their efforts from that of speculative "research" to that of hacking and harassment. I made sure that all my social media

accounts—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram—were set to private, and I contacted my family members to urge them to set their accounts to private as well; since our last name (Batti) is fairly unique, potential harassers may have been able to deduce their relationship to me and target my family as well. I changed the passwords of all my online accounts, including my email accounts—my Amazon account, and the accounts through which I pay my bills and do my banking—in order to make it harder for my accounts to get hacked. I filled out application after application, requesting sites like Spokeo and Pipl remove my physical address and requesting the Purdue registrar remove my contact information from the directory, in an effort to prevent harassers from physically threatening me (and my family) or from emailing me harassing or violent messages; such goals are, admittedly, almost impossible to achieve, since so many sites like Spokeo exist that it is difficult to fully expunge one's address from the Internet, and since, even after submitting my formal requests, my email address and office number are still present on Purdue websites.

This experience, on the spectrum of women's experiences with harassment, hostility, and violence in digital spaces, is much less severe than what many women face online. This is not to say that my experience did not instill fear in me—for it did. Indeed, I spent the rest of my time in that Victorian literature course constantly looking up at the classroom door, watching as people passed by as they walked down the hall, holding my breath, wondering if they were one of the anonymous Reddit commenters who had looked into the classes I was taking at Purdue, wondering if they were looking into taking more extreme measures against me. The desire to instill such fear is the ultimate goal of the campaigns of harassment that women face in online spaces because the hope is that such instilled fear will silence women and pressure them into leaving online spaces.

1.2 Networks of Risk: Engaging with the Materiality of the Body in Digital Spaces

I mention my experience with online harassment, here, as an inroad into an examination of the network of bodies at risk online and the network of women's experiences as primary targets of campaigns of online harassment. As Maeve Duggan explains, online harassment is a common experience for those existing in online spaces today:

> Around four-in-ten Americans (41%) have been personally subjected to at least one type of online harassment—which this report defines as offensive name-

calling online (27% of Americans say this has happened to them), intentional efforts to embarrass someone (22%), physical threats (10%), stalking (7%), harassment over a sustained period of time (7%) or sexual harassment (6%). This 41% total includes 18% of U.S. adults who say they have experienced particularly severe forms of harassment (which includes stalking, physical threats, sexual harassment or harassment over a sustained period of time). (4)

Duggan further explains that race, gender, and political beliefs factor into a person's being targeted for online harassment, for "[s]ome 14% of U.S. adults say they have ever been harassed online specifically because of their political views, while roughly one-in-ten have been targeted due to their physical appearance (9%), race (8%) or gender (8%)" (5), all of which demonstrates the fact that "[c]ertain groups are more likely than others to experience this sort of trait-based harassment. For instance, one-in-four blacks say they have been targeted with harassment online because of their race or ethnicity, as have one-in-ten Hispanics…Similarly, women are about twice as likely as men to say they have been targeted as a result of their gender" (5). These statistics are especially important to note because, for marginalized folks, "online harassment can even threaten their personal safety. Among those who have experienced harassment online, 12% say they felt a threat of physical danger for themselves or people close to them during their most recent harassment incident" (28). Video game culture—as demonstrated, for example, by the incredulous and hostile reactions my feminist work on games has garnered online—is particularly hostile and harassing toward women (Consalvo 2012; Mantilla 2015; Quinn 2017; Shaw 2014) and thus requires thorough feminist interventions in order to establish methods for countering and resisting video game culture's patriarchal efforts to exclude, silence, and threaten women's existences in gaming communities and spaces.

As Kishonna Gray and David Leonard argue, the patriarchal harassment and hostility of video game culture is nothing new and has instead "come to define gaming culture" (13) in that "[c]hallenges to the lack of diversity or the gross stereotypes promoted by mainstream games are often met with demonization and rhetorical violence directed at those who merely seek to help gaming reach its fullest potential" (13). In other words, Gray and Leonard explain, "Rape culture, toxic masculinity, and homophobia are ubiquitous to gaming, not only reflecting these ideologies but also existing as teachers, pedagogies, and platforms for the dissemination of dehumanizing representations and ideologies of injustice and violence" (8). However, while such

toxic, patriarchal structures are ubiquitous to gaming, they are by no means *unique* to video game culture, and "the ways gaming is entangled with mainstream cultures of systematic exploitation and oppression is clear" (5). Video games and gaming culture are thus complex spaces in which players exist and must navigate, which shows that while "video games may be a distraction to some communities and a source of power and pleasure to others, they can at times also be a source of violence, oppression, pain, and trauma. Our identities shape these complex and messy relationships with games" (5). Players' identities, subjectivities, and cultural contexts all shape their engagement with video games and experiences with video game culture, and all these complexities are entangled and bound up in the body and the ways bodies are inscribed. As such, my discussion of bodies (particularly those at risk) in this project understands the materiality of the body as a signifier of identity and personhood so that I can productively engage with the material and ontological impact of video game culture for those who exist within it.

I draw from critical theorizing on the materiality of the body (i.e., Butler 1993; Hobson 2012; Roberts 1997; Salamon 2010; Scarry 1985), particularly Elizabeth Grosz's calls for "a feminist reconfiguration of the notion of the body" (13) when engaging in this work, as well as her argument for "some kind of understanding of *embodied subjectivity*, of *psychical corporality*" (22). I also draw from Grosz's calls for feminist reconfigurations that dismantle mind/body dualities because "[o]nly when the relation between mind and body is adequately retheorized can we understand the contributions of the body to the production of knowledge systems, regimes of representation, cultural production, and socioeconomic exchange" (19). In this project, I discuss the body not as "an inert, passive, noncultural and ahistorical" entity but rather as "the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual, and intellectual struggles" (19). This project's engagement with the body as a site of contestation is particularly concerned with the economic, political, sexual, and intellectual struggles that occur through patriarchy, all of which Grosz argues is tethered to women's bodies

> Patriarchal oppression…justifies itself, at least in part, by connecting women much more closely than men to the body and, through this identification, restricting women's social and economic roles to (pseudo) biological terms. Relying on essentialism, naturalism and biologism, misogynist thought confines women to the biological requirements of reproduction on the assumption that because of particular biological, physiological, and endocrinological

transformations, women are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men. (14)

By being somehow *more* corporeal, women's materiality demonstrates what Judith Butler calls "the effects of power" because the body is "power's most productive effect" (xii). Further, the corporeal implications of patriarchal oppression occur because "a gendered matrix is at work in the constitution of materiality" (7), and this matrix occurs particularly through "the problematic of receptivity" (26). The receptivity of and reactions to women's bodies in gaming spaces is a focus of this project, and I center women's experiences in video game culture by engaging with women's bodies as sites of contestation.

I also draw from Rob Cover's arguments for an epistemology in game studies that centers corporeality and the materiality of the body: "Useful, therefore, to a future perspective on gaming culture is to understand precisely how misogyny, racism, lack of care of the self and others, risky digital activities, and violence can be challenged through new approaches to ethical relationalities that oblige gamers to act toward themselves and others without the violence of misogyny, racism, lack of care, or risk" (31). In order to further this corporeal epistemology, Cover defines *the body* as being "constituted and produced within frameworks of social, cultural, and psychic representation, discourse and language…which, for us, includes mediated and digitally communicated discourses of embodiment and corporeal normativity" (32). Thus, the body is a site through which to consider the materiality of subjectivity and identity—particularly, Cover argues, when it comes to interventions into gaming culture: "Put in the context of subjectivity, it might then be argued that the practice of gaming is one specific site which simultaneously…provides the codes and conventions by which a body will be inscribed to make bodies both intelligible and recognisable and thus able to participate socially as culturally determinate bodies" (32). Because of the ways bodies are inscribed, culturally determined, enacted, and acted on in gaming spaces, Cover argues that "digital gaming is insistently *about* the body" (33). And if gaming is insistently about the body, then it follows that the act of play, too, is an insistently "*corporeal* activity, with all the implications for sociality and ethics that emerge in a consideration of bodies" (29).

Thus, by seeing "the body and digital gaming as a mutually constitutive assemblage" (30), we can begin to interrogate gaming as a site that "*teaches us about social justice not in its content but in its play as a corporeal and social activity*" (30). This corporeal epistemology,

however, is unfortunately not a common one in the examination of digital spaces as a result of deeply entrenched and erroneous assumptions based on Cartesian dualities, or mind/body divides—assumptions that extend to the boundaried divides that get drawn between online and offline spaces:

> Thinking about *bodies* in the context of digital games remains novel in the sense that our contemporary approaches to digital communication and entertainment across activities in both offline and online gaming (both single-person and multiplayer) remain grounded in a radical separation of the body and the mind. This mythical separation, beginning from a Cartesian framework and extending into 1990s, Web 1.0 conceptualizations of cyberspace, relies on and reproduces a reductive, normative discourse in which an over-simplified representation of digital communicative, interactive, and engagement activities is separated into "real" and "virtual"…This binary informs almost all scholarly writing on games and online play in the context of bodies. It extends not just to gaming but to gaming culture and online communication focused on gaming. (30)

T. L. Taylor argues that these "[p]oor models, architectures, and underlying structures that rely on easy stereotypes overlook the power of these spaces as embodied, with all the possibilities that entails" (*Play Between Worlds* 117). Instead, Taylor calls for the use of analytical frameworks that understand that "[b]odies are not simply neutral objects that have no bearing on our experience but act as central artifacts through which our identities and social connections are shaped. Bodies carry particular social meanings and are often profound sites of contestation" (117). Taylor further argues that, because bodies are sites of contestation, this also means that "[s]ome bodies are ascribed legitimacy and some are not. They not only become places in which we express our identities but, because they are socially constructed, they offer or deny particular formulations…They are not neutral, and indeed their power lies in the very fact that they cannot be" (119).

The non-neutral nature of the body means that bodies have an active role in the "process of creating culture" (154). Engaging with the body's active socio-cultural functionality is particularly important when considering video game culture because, as Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum put it, "digital games—like other technologies and like social practices, systems, and institutions—have values embedded in them" (8). Flanagan and Nissenbaum argue

that the values embedded in games speak to the ways games "serve as cultural snapshots" (3), "capture beliefs from a particular time and place" (3), and "offer ways to understand what a given group of people believes and values" (3). An understanding of the corporeal values embedded in games is vital because "[m]any elements of games reveal the underlying beliefs and values of their designers and players. Further, because games are engrossing and reach deep parts of the human psyche, they may not only reflect and express but also activate these beliefs and values" (3). In other words, a game studies epistemology that centers corporeality and the body as a site of contestation is needed because, as T. L. Taylor puts it, "we need a nuanced understanding of the relationship between structure and culture, between the formalizations the designers set up and emergent practices and patterns" (154). I make use of this corporeal epistemology in this project because I argue that it is only through such a nuanced understanding of the body that game studies scholars can productively interrogate video game culture and the sites of contestation, engagement, production, development, play, and interaction that exist within it.

1.3   Bodies at Risk: Gamergate and Online Harassment in the Gaming Industry

Because many interactions in video game culture occur in digital spaces, marginalized members of gaming communities are often targeted through online harassment, (i.e., Jane 2014; Jane 2016; Lenhart, et al. 2016; Nakamura 2015; Shaw 2014). Danielle Citron defines *cyberharassment* as a form of harassment that involves "the intentional infliction of substantial emotional distress accomplished by online speech that is persistent enough to amount to a 'course of conduct' rather than an isolated incident" (3). Citron also addresses the purpose of categorizing this form of harassment as *cyber* harassment specifically: "Why affix the *cyber* label to the abuse? Why not simplify matters and just call it harassment or stalking? Perpetrators engage in persistent destructive behavior, whether it occurs online, offline, or both. The *cyber* label adds something important, however. It captures the different ways the Internet exacerbates the injuries suffered" (4). In this way, Citron stresses that, while the Internet intensifies this violence, cyber harassment occurs in both digital *and* physical spaces; she argues for the need to interrogate this intensification that occurs in digital spaces because "hate has found a powerful outlet in the Internet, and understanding the Internet's key features helps us understand why" (71).

Yet, even though cyber (or online) harassment occurs in both digital and physical spaces, and even though that which occurs in digital spaces is just as threatening, violent, and dangerous as that which occurs in physical spaces, online harassment is often delegitimized because digital spaces are often minimized; this, Citron says, results in the discounting and dismissal of the experiences of those targeted by campaigns of online harassment in which victims are told "nothing can or should be done about online abuse…Often victims are blamed for the abuse…They are told that they could have avoided the abuse had they been more careful" or that "the benefits of online opportunities are available only to those who are willing to face the Internet's risks…The choice is theirs: they can toughen up or go offline" (19). Thus, those targeted by campaigns of online harassment are often not taken seriously by members of law enforcement and others, which enacts a form of double marginalization—they are both victims of online harassment and victims of incredulity and disbelief.

Karla Mantilla explains that such modes of online harassment are often referred to as *trolling*, which she says "consists of making online comments or engaging in behaviors that are purposely meant to be annoying or disruptive" (4). Trolling strategies can include "being obnoxiously illogical, feigning ignorance, bringing up extraneous or irrelevant topics, or otherwise derailing conversations. The behavior is committed with the express purpose of tweaking, upsetting, or enraging others. Online trolls relish the resulting fallout of their strategies, which includes the target becoming angry, perplexed, insulted, or frustrated" (4). Trolls also discuss their efforts at online harassment together in online forums like "4chan and Reddit where they develop and refine their strategies and techniques. Out of such forums, trolls have developed a variety of recognizable strategies that they use to provoke their targets" (4). Such strategies can include practical jokes, flaming (a form of verbal and emotional abuse), griefing (a form of harassment that often specifically occurs in online gaming spaces, where players will purposefully sabotage other players), and impersonation. However, many trolling strategies are often implemented in physical spaces in order to "instill a sense of threat by letting the targeted person know they know where she lives" (9). One particularly dangerous offline strategy is that of *swatting*, which "occurs when trolls call an emergency service such as the police or fire department and report a serious threat such as a bomb, a shooting, a fire, a kidnapping, or other emergency at the home of a person they are targeting. Such incidents have resulted in the deployment of bomb squads, SWAT units, or numbers of police or other

emergency personnel" (9). Swatting is particularly threatening and insidious because it "is a trolling activity that crosses a line into real-life danger because of the possibility that law enforcement might kill or injure someone due to having received false information about an emergency" (9). Thus, online harassment strategies, because of the ways these strategies implement verbal, emotional, and physical abuse, reveal that online harassment is an embodied mode of violence and threat.

That said, specific bodies are often targeted more than others, and those targeted by online harassment are often women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQI community. Mantilla uses the term *gendertrolling* to categorize the kind of online harassment that specifically targets women, and she argues, "While types of generic trolling range from annoying to upsetting to maliciously destructive, there is a very different pattern of harassing, abusive, and threatening behaviors that is specifically targeted to women, which has been increasingly occurring on the Internet" (10). Some of what makes the harassment aimed at women distinct is that the perpetrators of such gendered violence "more often hope to inspire abject fear in their targets and to win the battle they believe they are waging, which is to drive the target, along with her objectionable opinions (usually that women deserve social, political, and economic equality with men), out of public discourse online" (10). Because such violence is enacted for the purpose of silencing and erasing women in digital and online spaces, "gendertrolling is exponentially more vicious, virulent, aggressive, threatening, pervasive, and enduring than generic trolling" (11). However, women's experiences with online harassment are not universal or homogenous. Indeed, women of color often experience an even more intensified mode of online harassment, and different intersectional positionalities—different intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and ability—can often result in a range of experiences with online harassment. Thus, researchers must interrogate intersecting positionalities when considering the network of bodies at risk in digital spaces as well as the various kinds of risk they might face.

Because much of video game culture exists and occurs in digital and online spaces— whether the games themselves are played online or whether players interact with each other and discuss games in online forums—online harassment and violence is a particular concern for members of the gaming community. For example, Mantilla describes the emergence of one specific and prevalent iteration of online harassment in gaming culture known as Gamergate:

The hashtag #Gamergate was coined by actor Adam Baldwin in August 2014 and has been tagged in tweets more than two million times since. Although the controversy might easily have remained relegated to the world of online videogamers, video game developers, and game reviewers, perhaps because the videogaming industry is so lucrative, producing more revenue than Hollywood, the effects of Gamergate have extended far beyond videogamers. The controversy has generated reactions by large technology corporations and has even been covered in mainstream media. (83)

The events surrounding Gamergate began in relation to a woman named Zoe Quinn, who describes herself as "an independent game developer who makes weird little artsy video games about feelings and farts…In the game world, my work was obscure enough that people could score serious hipster points by referencing it. I was a relatively low-profile internet citizen, living and working online like plenty of other people" (1). The event that resulted in "the Gamergate controversy occurred on August 16, 2014, when Eron Gjoni, the ex-boyfriend of Zoe Quinn…posted online a detailed a highly personal account of their relationship and subsequent breakup" (Mantilla 83). In this account, Gjoni alleges that Quinn "had had affairs with several other men, among whom was Nathan Grayson, a game reviewer for the videogaming website *Kotaku*. Gjoni's online tell-all spawned a slew of attacks against Quinn from people who were animated by their initial dislike of her game and latched onto the breakup story to find personal fault with her" (84). In this way, Gjoni attempted to slut-shame Quinn in an effort to delegitimize her—efforts that parallel the ways I, too, was slut-shamed on Reddit. Such parallels demonstrate the ubiquity of the online harassment of women in video game culture, as well as the harassers' goals of delegitimizing women to silence them. The slut-shaming of Quinn and myself show that online harassment consistently invokes the body and inscribes women's bodies (through violating and sexualizing strategies of harassment) as delegitimizingly sexual. In Gamergate, as elsewhere, women's bodies are sites of contestation, always invoked, always already there, whether we like it or not.

As a result of the online response to Gjoni's efforts to publicly slut-shame Quinn, Quinn then became the target of "the massive online attacks that were the beginning of Gamergate" (84), and these attackers, known as Gamergaters, enacted a "concerted and widespread campaign to harass and threaten her, including inundating her page on the social networking/gaming

community site Steamcommunity.com with negative reviews, hacking into her Skype account, doxxing her by publishing her home address and telephone number online, and sending her a 'near-constant stream of death and rape threats'" (86). This campaign intensified to the extent that "Quinn felt sufficiently threatened that she contacted the police and then fled her home to rotate staying among several friends' houses so she would be harder to locate" (86). As Quinn herself explains in her recent memoir, she continues to feel physically threatened as a result of Gamergate's campaign of online abuse: "I'm still plagued by constant threats and living in relative hiding. The abuse spread outward from me, devouring everyone I've ever been close to, and sometimes total strangers, for 'crimes' as minor as being seen with me at an industry convention or simply sharing my name" (19). Ultimately, Gamergaters claim that these attacks were simply an effort to combat the problems that they perceived with so-called "ethics in gamer journalism. The rallying cry 'ethics in gamer journalism' proved to be an enduring rationalization for continuing their attacks on Quinn" (Mantilla 86). This rallying cry also became the means of rationalizing not just the attacks on Quinn but also the attacks carried out against multiple women in the gaming community, such as those carried out against another game developer Brianna Wu, who "was doxxed on a forum called 8chan, where gendertrolls posted her home address, phone number, and email address. Shortly thereafter, she began receiving a series of detailed threats via Twitter by a user who called himself 'Death to Brianna'" (87). Wu explains that, as a result of Gamergate's sustained and violent campaigns of online abuse, she has "experienced the absolute worst harassment a person can experience" (39). Anita Sarkeesian—feminist media critic, creator of the *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* video series and executive director of the website *Feminist Frequency*—has also been targeted by these harassment campaigns, and Sarkeesian states, "Ever since I began my Tropes vs Women in Video Games project…I've been harassed on a daily basis by irate gamers angry at my critiques of sexism in video games" ("One Week of Harassment on Twitter").

Mantilla argues that Gamergate's targeted campaign of harassment against women like Quinn, Wu, and Sarkeesian—violence ironically enacted in the name of "ethics"—has since abated and that the "tide [has] appeared to turn somewhat against Gamergaters" (88). However, such a claim seems optimistic at best, especially since many women, people of color, and LGBTQI individuals in the gaming community continue to be targeted by violent and aggressive campaigns of online harassment. It also seems important to point out that, while Gamergate is a

particularly formidable instance of online harassment in video game culture, such harassment did not begin with Gamergate; rather, such threats and violence have been carried out against marginalized bodies in gaming spaces since the emergence of video games. As such, Gamergate simply exemplifies the ways certain bodies are targeted for violence in video game culture, certain positionalities are marginalized and oppressed in gaming spaces, and certain members of the gaming community seek to silence and erase women, people of color, and LGBTQI individuals from gaming spaces. As Zoe Quinn puts it, "Across the internet, marginalized people deal with online harassment at a much higher rate and level of seriousness than others do" (69). In short, Gamergate shows that many bodies are put at risk in video game culture.

However, online harassment in video game culture is also not unique to gaming spaces but, rather, is emblematic of a larger cultural problem. Katie Milestone and Anneke Meyer explain that one facet of this problem is the fact that new media and technology sectors are often "unwelcoming for women" (73). As such, the tech sector "provides an example of a new cultural industry where women are likely to encounter barriers because of the male domination of the adolescent training grounds for multimedia, namely computer games and arcades" (74). Assumptions and perceptions regarding digital spaces is another facet of this cultural problem, and many people "have optimistically argued that owing to the accessibility of new creative technologies, traditional values and norms about male and female relationships to technology will be discarded and a new era will dawn" (73). This assumption stems from constructions of cyberspace as a "disembodied space which does not contain real, physical bodies. This has led some thinkers to envisage the end of gender" (172). This mode of argumentation contends, "[I]n disembodied cyberspace, gender is no longer as salient a structural category because the physical markers of gender, upon which we rely in the offline world to categorize people as male or female, are no longer discernible" (172), and thus "physical anonymity means that individuals can hide, ignore or play with their gender by swapping or creating multiple identities" (173). Many people construct the virtual world as one in which "bodies are no longer an obstacle, we can be whoever we want to be; any identity is ours for the taking and making" (173). However, the argument that "bodies are no longer an obstacle" is inherently flawed because, as Milestone and Meyer point out, "fewer cues does not mean no cues" (173). Sarkeesian and Quinn's bodies—my body, women's bodies, marginalized and targeted bodies—are consistently invoked in digital spaces. The digital world is not one in which bodies do not exist or are no longer an

obstacle. Rather, bodies continue to exist in these spaces; indeed, such embodiment means that "conventional gender classification schemes are transported online through the invocation of the body even if the body is not visibly present" (175).

Bodies are inscribed in visceral, physical, sometimes violent ways in online spaces, and the nearness of the body is especially apparent when specific, marginalized bodies are invoked in online abuse strategies. These harassment strategies feel ever more present and intensified when their embodied violences are made manifest in physical spaces, as exemplified by Anita Sarkeesian's recent experience at 2017's VidCon, an online video conference:

> To kick off the Women Online panel at VidCon last Thursday, the moderator posed the question: Why do we still have to talk about the harassment of women? I replied, *"Because I think one of my biggest harassers is sitting in the front row."* He showed up with several others; together, his group took up the two front rows at the panel. Their presence was plainly not, as one of them later said in an "apology" video he posted to Twitter, to "give us the chance we never gave them" and to "hear us out," but was instead to intimidate me and put me on edge. They will no doubt plead innocent and act shocked at what they characterize as the outrageousness of such allegations. This, too, is part of their strategy: gaslighting, acting in a way intended to encourage me and their other targets to doubt ourselves and to wonder if all of this isn't just in our heads. But to anyone who examines their patterns of behavior with clear eyes, the intentions of their actions are undeniably apparent. ("On VidCon, Harassment & Garbage Humans")

Zoe Quinn argues that the intentions behind the harassment of women in games is "about control. It's about making you want to disappear, instilling fear, and limiting your possibilities. It's about punishing you for stepping out of line. It's about isolating and hurting you in specific ways to provoke a reaction…Violence is just one way that people control their victims. Instilling fear, breaking down their sense of safety and self-worth, and silencing are others" (50). These violences and efforts at power and control are all ultimately efforts to silence and erase women from gaming spaces, and because women's bodies are thus constantly invoked and at risk in gaming spaces—both physical and digital—these threats often cause women to remove themselves from the conversation in order to seek safety.

Indeed, Sarkeesian explains, "Because of the constant flood of threats and harassment I have received over the past five years simply for being a woman who argues for the basic humanity of women in a deeply misogynistic culture, I went for a very long time rarely participating in public conversations. Being a target of cybermob harassment is a traumatizing experience" ("On VidCon, Harassment & Garbage Humans"). In spite of these targeted threats, women like Sarkeesian and Quinn continue to show up, continue to claim space, and continue to face embodied risk in gaming spaces, even though, as Sarkeesian says about the physical presence of her harasser in the front row at Vidcon, "It's a deliberate act to create an environment that feels hostile, to communicate to us that if and when we dare to show up in public to express the ideas that we express online, the harassment will follow us into the physical world as well." Thus, because of the intensifying nature of digital and online spaces, "a wide cultural shift, rather than a narrow technological one, is needed for fundamental change" (Milestone and Meyer 178), and such change is especially needed for the bodies that are often at risk in video game culture.

1.4   Ludic Historicizing: Tracing the Emergence of Game Studies

Academic interventions into video game culture are one way to consider the kinds of change needed for bodies at risk in gaming spaces because academic interventions can begin the work of providing solutions for such change. The field of game studies has particular potential to engage in interventions into video game culture. Game studies is a scholarly field that began to emerge in the 1990s and has since become a site for exploring the cultural, technological, and multimodal significance of the video game as a form (Ensslin 2014; Gray 2014; Malkowski and Russworm 2017; Murray 1997; Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 2004; Wolf and Perron 2004). Throughout the development of the field, game studies scholars have consistently grappled with the objectives, frameworks, theoretical foundations, and methods that construct and define game studies praxis, something that is exemplified in Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron's 2004 game studies anthology, *The Video Game Theory Reader*.

In the introduction to the book, Wolf and Perron trace not only the history of video game culture but also the history of game studies, first mapping the "accounts of what is commonly considered to be the first real video game (*Spacewar!* [1962]), the first commercial video game (*Computer Space* [1971]), the first home game system (The Magnavox Odyssey [1972]), and the

first hit game (*PONG* [1972])" (2). Some of the first writing on video games appeared in the 1970s, and Wolf and Perron explain, "Although the term 'video games' first appears as a subject heading in the March 1973-February 1974 *Reader's Guide to Periodicals*, articles on games appeared as early as 1970 under the headings 'Electronic Games' and 'Computer Graphics'" (2). Many of these early articles were not located in academia but were rather how-to articles "written by and directed at computer enthusiasts and hobbyists, with articles appearing in such venues as *Popular Mechanics*, *Popular Science*, *Popular Electronics*, and *Radio-Electronics*, as well as general magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time*" (2), although several books "addressed to the computer programming community" were also published during this period (2). By the late 1970s—that is, shortly after "the appearance of commercial video games in the arcade and the home" (3)—these popular-cultural writings shifted from how-tos to game reviews and examinations of "the market for video games" (3). Technology began to shift in the early 1980s, resulting in a "growing market for home computers, fueled by electronics enthusiasts as well as video game players interested in home game systems" (4), and this growing market resulted in further shifts in video game writings: "Prior to 1982, the only theory to be found was in the practice of video game designers who innovated change and developed the medium with each advance in game design they made…But in 1982 Chris Crawford wrote *The Art of Computer Game Design*, the first book devoted to theorizing about video games" (4).

While the 1980s saw the emergence of the home computer and game theory, the 1990s saw even more rapid advances in gaming technologies and writing. The "introduction of CR-ROM-based games in 1992" (6) catalyzed many of these advances, since the CD-ROM's "increased storage capacity allowed for more detailed graphics and even full-motion video clips to be used in home games, and the representational power of the medium grew" (6), all of which made games even more popular for study and resulted in the 1999 anthology *On a Silver Platter: CD-ROMs and the Promises of a New Technology*. Wolf and Perron explain the CD-ROM's influence on video game writing:

> [T]he CD-ROM allowed games to grow to hundreds of megabytes in size while making their production cheaper than cartridges. The increased size and complexity of the games and their diegetic worlds also meant that game criticism would become more of a challenge as its object of study enlarged. More time and more game skills would be needed to see enough of a game to write

authoritatively on it, and to write something more in-depth than merely a game

review. (6)

Not only did the CD-ROM catalyze changes in games criticism but so too did the Internet's debut in 1993 impact the study of games: "With the spread of graphical browsers, the Web quickly became one of the best research tools for video game study…Game communities grew and produced large-scale repositories of game information compiled from hundreds of contributors" (7). Because of all these shifts and changes in the landscape of video game culture, writing, and technologies, by the end of the 1990s, the medium of the video game "had gained recognition (if not respect) in academia and had acquired the status of nostalgia and a historical, cultural object…No longer just a tangent or offshoot of new media theory, serious academic writing on the video game was finally beginning to carve out its own niche in the theoretical landscape" (10).

The early 2000s saw the expansion of "video game theory, as a field of study, [which] included a handful of books, several academic programs, the first online academic journal (*Game Studies*), and over half a dozen annual conferences" (11). The growing academic interest in video games during this period resulted in specific trends and patterns in the research, such as the divergence of game studies scholarship into "a variety of approaches, including narratology, cognitive studies, theories of representation, and ludology (the study of play)" (11), as well as the formation of "an international network of video game researchers" (13). Ultimately, Wolf and Perron define the game studies of the early 2000s as a "multidisciplinary field of research…[that], by nature, must be a synthesis of a wide range of approaches, but at the same time focus on the unique aspects of video games" (13).

Game theory has continued to shift and change since Wolf and Perron wrote about it in 2004, just as the medium of video games has continued to change as the result of advances in gaming systems, mechanics, narratives, graphics, and representations. T. L. Taylor explains that one of the things game studies scholars currently consider is "the interrelation between technology and social practice, how technological systems co-construct experience, including how forms of social control and order get embodied in systems" (*Watch Me Play* 12). Scholars like Katherine Isbister examine games as "an innovative medium that has a rightful place alongside the other media we value for their ability to reflect our own human experience back to us and for their capacity to take us into new emotional territory" (131). Mary Flanagan and

Helen Nissenbaum argue that examining games as reflections of human value systems and experience "enriches our understanding of how deep-seated sociocultural patterns are reflected in norms of participation, play, and communication" and believe that "the growth in digital media and expanding cultural significance of games constitutes both an opportunity and responsibility for the design community to reflect on the values that are expressed in games" (3). Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees define video games as a "communication technology that employs both representation and performance" (3), and they contend that game studies scholars need to examine the "cultural practices that have emerged around them…[that] help to maintain existing power relations and reroute them to adapt to historical circumstances" (3).

Even though, as these scholars' arguments demonstrate, game studies' orientation has begun shifting toward and making space for examinations of the intersection of technology and culture, resistance toward such praxis is still prevalent in the field, and so the questions that Walter Holland, Henry Jenkins, and Kurt Squire ask in 2004 continue to remain relevant for the state of game studies today: "Why game theory? What functions does theory serve during a moment when a medium is undergoing rapid transformation, when it is still defining its aesthetics, its functions, and its audiences? What forms will give theory maximum impact?" (25). These questions stem from anxieties many scholars have over the state of the field—anxieties that existed during the emergence of the discipline, have not yet been resolved, and persist to this day; namely, as Holland, Jenkins, and Squire put it, game studies is "teetering on a threshold" where some "academics want to see game theory establish itself as a predominantly academic discipline, while others seek to broaden the conversation between game designers, consumers, journalists, and scholars" (26). The limitation of this understanding of the threshold, though, is that it does not fully account for the problematic tensions that continue to lie at the heart of game studies—a tension that scholars like T. L. Taylor, Mary Flanagan, Helen Nissenbaum, and their contemporaries interrogate in their attending to the intersection of technology and culture in video games. In other words, I argue that, as game studies continues to shift and expand, it needs to reconcile and dismantle its limited proclivity to privilege hegemonic epistemologies, exclude marginalized voices, and disregard much of the multiplicity of embodied experiences that occur when existing within video game culture. This erasure of the body has dangerous ramifications when considering the specific bodies at risk—the bodies of women, people of color, queer folk,

the disabled—and the bodies that are targeted, harassed, and threatened in gaming and online spaces.

Game studies' erasure of the body is a central concern of the emerging field of feminist game studies (Gray, et al. 2018; Huntemann 2013; Layne and Blackmon 2013; Shaw 2013), a field that challenges game studies' monolithic, patriarchal frameworks and that seeks to disrupt and dismantle such frameworks by establishing feminist coalitions as a means of claiming space for marginalized bodies in video game culture. In this way, feminist game studies praxis performs interventions into video game culture through the kinds of revolutionary, embodied methods that hegemonic game studies praxis cannot afford. These embodied methodologies— what I am calling methodologies of *disruption*—are located in a lineage of feminist work in the academy, for feminist game studies praxis continues the work of disruptive feminist theorizing in which feminist scholars across disciplines engage.

Such methodologies work off a foundation of feminist epistemologies, or feminist modes of producing knowledge. Stephanie Jennings argues that feminist ways of knowing are vital due to the problematically hegemonic nature of epistemology in Western thought: "Epistemology, the philosophy of knowledge, has had a troubled history in Western culture. In seeking to understand how human beings produce knowledge, it has solidified strict notions of what kinds of knowledge are legitimate and what kinds are illegitimate" (157). Epistemological policing is especially tethered to assumptions regarding gender because "traditional epistemology has reinforced an oppressive gender binary by dividing legitimate knowledge and illegitimate knowledge along gendered lines" (157). Jennings argues that feminist epistemology is needed to disrupt epistemological gatekeeping in game studies because "[f]eminist epistemology is one possible way of orienting methods of games criticism toward justice: it excavates the counter-hegemonic voices that are so often buried beneath the detritus of dominant industry discourses" (159). In other words, game studies requires feminist epistemology and feminist "methodological approaches the primary concern of which is elucidating the experiences of non-white, non-male players" (159).

Tara McPherson argues for feminist methodologies that are materialist and relational because "[r]elationality matters. Matter is relational. There is more to learn from feminist interventions" (40), and *material* feminist interventions are needed because "if matter matters, *how* we focus on matter also matters" (39). McPherson makes the case for material feminist

interventions into the digital humanities (DH) in particular, arguing that traditional epistemologies have become modular and bounded off both in our 'technological formations" and in the "divided departments of the contemporary university" (74):

> [These] modes of knowledge production and organization are powerful racial and technological operating systems that coincide with (and reinforce) structuralist and poststructuralist approaches to the world within the academy…The fragmentary knowledges encouraged by many forms and experiences of the digital neatly parallel the lenticular logics that underwrite the covert racism endemic to our times, operating in potential feedback loops, supporting each other. If scholars of race have highlighted how certain tendencies within poststructuralist theory simultaneously respond to and marginalize race, this maneuver is at least partially possible because of a parallel and increasing dispersion of electronic forms across culture, forms that simultaneously enact and shape these new modes of thinking. (74)

Modular epistemologies require disruptive and material feminist interventions because "[w]e need conceptual models for the digital humanities and for digital media studies that can help us attend to software, code, databases, and more in ways that push beyond modularity and that help us understand that these digital objects and systems exert their own agencies even as they also emerge from culture" (82). Because matter matters, because technology is entangled with culture, and because modular epistemologies are limiting in their bounded-off production of knowledge, McPherson calls for "ample, diverse, and contested approaches" (83) that afford the academy "lines of thought that might join histories of computation and DH practice with theories of feminism and difference" (84).

I argue that feminist game studies is located, at least in part, in the digital humanities, for feminist interventions into game culture require material methodologies that grapple with the entanglements and intersections of technology and culture. While Wolf and Perron do not much mention or privilege feminist praxis in their tracings of video game culture, Kishonna Gray, Gerald Voorhees, and Emma Vossen explain that "in fact there is a rich, far-reaching history of feminist theory and games criticism" (1). The continued development of feminist game studies has resulted in "a number of focal points" (2), including "women and marginalized peoples' erasure or unfavorable representation in games, exclusion and harassment in game cultures and

communities, and participation in the game industry and other sites of production" (2). In short, feminist game studies enacts a multiplicity of feminist methodologies and epistemological orientations in order to highlight the ways video game culture "extends beyond the gamers; the devaluation of marginalized bodies is present in the games that we play, the developers who create them, and the culture and institutions that sustain them—making them all complicit in the continued oppression of the marginalized" (4).

Shira Chess also traces the emergence of feminist game studies, and she contends that it "is a field of research that first emerged in the mid-to-late 1990s, simultaneously with the development of early games for girls. The initiatives of this research have often combined both industry and academe, with the goal of trying to influence more women and girls to have interests in both the video game industry and their consumer products" (16). Ultimately, the goals of feminist game studies praxis are political:

> The field of study itself suggests that the playful is political—that there are politics to how women and girls spend their leisure time in light of how it ultimately results in careers and cultural interests. In this way, those involved in feminist game studies have taken several paths: studying game characters, examining game-play mechanics, performing ethnographic and qualitative interview research on women and girls who both play and don't play, studying the role of masculinity in game culture, and using intersectional approaches to consider larger issues of diversity. Scholars have studied the video game industry itself in terms of responses to perceived feminine threats and have begun to study the impact and meaning of some of the new kinds of games as they have emerged. The field has grown increasingly robust, and the combinations of industry activism and academic research have helped create the recent influx of female video game players. (16)

In addition to these paths, feminist game studies also examines how "'toxic gamer culture' often creates a barrier to entry for women gamers" (18), analyzes "not only games but also the experiences of masculine gamer culture" (18), and interrogates "characters and character design, with a frequent focus on avatar bodies and how they might be both empowering and alienating to women players" (18). In order to engage in interventions into this diverse network of concerns and phenomena, feminist game studies scholars increasingly use "intersectional approaches

when studying video games and game players…Given this, many scholars have begun to consider how issues of sexuality, ethnicity, social class, and other factors play into and exacerbate problems that have already been documented in terms of gender within the video game industry" (19). I locate my own scholarship in this lineage of intersectional and materialist feminist work, drawing especially from my own positionality as a feminist literary scholar in order to map out the network of interdisciplinary feminist interventions and methodologies that can be implemented in feminist game studies in order to continue the work of disrupting modular patriarchal epistemologies in video game culture.

1.5   Literary Foundations: Tracing the Connections Between Literary Studies and Game Studies

   To be sure, one of the fields in which disruptive feminist theorizing occurs is that of feminist literary studies, a field in which I, a literary studies scholar, am located. Due to my embeddedness in the field, I use feminist literary criticism as a case study for the implementation of disruptive feminist theorizing in the academy. I argue that drawing from the field of feminist literary studies allows for a clearer framework through which to situate the objectives and methods of feminist game studies praxis in the academy. Just as Shira Chess defines feminist game studies praxis as being politically-oriented, so too does Ellen Rooney explain that the location of feminist literary praxis in the academy is a political one:

>We must acknowledge that the very fact that feminist *literary* theory makes its home within the academy seems (in some contexts) reflexively to arouse suspicions that it is politically marginal at best, that is to say, that its concerns are "merely academic."…At the same time, and despite the prevalence of such doubts, it is nonetheless still a commonsensical idea for many observers that the thoughts, analyses, and even the speculations of literary theorists concerned with questions of gender, sexual difference, or masculinist ideologies are closely connected to the political projects and organizations that address women's issues in the "real" world; indeed, more than merely plausible, this assumption has the status of something like a given. ("The Literary Politics of Feminist Theory" 74).

Rooney, in discussing the emergence of feminist literary scholarship in the academy, explains that early feminist literary scholars "viewed themselves not only as literary critics who were part

of a robust political campaign for women's rights, but as activists within the university…who would challenge not just the canons of their particular disciplines or the biases of their colleagues and intellectual predecessors, but the normal science of the university itself" (75). Thus, the function of feminist literary praxis is the explicit construction of "literary critical projects as a mode of politics, literally as political action" (77). This explicit political action within the academy is an orientation that feminist game studies criticism and scholarship take as well, for feminist game studies praxis, too, challenges the biases of game studies scholarship, interrogates the epistemological privileging that occurs within the field, and campaigns for the rights of those marginalized and erased in video game culture.

This complex activist framework for feminist literary (and game studies) scholarship results in what Geraldine Heng describes as the entanglement that occurs when both "[p]leasures and politics jostle together, from moment to moment, in the play of how meaning materializes" (53). Similarly, Rooney explains that these entanglements function as "the collective conversations—often contradictory, sometimes heated—of feminist readers concerning the meaning and practice of reading, the intersections of subject formations such as race, class, sexuality, and gender, and the work of literature" ("Introduction" 17). These collective conversations allow for the broad interrogation of literary theory in the field of literary studies, and I argue that this conception of feminist praxis as a collective (and sometimes messy) conversation is a helpful framework through which to conceive of the work that occurs in feminist game studies scholarship as well. What is more, such feminist conversations—because they result in a network of arguments, orientations, concerns, and objectives—require pluralistic methodologies in order to achieve a network of disruptive feminist goals. Indeed, Rooney, in discussing the "remarkable range of scholars [who] have tried to abstract the essential elements of feminist literary theory over the past two decades and more" (1), explains that such diverse work ultimately "resists generalization" (1) in that the "effort to propose a definition, genealogy or history of feminist literary theory…threatens to simplify what is, in a stubborn, perhaps ineradicable way, complex" (1).

That said, Rooney does note some patterns that occur across feminist literary scholarship. She argues that, for one, feminist literary criticism typically "maintains that women's readings is of consequence, intellectually, politically, poetically; women's readings signify" (4). This contention that women's readings signify also operates off the supposition that readers have "an

active relation to the text, one that attends closely to the play of its signifiers, its contradictory movements, its capacity to surprise. Reading in this perspective is transitive: reading a text changes it. If women readers 'make' a difference, it is because they read to undo previous phallic paradigms of interpretative mastery and to disclose as yet unimagined textual possibilities" (7). In this way, reading is a mode of feminist work and can be used as a feminist method that "threatens the transparency of categories like the (lesbian) woman or (black) women or even gender (in postcoloniality)" (7):

> Insofar as such categories imagine identity as rooted in an experience beyond representation, a unified experience given by some unmediated practice and not both formed and undone by language, literature is the site of their deconstruction as well as their renewal. Feminist reading here begins to complicate and unravel the very premises that first enabled it to get a purchase on textuality. Self-questioning and an unwillingness to settle in a single location are characteristic of feminist literary theories. They have not found skepticism to be paralyzing, for it is not only the identity of the woman reading that has been rethought. (7)

Thus, feminist literary criticism highlights active reading as feminist methodology, in that feminist readings expose "the *masculinism* of prior readings and readers. These prior readings had presented themselves not as the products of men accustomed to masculine privilege (so accustomed that their privileges appeared to them simply as nature), but as reading itself, objective, humanistic reading, where men (or certain men, to be more precise) were presumed to represent the human" (8).

Rooney argues that this methodology of active feminist reading often takes two forms, "the interrogation of tradition and the revaluation of the aesthetic" (8). Feminist literary scholars implement these methods in a variety of ways, including "nominating marginalized or entirely forgotten women writers for a place within the standard canon" and proposing "counter-canons of radically distinct traditions, seeking to dismiss once-revered figures from the syllabus. These approaches are corrective, righting the wrongs of exclusion and misreading" (8). In addition to these corrective methods, feminist readings may also implement "the critique of hegemonic aesthetic assumptions" (9), which works to "propose rivals to the terms of hegemonic masculinist aesthetics…Alternatively, a critique of the aesthetic may involve turning toward once-belittled forms…in order to disclose their substantial but overlooked aesthetic value" (9). In

short, the methodologies and theoretical lenses used in feminist literary criticism work in a variety of ways to disrupt and unsettle hegemonic masculinist structures that exist in the field of literary studies, and the methodological pluralism of feminist literary criticism has been applied in targeted ways to the field of literary studies. Such methodological pluralism, I argue, is similarly needed in the field of feminist game studies in order to counter and disrupt hegemonic masculinist structures in game studies, the gaming industry, and video game culture writ large.

1.6   Feminist Game Studies: Building Feminist Worlds in Video Game Culture Through Disruptive Methodologies

To be sure, scholars have already begun the conversation regarding how we might define and implement feminist game studies scholarship. T. L. Taylor calls for scholars to "attend to the interweaving of" digital and physical spheres in order to more fully interrogate the "phenomena that are unique to both spheres and [that] also occupy spaces of overlap…It is, of course, much simpler when we bound off both spaces and try and come up with tidy categories for each, but what I find in my work (and see in many others') is that people live much more in the gaps between the two and negotiate that experience in fascinating ways" (19). She also calls for games scholars and developers to center women and girls instead of continuing to define them as "simply exceptions, data points that are outliers to be written off. But taking this demographic as a central focus of research is key to understanding the complexities around gender and computer games" (94). I argue that feminist game studies engages in such centering through the implementation of intersectional feminist methodologies to claim space for marginalized subjectivities in video game culture by engaging in "research tackling these more structural and contextual relationships between gender, technology, culture, and games" (101). However, because this intersectional research is carried out in an academic field that is still emerging, several discursive gaps exist that require filling. For one, while the emerging field of feminist game studies is one that scholars across disciplines have examined, little discussion about the field exists within literary scholarship; as such, there is currently little interrogation of the application of literary analysis to video game narratives or how such work might allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the dismantling of patriarchal, heteronormative, white supremacist structures in the gaming industry and community.

Similarly, while arguments have been made regarding the need for feminist game studies analysis, much less discussion exists regarding the kinds of methodologies required for such analysis; this lack of methodological consideration is true not just for feminist game studies scholarship but for feminist thought overall, which causes Nina Lykke to argue that the consideration of "methodologies and methods have not occupied the same spectacular space in the limelight of feminist theorizing as have debates on epistemologies" (145). As such, the need for further examination of such considerations—or, more specifically, the defining, framing, and implementing of feminist game studies methodologies—drives this project. In short, I argue that methodologies must be more fully articulated for feminist work in and of the gaming community to move forward in productive, destabilizing, and transgressive ways.

Thus, the primary focus of this project is the mapping out of feminist game studies' methodologies of disruption. I draw from T. L. Taylor's scholarly lens and methods in an effort to ensure that my own methods in this project are feminist, particularly her definitions of the enactment of boundary work on "border stories" in video game culture: "My work has focused on players or issues that typically are not seen as central in retellings of these games. I am interested in gaps or boundary work in that such locations can be the place in which definitions become problematized or previously hidden practices are accounted for" (10). The epistemological orientation toward border stories allows feminist game studies researchers to attend to "the areas of gaming normally neglected" (10), allowing us to "learn something useful about both the games themselves and also about the broader culture in which they are embedded" (10). In order to implement this epistemological positioning, Taylor makes use of a methodology of what she calls "bricolage, pulling from a variety of techniques, tools, and methods to understand a mix of practices, representations, structures, rhetorics, and technologies" (17). I too implement a methodology of bricolage in this project, weaving together border stories in video game culture with intersectional and interdisciplinary feminist methods in order to argue for methodologies of disruption and worldbuilding in feminist game studies.

As for the bricolage methods I use in this project, I make use of worked examples by I specifically interrogating video games' representations of gendered labor from a feminist literary perspective. These methods demonstrate the implementation of methodologies of disruption within the field of feminist game studies. In doing so, I show that such methodologies allow feminist game studies to enact disruption by problematizing the controlling images within video

game narratives and imagining new possibilities for representation. I also argue that feminist game studies' methods establish coalitions based on feminist solidarity in order to dismantle and disrupt the borders drawn around who gets to be a knower and what gets to be known in the gaming community. Through such disruptive methods, feminist game studies unsettles hierarchical, sexist, racist, homophobic, and colonialist structures of power in the gaming community and imagines models similar to that of the assemblage, models that allow for feminist worldbuilding based on inclusion, fluidity, movement, and *change*. In short, my disruptive lens for feminist game studies is concerned with providing an intervention into video game culture, and I work toward such a goal in this project by examining feminist game studies' efforts to create a space within the world of video games, the gaming industry, and the field of game studies.

The chapters that follow provide just such a critique. The next chapter, "Disrupting Video Game Culture: The Importance of Intersectional Approaches for Feminist Game Studies" frames and contextualizes the field of game studies and the location of feminist game studies in academia. Thus, this chapter traces the ways hegemonic, patriarchal frameworks in game studies epistemologically deprivilege material, representational analyses of bodies and culture in the study of games and, instead, argues for the implementation of intersectional approaches to video game culture. I argue that game studies' discussion of the structure of video games is an important consideration for feminist game studies to extend and (re)evaluate, and game studies' interrogation of how games and narrative intersect is one such concern; this interrogation is important for game studies' understanding of the medium it examines, and such an understanding is important for feminist game studies as well. Through such an examination, I argue that disruptive intersectional feminist praxis is important for feminist game studies to methodologically incorporate in order for the field to intervene into video game culture. Thus, by putting disruptive feminist praxis in conversation with game studies' definitions of games and play, I define feminist game studies' methodologies of disruption as interventions that build feminist worlds for bodies that are typically at risk within video game culture.

The third chapter, "Feminist Worldbuilding: Identifying Intersectional Methodologies in Feminist Game Studies," highlights the conversation occurring between feminist game studies and feminist science fiction criticism, and I trace. the intersectional feminist methodologies that can be implemented in feminist game studies in order to perform generative and disruptive

interventions into video game culture and build feminist worlds. In doing so, I highlight the ways feminist games studies can look to the scholarship that has occurred within feminist science fiction as a means of considering effective frameworks for the feminist interrogation of games, for such frameworks require collaboration, collectivity, and coalition. I argue that feminist science fiction especially works to challenge patriarchal inscriptions of gender and labor and that feminist SF criticism reveals the varied ways that we might critique patriarchal configurations of gender while imagining alternative configurations that destabilize patriarchal hegemony. In this way, I argue that an engagement with feminist science fiction allows for an interrogation of the ways feminist game studies might draw from feminist science fiction in order to imagine alternative configurations as well.

The fourth chapter, "Applying Disruptive Methods: Examining Maternal Labor and Futurities in Video Games and the Gaming Industry," provides worked examples for this methodology through the implementation of this methodological approach to the controlling images of gendered labor and parenting roles in video game narratives. I apply methodologies of disruption to the alienation of mothers in the gaming industry's workplace culture and representations of mothers in the games *Among the Sleep* and *Horizon Zero Dawn* in order to intervene into video game culture's prejudicial attitudes regarding labor, mothers, and women. As such, applying this methodology of disruption to specific video games as worked examples demonstrates the ways feminist game studies' methodologies can be used to disrupt the controlling images located in these games. I specifically focus on representations of gendered parenting labor in video game narratives as one example of the ways controlling images and representations can be dismantled through feminist game studies' methodology of disruption. The application of these disruptive methodologies to representations of gendered labor in video games and video game culture puts into practice feminist game studies' methodologies of disruption to destabilize controlling images and (re)imagine feminist models of representation and labor instead.

The final chapter, "Reflexively Building Feminist Worlds: Toward a Methodology of Disruption," continues the autoethnographic work of this chapter through the connection of my experiences with online harassment to previous experiences with gendered violence and trauma in order to underscore the stakes of feminist game studies praxis. This chapter also analyzes the significance of feminist game studies' methodologies of disruption in order to consider the

implications for the future of the field and its engagement with bodies at risk in video game culture. In doing so, I reflexively interrogate the material impact of feminist game studies praxis in the academy in order to examine epistemologies, risk, and ethics in feminist research on video game culture. Through such an interrogation, I argue for and put into practice an embodied and material methodology of disruption in an effort to build feminist worlds through a reflexive examination of women's public narratives of online harassment, gendered violence, and trauma.

Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, in working to establish feminist interpretive frameworks, argues, "Feminist thinking and practice require taking steps from the 'margins to the center' while eliminating boundaries that privilege dominant forms of knowledge building, boundaries that mark who can be a knower and what can be known" (3). Hesse-Biber also explains that there is no one right way to go about feminist thinking and practice because "there is no single feminist epistemology or methodology. Instead, multiple feminist lenses wake us up to layers of sexist, racist, homophobic, and colonialist points of view" (4). Due to this multiplicity of methods in feminist research, Hesse-Biber asks, "What makes a method feminist? What are the unique characteristics feminists bring to the practice of this method? What are the strengths and challenges in practicing feminist research? What is gained and what is risked?" (20). There is much to be gained and much to be risked in the intersectional and interdisciplinary methods I argue are needed in a methodology of disruption. In short, I argue that feminist game studies builds worlds by performing interventions into video game culture through intersectional and pluralistic methodologies of disruption, for such methodologies imagine new, inclusive models of existence and futurity in video game culture.

CHAPTER 2.   DISRUPTING VIDEO GAME CULTURE: THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES FOR FEMINIST GAME STUDIES

2.1   The Study of Games: Interrogating the "Unique Formalism" of Game Studies

In the preface to her 2005 Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) talk, Janet Murray discusses the "advent of electronic games as a new entertainment and art form" and the ways that perspectives on this advent as "an event divorced from cultural history" have impacted the study of video games:

> Claims have been made for considering computer games studies as a field not merely differentiated by its objects of study, but as…explicitly disconnected from the kinds of inquiry that have traditionally been applied to other cultural genres. According to this view, games in general and computer games in particular display a unique formalism which defines them as a discreet experience, a different genre from narrative, drama, poetry. ("The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology")

This perspective contends that the "proper study of games is therefore an analysis of this unique formalism and a comparative study of particular games for their formal qualities." In other words, many of those entrenched in the field of game studies believe that the "focus of such study should be on the rules of the game, not on the representational or mimetic elements…Proponents of this view sometimes admit the potential helpfulness of empirical player observation, but they are opposed to and even offended by game criticism that makes connections between games and other cultural forms such as paintings, films, digital art, or storytelling." Murray points out that proponents of this "unique formalism" are so opposed to alternative modes of criticism that "[a]ttempts by other scholars to discuss games as part of a larger spectrum of cultural expression are denounced as 'colonialist' intrusions on a domain that belongs only to those who are studying games as abstract rule systems."

Murray's discussion of games formalism highlights one of the central conversations occurring within the field of game studies—one in which game studies scholars interrogate what is needed in the study of games. What Murray highlights in her examination of games formalism, here, is that certain modes of study, certain modes of knowledge production, become privileged

in game studies; this privileging separates games from other mediums or modes of study, and this separation results in the erasure and silencing of other disciplinary means of engagement. As such, Murray's comments allow for an inroad into the need for feminist game studies—that is, the need for a mode of games criticism that dismantles the hegemonic knowledge production of game studies formalism and creates a more inclusive disciplinary space for additional voices in the field.

In order to consider this disciplinary need in this chapter, I trace the intersectional frameworks, contexts, and goals of feminist game studies. In this way, this chapter performs an intervention into the historical lineage of feminist game studies through the interrogation of its emergence, location, goals, and significance. I engage in this tracing, first, by defining the field of game studies more broadly, in order to examine the need for and enactment of feminist interventions in response to game studies' hegemonic epistemologies. I trace the intersectional feminist thought that is required to disrupt the hegemonic formalism of game studies, and I show how these feminist theories and modes, then, construct the field of feminist game studies. In all these ways, this chapter begins the work of opening up another mode of analysis regarding who has epistemic claims to knowledge production in game studies and examines the marginalization of women, people of color, and LGBTQI voices in video game culture.

2.2   Ludology and Narratology: Tracing the Disciplinary Trajectory of Game Studies

The question of how it is games and narrative intersect is a particularly contentious one, especially within the field of game studies; as Henry Jenkins puts it, "The relationship between games and story remains a divisive question among game fans, designers, and scholars alike" (118). This "divisive question" sits at the heart of the ludology/narratology debate among game studies scholars, a debate that seeks to define the specific relationship between video games and narrative. This debate that causes Eric Zimmerman to ask, "But what would it mean to take a closer look at games and stories?" (154). Such a question contains multiple implications and modes of interrogation: "Does it mean figuring out how to make games more like stories? Or how to make stories more gamelike? Does it mean documenting and typologizing new forms of game/story culture?…There are as many approaches to the question of 'games and stories' as there are designers, artists, technologists, and academics asking the questions" (155).

Gonzalo Frasca admits that "[l]iterary theory and narratology have been helpful to understand cybertexts and videogames" but ultimately believes that "there is another dimension that has been usually almost ignored when studying this kind of computer software: to analyze them as games" ("Ludology Meets Narratology"). Frasca calls this mode of analysis (this analysis of games as games) *ludology*, which stems from "*ludus*, the Latin word for 'game'," as a term that refers "to the yet non-existent 'discipline that studies game and play activities'." In order to differentiate this mode of analysis, Frasca frames ludology as a lens that functions *in opposition* to narratology, for he identifies narratology as a type of analysis that has been "invented to unify the works that scholars from different disciplines were doing about narrative." Ludology, unlike narratology, does not highlight narrative but the ludic quality of games, a quality that (as the Latin term *ludus* conveys) is defined by its being an "*activity organized under a system of rules that defines a victory or a defeat, a gain or a loss.*" Yet, while ludic activity occurs within a system of rules, it also allows for "a set of possibilities," while narrative, Frasca argues, is rather "a set of chained actions"—all of which causes Frasca to conclude that "we cannot claim that *ludus* and narrative are equivalent." However, while Frasca does not believe *ludus* and narrative are equivalent, he does admit that "some kinds of *ludus*…can produce narrative sequences and, therefore, narrative. However, producing narrative and being narrative are different things. It is not correct to claim that adventure videogames are narratives." This, ultimately, is Frasca's point—that video games are not narratives and are "before anything else, games" ("Videogames of the Oppressed"). For Frasca, this means that if "we want to understand videogames, we first need to understand games. We need a *ludology*…a formal discipline that focuses on games, both traditional and electronic" (86).

Jesper Juul similarly argues that "we should allow ourselves to make distinctions" between games and stories because "[n]arratives may be fundamental to human thought, but this does not mean that everything *should* be described in narrative terms. And that something can be presented in narrative form does not mean that it *is* narrative." While Juul concedes that players "can tell stories of a game session," that some "computer games contain narrative elements," and that "[g]ames and narratives share some structural traits," he nonetheless argues that "[g]ames and stories actually do not translate to each other in the way that novels and movies do" because the "relations between reader/story and player/game are completely different." In short, Juul is concerned that the idea of narrative has become "a privileged master concept in the description

of all aspects of human society and sign-production" and that the privileging of "existing theories will make us forget what makes games games: Such as rules, goals, player activity, the projection of the player's actions into the game world, the way the game defines the possible actions of the player. It is the unique parts that we need to study now."

Espen Aarseth expresses these sentiments perhaps the most pithily of all the proponents of a ludological approach, for he asks, "Are games texts? The best reason I can think of why one would ask such a crude question is because one is a literary or semiotic theorist and wants to believe in the relevance of one's training" (47). Aarseth argues that games are not texts and, in fact, "games are not intertextual either; games are self-contained" (48). Aarseth believes that to argue that games are texts and to argue that games are narratives is the result of humanists making attempts at some sort of power-play in the study of games: "And to us humanists, the (let's face it) lowest caste of the academic world, it is nice to feel important again, for once. Finally, our expertise matters! We don't know much about technology, or biology, but we do know stories and storytelling. So why be critical when we can be important instead?" (49). Games, for Aarseth—as for Juul, Frasca, and ludologists—are simply games. But what does it really mean to make such a claim? What does it really mean to say that games are just games (that games are self-contained) and to separate their game-ness from the idea of narrative?

Janet Murray argues that what this means is that ludology's effort to separate game-ness from narrative functions as a form of game essentialism and game formalism:

> This approach, which has been associated with the term "ludology," which means the rather neutral enterprise of the study of games, functions as both an ideology and a methodology. The ideology can perhaps be called game essentialism (GE), since it claims that games, unlike other cultural objects, should be interpreted only as members of their own class, and only in terms of their defining abstract formal qualities. Separate from this ideology is a methodology which is also called "ludology" but which could perhaps be better named computer game formalism (CGF). As a methodology, CGF emphasizes the formal properties unique to videogames and attempts to analyse them and to create descriptors than can be used to classify and compare specific instances of game form. ("The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology")

Murray admits that ludology's formalism has "made many contributions to the study of games," such as the ways such work has "energized and focused the field by insisting on the legitimacy of computer games as objects of study in their own right, rather than as 'colonized' examples of film or narrative," as well as the ways this attention to the "formal properties of games" has "opened up a range of productive questions about the definition of games, the form of games, the boundaries between games and other cultural forms, that can be addressed from many directions."

However, Murray also highlights how ludology's formalism and essentialism exclude other forms of study: "As an ideology, a proscriptive theory of what game studies should and should not be, Game Essentialism has been particularly concerned with disavowing and differentiating itself from 'narratology.'" More specifically, Murray argues that narratology is "a category of interest to the computer game formalists" because it "represents the authority against which they have rebelled, the thing that must be repudiated in order for their own interpretation to have meaning." Murray argues that the ludology/narratology debate is one that has never truly existed, for the narratological side is an opponent of ludologists' own making; in short, she argues, "The opposition to narratology, and the imposition of the label on those who do not choose it, seems at times to be a complaint looking for a target."

Thus, I argue that the motivation behind ludologists' formalism, essentialism, and efforts to exclude alternative forms of study stems from a desire to do exactly what Aarseth and others actually accuse narratologists of doing—that is, such claims seem to work from a desire to "feel important," to legitimize games as a field of study and academic inquiry, and to do so by creating a boundary around them, a boundary that sets them apart from other media forms. This is not to say that games are not different from other forms, and this is not to say that such differences should not be explored—but to explore such differences at the expense of considering how it is games make use of narrative would seem to limit us from fully understanding what video games are and how we interact with them. The ludology/narratology divide articulated by scholars like Frasca, Juul, and Aarseth artificially forces the study of games into a system of binaries, which only serves to essentialize and dilute the multifaceted ways we engage with and are affected by video games.

Janet Murray further highlights the artificiality of this divide: "The computer is not the enemy of the book. It is the child of print culture, a result of the five centuries of organized,

collective inquiry and invention that the printing press made possible" (*Hamlet on the Holodeck* 8). Because computers and books—games and stories—are not enemies, we can study the ways computers "reshape the spectrum of narrative expression, not by replacing the novel or the movie but by continuing their timeless bardic work within another framework" (9). By understanding this "spectrum of narrative expression," we can also understand the manner in which narrative texts "in any medium…help us understand the world and what it means to be human" because "all successful storytelling technologies become 'transparent': we lose consciousness of the medium and see…only the power of the story itself. If digital art reaches the same level of expressiveness as these older media, we will no longer concern ourselves with how we are receiving the information. We will only think about what truth it has told us about our lives" (26). Murray argues that games can convey such truths in new and exciting ways because a video game "is a kind of abstract storytelling that resembles the world of common experience but compresses it in order to heighten interest. Every game, electronic or otherwise, can be experienced as a symbolic drama. Whatever the content of the game itself, whatever our role within it, we are always the protagonists of the symbolic action" (142). Yet, while, for Murray "[g]ames are always stories" ("From Game-Story to Cyberdrama" 2), she also believes that, we should work to understand how game-stories function *differently*—we should "stop trying to assimilate the new artifacts to the old categories of print- or cinema-based story and board- or player-based game. We should instead think of the characteristics of stories and games and how these separable characteristics are being recombined and reinvented within the astonishingly plastic world of cyberspace" (10).

Astrid Ensslin, like Murray, discusses the recombination and reinvention of stories and games in her exploration of "the creative interface between digital books that can be played and digital games that can be read" (1), and she "suggests ways of combining both processes for users and analysts" (1). In doing so, Ensslin stresses, "There is no one way of reading digital media. Digital literacy must involve the aptitude, ability, and willingness to adapt our interactive practices to every individual artifact, which may involve a wide range of heuristic and autodidactic practices" (5). We need this wide range of practices because the "evermorphing existence of digital texts requires new concepts of materiality and textuality that are far less bound to the hapticity of the artifact as tangible product (book and print) but inextricably connected to its medial contexts and connotations. Textuality becomes a pluralistic idea and the

work of art an 'assemblage' of instantiations" (32). In order to address this textual assemblage, Ensslin argues that scholars can and should think of these instantiations as "a phenomenologically grounded continuum of literary-ludic hybrids spanning the full spectrum from experimental digital literature containing game-like features…to computer games with poetic, dramatic, and/or fictional qualities" (44). And in order to examine this spectrum of hybrid texts—of which video games are a part—Ensslin proposes that scholars make use of "an analytical toolset called functional ludostylistics, which integrates elements of narratology, poetics/stylistics, semiotics, mediality, and ludology" (51). These "functional ludostylistics" can prevent us from enacting "a purely generic approach to ludoliterary hybridity [that] is likely to lead to theoretical and analytical oversimplification. Instead, ludostylistic analysis should look in detail at individual specimens rather than generalize about entire groups of seemingly similar texts" (72).

In short, what Murray, Ensslin, and, indeed, many others (i.e., Domsch 2013; Jenkins 2004; Zimmerman 2004) work toward is a way of complicating both our understanding of what video games *are* as well as the ways we can study them, and they do so by blurring the game/story and ludology/narratology divides that proponents of ludology have sought to uphold. Yet, while Murray and Ensslin's modes of analysis function differently than those of ludologists, all these modes operate from the same desires—the desire to make a case for the study of games, to legitimize them as a form that warrants deeper interrogation, and to especially examine the conversation between ludus and narrative—between games and stories.

It seems important to note that Frasca, Juul, and Aarseth were all making these claims around the early 2000s, and since then, the shifting and changing intersection of games and narrative problematizes their claims that games are not stories. Further, the adoption of a solely ludological approach limits the ways game studies might examine games instead of fostering "diversification of genres, aesthetics, and audiences" and opening our study of games up "to the broadest possible range of experiences" (120). This is not to say that playing games can "be simply reduced to the experience of a story" (120), and this is also not to say that video game narratives function the same as other narrative forms; rather, as Jenkins puts it, "If some games tell stories, they are unlikely to tell them in the same ways that other media tell stories" (120). These differences are just as important as the areas of overlap, which is something that Eric Zimmerman, like Jenkins, stresses as well—because "games are in fact narrative systems. They

aren't the only form that narrative can take, but every game can be considered a narrative system" (161). Because they are not the only narrative form, scholars within the field of game studies "need to ask not just how games can be narrative systems, but we need to ask how games can be narrative systems in ways that other media cannot" (161). This mode of interrogation is something that a ludological approach cannot afford the field of game studies.

Such a limitation is what causes Murray to argue for a shift in game studies, and she calls for the field to acknowledge "the difference between the useful formalist methodology and the distractingly prescriptive ideology of game essentialism. No one group can define what is appropriate for the study of games. Game studies, like any organized pursuit of knowledge, is not a zero-sum team contest, but a multi-dimensional, open-ended puzzle that we all are engaged in cooperatively solving" ("The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology"). In short, ludology's game essentialism and computer game formalism limit the field of game studies from fully interrogating video games. But ludology is limiting not only because of its inability (or unwillingness) to examine the conversation between game and narrative; ludology's formalism, in only caring about concerns like rule systems and procedurality (Bogost 2007), is limiting in its inability (or unwillingness) to interrogate *bodies*—both the bodies that are represented in gameworlds and the bodies of players themselves. Indeed, Aarseth discusses the body of Lara Croft, the main character of the *Tomb Raider* franchise, in a way that demonstrates this lack of concern: "[T]he dimensions of Lara Croft's body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently…When I play, I don't even see her body, but see through it and past it" (48). The brushing aside of Lara Croft's body actively ignores the inscribing of bodies and fetishizing and objectifying of women's bodies. Aarseth's contention also actively ignores the comprehensive consideration of the body that other modes of analysis (especially feminist analysis) afford. Thus, ludology's game formalism enacts not only an erasure of narrative analysis but an erasure of *feminist* analysis as well, and ludologists make use of this form of erasure—this effort to make other forms of study marginalized and peripheral—in an effort to legitimize their own form of study in academia. And by doing so, ludology thus enacts the erasure of members of the gaming community whose bodies are already at risk.

2.3   Intersectional Feminist Theory: Centralizing Embodied Positionalities

Intersectional feminist praxis pushes back against this erasure, and Lisa Nakamura specifically points out the need for intersectional modes of analysis when interrogating digital visual culture. Nakamura argues that this need arises from the nature of digital spaces:

> Rather than a "digital divide" that definitively separates information haves from have-nots, the Internet has occasioned a wide range of access to digital visual capital, conditioned by factors such as skill and experience in using basic Internet functions such as "search" in addition to less-nuanced questions such as whether or not one possesses access at all. While earlier racial formation theory assumed that viewers were subject to media depictions or racial projects that contributed to racialization, and that these projects were ongoing and differential but nonetheless worked in a more or less one-way fashion, new media can look to an increasingly vital digital cultural margin or counterculture for resistance. (*Digitizing Race* 18)

Because of the wide-range of access to "digital visual capital," Nakamura argues that an effective mode of resistance is intersectional feminist work: "Intersectional critical methods are vital here; digital visual culture critique needs to read both race and gender as part of mutually constitutive formations" (18).

It is important to stress, here, that intersectional feminist theorizing and praxis arise from the work of women of color (i.e. Collins 2000; Davis 1981; hooks 2000; Lorde 1984), and Kimberlé Crenshaw first introduced this term in the 1980s. Crenshaw argues that the "intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" ("Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" 140), and thus feminist and antiracist work needs to interrogate racism, sexism, and patriarchy because "[t]he praxis of both should be centered on the life chances and life situations of people who should be cared about without regard to the source of their difficulties" (166). Crenshaw also argues that praxis that centers on the life situations of people works off the "view that the social power in delineating difference need not be the power of domination; it can instead be the source of social empowerment and reconstruction" ("Mapping the Margins" 1242). Intersectional feminism "highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (1245), and intersectional feminist theorizing "argues that racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing…and that a political response to each form of subordination must at the same time be

a political response to both" (1283). As such, Crenshaw highlights the ways intersectional projects must interrogate "the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others" and must work to "unveil the processes of subordination and the various ways those processes are experienced by people who are subordinated and people who are privileged by them" (1296). Intersectional feminist work, then, must consider not only "the existence of the categories" but also "the particular values attached to them and the way those values foster and create social hierarchies" (1297). And, as Crenshaw contends, "Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics" (1299).

Black feminists have contributed to this conversation regarding intersectional feminist praxis by working to expand Crenshaw's discussion of the need to acknowledge and ground difference and by working to provide additional definitions and frameworks. For Patricia Hill Collins, intersectionality is the place "where intersecting oppressions meet" and she specifically identifies "heterosexism, class, race, nation, and gender" as sites in which "systems of oppression converge" (128). Collins underscores the idea that intersectional models "remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice…Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression" (18). bell hooks, too, articulates this point in her assertion that institutionalized sexism "has never determined in an absolute way the fate of all women in this society" (5). And Audre Lorde extends this conversation by highlighting the need to interrogate the "very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation" (115). This misnaming, as it is often enacted by white feminists, often occurs through the homogenizing use of the term *sisterhood*, which Lorde explains is implemented by white feminists who "focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist" (116).

These discussions of problematic models of identity have been further extended by additional discussions of intersectionality in feminist spaces, and Jasbir Puar complicates the

conversation on intersectionality through her discussion of the model of the *assemblage*. Puar argues that the concept of the assemblage transcends the "limitations of intersectional identitarian models" (204), which is why she prefers the assemblage model over intersectionality: "As opposed to an intersectional model of identity, which presumes that components—race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, religion—are separable analytics and can thus be disassembled, an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency" (212). Puar also argues that intersectionality "demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time" (212), while assemblages "allow us to attune to movements, intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, and textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities" (215). As a result of its fluidity and movement, assemblage "allows for becoming beyond or without being" (216). In this way, Puar makes use of the concept of the assemblage as a call for feminist scholars to continue to conceive of new, more fluid models for becoming, to continue to work toward the "fantastical wonders of futurity" (222), not only to dismantle hegemonic structures of power but also the appearance of such structures within feminist thought itself.

Chandra Mohanty, like Lorde, disrupts hegemonic structures within feminist thought by problematizing models based on essentialist constructions of universal sisterhood. She argues for feminist praxis that centers solidarity instead of sisterhood and defines "solidarity in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together" (7). As a result, issues of "[d]iversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances" (7). Universal sisterhood, on the other hand, is not structured on the basis of the respect of difference but is rather produced "through specific assumptions about women as a cross-culturally singular, homogeneous group with…similar experiences" (110). As such, universal sisterhood as a feminist model is one based on erasure instead of inclusion, and it erases through the privileging of "white, Western, middle-class" women's positionalities (110). To disrupt such erasure—erasure that occurs in the name of feminism—Mohanty argues for a model that centers on the idea of *"coalition* as the basis to talk about the cross-cultural commonality of struggles, identifying survival, rather than shared

oppression, as the ground for coalition" (117). Survival is the goal of coalitions based on feminist solidarity models, models that allow feminist practice to begin "building feminist solidarities across the divisions of place, identity, class, work, belief" (250). The importance of building solidarity is due to the need to disrupt feminist structures that perpetuate privilege and erasure instead of dismantling them.

Mohanty defines her goals for disruption as *feminism without borders*, a term that she uses to "stress that our most expansive and inclusive visions of feminism need to be attentive to borders while learning to transcend them" (2). But she also stresses, "Feminism without borders is not the same as 'border-less' feminism" (2). This is because feminism without borders (unlike border-less feminism) acknowledges difference and conflict—it envisions "change and social justice work across these lines of demarcation and division" (2). Thus, feminism without borders is feminism that does not include "silences and exclusion" and that allows for the "emancipatory potential of crossing through, with, and over these borders in our everyday lives" (2). Puar and Mohanty both provide examples of the ways intersectional feminist thought has and can be extended in order to enact feminism without borders. Such discussions, too, more fully interrogate the impact of intersecting systems of oppression on bodies. Intersectionality reminds us of these bodies, and as Nakamura explains, intersectional feminist analysis is required when interrogating digital visual culture—of which video game culture is a part—because of our intersecting existences in digital spaces.

Of course, many scholars are already doing the work of unpacking digital bodies and existences (i.e., Hobson 2012; Nakamura 2015). For example, Leora Tanenbaum discusses the the Internet's role in intensifying how women's bodies are policed by specifically examining the cyberbullying and slut-shaming strategies used against teenage girls. Tanenbaum explains that, because of the Internet, the "experience of being labeled a slut is heightened and sharpened like never before. In today's electronic age, 'slut' is an identity with no escape" (16). Thus, what Tanenbaum terms *slut-bashing* demonstrates (as do my own experiences with slut-bashing) the Internet's intensification of violences against women, for while slut-bashing and slut-shaming are not new practices, the Internet has "enabled [them] to envelop girls' lives…Disconnecting from the Internet isn't a viable solution, since that means disconnecting from social life completely. Besides, with teachers increasingly integrating technology into their classroom and homework assignments, disconnecting is not even a choice a girl is permitted to make" (62). As

Tanenbaum's analysis shows, our digital lives have become inexorably linked to our overall existences and adds complexity to our already complex identities and experiences. Because of these complexities, intersectional feminist praxis provides a beneficial and productive framework through which to analyze complex digital existences.

Game studies, in particular, is a field that requires such praxis because video game culture is so digitally entrenched. Rob Cover argues that game studies requires this kind of praxis in order to "point to the very complex 'assemblage' between bodies, gaming, technologies, socialities, and relational engagements that may occur in both local and digitally defined spaces but primarily also outside of it…An assemblage basis allows us to approach and apprehend an ethical perspective grounded on bodies, no matter where those bodies might be" (37). Using methodological frameworks like assemblages and intersectionality afford a particularly generative lens through which to interrogate the material entanglements of technology and culture: "Linkages, communicative flows, collective actions, and activities over global spaces that come to resemble machines, temporary sites of group-work, in a disunified series of systems and flows becomes not only normative in the everyday engagement of embodied subjects with others but produces meanings in ways that mutually define bodies and technologies" (40). In other words, game studies requires intersectional feminist work in order to untangle and unpack our existences in gaming spaces, interrogate gaming bodies, and make seen those in the gaming world who are often unseen.

2.4   Feminist Game Studies: Disrupting Hegemonic Thought in Game Studies

This is the kind of work undertaken by feminist game studies, and intersectional feminist thought helps construct the space, work, theory, praxis, and activism of the field. Nina Huntemann says that feminist game studies specifically works to "confront toxic gamer culture" by "documenting, archiving, analyzing, and responding to sexism, racism, ageism, and homophobia in games and game spaces." But she also addresses the challenges and resistance that scholars in feminist game studies face when engaging in this kind of disruptive work, explaining that "feminist attention to video games and game culture is threatening" to those "who wield gender, race, class, sexuality, ability and other forms of social power in order to intimidate, silence, and oppress others" in gaming spaces. Huntemann points out that the "mere

suggestion that these cultural products are not the domains of white, heterosexual men unleashes a torrent of vicious border policing."

Jennifer Malkowski and Treaandrea M. Russworm importantly point out that this border policing occurs not only in the larger culture of video games but in the ways games are studied as well. The discipline of game studies itself privileges certain forms of knowledge production in the field, and while the "discipline itself has grown rapidly…for most of game studies' history, conversations about identity have only ever happened on the margins." Game studies has systemically marginalized analyses that consider identity, representation, and embodiment—in other words, the kind of analyses in which feminist game studies scholars often engage—because "representational analysis becomes the less rigorous, less medium-specific way to approach video games, compared to a focus on 'hard-core' elements" like rule systems, coding, game mechanics, and software. But the disciplinary and epistemological privileging that occurs in game studies, Malkowski and Russworm argue, "misunderstand both the nature and importance of representation in the medium. It is both possible and essential to study representation productively in video games, even as this pursuit might initially seem poorly aligned with the ontology of video games (built as they are on processes and actions) or with disciplinary trends toward areas like code and platform studies."

Malkowski and Russworm centralize three "beliefs about representation and game studies" in order to counter these misconceptions regarding representational analysis. They argue, first, that "representation is not fully separate from the implicitly hardcore elements of games: it is achieved through and dependent on player and machine actions, on code, and on hardware, not just on surface-level images and sounds" Secondly, they explain that "games still prominently include images and sounds (and plot, characters, language, etc.); having code underlying these elements does not negate their existence or impact, and game studies should be comprehensive enough to welcome their analysis." Finally, they note that "the field would prove itself dangerously out of touch if it did not attend meaningfully to representation in this moment when representation, identity, and their intertwined relationship in games and game culture have become (or, rather, have been revealed as) such high-stakes matters" after events like Gamergate. Thus, through these premises, Malkowski and Russworm argue, "[A] focus on race, gender, and sexuality need not exclude other factors of production, and we believe that such analysis must be accountable to the medium-specificity of video games." The importance of this mode of analysis

is due to the need to counter the ways "[r]epresentation and identity have often been sidelined in game studies." In short, Malkowski and Russworm display the need to disrupt the epistemological privileging and hegemonic knowledge production that occurs in game studies; they display the need, then, for game studies scholarship that centralizes representational analysis because "[r]epresentation in game studies must be viewed as a system that functions as akin to—rather than as a distraction from—the discipline's more celebrated, hard-core objects of study."

This is where feminist game studies becomes helpful as a field that explores the complexity of intersecting systems. Mia Consalvo, for one, interrogates the potential contributions of the field, and she argues that feminist game studies demonstrates "the usefulness of research and particularly how it can help to give us a firm foundation on which to stand in order to shed light on the persistence of particular issues, point to historical solutions for overcoming similar difficulties, and thereby push for a more welcoming kind of game culture for everyone—not simply girls and women players" ("Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture"). Feminist game studies problematizes video game culture, disrupts its definitions of who gets to be a gamer and what gets to be a game, and disrupts game studies' definitions of who gets to be a scholar and what gets to be studied. And if we think of feminist game studies as a field that dismantles and disrupts the power structures that exist within video game culture, game studies, and the gaming community, disrupting hegemonically constructed gaming identities and embodiment seem like good places to start, which is something that Adrienne Shaw also argues in her assertion "that critical perspectives, such as feminist and queer theory, offer an approach to video games that can focus more attention on the lived experiences of those who engage with these games outside the dominant audience construction—indeed outside of identifying as gamers—and make an argument for representation that takes seriously those perspectives" ("On Not Becoming Gamers"). Kishonna Gray, like Shaw, calls for and works to enact analysis that takes seriously those perspectives, and she seeks to "highlight an often overlooked aspect of gaming and that's examining the margins where women and people of color game on a regularly basis" (*Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live*). Gray explains that by "examining video game content through the eyes of the marginalized, by highlighting the virtual gaming experiences of minorities, and by interrogating possible solutions to intersecting oppressions," her critical perspective and analysis of representation, race, gender, and intersecting oppressions in gaming spaces is "a much needed addition to the theoretical examination of video games." To be sure,

such analysis is much needed in the field of game studies, and while many challenges to this kind of work still exist, feminist and critical race scholars like Shaw, Gray, Consalvo, and others are already providing inroads into centralizing such praxis in game studies.

Alex Layne and Samantha Blackmon also display the ways feminist game studies' inroads into the interrogation of representation in games and player interaction. Layne and Blackmon explain that feminist analysis of the relationship between player and game is needed because this "player-game relationship is complex and it is not nearly as static as some theories of game studies that focus on the mechanics or the procedures may suggest (such as Procedural Rhetoric and other theories that focus on algorithms)." In this way, feminist game studies scholars have an active role in the construction of games:

> As we play, read, interact, discuss, rant, narrate, research, and fictionalize, we change the narrative of the game. As feminists, the more we engage in this kind of narrative changing, the more likely we will be able to encourage players to both demand better games and read games more critically. By becoming part of the discourse of gaming, feminist reads will be central to how everyone experiences the games themselves. The more voices there are that demand recognition for female players, better heroines, and princesses that save themselves, the more the games industry will have to take this audience into account or be left behind.

Feminist research on games claims space not only in game studies but also in video game culture and the gaming industry at large. It does so by being enacted in a multiplicity of ways—both intersectionally and interdisiplinarily—in order to seek change and to create "a safe environment for women," people of color, and LGBTQI individuals who "are looking for an ingress into the larger video gaming community." Layne and Blackmon believe that, while violent resistance and reactions to these feminist efforts "will likely continue for the foreseeable future, we believe it is encouraging to see just how many ways women are enacting change and just how members (of various and varying ilks) of the larger gaming community are positively responding to the disruption of the traditional notion of narratives—narratives in the games themselves and narratives surrounding the games."

Adrienne Shaw explains that this kind of work—feminist game studies' disruptive interrogation of representation and embodiment in video game culture—is needed in order to "contextualize the sexism, racism, homophobia, and other biases of game culture within broader

systems of oppression" (*Gaming at the Edge* 2), and this mode of contextualization engages more fully with the idea that "[v]iolences in games, game culture, and the gaming industry are not unique to gaming" (2). Feminist game studies, unlike the games formalism of ludology, which seeks to treat "gaming as an isolated realm" (3), contextualizes the "oppressive behavior within mainstream gamer cultures" (3). As such, feminist game studies unsettles the isolationism of games formalism and argues that "to treat representation in games as being just about games, to do the same for any medium for that matter, fails to account for the ways in which violence against queers (homo- or bisexual or not), women (cisgendered or queer or not), and people of color (queer or not, cisgendered women or not) exists everywhere, in all media, and in all institutions of power" (3). Thus, significant work in feminist game studies is already being done in order to put video games and gaming culture in conversation with other mediums, forms, and spaces as a means of unsettling the network of oppression that marginalized groups—and bodies—systemically face in these spaces. However, as scholars like Blackmon, Consalvo, Malkowski, Russworm, and more consistently stress, and as Shaw points out, feminist work in game studies continues to face challenges in its efforts to centralize the need for "[r]esearchers, as well as producers and players, [to] be cognizant of the ideologies encoded into video games" (*Gaming at the Edge* 226).

2.5   Erasure on the Holodeck: Gatekeeping and Epistemological Privileging in Game Criticism

Ian Bogost, a game studies scholar at the Georgia Institute of Technology, has made a variety of arguments regarding how he believes games should be studied—and he makes the argument that we should think of games as "[p]rocedural systems…based on rule-based models" that create "meaning through the interaction of algorithms" (*Persuasive Games* 4). Thus, Bogost's perspectives on video games and game studies are aligned with the games formalism of ludology, and this line of thinking continues on in some of his most recent writing as a contributing editor at *The Atlantic*. In his 2015 article "Video Games Are Better Without Characters" (an antagonistic title that perhaps reveals Bogost's motivation to generate conversation through tremors of controversy in the gaming community), Bogost frames his arguments through the example of *SimCity*, a game that he says "was a radical way of thinking about video games: as non-fictions about complex systems bigger than ourselves. It changed

games forever—or it could have, had players and developers not later abandoned modeling systems at all scales in favor of representing embodied, human identities." Through such a framework, Bogost reveals the ways he often thinks about video games in a system of binaries—games (that is, *all* games), from his point of view, can either model systems *or* represent embodied characters but not both and certainly not at the same time. Bogost privileges systems over bodies, and according to his binaristic mode of argumentation, modeling systems is the best way for games to counter the ways they are "often cast aside as vulgar and flagrantly violent. They're maligned as pointless drivel serving no purpose and simultaneously criticized for encouraging outrageous, irresponsible behavior and delinquency. Some will concede, at best, that video games offer harmless distraction, like the idle dream of being a professional football player." Bogost's motivation for making these arguments parallel those of Frasca, Aarseth, and other ludologists—he seeks to establish rigor and legitimacy for games by highlighting their mechanical properties and rejecting their representational, embodied ones.

Bogost resists other scholars' calls for better representation in games by asking what he calls "an unpopular question": "Why must we have characters in games at all? Or, more gently put, why have we assumed that the only or primary path to video-game diversity and sophistication lies in its representation of individuals as opposed to systems and circumstances? In truth, we've all but abandoned the work of systems and behaviors in favor of the work of individuals and feelings." Again, Bogost frames this as an either/or scenario—one in which games can either focus on systems *or* on representation. He argues that focusing on representation is something games should simply avoid because other mediums and forms do it better:

> The assumption that games are a medium of individual identification that would provide self expression and personal validation…is an unexamined ideology. Why not ask, at least, why we should bother? Other narrative media succeed more often and more profoundly at producing identification and empathy with individuals of our own creed, color, gender, and sexual identification—or with those of other identifications. Sure, film and literature and television also have problems with representation, but their character-driven narratives match well to their forms. Yet, alas, at their best, game characters and game stories are still mostly like bad books and films and television, but with button pressing. Perhaps

the only reason not to let these other media do the work they do best is if we fancy

games a world unto itself, a private media ecosystem.

This argument, quite frankly, seems to stem from a place of indolent avoidance—that is, because representation is difficult, because narrative is challenging, Bogost seems to think that games should simply avoid these things (instead of the industry putting in the time and effort to get better at them) and that games can solve this challenging problem by separating themselves from these other forms, by becoming a "private media ecosystem." In other words, Bogost argues for "another way to think about games," a way that asks, instead, "What if the real fight against monocultural bias and blinkeredness does not involve the accelerated indulgence of identification, but the abdication of our own selfish, individual desires in the interest of participating in systems larger than ourselves?"

Bogost's arguments here, ultimately, are rooted in privilege—the privilege of thinking that representation and identification are selfish temptations and indulgences (because, for a cis white man, characters with whom to identify are abundant and plentiful). Bogost especially reveals this privilege in his claim that these concerns are not as important as many contend: "It is an extravagance to worry only about representation of our individual selves while more obvious forces threaten them with oblivion—commercialism run amok; climate change; wealth inequality; extortionate healthcare; unfunded schools; decaying infrastructure; automation and servitude." This line of thinking, one that is, again, rooted in privilege, enacts a form of erasure; by referring to the desire for representational equity as an "extravagance" because, from Bogost's point of view, there are "more obvious forces" that threaten us with oblivion, Bogost reveals that he does not understand or even care about the kind of ontological oblivion that marginalized people endure when they are not represented, when their bodies are not seen, when their voices are not heard. Bogost also does not seem to understand that these various threats— whether they are about representation or climate change—are not hierarchically organized but rather a network of oppression, violence, and threat that exist concurrently and that, thus, need to be examined and interrogated in conversation with each other. Bogost's reasoning, which, again, parallels the games formalism of ludology, is thus insidious in the ways it deprivileges, delegitimizes, erases, and silences certain modes (namely, representational and embodied) of analysis in order to bolster and legitimize his own.

Bogost has continued these efforts even more recently in a 2017 article entitled "Video Games Are Better Without Stories" (a titling convention that, again, reveals the repetitive patterning of Bogost's antagonistic and essentializing mode of argumentation). While in the previous article Bogost frames his arguments through the lens of *SimCity*, here he frames his discussion through the construct of the Holodeck:

> A longstanding dream: Video games will evolve into interactive stories, like the ones that play out fictionally on the Star Trek Holodeck. In this hypothetical future, players could interact with computerized characters as round as those in novels or films, making choices that would influence an ever-evolving plot. It would be like living in a novel, where the player's actions would have as much of an influence on the story as they might in the real world.

But, again, Bogost argues that this dream is one that video games should abandon because, as Bogost contends, "alas, the best interactive stories are still worse than even middling books and films. That's a problem to be ignored rather than solved. Games' obsession with story obscures more ambitious goals anyway." In other words, for Bogost, the desire to construct compelling narratives is an *unambitious* goal, one that games should simply ignore. But more than this, Bogost highlights specific video game narratives as being unambitious—namely, *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch*, both of which are games about young women exploring their deserted family homes. For example, Bogost calls *Gone Home* "the video-game equivalent of young-adult fiction. Hardly anything to be ashamed of, but maybe much nothing to praise, either. If the ultimate bar for meaning in games is set at teen fare, then perhaps they will remain stuck in a perpetual adolescence even if they escape the stereotypical dude-bro's basement. And of *What Remains of Edith Finch*, Bogost simply asks, "Why does this story need to be told as a video game?"

It seems telling that Bogost specifically targets games that center on young female protagonists in order to deprivilege what he calls the "teen fare" of video game narratives. In this way, the "perpetual adolescence" that Bogost sees in games is not embodied by the "stereotypical dude-bro" that he mentions but by the young women represented in these game narratives. Thus, in this argument, Bogost concurrently devalues narrative, young adult fiction, and the women represented in such stories. And he does this, again, by constructing a hierarchy of ambition for games: "Yes, sure, you can tell a story in a game. But what a lot of work that is,

when it's so much easier to watch television, or to read." Instead, he claims, a "greater ambition" for games would be "to show the delightful curiosity that can be made when stories, games, comics, game engines, virtual environments—and anything else, for that matter—can be taken apart and put back together again unexpectedly." Thus, because, for Bogost, because telling stories is "a lot of work," work that he sees as somehow less ambitious (even though, according to his argumentation, it requires more labor) than modeling systems, Bogost ultimately argues, "To dream of the Holodeck is just to dream a complicated dream of the novel" and games should instead "abandon the dream of becoming narrative media and pursue the one they are already so good at: taking the tidy, ordinary world apart and putting it back together again in surprising, ghastly new ways."

Upon first glance, especially for readers of *The Atlantic* who may not be fully embedded in game studies scholarship, using the framework of the "longstanding dream" of the Holodeck may not seem problematic; however, Bogost's use of the construct of the Holodeck is insidious and duplicitous, and this is due to the fact that he is coopting this framework from Janet Murray without citing her or acknowledging her original contribution. Indeed, Murray's 1997 book *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* is Murray's major contribution to the field of game studies. It is a book of which Bogost is most surely aware, not only because of his embeddedness in game studies but also because he and Murray *both* teach in the School of Literature, Media, and Communication at the Georgia Institute of Technology. For Bogost to discuss the "longstanding dream" of the Holodeck without acknowledging that this is *Murray's* longstanding dream, for Bogost to argue that this dream is unambitious and should be abandoned without transparently putting his arguments in conversation with Murray's is not simply unethical in its problematic citation practices (or lack thereof) but also actively functions as a form of erasure—an effort to erase Murray's contributions from the field of game studies and to silence her voice. These efforts to silence Murray's voice is quite literally underscored by actions undertaken by Bogost on Twitter in the days immediately following the publication of the "Video Games Are Better Without Stories" article; as Janet Murray explains in a Twitter post, Bogost "blocked [her] from his twitter [sic] feed" (@JanetMurray). In this way, Bogost seeks to block Murray from participating in conversations surrounding games—just as he seeks to block women's stories in games like *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch* from attaining legitimacy in video game culture. This instance of erasure is not unusual in Bogost's work in

game studies in general, and Tara McPherson, in her critique of Bogost's arguments elsewhere, argues that Bogost "tends here and elsewhere to equate human politics with a narrow version of identity politics, obscuring decades of feminist or queer-of-color theory that think gender, race, and other vectors of difference far beyond the terrain of essentialism" (88). Bogost's overall efforts to obscure and erase, then, function as a form of gatekeeping and epistemological privileging and policing in game studies and gaming spaces.

2.6   Claiming Space: The Continued Need for Feminist Game Studies

In *Gaming at the Edge*, Adrienne Shaw briefly addresses the ludology/narratology debate, arguing that "most games scholars now seem to accept that the best way to study video games lies somewhere between the ludology/narratology divide" (37). In other words, Shaw believes that most game studies scholars have moved past this debate, and she contends that most scholars recognize that games "do not exist in a 'ludological vacuum'" (37). However, as Bogost's recent arguments regarding games, characters, and stories reveal, this debate is still ongoing, and there are still those (like Bogost) in game studies scholarship who argue for games formalism and essentialism—there are still those who problematically believe that games *should* exist in a ludological vacuum, that games should not tell stories, that representation should not matter. But there are many concerning problems with this perspective. For one, representation *does* matter, especially for those who do not see themselves represented in games, for those who do not see their bodies on the screen—and representation matters, Shaw explains, because it "provides evidence of what could be and who can be possible" (41). Thus, the ludological argument that representation is a concern that games should ignore enacts a form of double erasure of the voices and bodies of marginalized members of the gaming community who have already been marginalized by a lack of representation in the first place. What is also concerning is the manner in which ludological arguments seek legitimacy by erasing not only these marginalized bodies but also the (often already marginalized) scholarship of others—and not just the scholarship of people who see value in narrative but also the scholarship of women (like Murray) in the gaming community. This, of course, is especially revealed in the efforts Bogost has taken to coopt Murray's framework of the Holodeck without attributing her for her ideas and in the efforts he has taken to block her on Twitter—all efforts motivated by the desire to silence her, erase her, and ignore her in order to bolster his own perspectives on games. Ludological

argumentation enacts an intersecting network of oppression and marginalization in order to render (doubly) peripheral the concerns of marginalized members of the gaming community and the field of game studies.

This is why feminist game studies praxis is needed; that is, because ludological games formalism continues on in game studies, feminist game studies scholarship is required in order to untangle the intersecting forms of erasure, silencing, and privileging that occurs in video game culture and the study of it. T. L. Taylor explains that feminist game studies scholarship creates space for games research that interrogates "the interrelation between technology and social practice" as well as "how technological systems co-construct experience, including how forms of social control and order get embodied in systems" (*Watch Me Play* 12). Feminist game studies also makes room for the analysis of the intersection of game and story:

> Games have become a central way that we tell stories embedded in larger systems of belief and interaction across cultures, and their recurring conventions, themes, player rituals and actions, and music may function as a means of mythmaking. Theories borrowed from literature, television, and film studies do not fully address the psychological, social, and mythic power of games. The emerging generation of game theorists recognizes the role that digital games play as a distinctive cultural artifact and have begun to theorize about player agency, identity, and rules within a community of play. (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 4)

Feminist game studies research dismantles and disrupts not only the problems of representation that occur within video game narratives but also the structures of power within the gaming industry and the field of game studies. Feminist game studies sheds light on the bodies at risk in gaming spaces and to make these bodies seen. Feminist game studies provides the intersectional strategies required to dismantle the hegemonic knowledge production that ludologists seek to perpetuate through their games formalism and game essentialism. Thus, feminist game studies allows us to seek change, and these efforts toward change, Janet Murray says, are goals she learned from the feminist movement: "I learned from the feminist movement that some truths about the world are beyond the reach of a particular art form at a particular moment in time. Before the novel could tell the stories of women who did not wind up either happily married or dead, it would have to change in form as well as in content" (*Hamlet on the Holodeck* 4). This is why feminist game studies' analysis is necessary—feminist game studies imagines new

possibilities for representation and new models of existence and futurity in game studies, video game culture, and the gaming community.

CHAPTER 3.   FEMINIST WORLDBUILDING: IDENTIFYING INTERSECTIONAL METHODOLOGIES IN FEMINIST GAME STUDIES[1]

3.1   Pluralistic (Re)Imaginings: Enacting Feminist Alternatives through Intersectional Methods

The ludology/narratology debate examined in the previous chapter demonstrates that, while the field of game studies has worked to establish itself as an independent field, one autonomously bounded off from other fields of study (Bogost 2007; Frasca 1999), the conversation occurring between game studies and other fields (such as the field of literary studies) requires additional consideration, especially regarding the implications such blurred, interdisciplinary conversations have for methodological approaches to the analysis of games. Feminist game studies encourages intersectional methodologies in the study of games and looks toward feminist studies at large (i.e.., Haraway 1991) in order to consider how and why such approaches might be utilized in feminist game studies scholarship (Consalvo 2012; Shaw 2014).

Nina Lykke argues that feminist studies requires "theoretical diversity and methodological pluralism" and encourages readers to think of feminist studies as "a field of knowledge production characterized by diversity, fluctuation, fluidity and change" (3). This chapter enacts such pluralistic knowledge production through the interrogation of intersectional feminist praxis in game studies and literary spaces in order to explore the intersections of criticism, production, and community. I specifically interrogate the interdisciplinary conversation between feminist game studies criticism and feminist SF criticism in order to consider the ways both fields imagine alternatives to patriarchal structures. I also examine the ways both fields' methodologies legitimize their epistemological claims in academic spaces that view such criticism as peripheral. In doing so, I assess the implications this conversation has for the implementation of intersectional feminist methodologies across academic spaces; as such, through the examination of the intersection of games and literature, I assess the ways intersectional feminist methodologies can dismantle boundaries, claim space, and make room for

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[1] A previous version of this chapter is located in volume 2, issue 2 of *Transmissions: Journal of Film and Media* as "Feminist Worldbuilding: Intersectional Methodologies in Feminist SF Criticism and Feminist Game Studies."

criticism and production that centralizes the importance of inclusivity and intersectional positionalities and methodologies.

Further, I argue feminist games studies can look to the scholarship that has occurred within feminist science fiction as a means of considering effective frameworks for the feminist interrogation of games, for such frameworks require collaboration, collectivity, and coalition. I also contend that feminist science fiction especially challenges patriarchal inscriptions of gender and labor, and, as such, Both feminist SF and feminist SF criticism reveal the varied methodologies through which we might critique patriarchal configurations of gender while imagining alternative configurations that destabilize patriarchal hegemony. As such, an engagement with feminist science fiction allows for an interrogation of the ways feminist game studies might draw from feminist science fiction in order to imagine alternative configurations as well. Feminist game studies can look to feminist SF and feminist SF criticism's use of intersectional feminist worldbuilding in order to implement such worldbuilding as a methodological tool. Ultimately, I argue that intersectional methods are a form of feminist worldbuilding because these efforts allow feminist work to disrupt and dismantle patriarchal structures through the (re)imagining of feminist alternatives—that is, through the building of feminist worlds.

3.2   Fluid Frameworks, Multiple Lenses: Defining Intersectional Feminist Methodologies

Nina Lykke examines the multiplicity of intersectional feminist methods and argues that, while conversations regarding epistemologies, methodologies, and methods often intersect, it is important to note the differences between these terms:

> A common distinction between *epistemology* and *methodology* is that the former deals with *criteria* for what constitutes scientific and scholarly knowledge, while the latter focuses on *rules, principles* and *procedures* for the production of knowledge. Distinct from methodology, *methods* relates to the *concrete approaches* chosen to carry out a particular piece of research. Since the process and the product of research—and issues concerning choice of approaches, methodological underpinnings of this choice and criteria for how a desirable outcome of the research can be reached—are so closely related, these issues are often discussed together. (144)

While these issues are often discussed together, methods and methodologies are often not the focal points of these conversations, and so they require additional feminist theorizing so that feminist researchers can better interrogate the approaches and procedures used in the production of feminist knowledge. Lykke also argues that feminist epistemologies, methodologies, and methods all require *pluralism*—because "it is more or less self-evident that this entails a great deal of diversity when methods are to be chosen" in any feminist work (160). Feminist methods and methodologies—feminist approaches and procedures—rely on and result in pluralistic approaches to knowledge production, and *intersectional* feminist methodologies specifically result in such epistemological pluralism.

Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge detail some of the defining characteristics of intersectional approaches, and then investigate "intersectionality's two organizational focal points, namely, *critical inquiry* and *critical praxis*" (31). Intersectionality as critical inquiry means that intersectional work criticizes "existing bodies of knowledge, theories, methodologies, and classroom practices, especially in relation to social inequality" (31), while critical praxis "refers to the ways in which people, either as individuals or as part of groups, produce, draw upon, or use intersectional frameworks in their daily lives…Intersectionality's critical praxis can occur anywhere, both inside and outside the academy" (32). As Collins and Bilge contend, intersectional methods do not simply work through solely critical inquiry *or* critical praxis; rather, it is important to engage with "the interconnections between the two" because this synergistic methodology "can produce important new knowledge and/or practices" (33).

Intersectional methods thus work in a similar fashion as Chela Sandoval's *methodology of the oppressed*, which she defines as "a shared theory and method of oppositional consciousness and social movement" (78), one established through "a set of processes, procedures, and technologies for decolonizing the imagination" (69). Sandoval argues that such methods, such "resistant activity" (72), requires the development and harnessing of "oppositional powers" and "a dissident globalization" (72). For Sandoval, the "shared vision" and "oppositional and coalitional politics" (72) of this methodology of the oppressed make use of "technologies of oppositional consciousness" that centralize the praxis, theories, and positionalities of "a racially diverse U.S. coalition of women of color" (182), which demonstrates "the procedures for achieving affinity and alliance across difference" (182). This kind of alliance that acknowledges and embraces difference allows for what Sandoval calls "revolutionary,

mobile, and global coalitions of citizen-activists who are allied through the apparatus of emancipation" (182).

Emancipatory coalition-building is the goal of intersectional methodologies as well. Mari Matsuda examines the significance of coalition-building for intersectional methods and contends that "the instrumental use of coalition-building to achieve certain political goals is merely the beginning of the worth of this method. The deeper worth of coalition is the way in which it constructs us as ethical beings and knowers of our world" (1184). Coalition-building as intersectional methodology also has epistemological ramifications, for, as Matsuda explains, when "we work in coalition…we compare our struggles and challenge one another's assumptions. We learn of the gaps and absences in our knowledge. We learn a few tentative, starting truths" (1188), and these truths allow us to "learn, finally and most importantly, that all forms of subordination are interlocking and mutually reinforcing" (1189). For Matsuda, what these intersectional methods actually look like is what she calls *asking the other question*: "When I see something that looks racist, I ask, 'Where is the patriarchy in this?' When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, 'Where is the heterosexism in this?'" (1189); asking such questions demonstrates that "[w]orking in coalition forces us to look for both the obvious and non-obvious relationships of domination, helping us to realize that no form of subordination ever stands alone" (1189). Thus, when we make use of intersectional methods like coalition-building and asking "the other question," we are able to more fully realize that "dismantling any one form of subordination is impossible without dismantling every other" (1189).

Because of this, Leslie McCall calls intersectionality "the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far" (1771). McCall also contends that feminist scholars need to apply "a wide range of methodological approaches to the study of multiple, intersecting, and complex social relations" (1772). As such, McCall identifies three methodological approaches for intersectional scholarship; the first of these is an *anticategorical* approach, which rejects categories because it is "based on a methodology that deconstructs analytical categories" (1773). Second, an *intercategorical*, approach uses categories strategically because it "requires that scholars provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions" (1773). And third, an *intracategorical*, approach lies somewhere between the first two approaches because it

both "interrogates the boundary-making and boundary-defining process itself" and "acknowledges the stable and even durable relationships that social categories represent at any given point in time, though it also maintains a critical stance toward categories" (1773). Intracategorical methods "tend to focus on particular social groups at neglected points of intersection…in order to reveal the complexity of lived experience within such groups" (1773). Ultimately, McCall argues that all three methods illustrate "that different methodologies produce different kinds of substantive knowledge and that a wider range of methodologies is needed to fully engage with the set of issues and topics falling broadly under the rubric of intersectionality" (1774).

While it may seem that this wide range of different methodologies might make intersectional approaches difficult to define and identify, Kathy Davis argues that it is "precisely the vagueness and open-endedness of 'intersectionality' [that] may be the very secret to its success" (69). Davis explains that there are four things that make an intersectional method successful—one of these is that it "speaks to a primary audience concern…This concern must, in fact, be so pervasive that in order to be successful at all, a theory will simply have to address it" (70). Another is that successful approaches must "make unexpected connections between unlikely events in ways that the audience could not have imagined before" (72). Successful methods must also "appeal to a broad academic audience, bridging the gap between theory generalists and specialists" (74). And finally, they are "inherently ambiguous and obviously incomplete" (76). Intersectionality, Davis argues, is comprised of all these elements, and these characteristics make intersectional methods successful because intersectionality does not "settle matters once and for all; [it opens] them up for further discussion and inquiry" (77). This ability to open up conversations is what Davis contends makes intersectionality "so productive for contemporary feminist scholarship" (77), because intersectionality "initiates a process of discovery, alerting us to the fact that the world around us is always more complicated and contradictory than we ever could have anticipated. It compels us to grapple with this complexity in our scholarship" (79). Intersectionality provides a methodological framework through which to grapple with complexity because, instead of compelling researchers to engage in a one-methodology-fits-all approach, it "stimulates our creativity in looking for new and often unorthodox ways of doing feminist analysis…[and] encourages each feminist scholar to engage

critically with her own assumptions in the interests of reflexive, critical, and accountable feminist inquiry" (79).

For Elizabeth McDermott, the need for critical and creative feminist inquiry means that "the way social categories are conceptualized, and the *purpose* of the empirical study which is important to developing the appropriate methodology for intersectional research" (240). Because the conceptualization of social categories and the purposes of intersectional research are multifaceted and multiplicitous, Umut Erel, et al., do not "believe that critical 'intersectionality' and other multi-issue theories require a specific method" (67). However, what does matter for intersectional methodologies is that feminist researchers "adopt two orientations: a commitment to theory and a reflection on positionality, both of which…have specific roots in the anti-racist feminisms of the 1980s and 1990s" (67).

It seems important, here, to make a distinction between intersectional methodologies and mixed methods research (MMR). Mixed methods research—or, what John Mingers and John Brocklesby call a *multimethodology*—is the combining of several methodologies in order to "make the most effective contribution in dealing with the richness of the real world" (489). In other words, mixed methods research, like intersectional research, utilizes "more than one methodology, or part thereof, possibly from different paradigms, within a single intervention. There are several ways in which such combinations can occur, each having different problems and possibilities" (491). However, while MMR makes use of multiple methodologies from different paradigms, there is no required orientation or purpose for such methods, and while "multimethodology does ask the user to consider the social and political context of any intervention it does not presuppose a particular stance on it" (507). This is where MMR differs from intersectional research, for intersectional methodologies are implemented for a particular purpose, with a particular stance. That is, unlike mixed methods research, the intersectional methodologies implemented in feminist research take a specifically antiracist stance and make use of epistemological and methodological pluralism in order to construct an oppositional consciousness and build revolutionary feminist coalitions.

While R. Burke Johnson, et al., note that "there might not be a single criterion of demarcation for mixed methods research" (112), they contend that the "primary philosophy of mixed research is that of pragmatism. Mixed methods research is, generally speaking, an approach to knowledge (theory and practice) that attempts to consider multiple viewpoints,

perspectives, positions, and standpoints (always including the standpoints of qualitative and quantitative research)" (113). Thus, for Johnson, et al., what is significant about mixed methods research is the combining of methods, or the "synthesis that includes ideas from qualitative and quantitative research" (113); the implementation of such methods is used "for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration" (123). For intersectional research, it is not simply the synthesis of methodological approaches that matters, and the purpose of such synthesis is not simply to allow for the pragmatic consideration of multiple viewpoints— although intersectional methods can and do work in these ways. However, intersectional methods go further than this in that intersectional research does not just consider multiple viewpoints but rather actively works to centralize and claim space for positions that have historically been marginalized or erased. In this way, intersectional methodologies, unlike MMR, is not pragmatic in orientation but is, instead, disruptive in purpose and scope, especially since such methods specifically build feminist coalitions.

Intersectionality's efforts (to revisit Kimberlé Crenshaw's phrasing) to "find expression in constructing group politics" ("Mapping the Margins" 1299) is what results in Nina Lykke's assertions that intersectionality emphasizes "pluralism in terms of methods not only as a characteristic of existing feminist research, but also as…an overarching guiding methodological principle when it comes to the choice of methods" because intersectional methodologies require feminist innovation that "emerges out of untraditional, non-authoritarian…approaches to existing theories, thinking technologies and tools" (161). Thus, intersectional feminist methodologies "take an anti-canonical stance" and emphasize methodological diversity and pluralism because such feminist work "unlocks fixed and stereotyped ideas and concepts of gender, sex, science and knowledge production" (3). Central to this understanding of intersectional feminist methods is "a belief in a politics of location and an epistemology of situated and partial knowledges. This implies that the landscape must always be understood as seen from a non-innocent somewhere, and that the author has an obligation to make herself accountable for her location in it" (4).

Donna Haraway similarly discusses an epistemology of situated knowledges and partial perspectives in her argument for a "doctrine of embodied objectivity" ("Situated Knowledges" 581). Haraway contends, "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see" (582). Intersectional feminist methodologies require this

understanding of situated knowleges because methodological pluralism implements "politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives" (589). Intersectional methodologies, then, incorporate and invoke "the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" (589).

3.3   The Reflexive View from a Body: The Role of the Intersectional Feminist Researcher

Because intersectional feminist work requires "the view from a body," one that is complex and contradictory, the role of the feminist researcher, then, is also complex and contradictory, situated and partial. This causes Lykke to define her position as feminist author as being "that of a *guide*; that is, as a person who shows readers around in a diverse landscape of feminist theories, epistemologies, methodologies, ethical reflections and writing practices" (4). Such a role, Lykke continues, requires the writer-as-guide to provide readers with knowledge that will allow them to "further explore the landscape on their own" without making universalizing prescriptions of "one interpretation or one particular way through the landscape as being 'the right one'" (4). Lykke stresses that the guide performs as one "who has her own opinions, passions and interpretations of the enchantments and attractions of the landscape" and who helps the reader "develop her or his own passions, interpretations and curiosity and to make her or his own choices of directions in which to move" (4).

I see my role, here, in my own writing, as having a similar function; in short, my goal in unpacking intersectional methodologies by tracing the methodological conversation between feminist SF criticism and feminist game studies—goals that are themselves rooted in intersectional feminist praxis—is to guide readers through the implementation of a multiplicity of methods, processes, and perspectives. My goal is to guide readers through the interrogation of intersectionality's methodological pluralism and its construction of the emerging field of feminist game studies as a space based on inclusivity, solidarity, and the acknowledgement and respect of different positionalities. In short, my goal is to guide readers through the inclusive space of feminist game studies to help readers explore intersectional feminist methodologies' modes of worldbuilding—in which worldbuilding can be understood as a way to imagine alternative modes of existence—because the pluralism and inclusivity of intersectional feminist

methodologies allows feminist writers to build worlds and imagine alternative spaces that disrupt hegemonic, patriarchal structures.

That said, I find it important, here, to also reflexively address my own positionality as a feminist researcher and to consider the ethical implications and responsibilities of my implementation of intersectional praxis—feminist praxis that comes from the work of black feminists—when I myself am a cisgender white woman. As Bonnie Moradi and Patrick R. Grzanka explain, the term "intersectionality is in danger of being coopted, depoliticized, and diluted, serving only as shorthand for 'multiple identities' or 'within group diversity'" (501). Ultimately, much of the cooptation, depoliticization, and dilution of intersectionality occurs when the term is wielded by white women and men (that is, white feminists) who use intersectional work in self-serving ways; they use the term *intersectionality* in an effort to make themselves appear inclusive and revolutionary, when in fact such usage only serves to reinforce a neoliberal, consumerist, capitalist status quo.

I want to make sure to more deeply and ethically engage with intersectional feminist praxis so that I do not reproduce and reinforce white, cisgender dilution and cooptation of intersectionality. Instead, I want to make sure that my work here "includes understanding how the field came to be (its roots and evolution), what content and themes characterize it, and how it is situated in current power structures and in relation to other fields" (501). In order to do so, I want now to unpack the following questions—who can use intersectionality as a term and practice? Why and how can non-black women (and non-women) claim intersectional research? How might we make use of feminist reflexivity and feminist citation practices to acknowledge, be cognizant of, and counter our own different privileges, biases, and positionalities? In short, how might researchers like myself make use of intersectional methods in responsible, ethical, productive, generative, inclusive ways?

Ann-Dorte Christensen and Sune Qvotrup Jensen grapple with some of the methodological challenges researchers need to consider in order to responsibly engage in intersectional feminist work. They warn "against the danger of treating class, gender, and ethnicity as if they function according to identical logics" (111), and they argue that, "forms of differentiation work differently, on both a structural and an identity level, and that they are all conditioned by power relations" (111). They also stress that "arguing for the differences in the ontology of the categories should not be taken to imply a hierarchization in terms of some forms

of differentiation being considered more real than others" (111). While Christensen and Jensen acknowledge that the "number of categories is a methodological challenge" (112), they ultimately contend that intersectional methods that center the importance of "life story narratives" (114) and that use "everyday life as a point of departure" (118) are ways to make the analysis of different categories more manageable, more strategic, and ultimately more successful in "empirically approaching not only constructions of identities but also the role that social structures play in people's lives" (114). Thus, writing about everyday life and life-story narratives—narratives that are both others' and my own—is one empirical approach that better acknowledges and grapples with the complex network of intersectional experiences.

Moradi and Grzanka provide some additional guidelines for intersectional research, explaining that such guidelines are needed since "[w]ith this exponential popularity of [intersectionality] comes the responsibility of reflecting on the present uses of intersectionality, its roots, and its promise" (500). Moradi and Grzanka call for "responsible stewardship" of intersectionality as well as intersectional praxis that "more thoroughly centralize[s] structural and systemic critiques of social inequalities and reflect[s] the social justice politics that are integral to intersectionality" (500). Moradi and Grzanka explain that responsible stewardship "emphasizes respect for intersectionality's foremothers and for their political priorities while encouraging opportunities for elaborating intersectionality in new communities and spaces" and also engages "with intersectionality's roots and promise shaped by U.S. Black feminist thought and activism…and multiracial feminism" (500). As such, responsible stewardship of intersectionality is "a responsibility of all scholars, not just 'diversity' scholars" (501) and is thus a helpful framework through which to consider how the expansion of intersectional praxis can be implemented in ethical, responsible ways.

Moradi and Grzanka lay out seven guidelines for the responsible stewardship of intersectionality. The first of these is to credit the "long and rich history [of black feminist activism and scholarship] and [acknowledge] the centrality of the call for coalition politics" and to make such citation practices substantive and not cursory (502). Moradi and Grzanka's second guideline is to challenge and evaluate privileged epistemologies by engaging in interdisciplinary collaborations and scholarship that "*integrate multiple tools and radical perspectives in conducting intersectional research, practice, teaching, and activism.*" (503). Their third guideline is to avoid working under the assumption that intersectionality only applies to *some*

people and to instead "consider the prototypes and dimensions of people's experiences that are in the foreground and in the background when invoking intersectionality and to commit to broadening these boundaries to a fuller understanding of people's experiences" (504). The fourth guideline stresses the need to use iterative, cumulative, creative, and diverse intersectional methods "rather than the purview of a single perfect study or a single perfect measure" (505); such methodological innovation, Moradi and Grzanka contend, allows researchers to "resist insular theory and research pipelines, critically integrate theories and concepts across axes of inequality, and use single- and multiple- axis measures in ways that more fully capture the intersections of multiple inequalities in people's lives" (506). Similar to their call for ensuring intersectional citation practices are not cursory, Moradi and Grzanka also call for demonstrating care and attention to the terminology and language used in intersectional work and to "replace identities conceptualizations and terminology with constructs and terms that explicitly and precisely name the underlying social inequalities and power dynamics that are a focus in intersectionality research, practice, teaching, and activism" (507). The sixth guideline is to not just implement intersectionality as a "unique form of categorical analysis, but as a comprehensive methodological framework for conceptualizing and evaluating all stages of the research process—including the shape, content, goals, and imagined outcomes of the project" (508). Moradi and Grzanka's seventh and final guideline is to conceptualize intersectional research and social justice activism as "[i]nextricable and [r]ecursive" (508) because "scholars can ultimately envision social justice as scholarship and scholarship as social justice" (509).

It is this recursivity between scholarship and social justice that makes me want to engage in intersectional praxis and to make use of Moradi and Grzanka's guidelines for responsible stewardship when doing so. As Moradi and Grzanka explain, intersectionality's popularity "represents an opportunity to reflect on the state of the stewardship of this concept, its roots, and its promise" (509). As someone who makes use of intersectional methods, it is important for me to reflect on my own stewardship. I strive to follow the guidelines that Moradi and Grzanka lay out in order to engage in responsible stewardship and scholarship—I strive to centralize intersectionality's roots in Black feminist thought by using substantive citational practices, and I strive to use language and terminology that is rooted in precision, nuance, and empathy. I strive to enact interdisciplinary scholarship in order to interrogate privileged epistemologies in the academy and video game culture. I strive to be more inclusive and innovative in my

intersectional work by applying my intersectional lens to a multiplicity of gaming spaces and bodies. And because I consider intersectional scholarship and social justice to be inexorably linked, I strive to make use of intersectional methodologies because I believe intersectional research processes can have a social impact. The social impact that I believe the intersectional methodologies of feminist game studies call for—a call that I, as a feminist game studies scholar who makes use of such methods, lend my voice to—is the construction of intersectional feminist worlds. Such intersectional space-making lies at the heart of intersectional worldbuilding, and it is toward conceptualizing feminist worldbuilding as an intersectional methodology that I now turn.

3.4   Constructing Social Blueprints: Building Worlds in Feminist Science Fiction and Feminist SF Criticism

When interrogating intersectional feminist methodologies and unpacking their potential for feminist worldbuilding, it seems only fitting to discuss feminist science fiction as an example of such work because, as Donna Haraway notes, "science fiction has been such a rich writing practice in recent feminist theory. I like to see feminist theory as a reinvented coyote discourse obligated to its sources in many heterogeneous accounts of the world" (594). For Haraway, then, feminist SF is a particular exemplar of this "reinvented coyote discourse" because of its ability to implement "heterogeneous accounts of the world" and to use these accounts as a way to (re)imagining of alternative feminist futurities—as a means, that is, of feminist worldbuilding. Alexis Lothian, in working to define and frame feminist science fiction's futurism—its reinvented coyote discourse—argues that the genre "is a world of imagination, but it is also just around the corner, always and almost already here." Lothian argues that this tension between nearness and distance means that if "our times are science fictional, then the feminisms they demand must be technological and ripe for speculation." Debra Benita Shaw contends that women writers make use of the genre of feminist science fiction to "expose the gender-biased ideology which informs what counts as scientific knowledge and to offer surprising and often revolutionary alternatives to the future visions of their male counterparts" (2). Thus, feminist science fiction has historically worked to challenged and disrupted epistemological claims in both scientific and literary knowledge production because such fiction has "a socially or

politically critical purpose" (2), a purpose that Marleen Barr says allows feminist SF to present "blueprints for social structures that allow women's words to counter patriarchal myths" (7).

Patricia Melzer similarly discusses the feminist value of this "particular narrative mode" (1). Melzer explains, "Two textual aspects that define science fiction are the structures and/or narrative devices that constitute its mode, on one hand, and themes and approaches on the other" (1). Some of the narrative devices that Melzer identifies are "the element of estrangement, or the confrontation of normative systems/perspectives, and the implication of new sets of norms that result in the factual reporting of fiction. Spatial and temporal displacement as well as absent paradigms that structure the reading process are typical for science fiction" (1). Melzer explains that these narrative elements, then, "shape the reading process" (2) through the thematic "exploration of socioeconomic relations, the conflicting elements of modernity and postmodernity played out in urban science fiction, the construction of nature and culture, and the implications of technology…on human relations and life in general" (2). Through these structural and thematic approaches, science fiction, Melzer contends, can "create 'blueprints' of social theories" and imagine "completely new social orders and ways of being that differ radically from human existence as we know it" (2).

Melzer explains that the reason science fiction is the genre we often turn to in order to imagine social change is because of the "combination of strangeness and familiarity that make up the particularities of the genre. This tension between the 'known' and the 'unknown' is at the heart of science fiction. It creates a reading process based on estrangement, which places familiar issues into strange territory…This estrangement also creates spaces of abstraction for theorizing" (3). Yet, this space for theorizing does not solely rely on estrangement, but, rather, it also requires *identification*—because, in science fiction, "we grow to know the protagonists and their world intimately" (3). This intimacy means that SF's "concept of theorizing grows from both the strategy of estrangement and the power of storytelling. Different forms of storytelling…are crucial tools for shaping cultural identities. As in other types of fiction, the 'realness' of science fiction narratives enables individuals (and groups) to relate to and recognize the debates as relevant to their own lives" (3).

Thus, the science fictional strategies of estrangement and identification are the *methods* that allow the genre of feminist science fiction, in particular, to be utilized as a crucial tool for

examining issues of gendered and race-based power and oppression, and Melzer traces the historical trajectory of the genre's concerns:

> While feminist science fiction in the 1960s and 1970s explored feminist resistance to women's oppression mainly through separatist societies (e.g., lesbian utopias) and/or reversal of gender roles (e.g., matriarchal societies), later feminist science fiction understands a disruption of gendered power less as a question of a simple role reversal (even though some narratives explore the ramifications of this) than of undermining and subverting that power (e.g., through the use of technology) and linking it to material relations. (8)

What is important about this history—this understanding of feminist SF's thematic concerns, structural and methodological strategies, and goals of resistance—is the fact that it reveals that "[d]iscussing science fiction's relationship to feminist thought recognizes popular culture's role in creating meaning through representation, and it acknowledges the spaces of agency located within the process of consuming and producing cultural texts" (34). Thus, Melzer contends that reading feminist SF in this way and interrogating its efforts to enact social and political change "does not diminish the pleasure aspect of consuming (and producing) cultural texts; instead, it understands imagination, narrative, and desire as part of feminist theorizing" (34).

Raffaella Baccolini argues that, as far as the popular-cultural feminist theorizing in "science fiction is concerned, the intersection of gender and genre has generated new, subversive literary forms" (15). One of the subversive contributions of feminist SF writers has been the questioning and disruption of patriarchal "discourses of traditional science fiction. Their novels have contributed to the breakdown of certainties and universalist assumptions about gendered identities: Themes such as the representation of women and their bodies, reproduction and sexuality, and language and its relation to identity, have all be tackled, explored, and reappropriated by these writers" (16). Such thematic disruption and resistance is also mirrored by feminist SF's disruption of genre convention and the ways feminist SF oppositionally blends "different genre conventions" (18), and this resistance puts forward the "notion of an *impure* science fiction genre, with permeable borders that allow contamination from other genres, that represents resistance to hegemonic ideology and renovates the resisting nature of science fiction and makes the new science fiction genre also *multi*-oppositional" (18). These are some of the ways that feminist SF builds worlds. Feminist SF constructs a new science fiction genre that is

fluid, impure, permeable, and hybrid, and this impure genre builds new worlds in order to oppose patriarchal, hegemonic power structures within science fiction.

Melzer describes feminist worldbuilding in science fiction as the creation of "systems of representation that create the freedom to voice assumptions otherwise restricted by a realist narrative frame, and the geographic displacement of identity formations" (1). Feminist science fiction often makes use of such systems of representation—such *worlds*—in order to imagine possibilities for transformation. Feminist science fiction specifically conceives of such transformations through a lens that imagines a feminist future while, at the same time, recognizing the obstacles and challenges in the path to such a future. Feminist science fiction engages in worldbuilding in order to conceive of different ways of experiencing gender; such worldbuilding critiques intersections of race and gender and the ways the oppression that occurs at such intersections might be transgressed and dismantled.

Works like Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, and Octavia Butler's *Dawn*, for instance, problematize patriarchal social structures and imagine ways to challenge and disrupt such structures by constructing other possible structures of, for example, kinship, family, and parenting. Whether it is Le Guin's representation of an ambisexual, androgynous society in which gender identity and roles are not fixed but, rather, fluid in *The Left Hand of Darkness*; or Russ's conception of Whileaway, a utopian society of the future in which motherhood is constructed as a period of leisure, pleasure, and power in *The Female Man*; or Butler's depiction of Lilith, a black woman who becomes mother to a new human-alien race in *Dawn*—what all such representations reveal are the varied ways that feminist SF worldbuilding critiques patriarchal configurations of gendered labor and gender roles while imagining alternative configurations—alternate worlds—that dismantle and disrupt these hegemonic structures.

Just as feminist SF dismantles hegemonic knowledge production in science fiction, so too does feminist SF *criticism* disrupt epistemic hierarchies, especially in the field's anti-canonical positioning. Broadly speaking, feminist literary scholarship consistently interrogates the idea of the literary canon, what comes to count as legitimized knowledge in literary studies, and who comes to count as legitimate researchers of such knowledge. The feminist interrogation of canon formation problematizes the rendering of canonical hierarchies based on issues like race, gender, sexuality, and ability. But more than that, feminist literary scholarship disrupts the

epistemological claims and implications of the canon—it destabilizes the normative privileging of who gets to be a knower and what gets to be known in literary studies. Feminist science fiction criticism exemplifies such goals, because, as Marleen Barr notes, it is a field that, when it first emerged, had to reconcile with the need to legitimize its epistemological claims in a space in which such claims were often deemed illegitimate as a result of its not only exploring women's writing but its also doing so within the popular-cultural genre of science fiction. Barr, in explaining why she "chose to be a feminist critic who focuses on feminist science fiction" (2) asks, "Why would I, a person who cares about professional success, embrace a twice marginalized field, a double whammy in relation to career advancement?" (2).

It would seem that those who embark on feminist SF scholarship do so not only to unsettle the marginalization of the field but also because this "twice marginalized field" is a space that imagines other potentialities and futurities. Melzer argues that science fiction is a valuable genre for feminist interrogation because, even though it "has the reputation of being a male-dominated genre, it has always included women writers, and as a narrative style it is open to feminist appropriation" (7). But more than this, feminist science fiction, feminist criticism, and "*readings* of science fiction have challenged existing gender relations and have explored theoretical and political debates of the time" (9). Such challenges reveal that "[w]omen's increased involvement in science fiction has proven to be crucial both for the development of the subgenre of feminist science fiction and for feminist theorizing *outside* the science fiction community" (9). Thus, the interrogation of "science fiction's relationship to feminist thought recognizes popular culture's role in creating meaning through representation" and "does not diminish the pleasure aspect of consuming (and producing) cultural texts; instead, it understands imagination, narrative, and desire as part of feminist theorizing" (34). Baccolini, too, discusses the role of popular culture, and she explains, "Traditionally, science fiction belongs to the category of popular literature, or paraliterature. Its position, in regard to so-called high literature, is one of marginality (at best) or inferiority (at worst). Several critics, however, rescue paraliterature from its associations with inferiority and have pointed to its subversive potential" (15). The subversive potential of feminist SF and of the "twice-marginalized field" of feminist SF criticism is what makes the world of feminist SF ripe for feminist theorizing.

Joan Haran and Katie King also discuss the feminist theorizing that occurs in science fictional spaces, and they believe that the feminisms that occur during our science fictional times

allow for collaborative, collective feminist projects that work toward interventions for the present in order to improve "the condition of our continuing"; that is, science fiction feminism is one that brings us together because "SF is multiply…[it is] variously contested and in coalition." As Haran and King contend, this multiplicitous SF means feminist science fiction considers such things in more productive ways than feminist theory alone can due to the many ways SF asks us to confront ourselves by generating "simultaneous selves, rework processes for play and for practicing hope, and arouse and resituate what counts as 'us' and 'them.'" This generating of multiple selves—and this reworking of processes and hopeful practices—is what constitutes the worldbuilding of both feminist SF *and* feminist SF criticism.

Feminist SF's worldbuilding is something that informs Donna Haraway's scholarly practices, for it mirrors the ways she thinks of her own scholarship; indeed, Haraway argues, "My multispecies story telling is inflected through SF in all the fibers of the string figures that I try to pattern and to relay" ("SF"). Thus, for Haraway, scholarship mirrors and is indebted to the structure and patterns—the fibers and string figures—of the forms under study. And for Haraway, since SF is a polyglot, polymorphic form, so too is her writing and research of it. Since SF is about worlding, about building worlds, so too is her feminist scholarship—because the question of how one might be "response-able is the consequential question in SF worlding. String figure games are practices of scholarship, relaying, thinking with, becoming with in material-semiotic makings. Like SF, cat's cradle is a game of relaying patterns…Scholarship is like that too; it is passing on in twists and skeins that require passion and action, holding still and moving, anchoring and launching." Haraway's conception of such patternings in scholarship, influenced by her embeddedness and interest in science fiction and feminist thought, reveals the ways feminist worldbuilding does not solely occur in fictional settings but, rather, can be implemented within feminist scholarship as well. In other words, feminist scholarship also manifests such patternings, for academic worldbuilding and feminist methodologies make use of twists and skeins, knots and webs, worlding and transmediality—which requires a similarly patterned methodological approach—in order to disrupt hegemonic knowledge production.

3.5 Seeking Material Change: Building Worlds and Disrupting Rule Structures in Feminist Game Studies

But, one might ask, what does feminist science fiction have to do with feminist game studies? Or, to put this question perhaps more generously, what ultimately is the deeper conversation between the two fields? What can feminist game studies scholars learn from the work of feminists in literary studies? Ellen Rooney points out that "while feminist literary theories represent remarkably wide-ranging, diverse, and contradictory projects, they are also increasingly pervasive and potent…the work of feminist critics in literature has influenced scholarship in a wide range of related fields" (10). The disruptive methodologies conceptualized by feminist literary criticism have implications for the position of feminist game studies criticism, too. Joan Haran and Katie King discuss the ways feminist science fiction intersects with the world of video games, for they interrogate the idea of the screen as the space of confrontation in transmedia storytelling and explain that gaming "has become an icon, as well as a material practice and apparatus of learning and of risky uncertainties, with economic, technological, and metric significance for seeking sustainabilities of many sorts today." As such, games—as material practices, as apparatuses of risk, as metrics for sustainabilities—converse with science fiction because "[g]ames and media play upon our neurological and cognitive 'screens' with commercial and hobby practices that SF cares about and with." These cognitive screens, these practices that occur within both games and SF, are perhaps the point of linkage at which the two intersect—an important intersection for feminist game studies to explore—for these screens are the location through which we engage with video games and science fiction and the screens at which we must orient our feminist practices in order to interrogate and confront the worlds that these screens convey. Thus, I argue that the disruptive worldbuilding of feminist SF criticism can similarly be utilized by feminist game studies in order to make use of intersectional methodologies to dismantle hegemonic thought in the field of game studies. Such disruptive worldbuilding allows feminist game studies to claim space in the field of game studies through the feminist examination of games and the dismantling of video games culture's reification of structures of power.

To return to the construct of the screen, the screen-as-interface encapsulates many of the ways power is structurally built into visual artifacts like games. As such, it is important here to define the space of the interface in order to better understand the screen's reification of gendered

constructs of power. Alexander Galloway defines the interface as a space of openness that allows for "the freedom to connect to technical images" (9). This freedom of open interfaces is what results in what Galloway calls "the interface effect," in which "the computer is not an object, or a creator of objects, it is a process or active threshold mediating between two states" (23). The actively mediating threshold is one that causes Janet Murray to argue that "computers are liminal objects, located on the threshold between external reality and our own minds" (99). The interface as a threshold results in Seung-hoon Jeong's definition of the interface as "the communication boundary or point of interaction between two other parts or systems, while it becomes part of that system, influencing how two parties interplay with each other" (3). Johanna Drucker argues that this interactive system of the interface "is a mediating structure that supports behaviors and tasks. It is a space between human users and procedures that happen according to complicated protocols. But it also disciplines, constrains, and determines what can be done in any digital environment" (138). The disciplining, mediating space of the interface is one "in which a *subject*, not a *user*, is invoked…They are affected by it, and so is what they 'read' or 'receive' through an interface and they/we are produced by it" (177).

Mutual production defines the seer's relationship with the interface of the screen; Mieke Bal argues that, when studying the screens of visual artifacts and visual culture, researchers must then "focus on the *relationship* between the seen and the seer" (14). Laura Mulvey famously interrogates this relationship between the seen and the seer through the concept of the gaze, contending that men are "the active controllers of the look" (385), which means the relationship between the seen and the seer is one based on gendered constructions of power. In highlighting these manifestations of the male gaze in relation to film, Mulvey exposes cinema's building of such gendered modes of looking into the very structure of film itself in order to break down and challenge cinematic codes' reifications of external structures of gender and power. Whether it is film or science fiction or games, the gaze is mediated by the screen—by an interface. When considering the implications of the interface as a space of mediation Johanna Drucker raises some important questions: "Who is the subject of an interface? How are we produced as subjects of the discourses on the screen? And in our embodied and culturally situated relations to screens and displays?" (147). Because feminist game studies methods are oriented toward the space of the screen, I wonder here—what does the space of the screen mean for feminist game studies' intersectional methodologies? How might an understanding of interface and the gaze be

incorporated into feminist game studies' intersectional interventions into video game culture? Tara McPherson, in a broadening out of the scope of this project to the realm of the digital humanities, argues that the digital humanities require a better understanding of screens because researchers "must better understand the machines and networks that continue to powerfully shape our lives in ways that we are often ill-equipped to deal with as media and humanities scholars. This necessarily involves more than simply studying our screens and the images that dance across them, moving beyond studies of screen representations and the rhetorics of visuality" (105). Feminist game studies methods should be oriented toward the space of the screen in modes that do not just "read the logics of these systems and networks solely at the level of our screens" because "screens are often cover stories, disguising deeply divided forms of both machine and human labor" (105). And one of the things screens provide a cover story for is maleness as the privileged mode of spectatorship and playership.

Mulvey shows how maleness, as the assumed and privileged mode of spectatorship is structurally built into the cinematic screen of film. However, this structural privileging is true not only for cinematic screens but for science-fictional and gaming screens as well. It is this structural privileging that feminist science fiction writers and researchers dismantle through their work, and it is this same structural privileging that feminist game studies researchers disrupt in video game culture. As such, the space of the screen is the shared locus in which feminist science fiction and feminist game studies exist; the screen is the shared site of creation and praxis. There are thus shared actions we can take and methods we can use when working to dismantle the structural privileging that occurs through the shared space of the interface.

Another shared space is that of the academic and epistemological periphery. That is, both feminist science fiction criticism and feminist game studies research have been marginalized in the academy—and this epistemological marginalizing is one of the reasons feminist science fiction criticism takes an anti-canonical stance. Gary Westfahl explains that, because "science fiction has been one major bone of contention in academic arguments over the canon" (2), science-fictional literature "offers unusually fertile grounds for an examination of these continuing processes of literary canonization and marginalization" (2). However, I argue that *feminist* science fiction offers an even more fruitful lens through which to examine canonization and marginalization because the field is, to return to Marleen Barr's phrasing, doubly marginalized—it is not solely a popular-cultural genre but one that also centers women's stories

and women writers, all of which contributes to the epistemological depriviteging of feminist science fiction in the academy.

Joanna Russ, a feminist science fiction author and feminist literary scholar, examines the devaluing of women's writing in the academy, arguing that canon-formation makes use of a host of methods to suppress women's writing:

> The methods…are varied, but tend to occur in certain key areas: informal prohibitions (including discouragement and the inaccessibility of materials and training), denying the authorship of the work in question (this ploy ranges from simple misattribution to psychological subtleties that make the head spin), belittlement of the work itself in various ways, isolation of the work from the tradition to which it belongs and its consequent presentation as anomalous, assertions that the work indicates the author's bad character and hence is of primarily scandalous interest or ought not to have been done at all (this did not end with the nineteenth century), and simply ignoring the works, the workers, and the whole tradition, the most commonly employed technique and the hardest to combat. (3)

One of the most insidious methods used to enforce literary gatekeeping is the implementation of *regionalism* and *genre* as "literary renamings [that] are especially capable of abuse" (62) and of perpetuating the positioning of women writers on the literary periphery. Regarding the categorization of women writers as regionalists, Russ asks specifically, "Why was Willa Cather described to me twenty years ago in college as a *regionalist* (whereupon I did not read her) while Sherwood Anderson was not a *regionalist*? More pointedly, if Cather (who concentrates on several large, western states) is a *regionalist*, why is Faulkner (who concentrates on one, small southern county) not a *regionalist*?" (63). Here, Russ answers her own questions by concluding that the label *regionalist* renders the woman writer "a second-rate fictioneer" (63). Genre functions similarly to regionalism because the "assignment of *genre* can also function as false categorizing, especially when work appears to fall between established genres and can thereby be assigned to either (and then called an imperfect example of it) or chided for belonging to neither" (63).

Assigning women's writing to peripheral categories occurs not just in literature but in women's scholarship as well. Feminist scholarship is often deemed peripheral because, as Russ

sardonically puts it, even though feminist scholarship is "crammed with facts and references, it has the wrong *style*; it is personal and sounds unscholarly, a charge often leveled at modern feminist writing. That is, the tone is not impersonal, detached, and dry enough—in short, not patriarchal enough—to produce belief" (91). Rendering women's writing peripheral is another experience shared by women in both literary and gaming spaces. Whether it is the patriarchal structures that impact canon formation in literary fields, the formalism of ludology's claims to epistemological privileging in game studies, or gaming culture's harassment and alienation of women in gaming spaces—what we see in all such instances are the gatekeeping strategies implemented by patriarchal institutions in order to keep women on the margins. Women's writing, women's experiences, and women's knowledge is deemed not central, not so-called "universal," not essential, not important. Unfortunately, this space of epistemological deprivileging is another space feminist science fiction and feminist game studies share, and this epistemological gatekeeping is something else that both fields methodologically dismantle.

Of course, the gatekeeping strategies enacted in literary spaces are often differently enacted than those in gaming spaces. However, literary strategies of gatekeeping can and have been just as hostile and harassing as those implemented by the likes of Gamergate; for example, Russ notes, "In 1977 Olga Broumas, Yale Younger Poet, published a volume of poems, entitled *Beginning with O*. Many of the poems were lesbian love poems. The result? Threatening and obscene phone calls from her fellow citizens of Eugene, Oregon" (36). Such strategies mirror, for example, the swatting methods used by online harassers—a mirroring that thus shows that threatening strategies of harassment have historically been perpetrated against women who unsettle the boundaries constructed by the dominant ideology. While the violences that occur in gaming spaces are different than those that play out in literary spaces, all such violences speak to each other and are situated in the vast network of oppression that feminist methodologies—in any discipline—actively disrupt and dismantle. This is why the conversation between feminist game studies and feminist literary studies is a fruitful one; the conversation between the two disciplines affords feminist game studies a methodological model, and models, as Russ puts it, function as "guides to action and as indications of possibility" (106), because without the indications of possibility models provide "it's hard to work; without a context, difficult to evaluate; without peers, nearly impossible" (117). Feminist game studies needs the model of feminist science fiction in order to ground its emergent praxis in the feminist context of its

interdisciplinary feminist peers. This modeling is a form of feminist solidarity; we can learn from the work of feminists before and around us in order to continue the necessary work of disrupting patriarchal structures in a variety of disciplines and spaces, using a variety of methods to do so. Mapping these conversations is the first step in building interdisciplinary, intersectional feminist worlds.

3.6 Disruptive Worldbuilding: Mapping Out the Intersectional Methods of Feminist Game Studies

Since feminist game studies occupies space on the epistemic periphery just as feminist science fiction criticism does, and since feminist game studies can learn from feminist science fiction in the methodologies it can apply, I now want to address the following—what are the actual, tangible methods that feminist game studies can implement? How can the field make use of these methods, and why are such methods helpful for the kinds of praxis that feminist game studies needs? Ultimately, my goal here is to clarify and map out feminist game studies methodologies in order to help lay a foundation for analysis in this emerging field.

One of the methods feminist game studies can make use of is that of *cyberactivism*. As Martha McCaughey explains, cyberactivist work occurs through "the creation and spread of content, changing social movement activism and organizing…[M]ovement participants are recognizing and expressing grievances, and organizing resistance, through the information and communication technologies that are now more widely available, portable, and participatory" (2). In cyberactivist work, the Internet is used as a tool for social movement activism, organizing, and resistance. As such, just as the Internet is a tool used to enact strategies of online harassment, so too (paradoxically) can the Internet be used to counter and resist such hate. Because cyberactivism occurs in the digital space of the Internet, it must occur in tandem with other methods of resistance and be "combined with many forms of movement organizing and protest from the analog era, including donating time and money, talking to people, showing up to courts, demonstrating on the streets, clashing with police, and otherwise putting one's body on the line" because activist "movements are hybrids of online and offline activity, and one does not cause, or prevent, the other" (2). What is particularly helpful is cyberactivism's use of the Internet to mobilize *transnational* resistance, since the "computer-mediated communications" that occur on the Internet "enable people to make the connections with those around the world variously

impacted by violence…and repression. Our awareness, identification, and organizing can be transnational—and instantaneously so" (5). Instantaneous organizing makes cyberactivism an effective method for feminist game studies, which also uses computer-mediated communications to organize transnational modes of resistance and to engage in disruptive interventions into video game culture.

Another method of resistance that can be incorporated into feminist game studies methodologies is that of what Rita Raley calls *tactical media*, or digital and new media art projects that are meant to be "forms of critical intervention, dissent, and resistance" (6). The activism of tactical media engages in a politics of "disruption, intervention, and education" (1). Raley argues, "If there were one function or critical rationale that would produce a sense of categorical unity, it would be disturbance. In its most expansive articulation, tactical media signifies the intervention and disruption of a dominant semiotic regime, the temporary creation of a situation in which signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible" (6). Thus, tactical media's interventions into and disruptions of dominant ideologies and regimes make it ripe for incorporation into feminist interventions into gaming culture. Such interventions can occur through feminist creation, development, and production in gaming spaces, from the development of feminist games to the production of feminist analyses. In the spirit of intersectionality's epistemological and methodological pluralism, multiple modes of feminist creation, feminist disruption, and feminist intervention are needed to resist and disrupt dominant regimes in video game culture.

Not only are feminist creation and production important methods of feminist game studies practices, but so too do feminist playership and spectatorship play important roles in feminist game studies methodologies. Feminist game studies can look to feminist scholarship on methods of active, transgressive spectatorship, which is something that Gilad Padva and Nurit Buchweitz argue for; Padva and Buchweitz expand on and problematize Laura Mulvey's discussion of the male gaze in their construction of transgressive spectatorship, explaining that Mulvey's theorization of the male gaze "has since been challenged by both straight and queer, male and female thinkers who theorize the pleasure of the presumably straight female viewer and her relationship with both the male and female protagonists, and the multi-layered identifications of queer spectators with their same-sex cinematic protagonists projected on screen" (6). Padva and Buchweitz's alternative, transgressive spectatorship subverts "the dichotomous distinctions

between viewer-viewed; masculinity-femininity; activity-passivity" (7) that Mulvey's discussions of the male gaze nonetheless perpetuates; the method of transgressive spectatorship, on the other hand, opens up a more intersectional approach to resistance. Similarly, bell hooks's construction of the *oppositional gaze* centers the power of the transgressive spectatorship of black women, arguing that such power can afford spaces of agency and sites of resistance for black spectators; in other words, the gaze can allow black spectators to "look back" (116), to gaze critically and oppositionally, thereby transforming the gaze into a "site of resistance" (116). Such oppositional looking can also occur through the choice to *stop* looking, a choice carried out as an act of resistance and protest again the negation encountered through the screen. For hooks, this act of choice, this rejection of negation, motivates the *oppositional gaze*, rendering this a method that counters and resists the violence of the white male gaze—a strategy that makes space for other modes of spectatorship and that allows us to interrogate both gender and race when thinking about methodologically countering violences perpetuated through the interface's structural privileging of white male spectatorship.

Stephanie Jennings extends the conversation about transgressive gazing by specifically considering gazing's function in players' experiences with video games, and she asks if game scholars could "talk about players' encounters with video games in ways that refuse the totalization of male gaze? How could we more fully account for the gazing practices of subject positions outside of or in opposition to hegemonic masculinity?" (236). Jennings argues for an understanding of gaze as "a gendered performance influenced by intersecting facets of identity, the framework that I propose does not refer to gaze as a characteristic inherent to subjects or to game artifacts, but emphasizes gaze as a praxis that players can adopt, learn, and develop throughout their moments of play" (236). Further, while film and media studies have provided theoretical frameworks through which to understand the role of the gaze in spectatorship of mediums like film and television, Jennings importantly notes that "game studies require its own theories of gaze both to understand how gaze in gameplay functions differently from that of filmic spectatorship and to reconceptualize gendered gazing in gaming environments" (238). Game studies requires its own theories of gaze due to the active nature of looking in play:

> Looking in video games is not a passive response, even in those circumstances—
> such as during a cut-scene—when players are not in direct control of the camera
> or their character's line of vision. Gamic gazing is exploring, interrogating,

searching, examining, reacting, creating, shaping, and structuring…if players are active and agentic during their experiences of play, then they must all be in a masculine subject position in relation to the text. But rather than viewing agency during gameplay as an appropriation of male gaze or a masculine position, I conceptualize gameplay as an open, agentic potentiality for expressions and performances of femininity. (239)

The agentic potentiality of gaze in play also includes "playful interpretation and textual invention" (239), and it occurs through "a confluence and clashing of manifold layers: designs, rules, player-embodied characters, non-playable characters, player camera control, player action, and player interpretation" (240). In play, gaze is thus "an inventive process" (240), for it is "shot through with a player's individual subjectivity and dispositions—their identities and identifications, their outlooks, and their actions and reactions" which allows for "a process of creating visual texts of the player's own" (240). Understanding the gaze as an active inventive process of creation means that the gaze can then be used as a methodology of disruption, and marginalized players can implement gaze as a methodological strategy for transgressing hegemonic norms in games and play.

Because players gaze through the cognitive, techno-cultural screen of the interface, active, inventive engagement with the interface—whether this engagement occurs through development or spectatorship, production or playership—is an important consideration for feminist game studies methodologies. Miriam E. Sweeney explains that it is important to remember that interfaces are not solely the technological "point of interaction between two systems, organizations, subjects, or components" but are also "a cultural point of contact shaped by ideologies that are manifest in the design, use, and meaning of the technology" (215). Feminist game studies should approach the interface as a cultural contact zone because "[a]pplying the contact zone to the computer interface offers a critical reframing of this discourse, highlighting that computers do no *de facto* serve democratic aims, and instead may be directly implicated in facilitating legacies of racism, sexism, heterosexism, colonialism, as well as capitalistic exploitation and classism" (216).

By methodologically applying the contact zone to the computer interface, feminist game studies can interrogate race and gender in more holistic, intersectional ways—as opposed to the ways these issues are often problematically viewed in interface design, such as in studies on race

and gender "in agent interface design [that] tend to focus only on optimization, ignoring how race and gender function within systems of social difference" (222). Such limited analysis views race and gender "only as barriers to optimization. Thus, in these configurations, the normative subject is usually constructed as White, male, and presumptively heterosexual, and therefore unproblematic and uncomplicated as a design option" (222). Women and people of color are then "seen as potentially problematic in terms of meeting design goals that promote 'authority' or 'trust'" (222). Feminist game studies' intersectional method of applying the contact zone to the space of the interface can disrupt the privileging of the white, male, heteronormative subject and can, instead, call for and enact "[s]ocially responsible interface design" (225), which "requires active engagement with issues of identity, representation, and power from both designers and digital media scholars. Critical cultural frameworks are potentially powerful tools for investigating culture and power in technology design and should be integrated into the training of computer engineers and designers" (225). By integrating this active engagement with the cultural context of interface design into feminist game studies methodologies, feminist research on video game culture can actively disrupt hegemonic, patriarchal interface design and instead make space for intersectional modes of development and production.

Something that opens up and complicates feminist game studies scholars' methodological engagement with video game culture and design is by understanding games as Alexander Galloway does—that is, to conceive of video games as actions. He argues that we are now located within "an interesting upheaval in the area of mass culture" that is the result of the emergence of a medium "whose foundation is not in looking and reading but in the instigation of material change through action" (3). Thus, if video games are actions, then feminist critiques of games are also actions. And if, as Galloway contends, such action is oriented toward "material change," then such an orientation is also the goal of feminist game studies—because this action, this orientation, is what encompasses the worldbuilding that facilitates the goals and methodological frameworks for feminist game studies, which enacts change in the gaming community through active methodological disruption. Feminist game studies, as a discipline, is one that is disruptive because feminist actions unsettle the rule structures and normative systems in which video game culture is situated. Feminist game studies is methodologically disruptive in the ways it troubles boundaries by disruptively manipulating the rule structures of the dominant social order.

Another game studies concept that feminist game studies can make use of in its methodological approaches to the critique of video games is the idea of play, which Johan Huizinga defines and frames within the context of culture by arguing that the "great archetypal activities of human society are all permeated with play from the start" (4). Huizinga specifically examines language's exemplification of this: "In the making of speech and language the spirit is continually 'sparking' between matter and mind, as it were, playing with this wondrous nominative faculty" (4). Huizinga's discussion of language as a form of play also constructs play as a form of communication; there is, then, a discursive element to the manner in which play is made manifest. Huizinga asserts that play is "in fact freedom. A second characteristic is closely connected with this, namely, that play is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (8). Yet, even though Huizinga argues that play is a temporary sphere outside of "real" life, he also argues that the field of play is one in which "something is at stake" (40).

Miguel Sicart argues that what is at stake is that "[t]hrough play we experience the world, we construct it and we destroy it, and we explore who we are and what we can say. Play frees us from moral conventions but makes them still present, so we are aware of their weight, presence, and importance" (5). Perhaps this ability to potentially free us "from moral conventions" is what causes Huizinga to regard play as being outside of "real" life, and it is what causes Sicart to argue that play "can be dangerous too: it can be addicting and destructive and may lead to different types of harm…Play is a dance between creation and destruction, between creativity and nihilism" (3). Play is also a dance when it comes to rules, for even though all "contexts of play have rules of some type" (8), Sicart also contends that "rules are not sacred. They are nodes in the complex network of the context of play, servants to the action of playing" (8). Because these rules are not sacred, they can be manipulated and challenged: "A key ingredient of playing is thinking, manipulating, changing, and adapting rules. Rules, servant to the context, evolve while we play to address the necessities of particular play situations" (8).

T. L. Taylor further underscores the shifting, contextual, and situational nature of rules and play in that she contends, "Play is situational and reliant not simply on abstract rules but also on social networks, attitudes, or events in one's non/game life, technological abilities or limits, structural affordances or limits, local cultures, and personal understandings of leisure. The flexibility at work here moves in several directions" (*Play Between Worlds* 156). Taylor notes,

like Sicart, that "rules and norms can be…incredibly contextual, socially negotiated, heterogeneous, ambiguous, and quite often contradictory between players" (157). Understanding rules in play as being heterogeneous and contradicting based on player context and engagement is important because "it prompts us to consider the ways players and player communities actively shape their own experiences. We need to make sure we recognize the different layers of actors and wide contexts, from the individual player on up to formal groups, as well as the various degrees of freedom any given system provides" (157). Such active shaping opens up room for players to methodologically transgress and disrupt hegemonic rules and norms in games and video game culture through play. To be sure, Katherine Isbister explains that game rules, norms, and boundaries "can be warped and even actively transgressed" and that "exploring these limits…can be an integral part of the joy of play" (67).

Jennings extends this understanding of play to the role of the games critic and scholar as well, for she contends that, since "players are parts of the video game text" (160), that then means that a researcher's "subjectivity is part of the game text that they read, examine, and analyze" (160). Feminist game studies researchers also make use of play as a methodology of disruption because it "expands opportunities for intersectional analysis, illuminates diversities of play styles, and avoids the reinforcement of an essentialist gender binary" (160). As Jennings notes, researchers should not "overlook the significance of play" (163), which includes "different play-styles, of the variability of experience, of players' subjective outlooks that lead them to diverse ways of knowing…Adding subjective methods and concepts of feminist epistemology to our analytical toolkits for games criticism can aid us not only in understanding diversities of play and experience, but also diversities of feminisms" (163).

In short, play's ability to methodologically manipulate rules contributes to its being dangerous and *disruptive* because play can "disruptively reveal our conventions, assumptions, biases, and dislikes. In disrupting the normal state of affairs by being playful, we can go beyond fun when we appropriate a context with the intention of playing with and within it. And in that move, we reveal the inner workings of the context that we inhabit" (Sicart 14). In this way, the disruptive nature of play allows us to "shock, alarm, and challenge conventions" (15), which means that play's disruptiveness makes discursive meaning: "Play is like language—a way of being in the world, of making sense of it. It takes place in a context as a balance between creation and destruction, between adherence to a structure and the pleasures of destruction.

Playing is freedom" (18). This examination of the discursive quality of play's disruptiveness converses with Joan Scott's discussion of feminism and experience—especially her consideration of identity as discursive, which she argues "is not to introduce a new form of linguistic determinism, nor to deprive subjects of agency. It is to refuse a separation between 'experience' and language and to insist instead on the productive quality of discourse" (278). Scott's examination of experience as discursively constituted lines up with Huizinga and Sicart's discussions of language and discourse as something that allows us to make sense of the world and construct the self. As such, Scott argues that a priority for feminist research lies in an engagement with language to open "new possibilities for analyzing discursive productions of social and political reality" (278). Ultimately, Scott believes such an engagement is vital "for those whose discipline is devoted to the study of change…it is a way of changing the focus and the philosophy of our history, from one bent on naturalizing 'experience' through a belief in the unmediated relationship between words and things, to one that takes all categories of analysis as contextual, contested, and contingent" (279). The feminist examination of identity as a discursive event reveals that identity is not naturalized or universal but complicated and complex—it is "contextual, contested, and contingent." This method of feminist reading is therefore disruptive in its complication of identity and its work for change.

Feminist thought's engagement with the politics of systems of meaning and power has something to do with the concept of play because, as Sicart puts it, to "play is to be in the world. Playing is a form of understanding what surrounds us and who we are, and a way of engaging with others. Play is a mode of being human" (1). To be human also means to be narratively and discursively constructed because, as Lorraine Code contends, to be human means to be "embedded in and shaped by all of the myriad story lines into which each of us is thrust at birth" (296). What matters when thinking about these "myriad story lines" is "working out, collectively, how to produce and circulate new scripts, how to devise improvisational possibilities that can unsettle and disrupt story lines that are apparently seamless" (298). It is the effort to "unsettle and disrupt" these story lines that makes playful feminist work the type that engages in play's efforts to unsettle the rule structures and normative systems in which we are situated. Feminist game studies methods of play trouble such boundaries by disruptively manipulating the rule structures of the dominant social order. In doing so, the disruptive play of

feminist game studies establishes (to return to Sicart's phrasing) a space for freedom—a feminist world.

This idea of constructing a space for freedom through disruptive feminist worldbuilding converses with Gloria Anzaldúa's discussion of claiming space, in which Anzaldúa examines the issue of borders (and of conceiving of a feminism that can transgress them without perpetrating erasure). Anzaldúa argues that borders "are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*" (25), and she believes that the strategy for disrupting such borders is the establishment of *una cultura mestiza*: "I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture" (44). This *cultura mestiza*, this new culture, seems to be based on qualities inherent to both Jasbir Puar's assemblage and Chandra Mohanty's feminist solidarity as well—all three require the acknowledgment and respect of difference, borders, fluidity, movement, intensities, alliances, becoming. And all three are enacted in the name of building feminist worlds to promote survival, claim space, and not be erased. For Anzaldúa, this survival is attained through the disruptive force of both internal and external struggle: "Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (109). In order for feminist praxis to be truly disruptive, we must work to disrupt both external structures—the "real" world—and the internal "images in our heads."

These "images in our heads" bring to mind Patricia Hill Collins's interrogation of controlling images. Collins specifically discusses the controlling images constructed around Black womanhood: "The dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of several interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining Black women's subordination" (72). These controlling images continue on today, and Collins's discussion of the images that are not only in our heads but also in our texts speaks to Anzaldúa's discussion of the need to examine both inner and outer forms of oppression. The feminist interrogation of controlling images and their manifestations in narrative texts is an important method of disrupting such images and the structures and hierarchies of power they reify, which allows for the imagining of other potentialities, futurities, and worlds in feminist game studies.

We can look to Alex Layne and Samantha Blackmon's "Self-Saving Princess: Feminism and Post-Play Narrative Modding" as an example of how feminist game studies' disruptive methodologies can be put into practice, in their call for the emerging creative strategies "used by critics, academics, players, and others to critique, analyze, and change the video game community." Layne and Blackmon refer to these creative methods as *post-play narrative modding*, which reveals "some of the productive ways that feminists and those concerned about women in the gaming community can modify gaming narrative, protagonists, and the community in a positive way." Thus, post-play narrative modding is a methodological application of "creative resistance" that works "by both disrupting what exists and insisting upon choice that acknowledges a diversity of viewpoints." In short, Layne and Blackmon provide an example of the ways feminist game studies can enact creative resistance through methodologies of *disruption*.

3.7   Fluidity, Movement, and Change: The Disruptive Worldbuilding of Intersectional Methodologies

The imagining of new worlds and new futurities is what constitutes the goal of feminist worldbuilding that methodologies of disruption strive for. These methods of cyberactivism and tactical media, of transgressive spectatorship and feminist interface design, of play and modding, of claiming space and constructing coalitional assemblages are what allow for the building of feminist worlds in video game culture. Further, the epistemological and methodological pluralism of feminist game studies, as well as the field's anti-canonical, anti-formalism, anti-racist, and transnational positioning, allow for *intersectional* worldbuilding because this research centers the *embodied* experiences of people of color, LGBTQI communities, and other marginalized positionalities. As Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha M. Tynes explain, "[W]hat we need are theoretical and methodological approaches that allow us to intervene on the organization of social relations that are embedded in our digital technologies and that can foster a clearer understanding of how power relations are organized through technologies" (1). What we need are interventions that think "critically about the Internet as a system that *reflects*, and a site that *structures*, power and values" (2).

Noble and Tynes specifically discuss interventions that occur through the praxis of intersectional critical race technology studies (ICRTS), but I believe the methodological goals of ICRTS mirror those of feminist game studies as well:

> It allows us to interrogate naturalized notions of the impartiality of hardware and software and what the Web means in differential ways that are imbued with power. It allows us to examine how information, records, and evidence can have greater consequences for those who are marginalized. Unequal and typically oppressive power relations map to offline social relations in ways that are often, if not mostly, predicated on racialized and gendered practices. ICRTS could be theorized as an epistemological approach to researching gendered and racialized identities in digital and information studies. It offers a lens, based on the past articulations of intersectional theory, for exploring power in digital technologies and the global Internet(s). More research on the politics, culture, and values embedded in, and on, the Internet and its many platforms, devices, interfaces, and representations can help continue to frame broader contexts of digital information and technology engagement on the Internet. (4)

Intersectional approaches to technologies are similarly utilized in feminist game studies, but feminist game studies research is specifically oriented toward video game culture, narratives, and technologies and video games' identification of "[w]hiteness and maleness…as the default identities that define the culture" (5). However, what is important about the intersectional framework for feminist game studies methodologies is the fact that this lens is also implemented in order to interrogate the feminist work we do in the field as well; that is, intersectional methods problematize and disrupt hegemonic thought—namely, *white* feminism—within feminist work itself. As Jessie Daniels puts it, "Challenging White feminism in favor of an intersectional feminism that centers the experiences of Black, Latina, Asian, Indigenous, queer, disabled, and trans women is to speak against a social order. To challenge White feminism is also to risk causing unhappiness, but this is a risk we must take so that we can find each other in our resistance to it" (57). Finding each other occurs through the solidarity work and coalition-building of intersectional methodologies. This is disruptive intersectional worldbuilding made manifest.

This is also what Joanna Russ calls the "explicit feminism" that occurs "with the backing of feminist solidarity" (132). As Russ explains, explicit feminist solidarity occurs on the margins: "[A]s in cells and sprouts, growth occurs only at the edges of something…But even to see the peripheries, it seems, you have to be on them, or by an act of re-vision, place yourself there. Refining and strengthening the judgments you already have will get you nowhere. You must break set. It's either that or remain at the center. The dead, dead center" (163). Video game culture has a false, dead center to it—the dead center of white, cisgender, heteronormative patriarchy. The intersectional methodologies and disruptive worldbuilding of feminist game studies break this center in order to make room for something alive, for the fluidity and possibility that resides in feminist futurities and worlds.

CHAPTER 4.   APPLYING DISRUPTIVE METHODS: EXAMINING MATERNAL LABOR AND FUTURITIES IN VIDEO GAMES AND THE GAMING INDUSTRY

4.1   Invoking Motherhood: Gendered Labor and Bodies at Risk in Video Game Culture

In the previous two chapters, I have discussed the ways certain bodies are at risk in gaming spaces, the ways these bodies are targeted, marginalized, and erased, and the ways intersectional feminist methods can be used to counter and disrupt these hegemonic violences. Gamergate, of course, is one of the more recent examples of these violences, and the abuse directed at women like Anita Sarkeesian, Zoe Quinn, and Brianna Wu demonstrates the fact that these violences are implemented in order to seek a white, cisgender, heteropatriarchal status quo in gaming communities. Many strategies are used to perpetuate this status quo, and women are targeted through a host of hostile methods. One particularly troubling means of targeting women is to specifically invoke their motherhood in attacks carried out against them. Jennifer Hepler, a former writer for the video game company Bioware and senior writer on the 2014 game *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, received just these kinds of attacks.

Hepler explains that she began to be targeted upon the release of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*: "Instead of a release-day party, the team sat in dead silence as vicious attacks on the game and on us came from every dark corner of the web. This was the day I learned the word '4chan,' as their members slathered *Metacritic* with negative reviews and launched personal attacks, demanding the development team be fired" (120). After the launch, Hepler went on maternity leave, and she continued to be a focal point for harassment:

> Many months later (Valentine's Day, to be exact), I got some strange messages
> from friends offering me support in this difficult time. I finally go one of them to
> answer what was happening—someone on Reddit had written a screed accusing
> me of being "the cancer that was destroying BioWare." I tried to laugh it off, but
> it went viral, and hundreds of people piled on with vicious Twitter comments.
> (120)

Hepler, who is Jewish, explains that much of the harassment she received was both misogynistic and anti-Semitic, and "it took less than 48 hours for the misogynist attacks on me as a 'fat bitch' to turn into neo-Nazi attacks on me as a 'Jewess' who was taking over BioWare for the 'Elders

of Zion'" (120). What is especially troubling is that, because Hepler is a mother, her *children* were also targeted in an effort to silence and threaten Hepler herself: "One or more frightening psychopaths wrote long rants in the BioWare forums saying he was going to hide in the bushes and kill my children on their way to school, because they should have been aborted at birth rather than go through life with me as their mother" (120). For Hepler, these threats on her children's lives were especially devastating because it was "gut-wrenching to have to tell my daughter's kindergarten teacher to keep a special eye on her because someone who had never met her was threatening to kill her" (121). What Hepler's experience demonstrates is the troubling lengths people will go to make women feel unwelcome—and even in danger—in gaming spaces. That is, by specifically threatening Hepler's child with bodily harm, her harassers also invoke Hepler's embodied role as mother. To be sure, the video game industry's relationship with motherhood is a particularly fraught one. From its depiction of mothers in the video game narratives the industry produces to a workplace culture that alienates mothers, the video game industry is one that does not make space for maternal bodies. As such, the industry relies on gendered assumptions regarding labor, and its gendered labor provides a fruitful case study on which to enact a feminist intervention.

In this chapter, I engage in just such an intervention. I examine the gendered labor of video game culture by specifically interrogating the ways maternal bodies move around (or, perhaps more tellingly, the ways these bodies are *not* afforded space for movement) in gaming spaces. Through such an intervention, I demonstrate one application of feminist game studies' methodologies of disruption in order to seek change in video game culture. My analysis in this chapter works through a twofold approach; I first assess the industry itself, examining the ways the workplace culture of the industry actively disenfranchises mothers. I then put this culture in conversation with the games it produces by analyzing controlling images of gendered labor and maternal roles in video game narratives. By examining both the culture and the narratives this culture produces, I underscore the need for feminist disruption of and interventions into video game culture and begin a conversation regarding the ways we might, instead, enact feminist worldbuilding for mothers and women in gaming spaces. In all such efforts, this intervention into representations of maternal labor in video games and the gendered labor of the video game industry puts into practice feminist game studies' methodologies of disruption in order to

destabilize patriarchal structures and (re)imagine feminist models of representation and labor instead.

4.2   Maternal Labor: Women in Tech and the Gendered Labor of the Gaming Industry

The gaming industry is one that severely underserves, underrepresents, and under-hires women, and I consider here how the industry marginalizes mothers, in particular, in order to examine motherhood in tech as a case study for the ways women are consistently and systemically disenfranchised and alienated in the gaming industry. Importantly, the alienation of mothers in the gaming industry stems from the overall biases against women in workplace settings as well as overall biases against women's technological prowess and expertise. Robin Johnson points out that "[c]omputer technology is culturally associated with men through practices such as 'tinkering' or hacking. This perpetuates a gendered dichotomy between working *on* rather than solely *with* technology" (256). Shira Chess similarly highlights this technologically gendered dichotomy: "In popular culture, women often have the reputation of being particularly incapable concerning technology. Depictions of women in relation to technology often result in simplistic stereotypes and tasteless jokes about women's supposed incompetence in driving or programming a VCR" (25). The problem with these depictions "is deeper than just passing jokes" because unsettling "these stereotypes is difficult and often feeds into cultural understandings of who is involved in digital play. Thus, along with assumptions about who is able to work with technology, there are expectations about who plays with it and how that play should occur" (25).

In addition to these biases against women's work with technology, Joan Williams discusses several common forms of bias that women face in professional settings, including the fact that women "often have to provide more evidence of competence than men do to be seen as equally capable" (97). Another type of bias that women face is what Williams calls *tightrope* bias, in which "[h]igh-status jobs are seen as requiring stereotypically masculine qualities, while women are expected to be modest and self- effacing, so women must walk a tightrope between being seen as too feminine to be effective and too masculine to be likable" (97). A particularly telling type of bias (for this chapter in particular) is that of what Williams calls the *maternal wall*, in which biases "triggered by motherhood [have] dramatic effects on women in workplace settings" (98). Williams cites a study that "found that mothers were 79% less likely to be hired,

half as likely to be promoted, offered an average of $11,000 less in salary, and held to higher performance and punctuality standards" (98), as well as another study that "looked at mothers who were considered indisputably competent and committed. Because of their dedication to the job, they were seen as bad mothers and bad people. As a result, they were disliked and held to higher performance standards" (98). What this maternal wall demonstrates is the fact that biases against maternal bodies is one particularly entrenched assumption regarding gendered labor that women face in workplace settings.

The tech industry (of which the video game industry is a part) perpetuates these biases against women and mothers in particularly fraught ways. Elissa Shevinsky argues that the tech industry has a "gender problem" (9), one in which "[w]hite male subcultures have come to dominate the landscape of startups and blue chip tech companies. The success of men like Apple co-founder Steve Jobs and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg created the perception that ideal founders of companies look just like they did—young, white, male, and socially awkward" (9). What Shevinsky calls the "myth of the nerdy male founder has been perpetuated by men who found this story favorable" (9), and this myth is especially problematic because "it is blatantly untrue" (11) because, for example, "Jobs and Zuckerberg did not build their companies by themselves. Women played irreplaceable roles at Apple and at Facebook…Their stories have been carefully erased by men like Zuckerberg and Jobs, who are both widely acknowledged to be masterful storytellers" (11). Thus, while women have been "essential to the development of programming, computing, and the Internet itself" (12), they have consistently been "all but erased from our narrative of who gets to lay claim to technology and its culture" (12), a form of epistemological erasure that "persists today" (12).

Katherine Cross unpacks the gatekeeping implications of the myth of the male nerd in tech: "Gender (and race) are part of the formula, but those identities that constellate around the simulacrum of 'nerd'…are even more important in terms of defining who's in, who's out, and why" (72). White, cisgender, heteronormative maleness is positioned as the epistemological center of tech culture, and Cross argues that this dominant epistemology is "what gives 'the club' in technology its shape and purpose. The mythology of the nerd—the much beleaguered, aggressively bullied, unloved young (usually white) men whose brilliance was never appreciated by their peers, but who ultimately triumphed—is writ in the stars of the technology world today" (72). The mythology of the unloved, underappreciated, white male nerd is also one constructed

on the tech industry's mythology of meritocracy, which comes "from the sense that being a technologist and having the skills required to be one is an affirmative elective identity. You choose to be a nerd, in a way that one does not choose to be one's race or gender. In theory, then, this means that being a nerd/geek/gamer is open to everyone who has the technical know-how to master the skills required" (74). Of course, the nerd ethos is *not* open to everyone, due to a set of core features that define the masterful tech nerd in heteropatriarchal, white supremacist ways.

One of the core features of this nerd epistemology is that of a homogenizing "sense of universal history, one shared by all nerds" (75), and this shared history posits that all nerds have been "bullied by boys and denied by girls, hated for being a nerd, and, particularly, a hidden social outcast whose experience with prejudice was on a par with actual ethnic and sexual minorities" (76). Another core feature is the idea that the nerd performs a sort of unique techno-masculinity—that is, they perform a kind of manhood that is "based on technical mastery, one's intellect and mental acuity, rather than on physical strength" and consider themselves to be "better, worthier kinds of men, in this conception because they are clever and not physically violent" (77). However, these techno-men consider their "unique" and superior form of masculinity to be "unfairly slighted and not fully recognized for its superiority, especially by women" (76). The feeling of being unappreciated, of being slighted, results in Cross's final core feature, which is that of a binaristic social antagonism: "The stereotypical social tropes of a suburban high school—jocks and cheerleaders on one side, nerdy boys on the other—remain the ideal way to interpret and understand the social world for plenty of adults who hew to nerd identities" (77).

The tech nerd's binaristic sense of self has a particularly insidious gatekeeping function in tech culture because of its narrow epistemological inscription of who, then, gets to be a nerd. As Cross puts it, women, people of color, and LGBTQI folks are "not part of the dominant nomos because the key symbolism makes no room for us. The story of the awkward bespectacled nerd girl who was passed over from prom even by the geeky boys never gets to be part of this shared history because it's the round peg in the square hole of masculine tales" (79). In this way, the construct of the *nerd* functions as what Cross calls a "fictive ethnicity" (80), one that "reifies the male-centered history and culture of nerd identity" (80).

The tech nerd's binaristic sense of self is also tethered (in complex ways) to the masculinist norms and ideals of the military, for "[v]ideo games emerged in part from military-

funded research, and there are ongoing links between military simulation research, military recruitment efforts, and the video game industry" (Johnson 249). This has resulted in the production of "militarized masculine content" (249) in video games as well as "apparent militarized masculinity" (250) in the gaming industry, which is embedded within the technomasculinity of the sector that "associates men with advanced computer knowledge and proficiency" (250). As Robin Johnson argues, technomasculinity "is a dominant form of masculinity idealized in the products created by the video game industry" (252), but it also, paradoxically, runs "counter to the culture of idealized militarized masculinity" (260). In other words, Johnson explains, militarized masculinity "tends to subordinate technomasculinity, devaluing its cultural capital proficient in technical knowledge to the type of masculinity that values tough, dominant men of action and physical acumen. Because of this, part of the game workers' very identities are subordinated in recreating militarized masculinity as the ideal" (260). This subordination results in a tension that is reproduced in the "overall hegemonic gender structure" (260) in gaming industry workplaces in which the "more an individual is subconsciously attuned to technomasculinity and idealizations of militarized masculinity, the more likely he or she will be employed, fit in, get all the references and jokes, play the right games, stay late hours working without realizing the time, join in the rituals, and progress in seniority" (260). Technomasculinity, then, is a "significant constraint and not only because the culture tends toward a stagnating homogeneity. It is a constraint precisely because the dynamic is gendered, and this provides a significant inheritance of cultural capital to men" (260).

Liza Mundy explains that men's cultural capital results in the fact that many women in tech, while passionate about their jobs and their fields, have "stories about incidents that, no matter how quick or glancing, chipped away at their sense of belonging and expertise." The undermining of women in tech has resulted in a lack of women in the tech sector and is "one reason women today hold only about a quarter of U.S. computing and mathematical jobs—a fraction that has actually fallen slightly over the past 15 years, even as women have made big strides in other fields." These low numbers are because women "not only are hired in lower numbers than men are; they also leave tech at more than twice the rate men do." Mundy argues that it is "not hard to see why" women leave the tech industry at such a high rate, for "[s]tudies show that women who work in tech are interrupted in meetings more often than men. They are evaluated on their personality in a way that men are not. They are less likely to get funding from

venture capitalists, who, studies also show, find pitches delivered by men— especially handsome men—more persuasive." Tech's gender imbalance has been the subject of recent conversations regarding sexual harassment, and as Katie Benner reveals in a report for *The New York Times*, many women in tech "have started to speak out on the issue, including a former Uber engineer who detailed a pattern of sexual harassment at the company, setting off internal investigations that spurred the resignation in June of Uber's chief executive, Travis Kalanick." Some of these stories include that of an entrepreneur who "recounted how she had been propositioned by a Silicon Valley venture capitalist while seeking a job with him, which she did not land after rebuffing him. Another showed the increasingly suggestive messages she had received from a start-up investor. And one chief executive described how she had faced numerous sexist comments from an investor while raising money."

These women's stories "underscore how sexual harassment in the tech start-up ecosystem goes beyond one firm and is pervasive and ingrained. Now their speaking out suggests a cultural shift in Silicon Valley, where such predatory behavior had often been murmured about but rarely exposed." Unfortunately, though, there has been significant pushback against this "cultural shift in Silicon Valley." As Nellie Bowles explains, a deeply entrenched "radical men's rights perspective" persists in tech, and the "complaints" of men in tech "flow on Reddit forums, on video game message boards, on private Facebook pages and across Twitter. They argue for everything from male separatism to an end to gender diversity efforts." The complaints of these so-called "men's rights" proponents underscore the fact that "Silicon Valley has for years accommodated a fringe element of men who say women are ruining the tech world."

The accommodation of men who say women are ruining tech is especially prevalent in the gaming industry—indeed, as Gamergate demonstrates, the fallacious idea that women are ruining games is rife in gaming spaces. Because of this, Cross argues, "Gaming makes for a useful case study here as it exists at a unique collision of professional nerd identities in the technology industry (developers, designers, coders, etc.) and fans, the gamers themselves, modders, fan artists, amateur coders, and so forth" (80). Gaming is a productive case study because the fictive identity of the gamer contends that "anyone complaining about prejudice in gaming spaces is an outsider who does not grasp the culture and is apt to take something away from it, or even destroy it" (81). This fictive identity is gendered and raced because the "'Other' against which so many of these nerd identities are defined is gendered and raced. From 'whiny'

queer gamers to 'invading' feminist women to 'Chinese gold farmers,' threats come from all angles, casting long shadows from the fragile borders of this identity" (82). A host of violences is perpetuated against women and racial and sexual minorities through this gaming industry nomos, which "gives license to all manner of toxic behaviours, not least an alarming number of adults who seem determined to avenge their childhood traumas through their identity, making of nerd culture the very opposite of what it is intended to be—a spiny-shelled, defensive, fragile self, which is defined by perpetual attack" (83). The epistemological privileging of the nerd nomos means that a "nerd who does not identify as a white man is interpreted as a threatening outsider who will pillage it all—be it a freewheeling Silicon Valley disruption culture, to gaming's T&A-focused excesses. That is the nature of the 'boys' club' as it stands in tech; banded together not just by gender, but by ideology and an identity that feeds on ongoing inequalities" (83). The ideology of the "boys' club" is what causes women and racial and sexual minorities to be excluded and erased from video game culture. It is what allows the dominant epistemology of white supremacist heteropatriarchy to keep the gates of video game culture closed to all those who do not adhere to its narrowly inscribed norms.

Because of this gatekeeping, women in the gaming industry are "vastly outnumbered by men, who are more likely to choose to be trained in high-tech computer skills" (Orme 67), and there "is similar disparity in the industry workforce in terms of race" (68). Stephanie Orme explains, "While the number of female developers has been on the rise in the past five years, women are still very much a minority in the field" (69), and most women who are "employed in the game industry hold more stereotypically 'feminine' positions such as marketing specialists or administrative support, as opposed to the more technical roles like programming, developing, and art design" (69). What is more, these "more 'female-friendly' positions in the industry also tend [to] pay lower wages than the male-dominated fields. Even among the high-paying technical fields, women tend to earn less than their male colleagues performing the same roles" (69). Orme argues that hiring managers play a particularly significant role in women's and people of color's employment in the industry because "[h]iring managers are powerful gatekeepers. Unfortunately, some such gatekeepers also hold stereotypical notions about what a programmer looks like…This has cultivated the widespread expectation for what a game developer looks like and to reproducing gaming as a cultural preserve for white males" (72). The white supremacist and masculinist cultural preserve of the gaming industry "seems to assume that its young male

workforce is not burdened with childcare, an assumption that further reinforces the gaming industry's gendered division of labor" (72). These layers of reinforcement and gatekeeping underscore the fact that "the gender dynamics of the industry discourage women from pursuing careers in gaming, inadvertently leading to games made from a distinctly male perspective…Ultimately, these obstacles create a cycle that retains the masculinity of video game culture within the industry, the games themselves, and those who consume them" (Vysotsky and Allaway 101). The narrow inscription of who gets to count as a game developer means that "[m]en in the industry are therefore able to exploit their status…as a means of ostracizing women from game development, which reasserts them as the gender with majority power" (114).

Thus, women and racial and sexual minorities feel alienated and excluded from video game culture. Mattie Brice, a game designer and critic who particularly attends to issues of diversity in games, says that after Gamergate "I continued, and continue, to feel distant from the game industry" (203). Brice says that this distance is, in part, the result of the "large following of harassers who stalked and threatened me at every turn. I was walking on eggshells, always unsure what would set off the mob" (204). Unfortunately, the harassment and abuse Brice received also made it difficult for her to garner employment: "I couldn't find work; companies and institutions didn't find my experience credible or valuable, and I don't come from any sort of wealth to help me fund a new venture or education. I've spent the last year feeling defeated, crushed that all the work I just described amounted to nothing" (204). As a result of this toxicity and marginalization, Brice says, "I'm sad to say that my story ends with me disavowing the game industry for its lack of support and non-stance on the continuing harassment" (204), and what is important about this, Brice notes, is that "I don't think my story, at least its general themes and trajectory, is particularly unique" (204) because "[m]arginalized people face glass ceilings and revolving doors at extremely high rates in this industry" (204).

anna anthropy, a game designer whose games represents queer themes and concerns, has faced a similarly disenfranchising and dehumanizing experience in the industry as a result of the harassment she has received. anthropy discusses her recent experience being doxxed "as part of an ongoing campaign of harassment against women in games" (149), and she details the violence from the doxxing that she faced: "Someone posted my birth name, my partner's birth name, my parents' names and professions, my sisters' names. They posted links to a porn shoot I was in

(under my own name, the same name I attach to all of my work), lest there be any doubt that the motivation behind their campaign is anything other than punishing women for their sexuality" (149). anthropy explains that the difficulty finding sustainable employment in the gaming industry, compounded by these campaigns of abuse, requires a great deal of labor to persist through and strength to endure. anthropy continues, "We admire the strength of women, people of color, queers in enduring all this, in managing, somehow, to make rent month after month. It takes lots of it, great stone mountains of strength" (150). But anthropy also posits that *leaving* the industry requires strength because it too can be an act of resistance: "But here is another thing that takes strength: to say 'No more.' To walk away, to choose something else, to protect yourself. To say 'I don't deserve this.' The strength to unchain yourself from the altar of martyrdom. There's no shame in taking your hand off of something poison" (151). While she does admit, "But anna, what if that's just giving them what they want, though? What if that's just conceding space to them, when we should be maintaining visibility at all costs? What if things are getting better—just very slowly?" (151), anthropy ultimately counters, "What if it's killing you?" (151).

What Brice and anthropy's stories underscore is the fact that women, people of color, and LGBTQI folks are leaving the gaming industry as a result of both the harassment and abuse they receive and the toxicity of the industry's work culture. I want to stress here that this is not to say that their exits signify weakness or giving up—to make such a claim would be to perpetuate a form of victim-blaming and shaming. To be sure, many marginalized individuals stay in the industry to claim space and seek change. So instead, I argue that both strategies, of staying and leaving, can be acts of methodological feminist resistance—because these acts are both rooted in the assertion of one's agency in the face of toxicity, hostility, and violence, and both acts can work to make visible the ways the industry disenfranchises and erases women and sexual and racial minorities.

In short, women do not feel welcome in the gaming industry and even actively seek to leave it. To return to Cross's line of reasoning, this is part of what makes the gaming industry an important case study for the feminist interrogation of women in tech. What is also important to bring into this conversation is the ways that *mothers* are perceived in tech. According to the Elephant in the Valley survey, an initiative that has compiled the input of "200+ women focusing on women with at least 10 years of experience" in Silicon Valley, 40% of women who took the

survey said they "feel the need to speak less about their family to be taken more seriously" at work, and of "those who took maternity leave, 52% shortened their leave because they thought it would negatively impact their career." As Julia Carrie Wong explains, "Women are already a small minority at most tech companies, so being a mother or getting pregnant can only amplify the sense of not fitting it" because "women returning to work after giving birth face another set of challenges and biases. The startup scene frequently mimics the college lifestyle, with late nights, frequent drinking, and an emphasis on putting in 'face time'—all things that become more challenging when your social life involve [sic] more nappies than negronis." Wong interviewed "more than a dozen mothers and pregnant women working at tech startups" and these women "described experiences ranging from being 'guinea pigs' for companies that don't yet have maternity leave policies to facing outright hostility to their pregnancies." One of the women Wong interviewed, who is "a senior software engineer at a large tech firm, said that being a single mother had resulted in her losing 'respect and opportunity' at her company."

The lack of respect for mothers is also evident in the design process itself, for heteropatriarchal assumptions regarding women and motherhood are often built into the very designs tech professionals develop. Kieran Snyder, the CEO of a tech company called Textio, describes one such instance of this: "Several years ago, I was working at a major software company. One day, in a meeting about a new mobile app, the product manager used a phrase that comes up a lot in software reviews: 'Will it work for your mom?'" Snyder explains that the phrase "'so simple your mother could do it' is a trope I've heard in technology nearly every week of my career" and is "illustrative of how inhospitable the industry's work climate can be to motherhood." That is, the tech industry, Snyder explains, is one "where men far outnumber women, where the women who do stay are often pushed toward non-technical roles, and where the bro-grammer ethos creates a culture that is particularly hostile to mothers with young children." In short, it is an industry in which "'will it work for your mom?' is geek-speak for 'will dummies like it too?'"

The geek-speak understanding of mom-as-dummy provides an inroad into understanding the larger implications undergirding the tech industry's relationship with motherhood. Mothers are not afforded space within the nerd epistemology of the tech sector because nerds (to return to Cross's definitions of the nerd nomos) are clever—and moms are dummies. Structurally, this alienation of maternal bodies is built into the environs of the industry itself, from the lack of

maternity leave policies to a culture that views motherhood with outright hostility. But more than this, maternal alienation is built into the very products the tech sector *produces*. To return to the gaming industry specifically, such biases against mothers are built into the video games the industry develops. As such, I now turn to the games themselves and examine several games as case studies; these worked examples highlight the controlling images embedded within video game narratives and rule systems in order to shed light on the industry's cultural assumptions regarding motherhood, family structures, and the gendered labor associated with parenting roles. Such analysis similarly sheds light on the way feminist game studies methods can be wielded to disrupt such controlling images.

4.3   Something's Not Right: Monstrous Motherhood and Traumatic Survival in *Among the Sleep*[2]

Controlling images of motherhood are particularly fraught in video games, and while feminist scholars have thoroughly interrogated the cultural contexts surrounding motherhood (i.e., O'Reilly 2004; Roberts 1997; Ruddick 1980), the extension of and application of such analysis to representations of motherhood in video games provides a fruitful opportunity to consider the gaming industry's manifestations of sociocultural assumptions regarding motherhood and thus the sociocultural contexts in which games are embedded. A primary aspect of the context surrounding motherhood is the fact that constructions of motherhood occur within the confines of patriarchy and patriarchal inscriptions of gendered familial labor, or what Adrienne Rich foundationally defines as "the power of the fathers" (57). Under patriarchy, the concepts of family, property, and ownership are inexorably linked, and Gerda Lerner explains that this "patriarchal family" (216) not only "mirrors the order in the state and educates its children to follow it, it also creates and constantly reinforces that order" (217). The mother, then, becomes a figure used to reinforce this order, and as Rich says, patriarchy needs "the mother to act as a conservative influence, imprinting future adults with patriarchal values" (61). As Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky point out, these gender norms become especially rigidly defined during the Victorian era, during which the "Victorian cult of 'true womanhood' defined women as pure, pious, domestic, and submissive" (7). Marilyn Francus argues that this ideology

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[2] A previous version of this section is located in volume 6, issues 2 & 3 of *The Popular Cultural Studies Journal* as "Something's Not Right: Monstrous Motherhood and Traumatic Survival in *Among the Sleep*."

characterized "true" mothers as being "dutiful, religious, economical (but not parsimonious), modest, chaste, well behaved, charitable, and sensitive to the needs of others" (1), and this ideology celebrated women who upheld the ideology of the "true" mother and rendered monstrous those women who transgressed these norms.

However, the pure and pious social positioning of "true women" can be described as fragile indeed, for as Jane M. Ussher puts it, "[t]he pedestal is a precarious place to be: the woman positioned there has to remain perfect, in order to avoid falling into the position of monster incarnate" (3). Thus, when mothers fall from the "true" woman pedestal, they fall into the category of the "bad" mother, a figure who often "serves as a scapegoat, a repository for social or physical ills that resist easy explanation or solution" (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 22). In short, the bad mother is utilized as a scapegoat because she is an effective means of distracting from the underlying and more complex problems that reside in social structures and cultural norms—because it is easier to blame the mother and leave it at that than to challenge and change the structures that are predicated on these restrictive normative definitions of womanhood and motherhood. Paula Caplan calls for "a thorough understanding of mother-blaming" (128) because it is only through the careful interrogation of mother-blaming and bad mothers that an understanding of the patriarchal structures underpinning these constructs can be attained.

The field of psychoanalysis is one that particularly attends to Caplan's call for this more thorough understanding of mother-blaming and that engages with the ways the scapegoating of bad mothers functions and is made manifest (Stone 2011). One of the psychological concepts that lends shape to the impact of the bad mother as scapegoat is that of abjection (i.e., Batti 2017; Chanter 2008; Monahan 2017), a concept developed by Julia Kristeva (*Powers of Horror* 1982). Imogen Tyler explains that Kristeva "develops the concept of the abject to describe and account for temporal and spatial disruptions within the life of the subject and in particular those moments when the subject experiences a frightening loss of distinction between themselves and objects/others" (79). Tyler also defines abjection as "a concept that describes the violent exclusionary forces operating within modern states: forces that strip people of their human dignity and reproduce them as dehumanized waste, the dregs and refuse of social life" (87). More than this, as Andrew Hock-soon Ng points out, Kristeva's theory of the abject designates "the maternal as the locus of abjection. This is primarily because the maternal confounds (b)orders by externalizing the internal, typified especially by child-bearing and menstruation"

(11). This confounding of borders results in the idea that "Kristeva's abject body is fundamentally experiencing a loss, or a deconstruction, of reality. What replaces it is the Void, the origin of the monster" (11). Thus, maternal abjection (or the abject mother) means that "there are only two alternatives for the feminine other: she can either subscribe to the patriarchal order and repress her subjectivity, or challenge the order and risk being deemed transgressive, and marginalised" (12). In short, the psychological concept of the abject mother as a figure who transgresses and is cast out of the Symbolic order of the dominant (in this case, patriarchal) ideology is a helpful framework through which to consider the ways mother-blaming and scapegoating function. That is, mothers are blamed for various social and psychical woes, they are thus deemed transgressive and abject, and they are then cast out of the Symbolic order. The scapegoated mother, the bad mother, is thus an abject figure, and this understanding of maternal abjection provides an inroad into an understanding, too, of the ways this abjection constructs the bad mother as a *monstrous* one.

As Francus puts it, narratives that represent monstrous motherhood "repeatedly express the cultural fear of maternal agency and authority, which competes with and more often overturns patriarchal power" (170). The perceived monstrosity of the maternal body is often framed in ambivalent ways because this body is "deemed dangerous and defiled, the myth of the monstrous feminine made flesh, yet also a body which provokes adoration and desire, enthrallment with the mysteries within" (Ussher 1). In all these ways, the maternal body is coded as a space of duality—a space that is both dangerous and desired, sacred and corrupt. Yet, it is important to note, the representation of monstrous mothers in horror does not provide insight into female identity but rather sheds light on the manner in which such identity is patriarchally inscribed through the perpetuation of domestic ideologies. When considering such ideologies, Francus explains that, historically, domestic ideologies have not been "uniformly enacted" (5), and yet scholarship on such social phenomena often nonetheless relies on "the archetype of the middle-class domestic woman…as cultural shorthand" (5). As such, as Francus shows, it is important to ensure that scholarship on "the ideology and practice of female domesticity" not be read as "uniform and universal" because patriarchal constructions of family and motherhood can shift depending on intersecting systems of oppression based on experiences like race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability (6). Classifications and narratives of monstrous motherhood must then be read through a more nuanced lens, particularly when these narratives are conveyed

through the medium of the video game (a medium developed by an industry that has historically alienated mothers).

One video game that provides a particularly generative framework through which to interrogate the representational complexities of monstrous motherhood is the video game *Among the Sleep* (Krillbite Studios 2014). In *Among the Sleep*, a first-person survival horror game, audiences play the character of a toddler, who has just turned two years old and who lives alone with her mother. The game opens with a birthday celebration of sorts, a celebration in the kitchen between the mother and child, in which the child's mother, putting the finishing touches on a birthday cake, says, "Mommy just has to make sure that the cake is perfect." This celebration is interrupted by a knock on the door, and when the mother leaves to answer the door, players can hear raised, tense voices. The mother returns with a present, which is later revealed to be a teddy bear (one named Teddy, who talks and accompanies the child on the adventures that later ensue), and takes the child to bed. The child then wakes up in the middle of the night to the house in disarray, and the mother is nowhere to be found. The child and Teddy then embark on a quest for the mother, one that is conveyed in surrealist tones and through nightmare-scapes of broken-down playgrounds and craggy haunted houses.

This quest for the mother takes unexpected narrative and ludic turns, which results in *Among the Sleep* being a game that represents motherhood, monstrosity, and childhood trauma in complex and interconnected ways. While scholars have consistently interrogated the socio-cultural implications and underpinnings of representations of monstrosity (i.e., Almond 2010; Calafell 2015), such representations in games are particularly ripe for feminist analyses of motherhood, gendered labor, and patriarchal family structures. In light of all this, my goal here is to examine the construction of monstrous motherhood in the game *Among the Sleep*. Through the analysis of both the game's mechanics and its narrativity, this section reveals the ways *Among the Sleep* attempts to challenge normative constructions of gender, while, at the same time, perpetuating binaristic definitions of motherhood and (ultimately) womanhood. In doing so, I problematize not only the manner in which gender and motherhood are constructed in the game but also the ways gender and gender roles are socially constructed in broader systems of representation. Ultimately, my project in this section is to examine *Among the Sleep* in order to enact an intervention into representations of monstrous motherhood in video games because I hope to interrogate the ways video games as a medium reify and complicate narrative

constructions of maternal monstrosity. In other words, this section demonstrates the use of feminist game studies praxis as an active means of problematizing, intervening into, and *changing* video game culture and the reification of gendered labor, family structures, and parenting roles in the video game narratives this culture produces.

Among the Sleep is a game ripe for feminist theorizing because of the ideologies regarding motherhood that are encoded in the game. That is, *Among the Sleep* requires the application of feminist game studies analysis because of the ways the game's representations of motherhood—the true mother, the bad mother, the abject mother, the monstrous mother—are all bound up together and are all made central to the narrative and ludic stakes of the game. As mentioned previously, the protagonist of the game and the character players inhabit is an unnamed toddler; the only other characters seen throughout the game are the child's newly gifted teddy bear named Teddy (an anthropomorphic character who speaks to the child throughout the game), the child's father (who is heard, but not seen, at the end of the game and whose role I will turn to later), and, centrally, the child's mother. For most of *Among the Sleep*, the mother seems to be framed as the prototypical "good" or "true" mother (albeit a single one). For instance, she is depicted as the kind of mother who bakes birthday cakes, sings lullabies, and kisses her child good night. Such depictions frame the mother as one who adheres to the norms of true motherhood. Her good mothering is also predicated on the norms of white middle-class culture (she is a white woman living in a well-apportioned two-story home), and as Ladd-Taylor and Umansky point out, good motherhood is almost always conveyed as being "specific to middle-class culture" (8). When the child wakes in the middle of the night to find that the mother is gone, the (good) mother's sudden disappearance renders her a helpless, blameless victim, one who needs to be saved at all costs.

Teddy's references to the mother throughout the game underscores her victimhood. When the toddler wakes up in the middle of the night, having unceremoniously tumbled out of an inexplicably overturned crib, she finds Teddy locked inside the washing machine; when she frees Teddy from this prison, he immediately says, "Something's not right, we need to find your mother." The player's objective is based entirely on this mindset—on the need to find the victimized mother who needs our help. Throughout the game, Teddy makes comments like, "This place creeps me out. I hope your mother is okay," and "Your mother…She must be so worried about you. But don't be afraid. You and me, we'll work this all out—together. I know

we will." Such utterances perpetuate the damsel-in-distress lens through which players view the mother; she will remain a helpless victim, a good mother worrying about her child until players (with the aid of Teddy) are able to find and save her. The entire framework and rule system of *Among the Sleep* is thus predicated on this representation of and reliance on the normative trope of the good, true mother. Teddy's role, in constantly remarking on the need for the child to find the mother, reinforces the damsel-in-distress lens of the game, which means that Teddy's structural role also reinforces the normative, patriarchal representations of motherhood that are highlighted through this framework. But in doing so, Teddy also underscores the mother's *absence*, thereby rendering the maternal body a site of loss, a Void—a space of *abjection*—which creates the unsettling feeling that all is not as it seems in this game.

When players do find the mother at the end of the game, they come to realize that all is assuredly *not* as it seems and the mother is not necessarily the helpless victim she was initially made out to be. Rather, the mother is revealed to be an abusive alcoholic who has been the perpetrator of the violence that the toddler has endured throughout the game. At the end of the game, players see the mother (in a series of fragmented and surreal memories) drink from a bottle and slur, "Please, go somewhere else. I'll just…Just one more." During this series, the mother also stands ominously and monolithically over the child as she asserts, "He will not take you from me." In these moments, the mother's representation shifts—from that of the good mother to the bad mother. She is no longer the good mother who bakes cakes, doles out kisses, and sings lullabies; instead, she is revealed to be the bad mother who drinks too much and abuses her child. The mother's alcoholism and her abuse of the child function as representational shifts—they provide a narrative twist for the game's resolution. Because this is a *horror* game, this ending that relies on depictions of violent, bad motherhood is meant to horrify players. Because bad motherhood here is horrifying, it is also represented in monstrous ways. This monstrous representation of motherhood brings to mind Barbara Creed's famous discussion of the idea of "woman as monster" through her examination of the *monstrous-feminine*, a term that "emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of [woman's] monstrosity" (3), especially in relation to "mothering and reproductive functions" (7). Creed explains that representations of maternal monstrosity are especially prevalent in the horror genre—something that is true as well for *Among the Sleep*. To be sure, the game's mother embodies the monstrous-feminine; she is a mother and a woman, yes, but one to be feared and one who instills horror.

What makes the mother monstrous *is* her alcoholism, for her alcoholism is what causes her to act abusively toward her child. Thus, the mother's abusive alcoholism is what renders her the embodiment of the monstrous-feminine.

The game's depiction of this maternal monstrosity is reified and made tangible by the two monstrous figures that pursue the child throughout the game. The game requires players to hide from these monstrous antagonists in order to prevent the child protagonist from being captured and injured. The first monster, a banshee-like figure clad in a torn and dirty nightgown, drinks from a bucket and shrieks as she chases after the child; what is more, if the banshee finds the child, she grabs her and violently shakes her. The second monster is a disembodied trench coat with glowing eyes that attacks the child every time the child knocks over a glass bottle. Both these monsters—through the banshee's constant drinking and the trench coat's sudden appearance at the sound of breaking glass—represent the mother's alcohol-induced violence, and such representations underscore the monstrosity of the mother's alcoholism, abusiveness, and bad motherhood. These representations also render the mother abject in that these monsters represent the dehumanized nature of her violent transgressions; that is, the monstrous mother, here, is an *abject* one (one cast out of the Symbolic order) because her alcoholism manifests as the abuse of her child, and such behavior is unacceptable, appalling, and horrific. Such monstrous behavior is abject because it results in a loss of reality that occurs through the shock of the child's traumatic experience, a loss that is demonstrated through the surreal, nightmare world (one populated by surreal figures like banshees and trench coats) of the game. As such, these monsters' representation of abject motherhood highlight the monstrosity of the abusive, alcoholic mother, as well as the trauma such monstrous motherhood can inflict on a child.

Because the game's protagonist is a baby and not an adult—that is, because the violence endured throughout the game is enacted on a child's body—the mother's bad mothering is especially abhorrent. Teddy, in fact, says, "I've never seen anything like it. A child shouldn't have to go through this." Such protestations underscore the fact that the mother's abusive actions are carried out against the especially vulnerable and fragile body of a two-year old, and this traumatic vulnerability renders the mother's monstrous violence especially horrific and grotesque. As a result, the mother is no longer the helpless victim—the child is. This shift then renders the child protagonist the victim of the mother's abject monstrosity. This shift also represents a slight shift in *Among the Sleep*'s location in the *survival* horror game genre; as Irene

Chien explains, "As the 'survival' tag suggests, an aggressive agency is involved in these games: the emphasis is not on the traumatizing dimensions of fear and violence, but on the hero's perseverance—and sheer brutality—in the face of relentless enemies and seemingly overwhelming odds." The perseverance of the child protagonist in *Among the Sleep* is indeed emphasized; however, because the protagonist in this game is a child and because the monster is her mother—and not, for instance, a horde of zombies to be slain—the traumatizing nature that the fear and violence enacted by the monstrous mother is also centralized. The violently traumatic mother/child relationship is the horror that the child must survive in this game.

It should also be said, though, that the relationship between the mother and child in *Among the Sleep* is perhaps a bit more complicated than that. Even though the game informs players that the mother has been acting violently toward the child for some time, the child, nonetheless, desires to seek her out and reunite with her. This idea of *returning*—returning to a relationship with the mother—seems especially relevant when thinking about the objectives laid out in the game. In order to find the mother, players are directed to navigate their way through a surreal nightmare-scape in order to collect "memories" of the mother, which take the shape of several objects, including the pendant of the necklace she wears, a stuffed pink elephant, a story book, and the music box she plays for the child before bed; upon locating the first memory (the pendant), Teddy posits, "Maybe, if we can find more memories like this, it might bring us to her!" The quest for such positively framed memories—pretty pendants and plush stuffed animals—reveals the fact that the child longs for the mother, but for a version of her mother that is founded on all the good memories she has of her. Such longing is even manifested in the game's environment, for in order to get to the next location, get to the next memory, and get one step closer to being reunited with the mother, the child must enter and slide through a tube in order to be transported there—a tube that brings to mind the idea and imagery of the womb. This womb-like imagery further reifies the abject nature of the monstrous-feminine in the game; that is, this landscape makes tangible and visible the monstrous-feminine qualities of the abject mother because the womb is the Void, the confounding of borders between the internal and external, the confounding of borders between the (maternal) other and the (child's) self. Because this tube represents a return to the Void of the womb, this abject tube-as-Void also represents the idea of loss—not just a loss of borders between internal/external and self/other but also a loss of innocence for the game's child-protagonist. This warped, grotesque, horrific *Bildungsroman*

means that the child is also returned to her memory, something that results in the child's need to confront her traumatic past in order to move forward in the game.

Even though the child longs to be reunited with her mother due to these positively-rendered memories, the environment of and other characters in the game constantly work to help the child come to terms with her trauma and the unreliable positioning of these memories. Much of what Teddy says, for example, have multiple meanings, some of which point to the potentially dangerous side of the mother. Early on in the game, when the child has just met Teddy (and before the mother goes missing), the baby and Teddy play together in her bedroom and explore a closet in the room; while in the darkened closet, Teddy says, "I think something's coming," immediately after which the mother opens the closet door, saying jovially, "You've got to stop hiding from mommy." Such an instance seems to be a moment of foreshadowing that ominously heralds the bad mother players see by the end of the game—something is coming, and it is the coming knowledge of the mother's transgressions. Perhaps there is a similar duality in the mother's statement as well; "You've got to stop hiding from mommy" might also signal the onset of such knowledge, in that the child must stop rejecting (or hiding from) the truth of her trauma in order to begin the journey toward understanding and recovery. Such dual meaning is also pervasive in one of Teddy's statements referenced earlier in this section: "Something's not right, we need to find your mother." While, on the surface, this statement may seem to signal that the mother is the victim of whatever it is that is not right, such a statement could also mean that the something that is not right *is* the mother. The duality of meaning, here, harkens back to some of the concepts discussed earlier regarding the manifestations of the monstrous mother in horror texts; these manifestations are typically ambiguous and represent the maternal body as a space of duality—in other words, the monstrous mother is an ambiguous figure who is both a helpless victim and a powerful monster, a figure who is both sought after and rejected.

This makes the game's resolution particularly important to note. At the very end of the game, the child finds her mother slumped on the kitchen floor next to an empty wine bottle and clutching Teddy (whose arm has been ripped off). When the child tries to take Teddy back, the mother pushes her away, shouting, "Stay away from me." The mother then begins to cry and mutters, "I'm sorry. I never meant to. It's too much." At this moment, players have the option to have the child comfort her mother by stroking her hair, which complicates the ways the mother is constructed; she is not a victim, she is not a monster—she is, ambiguously, both at the same

time. She is a figure that is both pitied and feared. This, then, constructs the maternal body as a space of ambiguity. However, this ambiguous maternal figure is one from which the child protagonist is ultimately retrieved, for after comforting the (piteously monstrous) mother, the child hears a knock at the front door. The door opens to a blinding whiteness, and players hear a man's voice say, "Hi there, little one! Come here. You'll be safe with me. Did you like your gift? What happened to his arm? Don't worry, we'll fix him up." This man would appear to be the child's father, who comes to save the child from the drunken abuse of the mother. The father is someone with whom the child will be safe and someone who has the ability to fix things. In this way, the father is constructed as a savior, and this particular rendering of fatherhood is constructed as salvation from *Among the Sleep*'s monstrous motherhood. The game's motherhood then becomes constructed in opposition to its fatherhood.

Among the Sleep's construction of motherhood as being in opposition with fatherhood is something that requires particularly careful consideration, for this representation of oppositionality reveals the game's assumptions about gender and parenting roles. The game's monstrous motherhood lends itself to the representation of acknowledgment and processing of childhood trauma experienced as a result of monstrous, alcoholic, and abusive parenting. The surreal landscapes of the gameworld underscores this traumatic memory and provide spaces in which such traumatic memory might be processed. *Among the Sleep* uses its representation of monstrous motherhood as a way to narratively convey the immense risk children face at the hands of abusive parents; the monsters in the game (that is, the banshee and the trench coat) are then utilized as stand-ins for the horror that results when violence is enacted against the exceedingly vulnerable bodies and psyches of children. The game's surreality, its horrific, dark, and nightmarish world, reifies this horror, violence, and trauma, and the rule system of the game makes it so that players passively explore the world, collecting memories as they go, only able to run and hide from the monsters in the game. This passivity is underscored by the father's role as savior and the fact that the father saves the toddler at the end of the game—that is, the child does not make the decision to leave the monstrous mother behind but rather has these choices made for her—by the father. In this way, the person given agency at the end of the game is not the child-protagonist (and certainly not the monstrous, abject mother) but the *father*. Thus, the game's resolution underscores its patriarchal lens, for the father-as-salvation conclusion reifies the centering of patriarchy as a guiding, normalizing force for the toddler. This recentering of

patriarchy, interestingly, does seem to flip gender scripts though, for it results in a role reversal in which the *father* and *not* the mother functions as the model, idealized caretaker. That is, because motherhood and fatherhood are constructed in opposition to each other, the mother is a monster and the father is a savior; the mother is bad and abject while the father is good and true; the mother is a transgressive failure at parenting while the father is successful in his caretaking role and his ability to save the child from the monstrous mother. These binaristic mother/father roles and this flipping of gender scripts mean that the father's role here is that of the mother's foil, and his role then serves to underscore the game's abject representation of monstrous motherhood.

While the game's conclusion provides a compelling opportunity to flip gendered parenting scripts, this reversal reveals the limited ways the game implements and relies on binaristic definitions of (good and bad) motherhood. As such, perhaps what all this reveals is the fact that, as Ladd-Taylor and Umansky stress, "In many ways, 'bad' mothers are not so very different from 'good' ones. We all struggle under mountains of conflicting advice that cannot possibly be followed in real life. We all must find our way in a society that devalues mothering" (22). This "we all" is especially relevant for women, for as Alison Stone puts it, the association with maternity "burdens all women to varying degrees—mothers and non-mothers alike. So it is important for women generally that we reconceive maternity, and, in particular, reconceive it in terms of an active process and work of generating meaning out of body relations" (61). The interrogation of monstrous motherhood, in particular, is one way to enact the active process of generating meaning out of (maternal) body relations because the monster "enables us to reconsider positions and places of alterity, and through this reconsideration, perhaps understand our own bodies and selves better" (Hock-soon Ng 187). The consideration of representation in video games is one such mode of understanding the transmission of bodies and selves via the medium of games and games' reification of cultural assumptions made about such bodies.

Among the Sleep's monstrous motherhood also converses with the alienation of mothers in gaming industry workplaces. The mother in *Among the Sleep* is an abject figure, and her outcast status parallels the peripherality and outcast status of mothers in the industry itself. That is, mothers are cast out of the dominant social order—the nerd nomos—of the gaming industry, and this abject, outcast status is representationally and structurally reified by the narrative

depictions of monstrous mothers (like the one we see in *Among the Sleep*) in the games the industry produces.

4.4   Techno-Maternal Bodies and All-Mothers: Complicating Maternal Futurities in *Horizon Zero Dawn*

While *Among the Sleep* provides a helpful case study through which to consider the current abject status of mothers in video game culture, I now turn to the game *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerilla Games 2017) as a case study through which to interrogate how games are also beginning to represent motherhood as a site for exploring the future. *Horizon Zero Dawn* centers on the story of Aloy, a woman navigating a postapocalyptic landscape as she tries to solve the mystery of her past and find information on her mother, a woman Aloy grew up never knowing. *Horizon Zero Dawn*'s centering of Aloy's quest for her maternal roots makes this AAA game ripe for analysis; the audience's understanding of the stakes of Aloy's quest is tethered to assertions of the importance of kinship and familial bonds. What is also important is this tethering's manifestation in and complication by the game's worldbuilding, this world's exploration of the tension between nature and postapocalyptic technology, and Aloy's embodiment of these tensions in her movement around this gameworld.

Horizon Zero Dawn constructs the kind of postapocalyptic world many video games do—one in which humanity has barely survived the brink of extinction, in which social, political, and economic structures as we know them have crumbled, and these structures have been replaced by new, alternative communities and factions (communities that, still, mirror some of those that existed before them). Players come to realize that much time has passed since this world's apocalypse, as evidenced in the landscape and setting; the land is lush with vegetation and wildlife, but the vestiges of human life—the buildings and roads—are scarce and skeletal. Instead, people live in communities referred to in the game as *tribes*, all of which have different characteristics and defining features. For instance, the Nora tribe, of which Aloy is a part, lives on the outskirts of civilization in the forest and exists under a matriarchal social structure (an important construction that I will return to shortly). The Carja tribe, on the other hand, lives in a great urban citadel, a center for trade and commerce, and exists under the monarchy of the Sun King. This is all to say that, through these different tribes, *Horizon Zero Dawn* constructs its

postapocalyptic world as one that is fractured and fragmented, and it is also a world that is fragile and precarious—one that could come to an end at any moment.

This precarity is due, in part, to some of the same struggles we see today—war, political parties vying for power, xenophobia—but it is also due to the unique science-fictional framework of this world. In addition to these familiar struggles, *Horizon Zero Dawn* also presents a world in which dangerous, often violent robotic creatures roam the earth. These robots take the form of animals we know—Grazers look like deer with motors on their backs. Sawtooths look like large tigers with sharp blades on their faces. Glinthawks look like huge birds with guns in their beaks. These robots are thus uncanny in that they are familiar and yet not— they bring to mind creatures that exist and yet they are destructive machines, made of metal. So too are the tribes familiar and yet not—they manifest some of the same sociopolitical structures in which we exist and yet the game asks players to see these tribes as primitive, a return to earlier, more basic forms of existence. Like the animalistic robots, these tribes feel uncanny in their familiar difference. But the tribes' primitiveness is also uncanny because of the futuristic, science-fictional space in which this primitiveness exists. For instance, members of the Nora tribe live in dwellings made of wood, rope, and fur. They wear the skins and parts of creatures they hunt—creatures both organic and robotic. They paint their faces. They wield spears and arrows—but their weapons incorporate technological enhancements, like machinic, technological parts that can override a robot to hack it or arrows with tips that can shock the robots' electrical components. They are primitive, and yet not. They have returned to the basics, but they are of the future. They represent a primitive futurity, a future in which one must make use of the land to survive.

It is telling that this primitive future is the setting in which the Nora's matriarchy is situated—because this primitive future is the framework through which we read the game's construction of a matriarchal society. The Nora's matriarchy is run by several women, Jezza, Lansra, and Teersa, the High Matriarchs who make the social, economic, and political decisions for the Nora tribe. But there is also a religious dimension to their power, thereby also constructing this matriarchy as a theocracy of sorts, one that worships what the Nora refer to as the "All-Mother"—a maternal spiritual entity that manifests the gendered structuring of the landscape and culture of the Nora tribe. Motherhood seeps into every aspect of Nora life, for maternal bodies are the site of political, cultural, economic, and spiritual power. Maternal bodies

are the sites of contestation for the Nora. In this way, the power of the maternal body is tied to the land because, again, this power is tethered to the primitive natural landscape of the pastoral domain of the Nora. This tethering thus constructs the maternal power of the Nora's matriarchy as a primitive, even indigenous, form of power.

The indigenous construction of maternal power is made apparent in the gaming interface's visualization of such tethering to the earth through the landscape it visualizes—the lush wilderness, painted faces, bows and arrows, wooden dwellings. But more than this, this world's indigenous maternal power is located within the bodies of older women, for the matriarchs of the Nora tribe are three older women (their more advanced age signified by their greying hair and wrinkled faces), and their aged embodiment of the materiality of matriarchal power thus invokes the wisdom of the (maternal) elders as the wisdom that guides this community. Maternal, embodied knowledge is the privileged epistemology in the tribe. The use of this word *tribe*, too, is significant, for its use signifies the indigenous nature of the community and culture of the Nora. It is not a town. It is not a nation. It is a *tribe*. It is *of the earth*. Its matriarchal power is thus also *of the earth*. Its matriarchal power is thus *indigenous*. It should be noted here, too, that all the communities in the game are referred to as tribes, and thus this construction of primitiveness through indigenous positionality occurs across *Horizon Zero Dawn*'s gameworld.

The Nora's indigenous power is also manifested in the term used for hunters in the tribe, for Nora hunters are referred to as *braves*. The braves are those who have the power to hunt—the power to protect the tribe, provide for the tribe, and help the tribe survive. The braves are thus both soldier and nurturer, hunter and caregiver, all roles contained within the same body at the same time. It would seem, then, that braves embody both normatively masculine and normatively feminine forms of power; these forms of power are thus inexorably linked and mutually constituted, for the braves must embody all these things all the time in order to survive and help the tribe thrive. The braves must also be able to work with and know the earth to succeed—they need to know how to move silently through the cover of the brush to avoid the detection of their prey, locate plants to use for medicinal purposes, or use the natural resources of their environment to construct and repair their weapons. Knowledge of the earth is thus also part of the braves' power. Their epistemological power is an indigenous one.

But this indigenous power is often put at odds with technology and cultural progress. The Nora tribe lives in what they call the "sacred land" of Mother's Embrace, a space untainted by what the Nora consider to be the cultural excesses of the other tribes and the technological evils of the rest of the robot-ravaged world. The Nora fear technology and they fear strangers, for they fear the unknown. The Nora also strictly adhere to the norms and rules of the tribe, and those who break these rules or do not follow the norms are cast out of the tribe. They are deemed outcast and are rendered (like *Among the Sleep*'s mother) abject. The Nora tribe is thus manifested as an insulated society, one that has perhaps stagnated in its xenophobia and techno-fears. *Horizon Zero Dawn* thus constructs indigenous power as stagnant power that is stale in its primitiveness. It is power that is closed off to the potential of and for change. The Nora are closed off to cultural change. They are closed off to technological change. They are afraid of what they do not know. That this fearful primitiveness is located within an area referred to as Mother's Embrace is telling because the Nora have not left the safety and comfort of Mother's Embrace. They are thus constructed as childlike in their fear, their primitiveness, their (technological) underdevelopment. Their resistance to change is a stagnating infantilization. The landscape in which they live wields a maternal force—it has the ability to nurture and protect (the protective and comforting positioning of the mother's embrace); but this embrace is also constructed as one that is *too* protective in its ability to stagnate. It is overbearing. It is suffocating. It is the force of both the good and the bad mother intertwined.

There is a tension in the Nora's childlike fear of the unknown when considering their worship of the All-Mother. For the Nora, the All-Mother represents the creation of life and is quite literally tethered to the earth because she is seated within what the Nora call the Sacred Mountain. The mountain is the Nora's temple, the holy site toward which they direct their prayer, and the All-Mother their goddess. But this goddess, while tethered to the earth, is also a *technological* one, for the All-Mother is a technological remnant of the world before the apocalypse; there is an access door to a pre-apocalypse underground facility located in the Sacred Mountain, and the door makes use of a synthetic female voice as its auditory user interface. Thus, the Nora have mistaken this techno-voice, this simulated sentience, with god-like omnipotence and omniscience. In most cases, the Nora fear what they do not know. They fight it. They cast it out. But in the case of the All-Mother, they worship it.

We, the players, come to find all this out through Aloy's eyes, for she is our main character, our avatar, the embodied role of the player as we make our way through the game. But Aloy is not simply an empty vessel for the player to toggle through the gameworld, slaying robot and human foes as they go. Rather, Aloy is a *character*, narratively and structurally constructed as someone with her own agency and desires, someone with her own backstory and choices. As for Aloy's backstory, Aloy is of the Nora tribe, but she has grown up an abject outcast. She does not know why she has been rendered abject, only that she has always been an outcast, living just outside the Embrace. However, just because Aloy does not know why she is an outcast is not to say that she does not *want* to know; indeed, her desire to know more about her past and her origins is what motivates her actions in the game. It is this desire that sets Aloy apart from the Nora and that underscores her outcast status. Aloy does not rely on the faith of the Nora, she does not have faith in the All-Mother, and she does not believe the All-Mother has a plan for her or that her outcast status has a spiritual purpose. Rather, Aloy is angry, she resents the injustice of such alienation, and she wants to do something about it. She wants to find out who she is. In this way, Aloy is a liminal character, embodying the resistance of the in-between. She is an outcast—not accepted as Nora but still a part of the Nora tribe, unable to accept Nora faith and cultural values but still wanting to be accepted by the tribe. Her liminality results in resistance because it is within this liminal context that she has the agency and the drive to seek knowledge and change.

Aloy goes about her epistemological search for knowledge by seeking to become a brave. Once a year there is a contest for young Nora called The Proving. If they can make it to the end of a dangerous obstacle course, they get to become braves, and the person who finishes the course first is given the reward of having one request granted by the matriarchs. Even outcasts may compete, so when she is little, Aloy decides to enter The Proving when she is of age so that, if she wins, she can make the matriarchs tell her why she was made an outcast and where she came from. Rost, another outcast and the man who has been her caretaker since she was a baby (and is an adoptive father figure of sorts), trains her for years, knowing that if she wins The Proving she will no longer be an outcast and that, since he still will be, she will thus be required to shun him (for if she does not, she will be breaking Nora law, which will cause her to be rendered an outcast once more). In this way, Aloy's quest for knowledge of self is predicated on a rejection. She must reject Rost, her adopted kin, in order to find out about her origins. She must

reject her current roots and current identity in order to begin anew. The Proving, thus, is aptly named—Aloy must prove to the Nora that she has the strength to become a brave, yes. But more importantly, Aloy must prove to herself that she can reject her current kinship ties with Rost—a rejection that, like her outcast status, feels bitterly unjust. This breaking of kinship ties is reified when Rost sacrifices himself at the end of The Proving to save Aloy from being killed by a group of mysterious rogue Carja fighters (whose motives we will turn to momentarily). Rost's own fatal sacrifice underscores the fact that Aloy's search for self results in (often violent) rebirths and reimaginings that are grounded, paradoxically, in death and destruction—a paradox that seems connected to the paradox of Aloy's liminality.

In short, Aloy wins The Proving, but her original plan is derailed at the appearance of the Eclipse, a militaristic faction of religious cultists who serve an entity known as HADES—a mysterious, formless technological being that wants Aloy dead and has sent this shadow force to The Proving to kill her. While Rost prevents the cultists from carrying out HADES's orders (and dies in the process), Aloy is grievously injured during the attack on The Proving, and the High Matriarchs take her into the Sacred Mountain, a place usually only the matriarchs themselves are allowed to enter, so that she may recover from her wounds. While in the mountain temple, the matriarch Teersa tells Aloy about her past and takes Aloy to the place where she was born, the place where the matriarchs found her (a baby) one day—at the foot of the All-Mother, the mysterious access door. While Teersa thought Aloy's appearance was a miracle and a good omen, the other matriarchs thought it was a curse and made Aloy an outcast because of their (stagnating) fear of the unknown. These origins underscore Aloy's liminal positionality; she is both miracle and curse, she is a product of the All-Mother and the sacred mountain and an unnatural, tainted being produced by technology—produced by the synthetic simulation of humanity that is made manifest by the cold, hard metal of the access door.

Aloy is liminal, but this liminality also paradoxically renders her *exceptional* because it is her liminality that makes Aloy the only one who can, as Teersa puts it, "journey beyond our Sacred Land" to "heal the corruption" that now threats the tribe—the corrupting force of both the humans and the machines that threaten the safety of the Nora. Aloy is now a brave and the winner of The Proving, but she is also abject, an outcast, one touched just enough by corruption to be able to venture away from the sacred land of Mother's Embrace and out into the corrupted landscape beyond. Aloy is thus individualistically rendered exceptional (similar to the neoliberal

rendering of the tech nerd nomos as exceptional in video game culture), the only one ready and able to engage in this quest, and the title the High Matriarchs bestow on her highlights this exceptionalism; they give Aloy the title of Seeker, one chosen by the matriarchs to venture forth from the sacred lands, to find out more about the cultists, and to protect the Nora from HADES's threats. And in order to do all these things, Teersa says, Aloy must first find out (she must *seek*) more about herself and her mysterious past, for her origins contain the key to their collective survival.

Aloy's exceptionalism is consistently stressed throughout the game, especially in other characters' interactions with her. From Erend, who tells Aloy, "Look, maybe I shouldn't say this, but it's obvious that you don't belong in this backwater. I mean, you're smart, you're obviously capable, and well, I mean, look at you," to Varl, who with an awe-tinged voice tells Aloy as they prepare for battle, "You're not like other Nora." What such moments reveal is the way many characters in the game treat Aloy with a combination of awe, deference, desire, surprise, and respect. But, again, this respect is grounded in an understanding of Aloy as exceptional, as *not the average Nora girl*. This exceptionalism is especially grounded in Aloy's *corruption*—namely, her embodied connection to technology. This embodied connectivity stems not only from her technological birth but from the fact that she wears something called a Focus, which is a preapocalyptic, wearable piece of technology that Aloy finds in ancient ruins as a young girl. When Aloy slips the Focus around her ear and activates the device, she is able to perform a multitude of tasks that those without such technological enhancements cannot, including tracking her foes, locating and downloading preapocalyptic computer files, and downloading information on the best ways to bring down a particular type of robot. Most of the inhabitants of this world do not wear Focuses, which means that Aloy has a sort of second sight, as a mode of augmented reality; she is able to use the technology of the world before to see her world in a different way and to succeed in ways most people cannot, and this means that Aloy's exceptionalism is grounded in her embodiment of the tension between nature and technology—she is both primitive Nora girl and impervious, undefeatable techno-warrior all at the same time.

Aloy's gender is a significant contributor to the perception and conveyance of her embodiment of this nature/technology tension. Indeed, Aloy is consistently referred to as a Nora *girl* in the game—or, again, not the *average* Nora *girl*. Her embodied positionality as primitive Nora brave who also paradoxically wears a Focus and is able to override and ride robots is, in

part, what constructs her as above-average (as exceptional), but so too does her gender. The use of the diminutive *girl* reinforces the primitiveness of Aloy's perceived baseline identity. The use of the term feels condescending, patronizing; Aloy is just a Nora *girl*, and her girl-ness makes her prowess, capability, and courage even more shocking and exceptional to many of those she encounters because people assume that most *girls* are not capable of what Aloy is, simply due to their girlness. The use of the word *girl* also seems tied to gatekeeping efforts in the game; Aloy is just a Nora *girl*, and her girl-ness is cause for some to bar her entry.

This gendered gatekeeping is especially apparent in events that occur in a side quest for the Hunter's Lodge. The Hunter's Lodge, an exclusive members-only group of elite robot hunters, is currently run by a man named Ahsis (known as the Lodge's "Sunhawk"), who takes a very exclusionary, border-policing approach to running the Lodge. While the Lodge has recently opened up to all the ability to apply for membership, Ahsis believes the Lodge should adhere to the old rules in which only Carja nobility could become members of the Lodge. When Aloy comes to the Sunhawk to seek admittance, he pushes back; because he sees Aloy as a lowly Nora girl, he also believes she is beneath him and beneath the Lodge, a dehumanizing perspective rooted in erasure and hierarchy. When Aloy persists, reminding him that the law requires he let her in, he sends her to Talanah, the only other woman (and a woman of color) in the Lodge, to be Aloy's mentor. Talanah is aware of Ahsis's prejudiced motives, so she partners with Aloy to prove Ahsis wrong. Ultimately, they best Ahsis by taking down a particularly brutal robot known as Redmaw before he can—a besting that (according to the rules of the Lodge) makes Talanah the new Sunhawk of the Hunter's Lodge. Aloy and Talanah's coalition is a form of solidarity work that successfully dismantles Ahsis's hegemonic hierarchization and policing of the Lodge's membership. Aloy thus becomes the gendered embodiment of the need for such solidarity work, for her material positionality as *lowly Nora girl* provides the impetus for change at the Hunter's Lodge.

That seems to be Aloy's function throughout the game—she is the embodiment of change, the tension between old and new, and the tension between natural world and technological one. The game's resolution underscores the significance of Aloy's embodied role, in that the game's ending is about a beginning (another tension); the game's narrative resolves itself by shedding light on Aloy's past. In short, in the course of Aloy's exploration of ancient bunkers and what remains of their computer systems, Aloy finds out that she is not simply a

child born of this technology—not simply born of the All-Mother—but she is a *clone* of this system's creator, Elisabet Sobeck. The real name of this system, Aloy also discovers, is GAIA, an AI Elisabet tasks with terraforming and "re-seeding" all life on the planet. In the preapocalyptic world, a company called Faro Automated Solutions created a line of robots that they misleadingly titled Peacekeepers, which are actually war machines with the immense ability to reap destruction through their militarized, weaponized design. Elisabet discovers that a devastating glitch exists in the system that will allow these war machines to self-replicate and ultimately seek to destroy all organic life on the planet. Upon discovering this, Elisabet presents Project Zero Dawn, which turns out to be the only solution to this problem—the creation of GAIA and the construction of a series of underground bunkers to house the remnants of humanity.

One of the more striking things about GAIA is the way that gendered assumptions regarding labor are structurally built into its design and interface. When Elisabet designs and builds the AI that is GAIA, she gives the interface a woman's voice and body. This is what users see and hear when interacting with GAIA, and all the cultural coding embedded within women's embodiment thus colors our understanding of GAIA's function, role, and purpose—GAIA's purpose is thus conveyed through the lens of woman-as-nurturer, woman-as-caretaker, woman-as-life-giver, in that GAIA's purpose is to nurture, grow, sustain, and care for what is left of humanity so that the human race can survive. GAIA's role as nurturer and life-giver—the role of the (technological) good mother—is further underscored by the fact that GAIA is represented in contrast to HADES, which was originally designed as a part of the GAIA system itself. That is, HADES is a particular program within the GAIA system designed to be a failsafe protocol that sterilizes the planet in the event the GAIA system fails, but HADES eventually breaks away from GAIA, becoming an autonomous AI of its own, and sets its destructive sights on the GAIA system itself. This breaking away results in a fully binaristic relationship between GAIA and HADES; GAIA rebuilds the world while HADES destroys it. GAIA creates and sustains life, while HADES brings death and decay. GAIA is good. HADES is evil. There is no grey area because of this break; such grey area would perhaps exist had HADES remained a part of the GAIA system—both creation and destruction would have been contained within one system, enacting a potential commentary on the need for balance in a sustainable ecosystem—but the break results in a boundary between these two forces of light and dark, good and evil, life and

death. What is important about GAIA and HADES's binaristic rendering is the fact that the binary between these two technologies is *gendered*. GAIA has a female voice, whereas HADES's voice is male. GAIA's voice is soft, calming, loving, nurturing, hopeful. HADES's is deep, gravelly, threatening, violent, hateful. Gendered vocal patternings are structurally built into these technologies as a way to reify their purposes and roles. Assumptions regarding gender roles are thus built into their design, and these assumptions require the compartmentalizing of such roles—women's labor works to (re)build while men's labor works to destroy.

Perhaps we might read this binaristic construct as a commentary on the destructive, violent nature of patriarchal male forces. Perhaps, through this GAIA/HADES binary, *Horizon Zero Dawn* attempts to demonstrate the oppressive, exploitative toxicity of patriarchal masculinity—a masculinity that seeks to constrain and control the earth, to beat it into submission, as highlighted by HADES's destructive potential. We might then posit that GAIA wields a sort of ecofeminist mode of power (i.e., Gaard 1993; Merchant 1980; Shiva and Mies 1993), in that GAIA does *not* want to beat the world into submission but rather seeks to build a future based on a sustainable balance between nature and culture. This message is underscored by the interactions between Aloy and her main human foe, Helis, HADES's right hand man and leader of the Eclipse. Helis's efforts to kill Aloy throughout the game also demonstrate the connection between the environment and gender, for just as HADES wants to beat the world into submission, so too does Helis seek to beat into submission the one *woman* who threatens to undo all their plans. Indeed, Helis does not simply seek to kill Aloy but to utterly destroy and humiliate her; at one point in the game, Aloy is captured by the Eclipse, and instead of killing her then and there, Helis throws Aloy into the middle of a gladiatorial stadium, without her armor or weapons, where she must battle an onslaught of robots. The stands are lined with members of the Eclipse who jeer and shout at Aloy as she fights for her life, and this jeering highlights Helis's sadistic, misogynistic efforts to belittle, diminish, and erase Aloy, efforts that mirror the battle between GAIA and HADES. In this way, Aloy becomes the embodiment of this gendered struggle, and the fact that it is her womanly body that becomes the site for contestation is particularly important to interrogate.

We know by the end of the game that Aloy is the clone of Elisabet Sobeck, and so she is thus the living embodiment of the creator of GAIA—the mother of the All-Mother—and the woman who saved the human race. Aloy thus embodies the central tension of the game, the

gendered tension between nature and technology, which the game posits are often at odds with each other. On one side of the spectrum, we have the Nora, who shun technology, fear it, and seek to be closer to nature; on the other, we have the Eclipse, followers of HADES, led by technology on a mission of destruction. This spectrum is also gendered in that the Nora, a matriarchy, is run by a collective of women, whereas the Eclipse, led by Helis, is run by one man. Woman is natural and communal and man is technological and individualistic (categories by which the male nomos of the tech industry defines itself). But then there is Aloy, of the Nora but born from technology—both natural and technological, both feminine and masculine. Growing up, she was taught from her "primitive," natural culture to use the resources of the world around her and to respect the traditions and values of the Nora tribe; but as an outcast she does not live within these traditions and thus embraces the benefits of technology. Aloy thus embodies the balance between the two sides—because she is both.

But this ability to be both is situated specifically within Aloy's female body—and not just Aloy's body but, because Aloy is a clone, Elisabet's body as well. Aloy and Elisabet's stories also mirror each other in that they are both pitted against men in their efforts to save the day. Elisabet creates GAIA to save the world from the robots created by Faro Automated Solution's CEO, Ted Faro. GAIA creates Aloy, the clone, in the hopes that Aloy will save the world from HADES. Aloy seeks the knowledge of all this, her past—that is, she creates through this knowledge her *self*—in order to defeat Helis and HADES. And the cycle continues. This is a cycle in which women perform the labor of revolution—women perform the work of disrupting and dismantling of the destructive patriarchal power of men like Helis and Ted Faro. They do the work of imagining and enacting new worlds, worlds that do not rely on such power. And their labor blurs the nature/technology divide in order to do so. Through this blurred, liminal embodiment, women's power is revolutionary power, women's futures are revolutionary futures, and women's survival is revolutionary survival.

But there are limitations that prevent me from seeing *Horizon Zero Dawn* as an example of a fully realized ecofeminist futurity or as a demonstration of fully successful intersectional feminist worldbuilding. First of all, because of its preponderant use of binaries, *Horizon Zero Dawn* places the responsibility of revolutionary labor squarely and solely on the shoulders of women. As such, the game works off the assumption that the onus of such responsibility is on those marginalized by the patriarchal status quo, an assumption that then absolves men of the

responsibility of enacting such labor themselves. To be sure, a not-insignificant number of men in the game follow Aloy into battle against HADES and are allies to her cause, but their allyship also feels problematic in that these men do not simply respect Aloy but often also seem to *desire* her. Erend stumbles over his words when he is in Aloy's presence, while Sun King Avad, in a more direct approach, seeks a romantic relationship with her. Their respect (and often awe) of Aloy hinges on this desire—a sexualized, fetishized manifestation of allyship. Aloy rejects any and all sexual advances, including those made by women, but what all such advances do is position Aloy as something that is desired, some *thing* that is desirable. Importantly, Aloy is *not* depicted as someone who *desires*; at no point in the game does she express any form of sexual or romantic desire for another character. Thus, the only form of sexual agency Aloy wields is the agency of rejection, the agency of *abstinence*. While many *male* protagonists in many other games have the option to pursue romantic relationships with other characters, Aloy does not. She thus feels like a somewhat empty vessel, one void of desire or sexuality of her own making. She is one who is (sexually) sought after, not one who does any (sexual) seeking of her own.

Such objectifying positioning functions within the purview of the male gaze (Mulvey 1975); that is, Aloy, as the woman rendered through the gaming interface, is rendered in a fetishistic, sexualized, and thus dehumanized way for the sake of the pleasure of the assumed male player. Characters like Erend and Avad are thus a sort of proxy for the male gaze—their desire for Aloy, for a smart, brave, powerful woman, is a simulation of the desire of the (assumed male) player. Thus, because this gaze is structurally built into the interface, design, and narrative of the game, Aloy's strength, her bravery, her intelligence, and her *power* are all sexualized and fetishized. Her agency is thus fetishistically rendered throughout the game, and this rendering not only seems fetishistic but also self-congratulatory because it not only casts Aloy as something to be desired but also congratulates those who desire her. Good for you, Erend, the game seems to say, for being the kind of man confident enough in your own masculinity to (temporarily) lend your troops to Aloy's battle. Good for you, Avad, it continues, for having the confidence in your kingly power to (temporarily) put the fate of your realm in Aloy's hands. Good for you, player, the game concludes, for (temporarily) allowing Aloy to guide you through your gaming experience.

What is more, this self-congratulatory desire also hinges on Aloy's liminal exceptionalism. Aloy is not the average Nora just as she is not the average girl, and so her

strength, her intelligence, her bravery, her agency—her *womanhood*—is deemed exceptional as well. Most women are not like Aloy, the game posits. Most women, then, are not heroes. And since most women are not heroes, Aloy is thus positioned as a sort of exception to the patriarchal rule, which allows players to sustain the patriarchal status quo; that is, since most women are not like Aloy, most games will not feature protagonists like her. Most games will continue to define heroism as a masculine quality. There is something that feels self-congratulatory about this too. Good for us, the developers seem to say to themselves, for having the courage to depict such an exceptional woman. Good for us, they seem to continue, for being exceptional men. Aloy's exceptionalism thus says less about her and more about the gendered assumptions of the developers who created her. But it is not just gender that is at play here but race as well. While the game does feature a good number of people of color, with a fair number of them being *women* of color in particular, Aloy, its protagonist, the woman it centers, the only playable character in the game, is white. Thus, for all its efforts at inclusion, *Horizon Zero Dawn* perpetuates video games' centering of whiteness, a move made all the more troubling by Aloy's donning of the indigenous-inspired garb of the Nora tribe (clothing that thus feels appropriative when seen on Aloy's white body), as well as by the linguistic categorizing of her role as a *brave* or as a member of a *tribe* (terminology that feels discursively appropriative when used to describe a white woman).

This is all to say that all of this—the assumptions the game makes about gender and race as well as all the ways these assumptions are made manifest in the visuality, structure, and narrative of *Horizon Zero Dawn*—impacts the game's representation of motherhood, maternal power, and maternal labor. In short, the intersection of gender, race, and technology, as they are manifested when bound up together in Aloy's body, constructs motherhood in similarly exceptional, liminal, dehumanized, and even sterile ways. Motherhood, here, is technological. Indeed, we never see birth as we know it; we never see a baby born of a human body in the game. Instead, we see a series of sterile techno-births—Elisabet, in essence, births GAIA, a technology, an AI. GAIA, in essence, births Aloy, thereby making Aloy a woman born from a machine and making Aloy's birth a sterile, dehumanized one (and since Aloy was raised by Rost, she has no mother of her own, no mother other than GAIA). But more than this, because Aloy is a clone of Elisabet, GAIA also births *her own mother*, thereby disrupting the traditional trajectory of maternal lineage and genealogy. This new lineage thus manifests a sort of techno-

motherhood, a form of mothering that is perhaps revolutionary in that it uses technology to unsettle the normative processes of procreation, pregnancy, and mothering in order to find a way to save the world. However, because this technology is inaccessible to all but Aloy, its potential for revolution is limited; that is, this mode of mothering is accessible only to Aloy, a white woman, an *exceptional* woman, which converses with the ways current technologies like IVF treatments, because of their costs and because of the race-, gender-, and class-based biases of western healthcare systems, are mainly accessible to privileged, upper class white women (Roberts 1997). Similarly, *Horizon Zero Dawn* privileges whiteness in its rendering of exceptional techno-motherhood, and thus the revolutionary maternal futurity *Horizon Zero Dawn* represents in its techno-maternal worldbuilding is limited in its capacity for revolution in that it is not inclusive or accessible to most.

4.5   Reifying Embodied Cultural Contexts: The Significance of Maternal Representation in Video Games

Ultimately, what I think games like *Among the Sleep* and *Horizon Zero Dawn* demonstrate is the network of maternal representation that occurs across gaming genres. *Among the Sleep* is an indie game—a game developed by a (comparatively) small development team, a game that only takes a few hours to play. It works within the survival horror genre to consider the traumatic impact an abusive, alcoholic mother can have on a child. It seems to at least make some attempts at a nuanced approach to this representation, but ultimately the game's conclusion reveals that its depiction of monstrous motherhood does not function to reveal the complicated nature of childhood trauma, alcoholism, mental illness, abuse, or challenging (and even violent) family structures; instead, the game makes use of maternal monstrosity as a way of scapegoating the bad mother to uphold the heteronormative, patriarchal construct of the father-as-savior.

Horizon Zero Dawn is a different game entirely. The motherhood it represents is not monstrous, and it positions Aloy, a woman, as savior. It is also not an indie game or a horror game; rather, it is a big-budget AAA game produced by a large development company, and it is a sparawling, science fictional action-adventure that can take 40+ hours to play. While it, too, seems to attempt to construct a nuanced gameworld through its reimagining of (techno)maternal power as heroism, its worldbuilding (particularly as it relates to the construction of the Nora tribe) relies on and perpetuates hegemonic and essentialist constructions of motherhood—

maternal power is connected to the earth; mothers are nurturers, caretakers, and life-givers, and motherhood (as in *Among the Sleep*) functions in opposition to fatherhood. Thus, while these two games are vastly different structurally, mechanically, and narratively, they both rely on patriarchal reifications of good and bad motherhood to tell their stories. They essentialize motherhood in order to drive their plots forward. Thus, in these games, mothers are not characters but plot devices.

This is why I have put these two games in conversation with each other. On the surface, these games seem diametrically opposed. In actuality and when considered together, they demonstrate the network of limited, essentialist representations of motherhood and maternal labor that occurs across video game narratives. This network of fraught maternal representation is enacted across the spectrum of video game genres, styles, and spaces—something that converses with the gaming industry's systemic alienation and disenfranchising of mothers in its workplace culture. All of this in intertwined. And because all of this is intertwined, a game like *Horizon Zero Dawn* is incapable of imagining or representing a feminist maternal futurity. That is, because both it and *Among the Sleep* are embedded in the patriarchal, mother-alienating, capitalist, neoliberal culture of the gaming industry, their representations of motherhood are rooted in the patriarchal culture in which they are entrenched.

Video game narratives reify the embodied cultural contexts in which the gaming industry is located; thus far, instead of (re)imagining feminist models of motherhood—instead of representing emancipatory feminist mothering (O'Reilly 2004) or transformed and transformative maternal thought (Ruddick 1980)—video games have continued to center the power of the father and essentialize the power of the mother. This reification of embodied cultural contexts connects video games representations with the gaming industry's cultural assumptions regarding motherhood, fatherhood, family structures, and the gendered labor associated with such roles. To be sure, the video game industry's biases against and assumptions about mothers are built into the products game developers produce. That is to say, the industry's patriarchal ideologies regarding maternal bodies and gendered parenting labor are structurally built into the narratives of video games, thereby impacting the ways mothers are represented in games. These representations thus perpetuate and reify some of the same assumptions regarding gendered labor that the gaming industry structures its culture and workplace around. As such, it is productive to interrogate such representations as emblematic of the culture of the gaming

industry because, in doing so, feminist game studies can better understand what it is up against, how to disrupt it, and how we might build feminist worlds—and games—instead.

CHAPTER 5.   REFLEXIVELY BUILDING FEMINIST WORLDS: TOWARD A METHODOLOGY OF DISRUPTION

5.1   The Evidence of Experience: Enacting Methodologies of Narrative Autoethnography and Feminist Reflexivity

Video game researchers, as T. L. Taylor so aptly puts it, "can hold complicated relationships to the cultures we explore" (*Play Between Worlds* 5). We are often deeply embedded in the video game cultures we research. We live within these cultures. We move around in their digital worlds. We exist in their workplaces. Play is our praxis. And our playful praxis, because it is so deeply embedded in the online, digital cultures we study, means that our praxis often occurs in public spaces. Feminist game studies work is thus public work, and our public engagement with video game cultures causes feminist game studies researchers to hold a particularly complicated relationship with video game culture—because video game culture reacts in hostile ways toward public feminist engagement.

Feminist academics have always faced hostile responses to their work, but because feminist game studies research is increasingly public-facing and is thus increasingly accessible to a wider audience, such hostility can be compounded through the use of social media and search engines. This is not to say that such access or public engagement are bad things—indeed, they are quite the opposite, for public interventions into video game culture often afford the best opportunity for wider, generative disruption. However, public interventions also put feminist game studies researchers at increased risk. Indeed, Elyse Janish notes, "In the months following the slander of Zoe Quinn, a full-fledged anti-feminist hate campaign ensued. Some of the backlash even came to focus on feminists who write about video games academically, much to the surprise of feminist games studies scholars" (221). My own brush with KiA exemplifies this hate campaign's ramifications for feminist game studies work in the academy, and such ramifications cause Janish to ask, "[I]n an often explicitly hostile environment, how do I, as a woman and feminist academic, experience playing video games?" (222). In order to grapple with such questions, Janish ultimately implements a methodology of narrative autoethnography: "I became increasingly attracted to the idea of narrating my experience as an academic means to open new avenues for knowledge-seeking. To convey my experience, to dig into the question of

what makes my experience as a woman—academic—game player significant or meaningful, narrative autoethnography became an increasingly compelling choice of method" (223).

In the first chapter of this project, I, like Janish, engaged in narrative autoethnography to open a new avenue for knowledge production by detailing my experiences being targeted by anonymous Reddit users and being slut-shamed, policed, and silenced by hostile members of the gaming community as a result of the increased exposure my feminist analyses of video game culture garnered. I would like to turn here, and again, in the final chapter of this project, to my brush with online harassment in an effort to achieve several goals. First, my experience provides a helpful, tangible framework through which to reflect on the stakes of this project's interventions into video game culture. Second, through this framework of narrative autoethnography, I hope to demonstrate the continued implementation of feminist reflexivity as a mode of methodological feminist disruptive-worldbuilding. Third, by using my experience as a connective thread in this chapter, I seek to highlight the patterns of violences in video game culture, the broader traumatizing implications of these violences, the therefore continued need for feminist interventions into this culture, and the complicated network of challenges and considerations feminist game studies methodologies must work through as the field continues its efforts to disrupt hegemonic epistemologies in video game culture.

Reflexivity is, of course, an important application of intersectional methodologies (Davis 2008; Lykke 2010), and narrative autoethnography provides a methodological framework through which to engage in reflexive, accountable feminist inquiry. As Janish puts it, "Autoethnographers seek to not only create the thick description of ethnography, but also relate personal and interpersonal experiences…The autoethnographer upsets convention and foregrounds *experience* not in its distilled abstractions that turn into theory, but in the narrative form that confronts the reader with subjectivity and, sometimes, discomfort" (224). Because of its focus on experience, autoethnography "entails much of the same work as other forms of ethnography. An autoethnographer, however, begins with the self as the subject of research, usually within the context of a subculture she already participates in—such as gaming" (224). The goal of the narrative component of this method is to "close the affective gap between the researcher and the reader as much as possible; this pursuit treats subjective and emotional experiences as critical knowledge-building tools, rather than prioritizing analytical abstraction" (224). When used as a feminist game studies methodology, narrative autoethnography functions

"as a means of taking up space" (225), which "stems from the work of especially feminist scholars of color, who have laid the foundations for narrative as a scholarly endeavor" (225). The methodological goal of narrative autoethnography in feminist game studies is to narrate the researcher's "subject position within games, and invite readers to understand it, without suggesting it is an essential experience for all women in games" (225).

Yet, autoethnography, like ethnography (and perhaps even more so, due to its focus on the self), is often devalued in the academy, particularly when oriented toward virtual worlds. Tom Boellstorff, et al., in their discussion of ethnographic methods in virtual worlds research, explain that such methods "are not always understood or valued. Some virtual world scholars still criticize ethnographic research by claiming it is anecdotal or unscientific—even doomed to irrelevance and extinction" (6). However, the experiential and reflexive feminist praxis of narrative autoethnography should instead be epistemologically valued for the ways it allows feminist researchers to critically interrogate their own experiences, positionalities, assumptions, and biases, all of which creates space for more nuanced and ethical work. Indeed, by engaging in continued reflexive analysis of my own situatedness in video game culture and my own experiences with harassment and trauma, I hope to open up space for conversations that problematize feminist inquiry in gaming spaces and unpack what it means for feminist game studies scholars to hold themselves accountable when researching some of the most marginalized members of gaming communities.

Before engaging in this autoethnographic work, I find it important to note my intention note that I intend to implement a discursive shift in the next section. My autoethnographic writing is more staccato, more personal, more informal. This is partially intentional—and partially not. I have written this section with the intention of honestly and transparently describing my experience, emotional state, and context. That said, I have also found that, when writing about such intimate violences and trauma, the vulnerability faced when doing so results in an at-times unintentional discursive reification of the retraumatizing nature of writing about one's traumatic past. In the spirit of transparent feminist reflexivity, I acknowledge here that the process of writing the following sections has been a challenging one, and I acknowledge that the next sections include language and discussion that is often deemed not valuable or productive within the realm of academic discourse. My use, then, of informal language, raw description, and intimate sentence structure challenges such devaluation. My evidence of experience does have a

place in academic discourse and does open up generative space for productive feminist praxis. As such, while this writing process has been challenging and sometimes retraumatizing, I engage in this work here to discursively disrupt the epistemological boundaries drawn around knowledge production in the academy. My narrative autoethnography enacts one mode of discursive feminist worldbuilding in its positioning as a methodology of disruption.

5.2 "Feminism can begin with a body": Reflexively Revisiting Experiences of Violence

My brush with online harassment resulted in my experiencing significant emotional and psychological strain, in part, because of my specific personal history and context. I have been diagnosed with PTSD, anxiety, and depression as the result of childhood trauma. When I was thirteen years old, I was repeatedly targeted by a serial, voyeuristic pedophile. This man attempted to assault me twice over the course of several weeks during the Spring of 2001. The first time, I was in the bathroom at home, brushing my teeth before bed, when I heard a scratching, scraping noise outside the open bathroom window; thinking (or hoping) it was an animal in the bush outside the window, I didn't think much of it, but I did close the window as I continued to get ready for bed. Several moments later, I heard the scraping noise again, and this time, when I looked at the window, I saw a man's head. The window was made of textured, foggy glass, which obscured the man's features—his head was a blur, and this anonymity compounded the unreality I felt in that moment. Indeed, I recall those brief moments lasting what felt like an eternity as my brain struggled to make sense of what I was seeing, as my hands struggled to turn the doorknob of the closed bathroom door, as my voice struggled to escape my throat in a scream. I told my mom what happened. She called the police. When they inspected the bathroom window, they found that the screen had been ripped off. He had tried to get in. The officers referred to him as a "Peeping Tom." I told my friends about what happened when I went to school the next morning. They laughed at the term "Peeping Tom." I laughed with them.

For the next few weeks, I was unable to use the bathroom unless my mom or dad sat in there with me. They would sit on the closed toilet, in front of the window—a human barrier to make me feel safe. My dad did crossword puzzles while I showered. My mom talked to me about her day while I brushed my teeth. It was an appreciated distraction. I kept the window closed and locked with the curtain pulled down whenever I was in there. Things were quiet, though, so we all started to relax a little. We let our guard down. One night, my mom asked if I would open the

window a crack while I showered, since the wood was swelling and cracking the paint around the window every time I showered, so I cracked the window a finger's width but kept the shade drawn. My dad asked if I needed him to sit with me while I showered, crossword at the ready. I said no, I would be okay; he said he'd be right there, in his office, if I needed anything. We all thought it would be fine.

Our tub did not have a shower curtain but a glass shower door, and like the window it was made of patterned and textured glass, twisting and distorting my view. As I shampooed my hair, I heard scratching and scraping noises; since my dad's office closet shared a wall with the shower, I thought (hoped) the noises were simply my dad rummaging around in his closet. Then the window shade twitched and I saw a blurry shape dart in and out under the curtain. I opened the shower door and looked around the bathroom, thinking (hoping) what I might have seen was our cat Simba, trying to delay my inevitable realization that what I saw was a hand. The bathroom was empty. The scraping sounds continued. I called my dad and told him what I saw. He opened the curtain and looked out the window, which was open wider than I had left it. My dad shouted—in a strained, sharp tone of voice I had never heard him use before—at something unseen, and then he ran out of the bathroom. I heard the front door open and slam. It was the tone of my dad's voice—the sharpness of his anger and fear—that made me realize what was happening. And I remember thinking in that moment, *not again*. I stumbled out of the shower and ran down the hall into the kitchen. I huddled on the kitchen floor next to the refrigerator, naked, shivering, and covered in soap. I remember thinking in that moment, *at least this is happening to me and not my younger sister because I don't want her to have to go through this*. Simba stared at me and yawned.

Later that night, more police officers came. They asked me questions, asking why I had left the window open in a way that felt accusatory. In a way that seemed to imply that my act of opening the window served as an invitation for assault. In a way that seemed to imply that I was thus asking for it. I blamed myself for that night's events. My mom blamed herself for asking me to open the window. My dad blamed himself for not sitting in the bathroom with me. No one blamed the man. The cops never found him. I don't think they ever really looked.

My parents chopped down the bush outside the bathroom. They installed a security light on that side of the house. Since my bedroom was also on that side of the house, I had a hard time falling asleep at night, since I would lie awake watching for the security light to turn on; every

time it did, my body tensed up. He never came back. We moved a few months later. It's been almost twenty years, and I still have a hard time with bathroom windows, particularly those visible from the bathtub. I still have nightmares that feel so vivid and real that I wake up disorientingly and completely sure my attacker is back and in the room with me. This certainty can last for hours. Loud noises coming from outside can trigger panic attacks; this past Independence Day was a particularly traumatizing one and the fireworks set off in my neighborhood left me huddled on the hallway floor. I was recently prescribed Lexapro for the anxiety and a blood pressure medication called Prazosin for my nightmares, since a side effect of the medication is that it makes users forget their dreams. My psychiatrist told me that he primarily prescribes it to military veterans.

I tell this story here, now, in an effort to articulate several arguments—the first of which is my argument that such reflexive work allows for transparent and embodied engagement with one's own situated, partial knowledges and perspectives (Haraway 1988) as a means of demonstrating both the stakes and the challenges of feminist praxis. Sara Ahmed argues that feminist praxis "is personal. The personal is theoretical" (10), and the personal/theoretical is important for feminist work because "theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin" (10). Ahmed invokes a nuanced understanding of the intersection of the body, memory work, and reflexive (re)visitations of violence, and she centers the body in her discussion of feminism: "Feminism can begin with a body, a body in touch with a world, a body that is not at ease in a world; a body that fidgets and moves around. Things don't seem right" (22).

My feminism began with my body. It began with my body being made to feel vulnerable and at risk in the bathroom of my family's home—a domestic, familial space that, prior to the events I have detailed here, had always made me feel safe and secure. My feminism began with me being made to feel my body was not my own—that it, instead, belonged to an anonymous, faceless man whose repeated attacks on me (and no one else in my family) made me feel as though I was constantly being surveilled, watched, and preyed on. I was made to feel as though my body was not under my control. I had no power over my body, what happened to it, or what was done to it. Indeed, I was forcibly reduced to my body through the sexual trauma forced on me, through the violent, penetrative acts of an anonymous voyeur and pedophile. Such acts told me that my body was not my own, and even those with institutional power—like the police officers who questioned me—not only reified my powerlessness but also made me feel as though

it was my fault this was the case. Other people around me—like my school friends who laughed when I told them about my experience—further reified my being made to feel as though my powerlessness and vulnerability were laughable, untroubling, and thus normal, status quo. It took (and continues to take) me a long time to come to terms with these responses and experiences, to understand why they felt wrong, and feminism is what has allowed me to engage in such examinations. And so, my feminist began with my body (one that has survived and sustained gendered, sexual trauma), a body that is not at ease in this world, a body that has endured experiences that have provided me with first-hand evidence that things are not right.

5.3 Things Are Not Right: Feminist Responses to Embodied Trauma

Ahmed explains the bodily impact of such traumatic experiences: "Experiences like this: they seem to accumulate over time, gathering like things in a bag, but the bag is your body, so that you feel like you are carrying more and more weight. The past becomes heavy. We all have different biographies of violence, entangled as they are with so many aspects of ourselves: things that happen because of how we are seen; and how we are not seen" (23). This idea of things happening because of how we are seen and not seen feels particularly relevant when considering that voyeurism lies at the heart of my own trauma. Voyeurism demonstrates the ways seeing— the male gaze—can be a material act of violence. And as Ahmed says, such violence "does things" (24):

> You begin to expect it. You learn to inhabit your body differently through this expectation. When you sense the world out there as a danger, it is your relation to your own body that changes: you become more cautious, timid; you might withdraw in anticipation that what happened before will happen again. It might be your own experiences that lead you here, to caution as withdrawal, but it might also be what you have learned from others. You are taught to be careful: to be full of care as to become anxious about the potential to be broken. You begin to learn that being careful, not having things like that happen to you, is a way of avoiding becoming damaged. It is for your own good. And you sense the consequence: if something happens, you have failed to prevent it. You feel bad in anticipation of your own failure. You are learning, too, to accept that potential for violence as imminent, and to manage yourself as a way of managing the consequences. (24)

In other words, these kinds of violences have severe and lasting ramifications for women. In making survivors inhabit their bodies differently because they come to expect violence and manage their own bodies accordingly, sexual violence is thus a particularly dire way women's bodies are policed and erased. By being forced to live a life with the constant expectation of violence, women's bodies are forcibly and violently inscribed. These inscriptions occur, in part, because the internalizing of bodily consequence causes survivors, like me, to police their own bodies and avoid certain situations or spaces (an avoidance that acts as a form of self-erasure) to mitigate and manage these consequences. My feminism thus began as a result of my need to understand my own experiences with (and continued expectations of) the bodily consequences of gendered violence, as well as my desire to engage with the implications and consequences of living in a world that consistently make certain people feel as though their lives are in danger simply because of the ways our bodies are seen and not seen.

Thus, my feminist work is also ultimately, as Ahmed puts it, "memory work" (22) because my "becoming feminist cannot be separated from an experience of violence, of being wronged" (22), and when such blurred foundations are the case then "what brings us to feminism is what is potentially shattering. The histories that bring us to feminism are the histories that leave us fragile…Feminism: how we survive the consequences of what we come up against by offering new ways of understanding what we come up against" (22). However, while feminist praxis can be "empowering as it is a way of reinhabiting the past" (30), it is also important to note that "to direct your attention to the experience of being wronged can mean feeling wronged all over again" (27). This is what it can mean to do feminist work—to consistently relive one's risk, trauma, and violent histories and becomings—in an effort to seek structural change. To be sure, Ahmed argues that such personal histories reveal the structural, institutionalized, normalized nature of gendered violence in that, for example, an "individual man who violates you is given permission: that is structure. His violence is justified as natural and inevitable: that is structure. A girl is made responsible for his violence: that is structure. A policeman who turns away because it is a domestic call: that is structure. A judge who talks about what she was wearing: that is structure" (30). I came up against these structures when my classmates' laughs gave my attacker permission through the minimizing of my bodily harm. I came up against these structures when the police offers' questions about my own actions made me feel at fault for or complicit in my own trauma. But more than this, I came up against these same structures again

when anonymous Reddit commenters began surveilling me, digging into my personal information online—acts that, like the anonymous, fetishistic voyeurism I was subjected to as a girl, made me feel as though I was constantly being watched, as though my body was not my own. I came up against these structures again when Kotaku in Action's efforts to slut-shame me structurally justified the invasive, penetrative, voyeuristic, fetishistic doxxing I was subjected to online. And these structures were intensified online because of the insidious ways they draw from the same actions, methods, and strategies as those implemented in other abuses and violences women face—the same methods (albeit enacted differently) of blaming, shaming, watching, surveilling, policing, and harassing. All these violences are located in the same network of oppression because all of them violently and forcibly inscribe women's bodies to make women feel vulnerable, to silence them, to erase them, to make them feel unwelcome and at risk, to prevent them from feeling at home in a world.

In short, these structures are thus what make the world into a dangerous, risky one for those made to feel vulnerable, and powerless when they come up against structural violences. Feminist work though (like the narrative autoethnography I have enacted in this chapter) gives us methodological tools for understanding these structures and violences; feminist epistemologies and methodologies allow us to engage with these structures, to process them, and then to come up with ways of dismantling and disrupting them because, by using such feminist methodological tools, "[e]ven if you still feel pain, frustration, and rage, even if you feel these feelings more as you have given them more attention, they are directed…neither at some anonymous stranger who happened upon you (or not only), nor toward yourself for allowing something to happen (or not just), but toward a world that reproduces that violence by explaining it away" (31). Thus, by engaging in narrative autoethnography that traces the connections between my childhood trauma and my experiences with online harassment, I direct my feelings not solely toward my anonymous attackers but also toward the world that allows such patriarchal hostilities and violences to exist. I thus talk back to this world to disrupt and resist these structures. In short, feminist methods, particularly when implemented through a reflexive, authoethnographic lens, provides feminist researchers with an inroad into "realizing how violence is directed" and into thus realizing that "violence is directed toward some bodies more than others" (34).

5.4   Axes of Trauma: Navigating the Impact of Risk in Feminist Praxis

In her discussion of gendertrolling, Karla Mantilla situates online harassment in a lineage of gendered violence in order to demonstrate the ways this network of violences against women and other marginalized groups is not taken seriously, and she specifically invokes the example of voyeurism when drawing these connections: "Voyeurism is another case of a crime that is perpetrated almost exclusively against women that is not taken seriously. 'Peeping toms,' or voyeurs, have been too-frequently viewed by police as harmless, and the police have often, therefore, advised women to ignore them and to simply close their curtains or blinds in response" (163), suggestions that bring to mind the suggestion for women to "simply" get off the Internet to avoid online harassment. Such suggestions are not tenable. And such suggestions work off assumptions that women have no control over their bodies, what happens to them, or their ability to exist in certain spaces and that women just need to accept that and move on in order to make everyone's lives easier. Yet, while women's bodies are consistently invoked in these structures, they are also paradoxically erased because such assumptions delegitimize the network of bodily harm in which violences like voyeurism are located. That is, voyeurism does not exist in a vacuum, and so voyeurs often escalate to other modes of violence:

> [S]tudies have shown that a significant percentage of men who participate in voyeurism have admitted to having had sexual contact with a pre-pubescent child (52 percent) and to having raped an adult woman (37 percent). It turns out that, although police tend to not take voyeurs seriously (and they have been the light-hearted subject of many cartoons and commentary), much of the time these men are engaging in "rape testing," that is, assessing the likelihood that they could get away with raping the woman they are observing. Certainly, many men who rape participated in voyeurism prior to raping. (163)

Mantilla then goes on to list a selection of studies and cases that exemplify these connections between voyeurism and rape—from (among other cases) a rape suspect in Dallas linked to several Peeping Tom cases (Heinz and McIlwain 2013) to a Peeping Tom in Roanoke convicted of rape and sodomy (Powell 2012); from a Peeping Tom in Knoxville found guilty by a jury of rape (Satterfield 2009), to a serial rapist in New Haven linked to prior Peeping Tom incidents (Dempsey 2009).

What Mantilla makes the case for, here, is the fact that the delegitimizing of the network of violences women face has severe and material consequences. That is, the diminishing of the severity of gendered violences like voyeurism and online harassment situates such attacks in bounded-off vacuums that falsely set such abuses apart from others (like more explicitly physical modes of abuse). Such boundaries work off the deep-seated social internalizing of Cartesian dualities—mind/body divides—that thus assume that psychic or digital abuses are not legitimate or serious modes of violence because they, upon first glance, are not tangibly or materially enacted upon the body. But, as Mantilla demonstrates, to construct delegitimizing and hierarchical boundaries that set these violences apart from others disregards and makes less visible the connections between these violences and others, the escalations, and the very real and tangible impact violences like voyeurism and online harassment have on those who endure such assaults. Often, the terminology and language used to describe these violences function as a reification of their delegitimizing; the phrase "Peeping Tom" signifies laughability, while the phrase "online harassment" may cause many to erroneously conclude that the harassment only occurs in cyberspace and does not have any connections to the physical world. Such assumptions have detrimental effects on those targeted—because these assumptions diminish and erase the seriousness of the violences experienced. In other words, these assumptions, through such erasure, function as yet another violence.

Ahmed explains that it is important to "tell these stories of violence because of how quickly that violence is concealed and reproduced. We must always tell them with care. But it is risky: when they are taken out of hands, they can become another form of beating" (72). Indeed, telling these stories can be another mode of risk because of the ways they leave us even more vulnerable. That is, our stories of violence can be taken up by our harassers and attackers, weaponized, and used against us as yet *another* mode of violence. This layering of vulnerabilities and risk constantly invokes the body because "[b]odies are the mediating relation. When we do not survive, we become body; a body is what is left. A body is behind. A body is vulnerable; we are vulnerable." (247). Feminist researchers like myself come to expect this vulnerability as a part of the work we do. Due to the toxic responses levied against feminist work, bodily risk becomes something that feminist researchers increasingly need to navigate and negotiate. As a result, the idea of resilience, troublingly, is often brought up as a so-called effective strategy for

coping with the risks, abuse, and labor feminist researchers face; the problem with this, as Ahmed explains, is that resilience, then, simply serves to allow such abuses to continue:

> We can see how resilience is a technology of will, or even functions as a command: be willing to bear more; be stronger so you can bear more. We can understand too how resilience becomes a deeply conservative technique, one especially well suited to governance: you encourage bodies to strengthen so they will not succumb to pressure; so they can keep taking it; so they can take more of it. Resilience is the requirement to take more pressure; such that the pressure can be gradually increased. (189)

In other words, the perpetuation of resilience as a methodological strategy for feminist praxis (just like the suggestions for women to just close their blinds or get off the Internet) allows for the neoliberal continuation of the status quo. That is, this "conservative technique" of resilience puts the burden for change on those already bearing the burden of trauma, violence, and risk as opposed to the men who benefit from the consequences of women's trauma and exclusion. Feminist researchers, like those enduring online harassment or other modes of gendered violence (and the intersections of these groups, in particular) are told they must endure, they must put up with more, they must put their bodies and psyches on the line to do the work because "living a feminist life requires being willing to get in the way" (66). But getting in the way can take a toll on those doing feminist work, and this need for resilience presupposes that what we get in the way of will not change—that it may, in fact, get worse and thus require even more resilience on the part of feminist researchers and activists. This is a unique and problematic challenge for researchers engaging in social justice-oriented praxis, for bodily and psychological risks are part of the job.

Women engaging in such work within the realm of video game culture, in particular, face a complex web of risk that they are forced to navigate, mitigate, manage, and reconcile with, for as Anita Sarkeesian explains, women in games face outright hostility and hatred: "There's a toxicity within gaming culture, and also in tech culture, that drives this misogynist hatred, this reactionary backlash against women who have anything to say, especially those who have critiques or who are feminists. There's this huge drive to silence us, and if they can't silence us, they try to discredit us in an effort to push us out" ("Anita Sarkeesian on GamerGate"). As my discussion in previous chapters demonstrates, this silencing occurs in a host of ways—some

explicit and some much less so—from the ways women are pushed out of the gaming industry through its implicit biases and gatekeeping methods based on assumptions regarding gendered labor, to the overt violence of campaigns of online harassment, like those seen in cultural phenomena like Gamergate. To be sure, my experience with being slut-shamed and targeted by anonymous members of KiA similarly demonstrates the ways harassers and toxic gamers seek to discredit and silence women, and being the target of such anonymous silencing efforts can have lasting effects; indeed, my experience with online hate prompted an increase in my anxiety and PTSD symptoms, causing me to relive my previous anonymous-attacker-related trauma. To look at this another way, my feminist research requires me to consistently relive these traumas in order to accurately and transparently consider the many axes of trauma feminist scholars in the field of game studies have to navigate in order to do the work of disrupting and intervening into these cultures that traumatize us in the first place.

5.5   Feminist Futures: The Continued Need for Disruptive Worldbuilding in Feminist Game Studies

In order to continue the work of intervening into these traumatizing culture, feminist game studies researchers might draw from Ahmed's autoethnographic discussion of the role of screaming in her own experiences with trauma as an inroad into the understanding of the acquisition of a feminist voice: "By screaming, I announced my father's violence. I made it audible. And I learned from this too: becoming a feminist was about becoming audible, feminism as screaming in order to be heard; screaming as making violence visible; feminism as acquiring a voice" (73). This idea of screaming, of feminist voices, creates an embodied understanding of what it means to engage in feminist praxis—that is, we claim space by telling our stories, we tell our stories in order to be heard, and we want to be heard so that we can claim space and make room for other voices.

Suzanne McKenzie-Mohr and Michelle Lafrance similarly discuss the significance of the space-claiming efforts of "women's attempts to re-story or counter-story their lives when prevailing discourses and dominant narratives are unhelpful or, indeed, harmful" (1). McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance ask several questions in order to consider the implications of women's counter-stories as interventions into toxic, patriarchal cultures: "What implications for identity do different stories hold, and how do these stories constrain or enable women's opportunities for

action?…How can such resistance be nurtured, and how do women navigate meaning making when discursive spaces are severely limited?…And, ideally, how can individual stories of resistance be mobilized for collective discursive change?" (1). Importantly, and in order to engage with these questions about resistance and discursive change, McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance stress an embodied understanding of discourse and storytelling, arguing that stories should be "understood to be constitutive and performative" (2), and through such an embodied understanding of the performativity of counter-stories as a mode of resistance, McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance argue that stories allow us to "make sense of our worlds" because they "legitimize claims, justify, provoke, explain, and bring some things into view while ignoring others. They direct us to what is good and valuable, and to what is wrong, and in doing so shape our subjectivities and choices for action. They are constructed within dynamic individual, social, and political contexts, and thus are instruments of self-creation and of power" (3).

In short, McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance demonstrate the ways "discursive resistance" can be "conceptualized in terms of 'counter-narratives', 'counter-discourses', or 'counter-stories', which challenge and disrupt hegemonic framings of social realities" (6); they argue that such (re)framings thus also have the ability to "alter our collective understandings" through their ability to not only "expose harmful or limiting master narratives, incorporate the complexities of our lives more adeptly, broaden our sense of options, and repair damaged identities" but also "yield a new collective telling with liberatory material effects. When counter-stories are rooted in the material consequences of people's lives, they can work in the service of social justice" (8). This is my rationale for engaging in reflexive, autoethnographic work in this project, for my hope is that, by sharing my counter-stories, I can help move forward conversations in the field of feminist game studies that challenge the master narratives of video game culture in order to actively and collectively make room for other voices in the field. In doing so, I have sought to demonstrate the ways disruptive feminist methodologies can be implemented.

However, because I locate my counter-story within a network of women's public narratives, I also need to reflect on the ethics of my doing so. That is, it is important to reflect on the dynamics and relationship between me, the researcher, and the subjects I research in order to transparently complicate my role as researcher. When thinking through the ethical implications of sharing other women's public narratives and counter-stories of trauma and online harassment, I draw from McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance's call to not only "give careful consideration to both

potential benefits and risks of re-storying based on context" but also "attend to who holds sway in shaping such resistance. Allies of those working to create more liberating narratives for their lives must tread carefully in this regard" (10). Treading carefully means, in part, acknowledging and negotiating the power dynamics at play in such work: "Researchers, politicians, helping professionals and others in privileged positions often have greater latitude to boldly contest oppressive master narratives than do individuals most directly affected by them, and thus must proceed with significant caution" in order to ensure that "marginalizing power dynamics are not reproduced" (10).

I also draw from the ethnographic framework of a "guiding principle of care" (Boellstorff, et al. 129) when researching and discussing women's public narratives. For ethnographers, care is "a core value to be internalized and acted on through the vigilance and commitment of the researcher. Any sets of research ethics guidelines and dicta will be ineffective if researchers do not have embedded into their practice strong values establishing ethical behavior built on the principle of care" (129), because the principle of care allows researchers to navigate and mitigate "asymmetrical power relations and imbalance of benefit between investigator and investigated" (129). To be sure, these asymmetrical power relations are present in my own work here in this project. I recognize that, by (re)sharing women's public narratives of online harassment, I may be opening them up to a resurgence of harassment or hostility. I recognize, too, that sharing my own stories of online hostilities similarly opens me up to increased risk—especially when I have located my brush with online hate in a personal history and lineage of trauma and sexual violence, connections that further increase the risk of any violent reactions to my feminist work in his project having a (re)traumatizing effect. But these women's narratives are public, in part, because of the collective desire to use these counter-stories to perform disruptive, intersectional feminist interventions into the hostile and toxic patriarchy of video game culture. I share my own story in my reproducing of women's counter-stories in this project in a coalitional, solidarity-based effort to demonstrate an ethics of care by using my story to share the risk. We embody this risk. Our bodies are our interventions. Our bodies disrupt and build worlds.

By mapping out a network of women's stories in video game culture—from that of Janet Murray being silenced by a colleague when he blocked her on Twitter, to that of Jennifer Helper being silenced in the gaming industry when she (and her children) became a target for online

harassment; from the stories of women like Zoe Quinn, Anita Sarkeesian, and Brianna Wu who were doxxed, swatted, and threatened by the likes of Gamergate, to my own stories of slut-shaming and trauma—what I have hoped to show is the ways these counter-stories can serve as a mode of feminist worldbuilding. That is, when these voices and stories work together, collectively, coalitionally, they help to make room in video game culture for alternative storylines, for feminist worlds. And when working to engage in such disruptive interventions, Ahmed contents, we must consistently reflect on what worlds we mean to build:

> If we become feminists because of the inequality and injustice in the world, because of what the world is not, then what kind of world are we building? To build feminist dwellings, we need to dismantle what has already been assembled; we need to ask what it is we are against, what it is we are working toward. By working out what we are for, we are working out that *we*, that hopeful signifier of a feminist collectivity. Where there is hope, there is difficulty. Feminist histories are histories of the difficulty of that *we*, a history of those who have had to fight to be a part of a feminist collective, or even had to fight against a feminist collective in order to take up a feminist cause. Hope is not at the expense of struggle but animates a struggle; hope gives us a sense that there is a point to working things out, working things through. Hope does not only or always point toward the future, but carries us through when the terrain is difficult, when the path we follow makes it harder to proceed. Hope is behind us when we have to work for something to be possible. (2)

Building feminist dwellings and worlds is both hopeful and difficult praxis. It requires an intersectional framework through which to interrogate and problematize our own work and through which to ensure the collectivity for which we work is inclusive, coalitional, and solidarity-oriented. This reflective work is challenging because "[t]here is no guarantee that in struggling for justice we ourselves will be just. We have to hesitate, to temper the strength of our tendencies with doubt; to waver when we are sure, or even because we are sure. A feminist movement that proceeds with too much confidence has cost us too much already…If a feminist tendency is what we work for, that tendency does not give us a stable ground" (6). Disruptive feminist worldbuilding requires this instability, for we must be willing to shift and change and we must work from fluid frameworks in order to build inclusive intersectional feminist worlds in

video game culture. Such instability is needed because a "fragile shelter has looser walls, made out of lighter materials; see how they move. A movement is what is built to survive what has been built. When we loosen the requirements to be in a world, we create room for others to be" (232). This loosening and creating lies at the heart of the disruptive methodologies of feminist worldbuilding. This unstable framework is needed in feminist game studies because it allows feminist game studies scholar-activists to enact embodied interventions into video game culture, disrupt the toxic patriarchy of gaming communities, and build intersectional, inclusive worlds in gaming spaces.

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