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Becoming a Gamer: Performative Construction of Gendered Gamer Identities

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Abstract

This article examines how women construct their gameplay identities in relation to the hegemonic "gamer" discourse. The article is based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with women who occupy central roles in the Finnish gaming industry. We deploy Judith Butler's theorization of performative identity construction to examine how the women negotiate their identity in relation to the hegemonic gamer discourse, focusing on how they both embrace and resist the hegemonic, masculine constructions of gameplay. The study shows the dynamics surrounding the gamer identity. While women submit to the hegemonic gamer discourse, reproducing the masculine gamer notions to gain recognition as a viable member of the gameplay community, the study also identifies how subversive opportunities arise as the women deploy new, alternative versions of gamer identity. The hegemonic discourse is subverted through the identity position of tech-savvy, which departs from the masculine connotations.

Introduction

Newzoo's (2019) analysis from 30 markets suggests that 46% of game enthusiasts worldwide are female. Nonetheless, games continue to be associated predominantly

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with men (Paaßen, Morgenroth, & Stratenmeyer, 2017). The discourses surrounding the "gamer" label are particularly powerful in maintaining the masculine hegemony of play; men are typically perceived as hardcore gamers, whereas women's larger representation as consumers of casual games positions them at the margins of play (Poels, Annema, Verstraete, Zaman, & De Grooff, 2012; Vanderhoef, 2013). The term gamer has been criticized for codifying gameplay as exclusive male membership, and women's shunning of the label is further elevated by the sexism associated with gamer cultures (McPhate, 2015). Even though women constitute a significant market segment, the masculine gamer culture challenges women's participation and identity not only in gaming but also in game development (Johnson, 2013).

Gamer identity studies have mainly used Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory in their theoretical framing to categorize gamer identities based on research participants' self-reporting (de Grove Courtois, & Van Looy 2015; Stone, 2019; Vermeulen, Van Bauwel, & Van Looy, 2017). The studies indicate that women are less likely to self-identify as gamers (de Grove et al. 2015; Stone, 2019; Vermeulen et al., 2017). Given the gendered assumptions surrounding games and gamers, it is important to examine how women give meaning to their personal experience as game-players, and if and how they can alter the hegemonic discourse (Chess, 2017). We are building on previous research on women gamers' identity work in the gendered gaming culture. Previous studies have examined how women's gameplay extends beyond the stereotypically feminine practice, including both masculine and feminine gender identities during gameplay (Hayes, 2007). Research has also acknowledged the subjectivizing effects of the masculine hegemony in gamer discourse (Shaw, 2013), and examined how women challenge the gendered identities by mastering gameplay (Eklund, 2011; Fisher & Jenson, 2017; Witkowksi, 2018) and envisioning girls' play beyond stereotypically feminine roles (Fisher & Jenson, 2017).

To further study the possibilities to challenge the masculine norms in gaming, this article adopts a Butlerian understanding of identity as performative (1990, 1993, and 1997). From a Butlerian perspective, a (gamer) identity is constituted by citing and subverting the existing sociohistorical discourses (Butler, 1997) of gaming, giving room for the emergence of new identity positions. Unlike earlier Butlerian analyses in this field, such as Shaw (2013), who assumed a preexisting subject, our study marks a significant ontological difference by acknowledging that submission is a precondition for attaining agency (Butler, 1993). Thus, the study asks how women construct gamer identities within the hegemonic discourse of gaming; more specifically, how women cite, resist, and subvert the masculine discourse of gaming. In doing so, the article contributes to gamer culture studies by expanding the understanding of how gendered discourses surrounding gameplay are maintained and possibly altered.

This study examines how women working in the Finnish video game industry negotiate their gameplay identities in relation to the masculine sociohistorical discourse of gaming. Our study tracks identity negotiations from childhood gaming practices onwards. Our focus on gamesworkers offers an interesting reflection point given that the masculine stereotypes concern not only gaming but affect the industry as well.

Women's participation in the game industry is possibly hindered by the expectancy of passionate gamer identities in recruitment (Johnson, 2013) together with masculine perceptions of ideal game developers (Johnson, 2018) and stereotyped positioning of women in traditionally feminine, clerical roles (Styhre, Remneland-Wikhamn, Szczepanska & Ljungberg, 2018).

The study highlights that women's social identity as gamers is constructed through reproducing the hegemonic masculine discourse of gaming; women's possibilities for building legitimate gamer identity outside the discourse seem to be rather limited. The study points out, however, that tweaking the power of the hegemonic discourse is possible through alternative ways of recitation that challenge some parts of the existing hegemonic discourse. In our study, the women recited their technology passion in ways that eschewed the typical masculine, tech nerd associations of the hegemonic gamer discourse and offered women a new identity position as tech-savvy with new connotations.

In the following, we will first discuss our theoretical understanding of identity as performative. We will then proceed to discuss the nature of the hegemonic discourse of gaming. In the methodology section, we describe the data set and elaborate on our Butler-inspired analysis process before we describe our empirical findings of women's identity negotiations. We conclude by discussing the implications of the study.

Performative Understanding of Gamer Identities

Much of the earlier work on gamer identities has been based on Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory, which posits that we tend to rely on social categories to differentiate groups of people and that belonging to a given social group occurs through identification. Social identity theory has been specifically used for survey-based analyses of gamer self-identification (de Grove et al. 2015; Stone, 2019; Vermeulen et al. 2017). Broadly speaking, it highlights the normative assumptions regarding the hardcore gamer category for those aspiring to identify with the social group of gamers. Social identity theory further stresses that there is innate competition between different social categories; in gamer cultures, the juxtaposition between hardcore gamers and casual gamers has given rise to a gendered order in play that marginalizes and devalues the female player (Vermeulen, Vanden Abeele, & Van Bauwel, 2016). The social identity theory produces a relatively stable view of identity (even though changing in time) but does not offer good opportunities to examine identities as fluid and situationally negotiated.

Several studies offer a more fluid reading of gamer identities. For example, Hayes (2007) examined women's gaming and gender practices as situated in specific gameplay events, and Kallio, Mäyrä, and Kaipainen (2011) highlighted the existence of multiple player profiles across social, casual, and committed mentalities that players adopt depending on the situation. Witkowski (2018) in turn examined how women players in high-performance esports challenge the stereotyped gamer girl construct through their mastery of game tactics. In a somewhat similar vein, Eklund's (2011)

analysis of women online gamers' performative constructions of gender identities shows how women can claim power through mastery of the game, reaching positions of masculine strength that are normally unattainable to women. Eklund (2011) found, however, that women's identity performances were situationally shifting; in some situations women used their female gender to gain benefit in the game, while in other situations they desired to prove themselves as equal players with men. Fisher and Jenson's (2017) feminist intervention through youth game development camps shows that even young girls recognize and resist their subordinate positions in gaming and alter the hegemonic discourse by extending the normative assumptions of what is available to girl characters in games.

Shaw's (2011, 2013) examination of female (and non-male) identification with gamer identity is closest to our study. She showed how gamer identity intersects with gendered, racial, and sexual identity categories (Shaw, 2011), and her Butlerian analysis (Shaw, 2013) of how situated acts of (non)identifying as a gamer are connected to the dominant beliefs regarding who constitutes a gamer is particularly intriguing. However, Shaw assumed the existence of an identifying subject, whereas our reading of Butler's theorization starts from the premise that to become a subject, one must engage in submission and mastery (Butler, 1993). While Shaw's analysis allows us to see how gamer identities are ordered by the hegemonic discourse, her analysis did not examine how gamer discourses could be otherwise cited (Butler, 1993) to produce alternative gamer identities. Thus, we argue that extant research has not been able to highlight the different ways in which the entangled discourses of gender and gaming contribute to women's identity formation, particularly how the subversion of hegemonic gaming discourse offers possibilities for new gamer identities.

We build our study on Judith Butler for the purposes of further examining the fluid nature of women's identity work in terms of the masculine gamer discourse. Butler (1990, 1993, 1997) originally developed her performative idea of subjectivity and identity to understand the construction of gender identity in society. According to Butler (1990, p. 33), (gender) identity is an outcome of repeated citational acts like language, gestures, and social symbols "within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being." Butler (1990) calls the regulatory frame for gender performances a "heterosexual matrix" where the gender binary is configured in hierarchical terms, privileging masculinity over femininity. As we are born into a world with established gender norms and cultures, we repeatedly recite existing gender discourses that constitute subject positions and identities for us. For Butler, identity formation is not a question of voluntary choice but rather "forced re-iteration of norms" (Butler, 1993, p. 94) that are further sedimented through repetition.

According to Butler (1990, 1993), each repeated recitation is a social accomplishment. We recite the gender discourse to gain recognition as viable subjects by others. Butler argues, however, that "this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject" (Butler, 1993, p. 95, original emphasis). This idea marks a clear ontological difference between a Butlerian idea of identity and that of the social identity theory

(Tajfel 1981; Tajfel &Turner 1986). Social identity theory assumes the existence of an identifying subject, whereas the Butlerian view considers subject formation "improvisational, discontinuous and processual, constituted by repetitive and stylized acts" (Meyer, 1993, pp. 2–3). In a Butlerian sense, subjects are addressed for their desire for existence (i.e., desire to be seen as appropriate), which is offered through subordination to the dominant order (Butler, 1997). Yet, submission does not mark "loss of control and mastery" (Butler, 1997, p. 116); rather, "the lived simultaneity of submission and mastery, and mastery and submission, is the condition of possibility for the subject" (Butler, 1997, p. 117). While Butler's view of identity may seem determined by discourses, there is always a possibility for resistance within the existing discourses through "repetition that is never merely mechanical" (Butler, 1997, p. 16), giving possibilities to repeat otherwise, to contest and diverge; to bend existing discourses allowing different subjectivities to emerge. Existing norms are called into question and altered through subversive repetition (Butler, 1993).

While the focus on Butler is on gender identity, her theory goes beyond gender. The performative idea of identity construction postulates that identity—whether professional, racial, or gamer—is produced performatively. The theory has been used, for example, to assess the intersectionality of gender and other axes of identity like age, sexual orientation, and professionalism (Jenkins & Finneman, 2018; Riach, Rumens, & Tyler, 2016; Ward & Winstanley, 2005), but it has also been used without any connection to gender identity. Within organization studies, Butler's theory of performativity has been used, for example, to emphasize the role of the existing discourse of project management and strategy in the constitution of managerial and strategizing subjectivities (Harding, Lee, & Ford, 2014; Hodgson, 2005; Laine et al., 2016). In gamer culture studies, Shaw (2013) drew on Butler to analyze how marginalized groups (non-male, non-heterosexual) produce their gamer/non-gamer identities in relation to the different types of consumption that constitute gamer culture capital, illustrating how the dominant beliefs surrounding the gamer label affect whether players consider themselves gamers. These studies highlight the normative and constitutive nature of different societal and organizational discourses constraining our actions and identity formation, suggesting that such a theoretical approach to women's identity formation as gamers could be highly fruitful. Becoming a gamer is not a question of self-identification but rather of the performative positioning of self within existing discourse constituting the self and the discourse.

In the following, we will highlight the hegemonic gaming discourse and gaming practices and the ways gamers are normatively constructed within the discourse. We pay special attention to the entangled nature of gender and gaming discourse to highlight the hierarchical positioning of male and female gamers in the discourse of gaming.

Sociohistorical discourse on gaming and gamers

Game space is a predominantly masculine terrain (Fullerton, Ford Morie, & Pearce, 2008), and the taken-for-granted idea of a male target market is continuously enforced

in the discourse and practices of the industry. Games are typically considered boys' pastimes (Paaßen et al., 2017; Thornham, 2008), with games having traditionally been designed for male audiences (Jenkins, 2006; Thornham, 2011). Design practices mimic the activities from boys' physical playgrounds, offering them adventure, violence, and competition (Jenkins, 2006). Further, the masculine space of play sustains the boys' culture, for example, via technical competency, mastering a game, and long hours of repetition (Jenkins, 2006). This is also visible in hegemonic narrations of gameplay envisioning mastery of the game and competition, hence maintaining the masculinization of the game space (Fullerton et al., 2008). Such ideas are reproduced in the consumer press, where male players, celebrities, and characters are substantially more frequently portrayed in text and magazine cover and, overall, given more voice than women (Cote, 2018).

In gaming cultures, the hegemonic discourse rests on a naturalized, gendered hierarchy of play, most visibly produced and reaffirmed through the privileging of the masculine hardcore gamer discourse over the feminized casual gaming discourse. The "gamer" as an idealized (male) identity associates Triple-A titles and PC games as "real" hardcore gaming while marginalizing casual games (Humphreys, 2019; Poels et al., 2012; Vanderhoef, 2013). Hardcore gamers typically appreciate challenging games and spend relatively more time on game session/games (Poels et al. 2012). They also tend to play more frequently and have a longer exposure to games (Stone, 2019). Hence, a true gamer is quintessentially associated with a certain type of game genre—the so-called Triple-A titles—and a devotion to gameplay. For gamers, games are typically ascribed as an important part of their daily lives (Deshbandhu, 2016), and frequency of play and playing hardcore titles are associated with the tendency to self-identify as gamers (DeGrove, Courtois & Van Looy, 2015). Hardcore gamer identity is further masculinized and privileged by emphasizing the technological prowess of true gamers. Male gamers are usually assumed to engage with nerd masculinities by expressing specialized knowledge (DiSalvo, 2016) and reporting personal passion and even obsession with games and computers (from assembling to learning the technical details and making purchase decisions; Johnson, 2018). While this type of nerd identity can also be ascribed as a negative gamer trait associated with excessive playing and social ineptitude (e.g., Shaw, 2011; Stone, 2019; Thornham, 2008), it also comprises positive attributes such as perseverance, competition, and intelligence (Stone, 2019).

The discursive logic of the gaming industry is to separate "real" gamers from the rest (Consalvo & Paul, 2019): it centers hardcore players and constitutes the casual game(r) as "the Other" (Chess & Paul, 2019, p. 110). The superiority of the hardcore gamer is reproduced through the constant juxtaposition to the casual games, which are considered less valuable in the masculine gamer discourse (Chess, 2017) and dismissed particularly by the male gamers (DiSalvo, 2016). Casual games are strongly associated with women (Paaßen et al., 2017; Vanderhoef, 2013), and the industry, marketing, and video game culture discourses (particularly by the hardcore gamers) produce a gendered discourse surrounding casual gaming (Vanderhoef, 2013). This happens through discursive feminization of casual players and game devices, for example, through the

production of pejorative categories of games that "wives" and "moms" play (ibid). The feminine assumptions of casual games are also visible in game design practices where girls' games are slower-paced and entail girls learning about their feelings and nurturing and caring for others (Jenkins, 2006). The increase in female players has led to what Chess (2017) metaphorically called "Player Two"—the social construction of a female target audience that is normatively held within the gender order. In effect, female players have typically been targeted through "pinkified" games (i.e., games that are stereotypically feminine in their storyline, content, and outlook; Fisher & Jenson, 2017). Even games with more varied female protagonists tend to reproduce gendered stereotypes (Butt & Dunne, 2019). In short, since the development of the first computer games, gaming fantasies have offered more variety for boys, less for girls (Cassell, 2002). Jenkins (2006) further argues that girls tend to engage more in benevolent competition; for boys, gameplay is merely constituted around competitive hierarchy (Jenson & deCastell, 2011).

The gendered discourses and practices around gaming are also visible in how women are treated in online play. Sexism and hostility toward women are prevalent in gamer cultures and gameplay. Their existence is explained as the attempts to protect the masculine gamer identity and maintain the gendered identity boundaries in gaming (Dowling, Goetz, & Lathrop, 2020; Vermeulen et al., 2016). It is typical that women encounter various forms of harassment and misogyny in online play, such as questioning their play skills to sexualized comments, rape jokes, and asking for sexual favors (Kowert, Breuer, & Quandt, 2017; Ochsner, 2019). Gamer-girls are also often sexualized (Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Ochsner, 2019). In effect, female gamers are much aware of their gender and the possibly negative reper-cussions of being identified as women. This causes women to conceal their gender by using gender-neutral/male avatars and screen names, refrain from using voice chat to communicate with other players, avoid playing with strangers, or even withdraw from online games altogether and choose single-play (Fox & Tang, 2017; Cote, 2017).

Altogether, the feminine connotations (and hence of lesser value) of casual games in contrast to hardcore (masculine) games serve as a particularly powerful means to maintain women's exclusion in gaming (Vermeulen et al., 2016). Given the feminine devaluation of the casual game segment, it is unsurprising that female casual gamers, in particular, do not typically consider themselves gamers (Poels et al. 2012). The hegemonic nature of the "gamer" discourse sets social pressure to determine one's own identity against the true gamer criteria (Deshbandhu, 2016), and the subject position of the gamer is more readily available for men. It has been found that men tend to self-identify as gamers more often than women (Stone, 2019). The gamer identity persists at large gendered, offering a masculine norm of gameplay and a platform for women's exclusion, marginalization, and misogyny. However, Chess (2017) suggests that with the emergence of Player Two, "Player One no longer gets to define what games and gaming culture look like" (p.26), suggesting that the subversion of the gendered gamer discourse can also be done from a marginalized and devalued position.

Methodology

Data

The data consist of 36 in-depth semi-structured interviews with women in the video game industry in Finland. The interviews were conducted as part of a larger study on gender in the video game industry, and they were collected originally to trace the women's career paths and work experiences. The interviewees held management positions (CEO, founders/co-founders, and producer), or occupied core development roles (game design, art, and programming). They ranged from entry-level to senior roles and represented early- to late-career stages in the industry. The participants were aged 22–43 years. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, and they typically lasted about an hour.

   In the interviews, the women were asked to share their "stories" of how they entered the gaming industry, to recite their career journey, and to reflect on their experiences as women in the industry. When asked of the story behind why they ended up working in games, most of the interviewees began their story by recounting their personal relation and interest toward games and gameplay, and many of the women also linked their journeys with their personal interests/history in gameplay. Indeed, many of the interviewees offered the explanation of games having been a dear hobby or having played ever since childhood as an explanation for their selection of occupation. Thereafter, follow-up questions were prompted relating to their preference of game types and how they play (e.g., alone/together, frequency of play, possible changes in game taste, and practices from childhood to adolescence). On some occasions, the interviewer prompted questions about the interviewees' gameplay if the issue had not been brought up by the interviewee. For the purposes of the study, we focus our analysis on these sections of the interviews to explore the ways the women negotiate their gamer identities since childhood all the way to being professionals in the gaming industry.

Analysis Process

Following Butler (1997), we approach identity construction as socially constituted by making use of and subverting the available gamer discourse and the identity positions it offers. The first step of our analysis focused on identifying the core sociohistorical discourses in the data. We analyzed the data thematically and focused on how the themes were connected to each other. We were able to identify the hegemonic gamer discourse that focuses on articulating the differences between hardcore and casual gamers and the gendered nature and hierarchy of the distinction. The interview texts also recited the technology passion parlance of the hegemonic discourse, which offered the tech nerd position carrying masculine connotations. However, we also identified that the women articulated alternating positions of technology passion that seemed to be outside the hegemonic masculine discourse of gaming.

   The second step of the analysis focused on how the interviewees positioned themselves and negotiated their identities within the sociohistorical discourses. We then

paid careful attention to how gender norms were not only recited but possibly transformed. Inspired by Morison and Macleod's (2013) Butlerian analysis, we focused especially on moments of gender trouble and repair, which are specific moments in the narrations that momentarily flesh out the way gender norms prevalent in the hegemonic gamer discourse are challenged and complied with. Thereafter, we examined the subversive potential of the shifts in meanings of the used sociohistorical discourse (see also Kofoed & Ringrose, 2012).

In the following, we address how the women negotiate their identity positions by submitting to and resisting the gendered meanings within the sociohistorical discourse around gaming. All names used are pseudonyms, and identifying background information has been either removed or generalized to protect the interviewees' privacy.

Negotiating Gendered Gaming Identities

In this section, we discuss how women position themselves vis-à-vis the hegemonic discourse of gaming and the identity positions of hardcore/casual gamers and the tech nerd positions it offers in the gaming world. We will first discuss the power of the masculine discourse of gaming and then proceed to explore how reciting and subverting ideas about technology passion in gaming offers women a new identity position beyond the masculine gamer discourse.

The Power of the Masculine Discourse of Gaming

Our study indicates that women's negotiation of their gamer identity regarding the masculine discourse and practices in gaming starts in childhood and continues throughout their lives across spaces. The realization of a gendered game space became a reality for many during their childhood games when being invited to join by their brothers, who positioned them as spectators or offered liminal participation: "*Umm, well, in the beginning, it was, of course, like, watching my older brother play, and at times, I got to hold the controller even though I didn't do anything with it (…) I didn't realize that I'm actually not controlling it,*" Petra memorizes, or as Carita ironically recalls how the multiplayer games, which require a second player, offered a chance to participate as "*then my older brother asked me, told the little sister, come play [laughs].*" Older siblings have a central role in children's learning of technology, and it is typical that this relation is somewhat conflicting. On the one hand older siblings are a source of expertise and learning, on the other hand siblings excercise control over when and how the younger sibling is allowed to participate (Plowman, McPake & Stephen, 2008). While Petra and Carita's memories represent rather typical power dynamics in families, they are also a part of the hierarchical (and masculine) aspects of the gamer culture. Petra's declarative tone in reciting her childhood experience of her illusion of participation in gameplay and Carita's self-ironical laughter of her secondary role as a little sister attune a lenient submission to the hegemonic discourse that renders players assumed as less skilled (often girls and women) at the bottom of the hierarchy. Both

Petra and Carita reproduce the hegemonic gamer discourse in a way that does not call the normative assumptions into question.

However, we also found how early childhood participation in games was also connected with the changes in the prevailing gender order that functioned as a source of pride. Mia, for example, narrated her childhood play:

> The Lion King game on the PC. I remember it well in the 90s because it was the game that caused a lot of tears and bitterness, but you always tried again and I never got [laughs] further than the fifth level. I never finished the game and then with my younger sister sitting next to me, we played with the same keyboard so it was multiplayer even back then. My sister is a couple of years younger than me so I taught her to play and quickly gained a friend to play with.
>
> Interviewer: Okay, do you have other siblings?
>
> Yeah, I do, I have a little brother. He doesn't play as much as me and my sister. We did it this way [laughs].

Through her narration, Mia first acknowledges the gender order prevailing in games, which she then challenges. Her laughter at the end of the quotation brings afore her ironical recognition of the curiosity of the situation; with the male gamer as the norm, Mia seems to attest to a certain kind of satisfaction of having challenged the gender roles with the girls (Mia together with her sister) assuming the role of "player 1" in their family. Her description of the way she tried to level up in games, thriving in the passionate endeavor, and to train her little sister read out as stories of (girl) players who gain recognition by their mastery and submitting to gamer practices.

The way our interviewees took up positions within the sociohistorical discourse of gaming was characterized by complexity and ambiguity highlighting gender trouble. It entailed both submitting to and resistance to the normative ideas surrounding masculine gaming. Susan relates her fondness of the gaming industry as her having "*been a **gamer** [uses the English version of the word] for all her life.*" When I asked her to explain what it means for her to be a gamer, she offered the following commentary:

> Well, I normally don't like using the word gamer because, umm traditionally the gamer communities haven't been very pleasant places for women, and I'm not sure they still are. But it's not like, even though I've played my whole life, it's not like about my identity… There are still many of those players whose identity is tied to their play and being REAL players… Real players are those who have spent a thousand hours on CS [Counter-Strike] and who lie somewhere, I don't know, some basement… And it's quite interesting because I myself, I'm 30 like, I spent my life gaming, I've played some Elder Scroll games probably like 800 hours in total, (made) questionable choices with games [laughs]. I've just started to speak publicly about I mean I got excited about Sims, some years ago, and then I have like spurts, I've started to just tweet and share material of Sims in my own

channels because I, too, think it's a bit absurd that I hadn't ever even though about it, why isn't it the same kind of gaming like other games, or so.

Here we see how Susan negotiates her gamer identity; even though she calls herself a gamer, she simultaneously is somewhat resistant to the label and the male-dominated gamer community that does not seem to accept her and women in general because of their gender. The above citation illustrates Susan's complex relation to the issue of hardcore gaming. While Susan resisted and ridiculed the idea of devoted, nerd, hardcore gamers, she also reproduced the very idea that spending hours and hours on gaming offers a more legitimate speaker position. In Butlerian terms (2009, p. iv), subjectification is conditional on one's compliance with "certain norms that govern recognition – that make a person recognizable." In this sense, Susan engages in mastery and submission to count as a legible subject in the hegemonic gamer hierarchy. While Susan's tweeting of casual gaming is a form of subversion, she simultaneously maintains her position as a real gamer—reciting the hours she has spent on first-person shooter games and making the playful comment about "questionable choices" she has made, gives her the social capital to challenge some industry norms without jeopardizing her legitimacy as a hardcore gamer. Such a discourse does leave the hierarchical positioning of the hardcore gamer versus the casual gamer of the gaming discourse intact, offering limited subversive potential. To further illustrate the ambivalences surrounding the interviewees' identity construction within the interview situations, we offer Tina's insights.

I WASN'T. [a gamer] I was not. I had it like I had brothers growing up, and they had like Sega Genesis and Nintendo, and I just felt like I could never play 'cause they were taking up all the space, and I felt like I was also not allowed to… I really liked Sonic the Hedgehog, and I liked Golden Axe, and I liked these Mickeys, ahh, there was a Disney one, (you know it) was Mickey's Haunted Mansion or something like that, or Castle of Illusion, I loved that game. But it was the only one which was like fun and colorful and maybe more sweet and not so aggressive. I hated all the aggressive games where you know you had permadeath and died and everything was really hard. I also really liked Tetris and this, so I DID [emphasized tone] play but I always felt like it wasn't, you know for me it was like something I did to hang out with my brothers or, you know.

… And I have to say that all of these mobile games that are like the Match 3s, (as) I've gotten more into them, I found myself develop as a person who likes games, and (a person) who really (is) also developing into getting into more complex and more depth, you know. (Such as) war mechanics and games that don't have to be simple or idle or anything, like that they can be more robust. But I needed to feel like it was my place to begin with, and I think the Match 3s and those things FELT like, you know, 'cause it's on my phone, it's private, it's my time, I get to choose, you know, like nobody's watching [laughter] yeah, cause I felt like there was always still that pressure, especially with the consoles is that, you know, dudes are gonna watch me and see how I perform, you know, and then like "uh let the guys handle it, the girl can't play" (you know) kinda thing… So, I am a gamer now [laughs] I wasn't.

Tina's story was rather typical in reporting how she was introduced to games through her brothers, as was her experience of feeling a lesser player due to her fondness of traditionally feminine game types and dislike of "aggressive games" (Vermeulen et al., 2016). In her early memories, she was offered entry into her brothers' companionship, but not as an equal participant. The quotation from Tina shows how the hegemonic notions of masculine hardcore gaming prevent women from claiming the gamer identity. Interestingly, later on in life, she is willing to call herself a gamer. However, based on the way that she structures her current position as someone who is finally ready to claim the gamer identity, we must be critical of the existence of the hegemonic grip that the hardcore gamer identity has. Tina seems to implicitly legitimize her becoming a gamer through the process of "leveling up" (i.e., she explains having acquired a more diverse taste of games, particularly those in the hardcore field) and enjoying more difficult games. The way Tina engages with performativity is open to multiple interpretations. On the one hand, it is typical that players change over time (Juul, 2010), and therefore moving from games that require less skill to more varied and complex titles and genres, characterizes a rather typical process as one becomes a more skilled player. However, when viewed through the lens of gender performativity, we cannot completely escape the masculine connotations of mastering game mechanics and game environments (Cote, 2020). As it turns out, Tina performs mastery and submission to fulfill her desire to be recognized, which according to Butler (2009: xi), is a "process of repetition that is structured by a complicated interplay of obligation and desire." It seems that women are simultaneously tempted as much as required to submit to the hegemonic gamer discourse. Similar to the earlier example from Susan, Tina's narration also shows how subversive potential only arises once one has qualified as a subject of recognition within the gamer hierarchy. Tina's experience also shows how women develop comfortable gamer roles in a private and pressure-free environment (Jenson & de Castell, 2011). For her, the ability to play games of her own taste in privacy shows that she has been able to cross the limitations of men "policing" and judging her gameplay only in circumstances where men are not present.

Reciting and subverting the gendered meanings of technology passion in gaming

The hegemonic gamer discourse offers a masculine nerd identity position for female gamers, but the way the women recite their technology passion opens alternative subject positions that offer subversive potential. In general, the women's technology relation is framed by ambivalence. We start with the story of Mia for whom those who work in the IT sector or programming are "superheroes":

> We had the first computers—I remember it was like a terrible rattletrap, and then, yeah, we had, like, everything in DOS; it was a terminal in a way, (…) and for some reason, I thought it was really cool, and somehow I just always stayed, like, every time, if somebody

said that they're in the IT industry or programming or something like that, they were, like, a superhero in my eyes. It was, like, something incredible, and somehow it hasn't ever disappeared in a way. Even today, in my opinion, it's somehow, like, a type of super, [laughs] like, power,

(…)

And I was, like, darn it, like, now really, programming, so I could try that, if I was able to do that. And I started with Python [programming language] and I got immediately hooked, and well, it became like, then at the moment, I realized that I have something that I can do, like had a knack for it, I understood and internalized it very quickly, I was like, darn it, yeah, yeah (…) like I want to be in the IT industry, I want to be an engineer, I want to be a programmer, like, my profession and I specifically want to be in the game industry.

Typically, passion for computers and technical issues has been reported by men (Johnson, 2018), and in the gamer discourse, it has been linked with nerd masculinity (DiSalvo, 2016). As shown by the quotation from Mia, espousing one's passion for game technology and computing are also significant resources for women's construction of the gamer identity. By emphasizing her own technological literacy and embracing the exquisite nature of the ones who make it to the programming profession, Mia submitted to the competitive hierarchies in games and computing and embraced the technical aspects of the nerd identity position, submitting to the dominant norms. It is noteworthy, however, that women in our data tended *not* to take up the masculine nerd position the way Mia did but rather subverted the discourse to create an alternative position, as Rosanna's story highlights. I asked her if she had thought about the possibility of having a career in games:

I didn't even stop and think that people made games. It was just, like, games exist.

Interviewer: Okay, all right.

But actually, I had, I didn't notice at the time, because I didn't appreciate what game design was, but had made, made many game design documents I had made many boardgames I had modded[1] the Sims. I'd even written code and didn't even know it was code. Because it's just, like, you know, you're watching a YouTube video, and then you modify something in an existing game, and you pull the source code, and I didn't even realize I was doing it but it was just something so fun when I was ten.

Interviewer: Okay, what motivated you to actually do these kinds of things?

It was just FUN. My mum and I and my sister loved it and, and especially in the Sims, it's all about customization, so we'd make our own um, like, color maps for clothing and makeup. So, it was just like a family, exciting thing.

What is interesting in Rosanna's story is how she never paid attention to the technical aspects of her gameplay—for her, engaging with game modification was a mundane activity that was linked to togetherness and fun, rather than translating it into technical expertise. In doing so, she subverted the stereotypical meanings typically associated with the technology passion within gaming that attach coding to the meaning of extraordinary technical expertise that only nerd boys/men can do. She, thus, challenges the notions of coding as a presumptively male activity and an exclusively male proficiency (Johnson, 2018). Rosanna signifies gamer practices with alternating meanings that do not draw from the masculine, competitive connotations to technology passion in gaming. Instead, she signifies coding through personal passion, ignoring the typical technological parlances associated with the hegemonic gamer discourse.

Carita also embraces her fascination with computers through what can be achieved: "*And then it became, like, somehow via the computer, you found, like, real experiences and feelings, and the world started to fascinate me, not the computer itself, like, how much power does it have or the screen resolution or, that was not the case at all, the technical refining wasn't the thing, to begin with, it was more like what can you do with it.*" Such articulations resignify what it means to be a gamer and what it means to engage with gamer cultures by taking up positions that shift away from the centrality of the "machine" and the technical prowess by emphasizing the machine as a vehicle to achieving something or as a fun social practice. In line with our findings, Wong and Kemp (2018) showed that among digitally skilled youth in the UK, opportunities to envision girls' participation in the masculine space of computing were enabled by depicting computing as a creative, rather than a technical path. Whereas in Western contexts, disruptions are offered through novel attributions of technology use, in the Malaysian context computer science is coded feminine altogether, because it is viewed as office work (Lagesen, 2008).

As we have shown before, the interviewees ascribe their gamer subjectivities and game enthusiasm in partially novel ways. Being a nerd is often ascribed as a negative gamer trait (e.g., Stone, 2019); however, the women in our study avoid the masculine position of a tech nerd and create a position of a tech-savvy instead. For these women, the tech-savvy position allows for a positive identification within the gamer community through the articulation of personal game enthusiasm. In the context of the interview, this serves to disrupt the normative expectations for a casual female gamer (assumed as someone less devoted to game development) and to temporarily disrupt the masculine gamer hegemony. These passages are illustrative of how women may find new subject positions when approaching games through "fun" and "enjoyment" and free from the expectations of '"who" can become produced as a recognizable subject' Butler, 2009: xii), such as the typical emphasis of high technical competence in the masculine gamer discourse. In these specific instances, the women appear to articulate their relation to games and technology without being overpowered by the sociohistorical discourse. These temporary disruptions that reside outside of the masculine discourse are somewhat novel as earlier research has mostly addressed women's resistance to the

subordinate gamer position through their mastery of (masculine) playskill (e.g., Eklund, 2011; Witkowski, 2018).

Summary and Discussion

By utilizing Butlerian theorization on the performativity of identity, the study illustrated how women negotiate their gamer identities vis-à-vis the hegemonic, masculine gamer discourse. Our study highlights that the gendered and hierarchical hardcore gamer–casual gamer distinction of the hegemonic gaming discourse has a powerful place in the ways women construct their identities in gaming. The study indicates that resistance to the gender order of gaming is difficult, and it entails subversive repetition (Butler, 1993) of the discourse; to become subjected, the recognition of a masculine gamer must precede. While the women in our study resist and take distance from the hardcore gamer label by ironically narrating the gendered norms of gameplay and their own marginality as casual players (and women) within the order, they are nonetheless tempted to join the discourse. To gain a legitimate identity in the community of gamers, aspiring to the masculine Player One position becomes a necessity. Thus, the desire to be recognized invites the women to engage in the simultaneity of mastery and submission—to emphasize their belonging by reciting the masculine gamer discourse. In doing so, they are strengthening the normative assumptions inherent in the discourse and thus complicit in their own subordination. It is only thereafter that the women can resignify as a feminine game enthusiast and deploy resignification "for an inauguration of signifying possibilities" (Butler, 1997, p. 94) to exceed the typical binding of gaming and game enthusiasm to male players. The study, thus, underscores the difficulty of constructing new subject positions outside the hegemonic sociohistorical discourse of gaming. However, the study also points toward that subversive change and it offers novel empirical findings to show how women operate through the flexible boundaries between (masculinized) core and feminized (casual) by adopting some parts of the hegemonic discourse while ignoring others (Cote, 2020).

   The study suggests that female gamers may weaken the masculine connotations of the "geek/nerd" position within the hegemonic gamer discourse by building a parallel tech-savvy position that is similar yet different from the "geek/nerd" position. Technology and expertise in computing have traditionally been associated with masculinity (Gill & Grint, 1995; Wajcman, 1991). Further, nerdiness has been associated with social ineptness and even obsessive playing and computer enthusiasm (e.g., Shaw, 2011; Stone, 2019; Thornham, 2008), although some studies have indicated that geek masculinities entail conflicting meanings (DiSalvo, 2016), that can be seen to both reproduce as well as diminish hegemonic masculinity (Massanari, 2017). The tech-savvy position challenges these connotations by constructing coding as mundane rather than exceptional activity; by constructing coding as collective fun rather than something done by asocial nerd; it further shifts attention away from the machine itself to what can be accomplished with the machine. These shifts in meaning are subtle enough to be legitimate but substantial enough to create potential for

subversion of the discourse/change. For the women to articulate a tech-savvy identity and to be passionate and knowledgeable of what the computer can do offers the women a sense of empowerment and capability. Moreover, the new tech-savvy position and the change potential it entails are not only valuable for women, but they also offer a new identity position for those men that are unable to perform geek masculinity appropriately to gain recognition. For example, it has been shown that male gamers can also have a more complex relationship with performing geek masculinities; even if they display parts of geek masculinities such as expert knowledge, they may at the same time divert from the asocial stereotype by having a keen interest in social games (DiSalvo, 2016). In addition some male players may reject the gamer identity altogether (DiSalvo, 2016).

The study suggests that through the new tech-savy subject position, women may find inroads not only in gaming but also in game programming through their technologically oriented, albeit different, ways of relating to technology. It has been noted that the availability of alternative meanings that diverge from the techno-masculinity are critical for women to be able to negotiate their fit in computing jobs (Wong & Kemp, 2018). The position of tech-savy may thus provide women game developers with the legitimation needed to debunk the stereotypical gendered expectations of them being experts primarily in women gamers' preferences (Styhre et al., 2018) and become visible as professionals within engineering cultures rather than as simply women (Faulkner, 2009). Such a shift in the discourse could open up possibilities for more equitable access to game development related careers for women.

Given that our interviewees were women who occupy core development and key managerial roles in the industry, the power of the masculine gamer discourse seems particularly interesting and suggests a need to examine how the hegemonic gamer discourse is reproduced at game companies. For example, according to prior research, personal passion for and knowledge of games are often assumed to be natural requirements for employment in the game industry (Weststar & Legault, 2018). Thus, it is important to understand if and how the reproduction of the masculine gamer discourse is required for attaining recognition in game companies. Further, we need to ask how alternative views of game development may be silenced by the persistence of the dominant bodies of knowledge and the consequences if these dominant bodies of knowledge are reproduced in game development. We suggest, that we need to look beyond the game industry and look at the interplay between the various masculine spaces, such as gameplay and game design, to further our understanding of the masculine hegemonies in games beyond the immediate gameplay setting. This is key to achieving more equitable gaming communities and game design practices.

The Butlerian approach adopted offers one explanation for why women continue to be marginalized in gaming, both as gamers and as game developers (Fisher & Jenson, 2017; Jenson & de Castell, 2018; Kafai, Richard, & Tynes, 2017). It further enables highlighting the ambivalence and tensions inherent in women's identity construction in gaming. Our findings suggest that women's subjectification and participation in gaming spaces as well gaming industry necessitates the mastery of, and submission to the dominant gamer discourse. When becoming a gamer is possible

only through reciting the hegemonic masculine discourse, change tends to be slow and incremental, as our study indicates. The study, thus, raises an important question about the liminality of subversive potential and from what positions subversive potential becomes attainable.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Note

1. Postigo (2007, p. 301): "Fan-programmers who design add-on components to games have various designations based on what they do. Modders, for example, make modifications, or 'mods,' to a game. These mods can range from changes in the physics of the virtual world to total conversions in game play that can lead to changes in story line and game type."

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