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Skilled play : positioning the player at the centre of the digital game

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**SKILLED PLAY:
POSITIONING THE PLAYER AT THE CENTRE OF THE DIGITAL GAME**

By

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Wilfrid Laurier University, 2005

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A thesis presented to Ryerson University and York University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Masters of Arts

in the program of Communications and Culture

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2008

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Skilled Play: Positioning the Player at the Centre of the Digital Game

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Masters of Arts, Communications and Culture

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Abstract

This thesis argues that a focus on the player and the skill sets required to play video games – a player-skill perspective – provides a productive framework from which to examine and address many contemporary ‘problem areas’ within games studies.

Familiarity, social performativity, and material mastery form three crucial, interlocking junctures where skill and mastery are framed as essential components for understanding games. The game controller is positioned as a ‘gatekeeper’ between player and game; a precluding factor in engaging with the medium. Participant responses from original qualitative research, which places a primacy on female voices, are framed within a gaming climate of historically increasing complexification of game genres and material components, and point to several trends in how women can (and do) contend with gendered technology.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the two Jens (Brayton and Jenson), who helped me plenty along the Master's road. Many thanks as well to ScutterK, who is amazing and getting pretty good at playing guitar on 'hard' to boot. The family should also get a nod for smilingly tolerating my unwillingness to get a real job, and for the high-speed access once upon a time.

I guess Ryerson University, too. Yeah!

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my old friend, the Konomi Code:

Up, up, down, down, left, right, left, right, B, A...

Start.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

It should be no surprise that video games are considered Big Business: even in an economic decline, game sales soared in 2007 to outpace both movies and music in the U.S. More than 18 billion dollars were spent by consumers on video games and the console systems to play them.¹ Such figures are often referred to in games studies to defend a more-than-casual interest in the medium. After all, financial clout indicates cultural impact, which in turn justifies academic interest. For me, the video game represents a surprisingly accessible avenue of study: accessible not only because, in such a newly-formed, loosely-aligned discipline, there is much work to be done, but also because of my own longstanding experience and interest in gaming.

1.1 Positioning the Researcher: A Narrative of Self

As a child console games were largely inaccessible to me for financial reasons (we were poor). Nonetheless, I had access to a Colecovision, which doubled as a computer, and spent many fruitless hours trying to bend the early programming language of *Logo* into a space-shooter. Meanwhile my friends, boys and girls, enjoyed the early exploits of Mario on their Nintendo systems and at every opportunity I would invite myself over to their houses to play. It frustrated me that they could play whenever they wanted and were, for the most part, better than I. For many, a lack of access might have led to indifference; for me, it became somewhat of an obsession. I borrowed old copies of Nintendo Power magazines and pored over them, eager to learn strategies and hints for games I never played, just in case someone I knew might get them. When the Super

¹ For an overview of sales figures, see here: <http://arstechnica.com/news.ars/post/20080124-growth-of-gaming-in-2007-far-outpaces-movies-music.html>

Nintendo was released (into the homes of others), I even wasted a great deal of time trying to turn the game *Secret of Mana* which, to me, seemed a wonderful adventure, into a board game in my basement. The best games were the ones I never got to see for more than a few introductory moments, mostly because they “had a story” and “took too long to get into”, as I was told. Instead of those games, I was usually treated to a series of defeats in some competitive sports title.

On the computer gaming side of things I am proud to say that I was involved in the early stages of contemporary online gaming, somehow tricking my parents into purchasing a hyper-powerful computer (for the time). We must’ve been slightly richer then, or perhaps they thought it would be ‘educational’. As *Quake* was becoming a PC first-person shooter phenomenon, I was there. Eventually I joined a semi-professional *Quake Team Fortress* clan – semi-professional in that we were *good*, we practiced and strategized and stole players from other clans and won money in tournaments – and the sociability of video games emerged in power struggles, in-fighting and a steady rotation of players who fell away from the rigours of the game only to return later. The technological component of games was also highlighted by these experiences: several times during important ranked matches against other top clans, one of my family members would try to use the telephone and instantly kill my modem connection to the internet, rendering my avatar frozen in-game and our defences weakened. We became early adopters of high-speed internet access. Our clan’s medic was a female, a real-life nurse from South Carolina, and it was here that a gendered component of gaming was first apparent to me: she put up with digital harassment and lewd text insinuations, suggestions that she could not be as skilled as she was and still ‘really’ be a woman.

Later in life, when I worked, made money and was able to buy all the gaming equipment I wanted, the obsession slowed. There is something especially alluring about restriction, whether it is financial, practical or whatever. I had many systems but did not play any of them with the fervour I once experienced. I became a part-time gamer, a casual player, although I still wrote about games occasionally as a columnist for the university student paper, and later made special allowances for game-related material as editor of the entertainment section. I have lived with roommates who I could beat, consistently, at any game we cared to play, and roommates who epitomized the elite player in every respect (who I could *never* beat). I have watched my girlfriend struggle to understand what I found so interesting about video games, begin playing herself, and later explain to her own friends what she had learned about gaming culture. I have seen multiplayer games like *Rock Band* transform how social get-togethers, local bars, and parties are experienced and configured.

In short, this thesis is my attempt at further exploring skilled play: what it means to be skilled or unskilled as a player, and how mastery characterizes the experiences which people have when they encounter video games within their own socio-cultural sphere. The research question embedded here asks, “What happens when you position the player at the centre of the game, and extrapolate the role of skill as an area of primary importance? How can established problems within games studies be readdressed from this perspective?” My own narrative characterizes many of the issues which will be discussed here, from lack of access to competitive play to the frustrations of being consistently terrible. It is a reflection of the multivariate ways in which players might come to games, with differing levels of expertise and at different times in their lives. A

perspective which focuses on the player and the player's abilities reveals a number of interesting ways to address this loosely-amalgamated medium, and this thesis explores several of these ways. Firstly, a discussion of skill necessarily incorporates a gendered analysis of technology; how masculine interests dictate and frame what 'skill' entails. Next, a selective review of games studies literature demonstrates a recognizable need for closer attention to be paid to the role of the player and mastery within many dominant frameworks. Several conceptualizations of how player skill might be addressed are brought in here, alongside an examination of the pleasures which such skills facilitate. A handful of areas emerge as particularly fruitful for a player-skill analysis, including familiarity, social performativity, and materiality. Throughout, player voices and observation from original qualitative research will be included for analysis, alongside games studies texts and popular discourse about video games.

Let's get started.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Tied closely to socio-cultural formations of mastery is the 'l33t', or elite, gamer. L33t parlance has roots in the BBS (Bulletin Board System) role-playing games of the 1980s: text-based MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) were, in many ways, precursors to massively multiplayer online games such as the popular *World of Warcraft*. 'l33t' was a term used to denote a player who was better, or more skilled, than other players. Many contemporary usages of l33tness also stem from competitive online first-person shooter games of the mid-1990s. Drawing from my own experiences playing semi-professional *Quake Team Fortress*, l33t players were those who were able to master complex techniques which, in many cases, circumvented conventional understanding of the game's physics. For example, it was discovered that concussion grenades – originally intended to disorient the screen perspective of victims – could be used to jump oneself to previously unavailable areas. This tactic became a necessity in competitive play as core offensive strategies revolved around extracting the opposing team's flag quickly. In the standard competitive map *2forts*, players who had not mastered the concussion jump were forced to run the flag up a long, arduous series of ramps where defenders were sure to be waiting. A skilled player, on the other hand, could use grenades to jump up an elevator shaft and circumvent these choke-point defenses. Of course, team strategy quickly adjusted to anticipate such maneuvers and thus l33tness came to play a reconfigurative role, as players sought to explore and master the game's physics system and develop new tactics with which to surprise opposing clans.

The l33t, or elite, player was thus seen to be defined both in terms of the game's rule structure (mastery of nuanced physics resulted in the completion of the tangible goal

of capturing the most enemy flags), but also through socio-cultural formulations of the gaming community. Writing on cheating and circumvention of game rules, Mia Consalvo adapts Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital to describe the value ascribed to certain skill sets by other gamers as "gaming capital" which, as she states, is, "highly flexible, able to adapt to different types of gameplay, various games, and changing notions of what's important to know about games ... depending on a player's social circle, that capital can be quite valuable in building a reputation" (p. 184, 2007). The discourse surrounding the elite player, in other words, is often formed through that player's expertise in exploring the depths of a video game's capacity, but the status is *ascribed* via social acknowledgement and recognition of these masteries. The very notion of elitism in any capacity is, of course, problematic, as it implies a hierarchy of skill which players are slotted into regardless of whether or not they desire to pursue the same goals or abilities that the 'best' players possess. Game culture tends to privilege such players and skills in a social setting, and discounts those who play in different or subversive ways as poor players or 'n00bs' (newbies), who are seen to be foolishly unaware of dominant standards and conventions of play in a particular arena regardless of their actual experience. A n00b may well be a player with a deep understanding of a game who refuses to play by standard rules of engagement; their status as n00b is socially assigned. Skill mastery, then, can be seen in some instances to foster a set of restrictive mores, where the 'right way to play' is delineated and reinforced socially through ascription (or lack of) gaming capital.

Brayton rightfully points out that expertise with technology, including digital games, is an inherently gendered cultural construct, "dominated by an ideological belief

system that assumes men are the developers, producers, and primary users of technological products and processes” (p. 763, 2006). The Entertainment Software Association reports that forty percent of all surveyed gamers are women², although contextual information about *what kind* of games being played by these respondents is problematically unclear. While women form a significant user base for video games, it is widely understood that games are designed primarily by men (Haines, 2004). If skill is conceptualized and acknowledged within largely patriarchal game and community spaces, a player-skill perspective must necessarily take on board gender considerations. Of particular interest here is a perceived “female technophobia”, where the “social construction of technology as masculine has negatively impacted upon women” (Brayton, p. 761, 2006). Within gaming this can be characterized by an ‘opting-out’ of play: a refusal to adapt to male-centric perspectives of pleasure and normalcy, or an underwritten resignation that game play entails conforming to a system of skills and masteries already well-established and practiced by male counterparts. Bryce and Rutter (2003) suggest that many factors contribute to a systematized understanding of video games as a male technology, from masculine-oriented representation of in-game characters to recycled and reproduced essentialist social mores about gender appropriate interests. More specifically, “contexts in which gaming occurs are gendered in such way as to prevent female access to the technology, and communicate the view that gaming spaces are male spaces” (p. 8, 2003). Males are permitted access ‘naturally’ whereas females must somehow negotiate their way into games, although Bryce and Rutter note that stereotypical formations of gender constraint are relaxing somewhat. As Taylor (2006) and others point out, females can and have adapted to and reconfigured these systems in

² Statistic found on ESA’s ‘Industry Facts’ page: <http://www.theesa.com/facts/index.asp>

multivariate ways, sidelining reductionist generalizations about ‘how girls play’ versus ‘how boys play’. Still, Jenson and de Castell, in examining the play habits of pre-teen girls, identify a gender predicated trend in *permission*: “Women and girls have been and are playing, very often supported in their play by their male relations (brothers, uncles, fathers, boyfriends, husbands)” (2008b). The notion that male figures take a central role in encouraging (or, conversely, discouraging) females to play video games is problematic to say the least, particularly where mastery is involved.

If skilled play is seen to fundamentally require active experience with games, systematic male gatekeeping of access to, and ‘ownership’ of, gaming hardware and knowledge heavily implicates gender within a hierarchical construction of ability. To be ‘133t’ one must learn and demonstrate complex understanding of a game, but socio-cultural expectations of technology precludes this degree of involvement for many potential players. Research suggests, for example, that women are underprivileged in distribution of leisure time, particularly in relation to technologically mediated activities such as gaming and internet usage (Bannert & Arbinger, 1996; Schumacher & Morahan, 2001). In many cases, gaming capital is reserved largely for men *by default*: an intricate weaving of social encodings continue to frame video games as a masculine domain, and skill mastery – predicated by access to experience – is similarly masculinized as a result. From a player-skill framework it is clear that gender cannot merely be addressed and then pushed aside, but must rather form a foundational point of inquisition alongside familiarity. These areas will be returned to in later analysis but, for now, a disclaimer: skill is always gendered, even when it’s not actively highlighted.

2.1 Games Studies

The state of video game studies (or digital game studies, as some prefer) has yet to crystallize into a formalized discipline. Indeed, one of the advantages of working in this ‘field’ is the sheer breadth of multidisciplinary approaches which have been, and continue to be, applied to the medium for the purpose of generating relevant new discourse and meaning-making practices. Long before Espen Aarseth declared 2001 to be “Year One of Computer Game Studies as an emerging, viable, international, academic field” (2001) in the premiere issue of *Game Studies*, video games were occasional objects of study for sociologists and cultural anthropologists. The historical timeline of humanities research on epistemological and ontological conceptions of ‘game’ and ‘play’ goes back even further.

Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, first published in 1938, is one of the earlier texts pertaining to video games studies which is still frequently cited by contemporary scholars to this date and, in fact, represents an ongoing site of theoretical contention. Huizinga’s book explores the relationship between play, culture and ritual, but of particular interest to games studies is his formulation of game *space*: the contention that a “magic circle” separates participants of play (and the ‘make-believe’ rules which they simultaneously follow and enforce) from the external, everyday rules of the ‘real’ world (p. 113, reprinted in Salen & Zimmerman, 2006). Play forms an essential component of human socialization, Huizinga argues, but in order for play to exist, the players must temporarily suspend their ordinary socio-cultural expectations and roles. A boundary must be set in place between the two.

However, more recent thought has moved away from game play as a delineated space and towards an increasingly holistic conceptualization. T. L. Taylor, among others, argues that contemporary practices of play are more likely imbued with a liminal quality; that the negotiation of play space is wrapped up tightly in the real-life experiences of participants. As part of an immersive ethnography research project within *Everquest*, a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (hereafter referred to as an MMORPG), Taylor interviews players and concludes that:

People are very adept at moving back and forth between on- and offline spaces and relationships, even while being ambivalent or unsure of how to frame the experience online life produces. These nuanced practices of negotiation, of flexibility in the face of emerging technology, are quite different than early rhetoric, which mostly framed online life as a bounded-off zone of experimentation. (p. 18, 2006)

Taylor clearly sees little advantage in limiting understanding of a game to the interactions which take place within a bounded space; for her, the game bleeds out into real life in a myriad of relevant ways. In fact, many of her most insightful observations of players take place outside *Everquest*, albeit at a convention where folk gathered to meet online friends in person and spent most of their time discussing in-game events and history.

Mia Consalvo also takes exception to what she sees as an over-simplifying of the relationship between player and game. She sees danger in reductionism, asking, "If we acknowledge that games can provide such opportunities in 'walled off' spaces, is it appropriate to judge games or game player actions by an external set of rules – rules that originate outside the magic circle?" (p. 189, 2007). Games which model themselves on real-world systems (such as *Grand Theft Auto IV*, which reflects the experience of traversing a twentieth-century New York City crime underworld) *necessarily* refer to a player's preconceptions of what such a space might entail and what actions may or may

not be appropriate while playing. Part of the fun of a killing spree in *Grand Theft Auto* is generated from an innate awareness of, and the game's contrast to, the social mores of a player's everyday life. Even if behaviour does not necessarily translate from one space to another, each informs the player's experience concurrently. From this perspective Huizinga's magic circle is, at best, porous and permeable.

Seeking to explain how players can autonomously transition in and out of established game space, Huizinga notes the dilemma of the "spoil-sport", a once-player who "shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others" (p. 106). While this 'shattering' clearly cannot hold true for online-persistent games – who could reasonably expect an *Everquest* player to remain, in character, at their keyboard for six hours without ever once taking a bathroom break? – Consalvo argues that every player transgresses or 'shatters' the rule-boundaries of their chosen game at some point, in some manner. She borrows a textual strategy from Gerard Genette, the "paratext", to frame experience with video games which players have *outside* the game's boundaries: review websites, FAQ lists and hint books are just some of the external resources which inform how players understand games (p. 21-22). Consalvo even suggests that paratexts, such as early gaming magazine *Nintendo Power*, were largely responsible for shaping North American cultural perceptions about what a 'good' game was, what types of knowledge were to be valued, and how people could begin to identify themselves as game players (p. 28-31). The video game, then, is positioned as a cultural text, the experience of which is informed by numerous, fluid sources of peripheral paratext knowledge *about* the game. As games become more complex, players are

increasingly compelled to 'shatter' the rule-boundaries, to seek external expertise, in order to return to the game's more difficult challenges and develop their own mastery.

Steven Jones, who adopts a similar perspective in *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies*, suggests that, "it's important to remember that the playing is always in the social world, always a complicated, highly mediated experience, never purely formal, any more than a text is purely a verbal construct" (p. 9, 2008). He applies Genette's paratext to video games, like Consalvo, to select case studies of contemporary gaming culture: emphasizing the importance of the mysterious *I Love Bees* meta-game, for example, in generating fan interest and hype for forthcoming blockbuster title *Halo 2*. *I Love Bees* was simultaneously an Alternate Reality Game (ARG) and a marketing strategy, driving intrigued players to scrutinize cryptic web pages and even travel to (real life) phone booths across the United States for clues. In the end, successful participants were given tantalizing bits of information pertaining to the *Halo* narrative: back-story which would ultimately prove useless to players in a ludological, actually-playing-the-game sense but nonetheless provide a bit of additional meaning to key plot points in the game's story. That thousands of players were willing to dedicate hours of their lives to collectively uncover this information, however, prompts Jones to conclude that, "This is why I have been arguing that truly studying *Halo* ... has to include more than the formal features of 'the game itself' – that anyway, those features, when properly understood, are thresholds to the possibilities represented by vectors of the expanding *Halo* universe..." (p. 96, 2008). For Jones, meaning-making practices for *Halo* and other video games must expand beyond the television screen into auxiliary novels, fan sites,

reviews, anticipatory marketing, documented player experiences, and other paratexts which actively work to shape a player's experience of the core game.

It is difficult, therefore, to accept Huizinga's contention that all play must take place within a carefully delineated, encircled space. If anything, Taylor, Consalvo and Jones provide examples which suggest that the boundaries between contemporary video games and real life are permeable *necessarily*, that meaning-making practices which expand to encompass the wide variety of tactics which players use to negotiate a video game more richly and accurately describe actual experience with the medium. No game is an island; the rocky outcroppings of paratexts connect games both to each other and to a wider media ecology landscape. The magic circle, however, has remained useful as a foil against which games studies scholars have tested new theoretical hypotheses on play and space. And, in fact, Huizinga's influence does not end here, as his work on enclosed rule-boundaries was an important foundation for one of the more influential and conflictive disciplinary formalisms in games studies: ludology.

Ludology, loosely defined here as the study of game rule systems, structures and mechanics, has had an historically nuanced development (see, for example, Avedon & Sutton-Smith, 1971), but much work moving towards its theoretical maturity has taken place in the past decade. This contemporary ludological formation, wrapped tightly up in games studies, can be seen as a reaction against Janet Murray's 1997 *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, a book which positions video games within an Aristotelian framework for interactive drama. Murray was particularly interested in notions of interactivity and immersion within what she called the "cyberdrama", or the enactment of a story within the particular fictional space of the computer (1997). This, along with other narrative-

focused works which seek to apply literature, theatre and film story-theory to games, was seen to be an unacceptable challenge by many proponents of the ludological approach, who envisioned games studies moving in quite a different direction.

Jesper Juul, for example, questioned the ability of games to form a cohesive narrative without depriving players of control, given that in most video games the story is both unfolding and 'told' synchronously (1999). Gonzalo Frasca was more interested in framing computer games as simulations than story, with users playing with rule structures which enabled experimentation within complex modeled systems (2003a). When addressed, the brief, exaggerated struggle between 'ludologists' and 'narratologists' within games studies was rarely productive, often set in polemical terms, and, at times, could be inflammatory. Markku Eskelinen framed the debate as a battle against the colonization of narrative theory, and suggested that games studies must "annihilate for good the discussion of games as stories, narrative or cinema" (2001a).

However, Gonzalo Frasca, another leading ludologist, eventually wrote a conciliatory piece suggesting that ludology and narrative were not necessarily at odds; that, in fact, many who worked under the ludological framework had used narrative terminology and comparisons, including himself (Frasca, 1999), Jesper Juul (1999), and even Markku Eskelinen (2001b). For his part, Frasca suggests that, "One thing is not favoring narratology as a preferred tool for understanding games and a whole different one is to completely discard it" (2003b). Most games studies texts since deign to mention the theoretical struggle, choosing rather to move onwards with respective frameworks and avoid further direct confrontation. Within games studies it would appear as though the debate has settled down, if not been satisfactorily settled, and that interdisciplinary

work is now free to continue without being generalized as a binary and forcibly set on one side or the other of the ludo-narratological divide.

2.2 What is a Game?

The reason I briefly mention this debate is not to re-open discussion on what a video game *is*, in a formative sense, whether it might be a narrative construction or a simulation or an assembly of rules or anything else. I am far more interested in the *how* of games than the *what*: how they are used, and by whom, and under what technological and material auspices. Nonetheless, a contextual understanding of the disciplinary spaces within which games studies operates is important, just as the experiential context of an individual undertaking a new game play challenge is important. I follow Steven Jones in taking the broadest possible definition of what a video game, and the study thereof, might entail; the game as an “articulation of material form with larger cultural and social meanings” (p. 9, 2008). This framing emphasizes both the material components of playing contemporary games (hardware, input/output devices), and pays specific attention to how games operate, as a technological entertainment medium, within a socio-cultural setting.

Bernard Suits’ definition in his article ‘Construction of a Definition’ adds a more ludologically concrete, complimentary perspective:

To play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity. (p. 184, 2006)

The key component here is that a video game is an activity conducted within a delineated system of rules. As for the rest, it seems enough to address digital games in the culturally

mediated sense; that is, the player acknowledges that they are playing a video game, which was produced, published and perhaps advertised as a video game, and reviewed by a print or web source as a video game. Espen Aarseth suggests that, “rather than being a newcomer, computer games are games in a new material technology, just as print novels were literature in a new technology 500 years ago” (p. 46, 2004). Video games, he decides, are difficult to consider as a whole, given that they appear on a range of technological devices, often encompass other media (print, video), and are played in a wide range of social contexts. The materiality of contemporary video games is simply a new way of presenting game models which have historical roots far preceding the home game console or the arcade machine. Aarseth does, however, note that “Games are, at best, a somewhat definable cultural genre” (ibid). This, to me, seems like a perfectly reasonable mode of categorization. If shops exist which exclusively sell video games, and the objects within are discs containing experiences which are popularly considered to be video games, then why must theory attempt to rearrange and reclassify such cultural instances? The physical presence of a console controller on the living room floor baldly signifies ‘video game’. It is too late for the medium’s everyday presence to be renegotiated or couched in divisive, polemical terminology. This is somewhat of an expansion on Mark Wolf’s observation on genre, that video games are categorized through consensual, informal agreement between producers and audience (p. 113, 2001).

Of course, there are experimental projects (cybertexts and the like) which lie on the periphery between game and something else, but I will leave it to others to draw formative categorical boundaries in the sand – which will undoubtedly need to be redrawn and redrawn again as technological innovation drives creative output in new

directions. However, I acknowledge here that popular gaming encompasses a wide variety of formats and media: children's interactive websites, virtual worlds, handheld devices, arcade machines, and much more. For the purpose of this thesis the primary site of analysis will be the interactive console video game, which represents the largest financial piece of the puzzle. According to the Canadian Video Game and Computer Industry site, these consoles are present in more than 40% of all Canadian households.³ This resource, maintained in part by established games scholar Nick Dyer-Witheford, also notes that an even greater percentage of Canadians play games on their home computers. Occasionally examples and comparisons will be made with popular PC (computer) games, as many video games have a tendency to migrate from platform to platform.

2.3 Skilled Play

In his foundational book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Espen Aarseth refers to the process of manipulating a game world or "cybertext" as characterized by the "non-trivial effort ... required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (p. 1, 1997). It is the nature of this "non-trivial effort" on which I wish to focus primarily. In what ways might a player exert such an effort while playing a video game? Does a "non-trivial effort" refer to the material conditions of handling, say, an Xbox controller efficiently, or accumulated knowledge of specific genre conventions which might render certain game challenges more recognizable and therefore easier to overcome? Is it enough to "traverse the text" halfway, falling short of completing a game because of its difficulty? Aarseth has changed his position on the textuality of games

³ <http://publish.uwo.ca/~ncdyerwi/>

somewhat since (see Aarseth, 2004), but the questions remain relevant. His key claim evokes questions pertaining to player *skill*: what it takes to play a game well, or at least competently. While games studies literature rarely addresses the notion of skill directly, hints at the manner in which players interface (or are expected to interface) with video games are nonetheless present in a number of texts.

The next part of this review consists of selectively revisiting theoretical frameworks within games studies, specifically well-established narratological and ludological perspectives, and observing how player skill is addressed or, alternatively, ignored. The following examples are by no means an exhaustive review of how discourses on skill unfold within games studies literature; they were, however, chosen both for disciplinary prominence and for the simple criteria that they mention player skill in *any* capacity. A cross-section of the literature demonstrates the need for more in-depth focus on this aspect of digital games.

2.4 Skill and Narratology

Janet Murray works towards positioning the computer as a site of fruitful storytelling, appropriating the term “agency” to describe the level of control users might wield within this system. “When the world responds expressively and coherently to our engagement with it, then we experience agency,” she writes. “Agency requires that we script the interactor as well as the world, so that we know how to engage the world, and so that we build up the appropriate expectations” (p. 10, 2004). Michael Mateas, also building on an Aristotelian framework for interactive drama, adds that:

If, in manipulating the interface elements, the player does have an effect on the world, but they are not the effects that the player intended (perhaps the player was randomly trying things because they didn't know what to do, or perhaps the player thought that an action would have one effect, but it instead had another), then there is no agency. (p. 21, 2004)

Clearly a position of expertise on behalf of the player is expected here. 'Button-mashing' – or pushing the buttons on a controller haphazardly in hopes that some positive result will occur on-screen – does not constitute agency just as, in common video game parlance, it would not generally be considered a skillful tactic. Of course, the very notion that button-mashing is an inappropriate style of play is a socially situated understanding, but in this case it describes a player who wields little to no agency over a game world. Exactly how agency might be acquired and demonstrated by players (or interactive dramaticists) within this framework is not addressed.

From a narrativist perspective, a player's skill might be represented by their ability to manipulate a game world according to their personal goals, which may or may not reflect the goals inherent to the game's structure. In multiplayer games, however, this perspective is problematic: an individual's agency may be constrained somewhat in the interest of a fair competition, but within those boundaries of 'fair play' one can still demonstrate the a superiority of skill (by winning, or taking out the most opponents, or collecting the most items). Skill must be something that not only the game acknowledges and respects, but which is respected by other game players as well. If we look to fan-driven communities for examples, GameFAQs.com ties skill in closely with completionism: while multiple authors might write Frequently Asked Question documents (FAQs) on the same game, it is the FAQs with the most information (and, generally, the largest file size) which are labeled with a star symbol of approval, which

denotes user recommendation. Expertise is thus tied closely to the range of possibilities set out within a game's rule systems and structures, and skill is represented by the most expansive exploration of these limits. Narrative assumptions of player skill involve a presumed level of *familiarity* with the controls and conventions of a given game, but neglect an important socio-cultural element of how skill is recognized and understood amongst players.

2.5 Skill and Ludology

Roger Caillois, whose writing predates video games, is an influential source for ludological work, primarily for adopting Greek categorical terminology in 'The Classification of Games'. He argues briefly, on play, that, "It provides an occasion for training and normally leads to the acquisition of a special skill, a particular mastery of the operation of one or another contraption or the discovery of a satisfactory solution to problems of a more conventional type" (p. 142, reprinted in Salen & Zimmerman, 2006). This statement, at least, has depth: Caillois points to the usefulness of games in developing "special skills", but also in developing related expertise with a material or technological object ("contraption"), and in the cross-application of knowledge gained through games to be applied to similar, presumably external, problems ("of a more conventional type"). Caillois was watching children at play, like Johan Huizinga, but his observation that play could be linked to the acquisition of skills and mastery provides a useful starting point. More recent ludological work on games, however, rarely returns to skill as a topic of interest.

Gonzalo Frasca, for example, writes on simulation games and how players might tweak game parameters to test out new hypotheses on the real-life systems the game is modeled after. He suggests that these choices could have ideological implications: “Whoever designs a strike simulator that is extremely hard to play is describing his beliefs regarding social mechanics through the game’s rules rather than through events. Simulations provide simauthors with a technique that narrauthors lack” (2003a). Exactly *how* these choices are made is assumed. If a simulation is built, people will (somehow) knowledgably modify it. Once again *familiarity* is taken for granted.

Similarly, Stuart Moulthrop notes that, “Games – computer games in particular – appeal because they are configurative, offering the chance to manipulate complex systems within continuous loops of intervention, observation, and response” (p. 63, 2004). The primary point here appears to recognize the opportunity to manipulate a game, rather than the actual tactics and practices a player actively employs. Is it enough to account for *chance* in a formalist understanding of video games, or must the actual conditions of everyday play also be accounted for?

Jesper Juul, comparing the ways in which “event time” and “play time” correlate in video game play, touches incidentally on the role of players in manipulating the game world. In his game-time model, an important component is “mapping”, which “means that the player’s time and actions are projected into a game world. This is the play-element of games; you click with your mouse, but you are also the mayor of a fictive city” (p. 134, 2004). Even in abstract theoretical frameworks, the player is still a necessary (if slightly inconvenient) element; as Juul says, games fundamentally “require at least one instance of the player interacting with the game state” (ibid). It is noticeable

that self-identified ludologists rarely address the player as more than a component of a feedback loop with video games. While this perspective is concurrent with the discipline's intent focus on the 'game as game', or the placing of primacy on rule structures and game mechanics, the player's experience, skill, and expertise is largely absent in these texts. Ludologists leave it to others to address the player in a more holistic manner.

2.6 Skill and the Player's Voice

Far more consideration of what it *means* to be skilled at video games comes from informal player accounts than from formal academia: voices from the playing field have more to say on mastery than any overtly scholarly source. Indeed, part of the multidisciplinary breadth of games studies comes from the inclusion of such accounts alongside work on semiotics, ludology and narrative theory. The short story 'Bow, Nigger', by an author who goes only by his screen name, always_black, is one such example. The story revolves around a one-on-one light saber duel between always_black and another player in *Jedi Knight II*, where his opponent tricks him into 'bowing' his character's head pre-fight and then, evilly, attacks during the traditional show of respect. 'Bow, Nigger' reflects a rich understanding of the expertise and skill required of *Jedi Knight II* players, as well as detailed knowledge of the ritual elements which evolved and solidified on multiplayer servers. After catching always_black chatting a few times and getting in several more 'cheap' hits, his opponent begins using overly-flashy attacks, "Which is a mistake on his part. It's total overkill, even though he doesn't know I have only five points left, and I happen to know that the very end of the move leaves you very

vulnerable indeed” (p. 607, 2006). always_black, predictably, fights back to victory. Skill and an intimate mastery of social conventions lies at the centre of this piece which, although very specific to a particular game, at least begins to address the complexities of the player’s role in a video game from a storytelling angle.

‘The Evil Summoner FAQ v1.0: How to Be a Cheap Ass’ is another player account of game mastery, albeit in a different form. Mia Consalvo’s conception of the paratext describes resources external to a game which nonetheless inform players about the game; FAQ pages are just one example of such a source. The Evil Summoner FAQ is an amusing walkthrough of a game which even the author finds to be sub-par. ‘Mochan’ introduces his FAQ as follows: “Most people write FAQs for games they love and worship and adore above all else. However, being unlike everyone else, I have taken it upon myself to write this FAQ with the sole intention of utterly trashing Summoner because I totally hate the game” (p. 271, 2006). Nonetheless, Mochan has clearly played enough to have built up a high level of expertise with the game’s intricacies. He offers suggestions like, “* *The Fire Wall Technique* * It’s slow, boring, but works all the time and has a 100% safety rate. You will NEVER lose with this technique ... Because of the stupidity of the enemies, you can creep up on any non-boss enemy to cast Fire Wall on it, and it will not see you!” (p. 279, 2006). This FAQ is interesting because it openly detaches enjoyment from familiarity, although Mochan seems to take a certain pleasure in dismantling what he sees to be inferior game mechanics. More importantly, the FAQ covers a wide range of skills players will need to play the game, from prescriptive configuration (the most efficient abilities to bestow on avatars), to context-specific tactics (the best ways to defeat particular enemies) to a critical review of the game’s underlying

code (the Fire Wall technique/bug). FAQs are a useful entry point into considerations of player skill and expertise; what players themselves consider important to know or necessary to do while playing a video game.

The accounts of Mochan and always_black are included here because they have been formally published, but their importance lies in the fact that they represent the tip of a much, much larger iceberg of player-generated conceptualization of what it means to be skilled in video games. A brief search through any community portal or forum will yield thousands of similar accounts: instruction on how to turn glitches or bugs in a game's rule structures to one's advantage, stories of great perseverance or expertise during game play, an immense, shifting repository of knowledge *about* video games and how to defeat them. Academic theoretical consideration, on the other hand, seems to have arrived at a scant few observations about the same topic although interest appears to be picking up (for example, see Jesper Juul's 'Fear of Failing? The Many Meanings of Difficulty in Video Games' in *The Video Game Theory Reader 2* [forthcoming 2009]). Contemporary ludological and narrativist frameworks indicate a problematic assumption of *familiarity* on the part of the player, while informal player texts fill in the contextual gaps.

Consequently, the remainder of this thesis will draw upon both types of sources for analysis, recognizing player narratives as crucial to a more expansive look at how skill intersects with video game play. For now, however, I turn to some difficult areas within games studies that a player-skill perspective might reformulate and which, in turn, reflect upon how skill and mastery can be conceptualized in a more nuanced manner. Applicable theories of pleasure, as explanations as to *why* players might seek to develop such skills, are integrated throughout.

2.7 Games as Text

If games are, as Aarseth contends, “open, dynamic texts where the reader must perform specific actions to generate a literary sequence, which may vary for every reading” (p. 1, 1997), what then fundamentally separates a video game from any other media ‘text’ in terms of the “specific actions” required of the reader/player?

Poststructuralist literary theorists such as Roland Barthes, for example, might suggest that reading print is simply a less strictly delineated practice in interpretation than playing a game; a book can be ‘understood’ just as a game can be ‘won’. Indeed, Barthes notes that, “The most subjective reading imaginable is never anything but a game played according to certain rules...” (p. 31, 1989). Likewise, a popular movie might be viewed by anyone but it takes a certain degree of culturally-sanctioned expertise in filmmaking, knowledge on the intricacies of celebrity and/or ‘authorship and/or film theory, for one to position their particular meaning-making practices of that movie as more important than others. Skill, in other words, can play a role in the interpretation of any media and is most manifest in the output of discourse: the skilful reader demonstrates accumulated knowledge in a review, in a post-performance discussion with others, or perhaps in operationalizing their understanding through a critique or addendum to a text in their own creative works. Expertise is granted through what Pierre Bourdieu termed “cultural capital”, which describes the ways in which dominant interests and opinions are disseminated, classified and reproduced amongst social groupings (1984).

Where the video game differs from other media is in an *inherently evaluative* functionality; that is, the game itself plays a role in assessing and responding to the player’s non-trivial efforts. Through what Martti Lahti describes as a “cybernetic loop

with the computer” (p. 163, 2003), video games are distinguished from printed and other texts by a process of tangible feedback and response: at its base level, the player inputs a command which the game then responds to, which prompts the player to input another command and so forth. The game plays an essential role in mediating this play. A book or a film, conversely, cannot dynamically *assess* a reader’s progress, although the materiality of the book can *signify* degrees of completion through the number of pages evidently remaining to be read. Still, the reader might skip every other page, say, or choose to only watch the last half of a film, and while expertise (or lack thereof) on the reading of said texts will be assigned in the discursive, cultural realm, the material artifact that is the film or the book has no say in how it is used. The popular, contemporary console video game tends to anticipate and expect a prescribed set of actions on behalf of the player; without these corresponding inputs the game rests, idle, or perhaps the player’s character, frozen in indecision, is horribly killed time and time again. Sometimes the game may revert to showing a cycling montage of action-packed clips, a demonstration of the experiences a player might enjoy as they progress further through the game (should they prove skilful enough). The game plays itself in an endless, disjointed loop, displaying over and over the necessity of a player to close the circuit.

2.8 Social Traversing

Understanding video games as texts must be predicated upon an acknowledgement that games often ‘spill out’ over the borders of Huizinga’s magic circle as players seek to discursively explore the possibilities afforded by their entertainment. Players talk. They read. They learn about games while playing, but also through dialogue

which takes place when the console is shut down and the game is over. Like other media, video games take on additional and more nuanced meaning through the paratexts which inform them: previews, reviews, FAQs, community forums, advertising, and more.

However, the “non-trivial efforts” which players must exert in order to “traverse” a video game, as Aarseth puts it, serve as a functional division through which video games are differentiated. Lahti’s “cybernetic loop” (p. 163, 2003) describes the player’s input-response pattern with the game: every action, even cheating or subverting the system, results in tangible change of some sort. This thesis deploys the term ‘interface’ in this sense: an interface with the game refers not only to the input device but also to the various mechanisms of feedback (mostly displayed on-screen) which respond to the player’s actions and inform them of the game’s dynamically altering status. The process of navigating the text of a video game, then, is one which constantly demands the employment of a specialized skill set, a kind of video game *literacy*, which is honed and refined by a procedural feedback loop of evaluative response from the game. This evaluation may be augmented by other humans: an action which the game acknowledges as valid, for example, may be considered a socially-situated taboo in some instances. ‘Button-mashing’ in a one-on-one fighting game may result in a number of awkwardly strung together attacks, as the machine faithfully reproduces the player’s inputted commands, but other players present will quickly perceive such actions as skill-less (a potentially loaded area in terms of gendered perspectives on technology). Mia Consalvo, returning to her framework of the paratext, emphasizes that player skill has been historically formulated through extra-textual material:

The magazine made visible a key activity: delineating the varying skill sets of players, and carefully playing to each of these groups... apprentices who successfully completed the route may have been encouraged to replay the game, first exploring the devotee route and finally progressing to the master level. (p. 29, 2007)

Guides thus became an *instruction manual* in how a player might hope to employ their game controller in a specific way, to overcome specific obstacles suited to a self-identified level of expertise. Variable difficulties in video games were introduced as a voluntary effort on the part of the player to artificially make the game harder, and were eventually 'hard-wired' into the game's mechanics. Consalvo points out that the paratext's role in framing difficulty and the skills players need to develop in order to surmount game play obstacles should not be underestimated: socio-cultural aspects of gaming are prominent in defining mastery.

Formalized evaluation from the game is often wrapped-up in conceptualizations of progress: the player is told she is 45% part-way through a task, perhaps, or new challenges and areas of exploration are seamlessly unlocked and revealed as play progresses successfully. Contemporary consoles take steps to enumerate and quantify ability, prescribing skilled play through 'Achievements' (Xbox 360) or 'Trophies' (Playstation 3), where points are attributed to a player's universal gaming profile based on completion of game-specific tasks. In this way a kind of meta-mastery emerges to typify gamers based on a wide range of play experiences. Successful play requires the accumulation of relevant skills and knowledge (both through in-game experience and through discursive engagement with other players) which are then applied towards the actual "traversing" of the game text. If one wishes to watch only the ending sequence of a film or read the final five pages of a book they are welcome to it; if a game player, on the

other hand, wants to complete a game they will first need to demonstrate to the game some show of mastery. This statement, of course, embeds the assumption of a ‘closed narrative’, in which a game can indeed be played to some sort of end point. While many popular console games do indeed take this format, there are many examples of ‘open ended’ narratives as well; games which can be played indefinitely, without an identifiable conclusion.

2.9 Games Without Goals?

As Jesper Juul notes, a widespread assumption is held in games studies that “video games are goal-oriented, rule-based activities, where players find enjoyment in working towards the game goal” (2007a). He then argues, using the blockbuster titles *Sims 2* and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* as examples, that making such goals optional or even removing them entirely allows for more expressive play. In *Sims 2* a player is not critically evaluated by the game on what type of chair they buy for their character; the choice is, rather, an aesthetic one and unbounded by formal constraints. Juul does, however, acknowledge that, “The game has no imperative, no demands on what the player *should* do, yet *Sims* (the characters in the game) generally become miserable if the player does nothing” (2007a). As for *Grand Theft Auto*, Juul sees experiential possibility in its ‘sandbox’ style, where players are encouraged to progress through the storyline but are, in fact, free to go cycling, swimming, exploring, or ignore the game’s direction in any number of other ways.

While I agree with Juul in that broader, more unbounded play lends itself well to a greater range of player experiences, each of his game examples nonetheless carries an

evaluative weight which evokes a critical assessment of a player's skill. In *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* the player can indeed ignore the game's primary goals. If he or she attempts to explore too far away from the game's starting point, however, police will instantly target and kill them: certain areas of the game's geography are considered functionally inaccessible until 'unlocked' by progression through the story missions. Likewise, certain weapons and vehicles only become available after the player has completed certain missions, challenges which, I might add, require the player to employ a particular set of game play skills against in order to be completed. Behind the supposed freedom of *Grand Theft Auto* lies a complex, quantified evaluation system through which the player is reminded of their accomplishments: 5% of the game's story completed, and so forth. As the game's protagonist develops his own expertise and skills alongside the player (riding a bicycle lots, for example, will be reflected in a numerical assessment of the character's mastery which grows with use and, in turn, makes it easier for the player to perform more complex maneuvers on a bike), it becomes impossible to escape *some* sort of progressive feedback from the game.

Sims 2 enacts evaluation in a more transparent manner, but nonetheless pushes players towards developing skills which lead to positive outcome for their avatars. The game's packaging, for instance, features a number of happy-looking Sims engaging in conversation, dancing, playing and the like. This paratext, along with socio-cultural expectations of what the 'good' life entails and a strong online community feature which prescribes the creation and exchange of virtual luxury consumption items, supplants the game's goal-less claims with a strong imperative for characters to succeed. If one does indeed, as Juul suggests, seek pleasure in subverting the 'optional' goal of maintaining a

good life for their Sims, many of the game's features remain inaccessible. House and interior design, formatively, cost Simoleans (money). The survival of one's characters is predicated upon in-game accomplishments which are tracked by Aspiration points, which can be traded for a longer lifespan or other unique rewards. Without effort, and without the micromanagement ability to enact these efforts, the game descends inevitably into squalor and death, outcomes which most will understandably perceive as a type of defeat or failure. Suburban decay may be fun to model, but it is difficult to accept as a definitive conclusion to one's game play experience. Juul concludes that *Sims 2* is a game promising, "absolute freedom, but is a game with many constraints and resistances to the player's plans" (2007a). Navigating these constraints and resistances becomes an imperative skill here; understanding well the mechanisms of a Sim-ulated life may be a game play success in and of itself.

Raph Koster's *A Theory of Fun* (2005) is based on the premise that people seek to find the pattern – and compare it against previously examined patterns – in any system; once the pattern is exposed in a video game, it may become boring. It is difficult to believe that a player might possibly unveil the patterns of *Sims 2* without ever once attempting to reproduce its (implied) model of success. Too much of the game experience remains inaccessible through inactive/subversive play techniques. To 'succeed', then, will inevitably require a certain accumulation of experience, expertise and mastery, even in games without explicitly rendered goals such as *Sims 2*. Additionally, any video game with an 'open-ended' narrative is quickly seen to have some sort of demand on the player, pertaining to masteries which may be socially situated within the boundaries of

what the game allows players to *do*. *Neopets*⁴, for example, is a casual virtual pet website, where users accumulate aesthetic items for their online charges. Collecting these items requires a certain degree of expertise with the game system: knowledge of which mini-games may yield the most currency, integration into the *Neopets* community to the point where a player knows which prizes are considered to have the most subcultural value, and so forth. Although these skills are far more cognitively and socially aligned than those required for most console games, they nonetheless represent an accumulated experience with the patterns of possibility afforded by *Neopets*. Beginning players traversing the forums of *Neopets* will use the status of other, more advanced players as points of comparison, as an indication of where they might get to, given enough time and effort. Success is seen to be far more personalized and dynamic here than with 'closed narrative', linear games, where the game itself is specifically evaluative, but always precludes the notion of mastery over some aspect of the game. Accumulation of expertise, whether social, cognitive, or technical, is valued and embedded in even the most casual of games. Without appropriate skill sets a game can be traversed only superficially; this will definitively influence the player's experience.

2.10 The Importance of Mastery in Research

The analysis of video games also requires a baseline understanding of skill. Steven Malliet, paraphrasing Kücklich (2002), suggests that researchers must crucially develop the same masteries employed by players when conducting qualitative content analysis on video games. Malliet writes:

⁴ *Neopets* can be found (and played) at: <http://www.neopets.com>

A game has to be played in order to be understood, and playing a game implies making active choices another player or researcher would not necessarily make. Kücklich claims that there exists no such thing as an ideal player, because it is an essential part of games that players are allowed (and required) to be creative within the framework provided by the game rules. As a consequence it is not possible to grasp the meaning that is formulated in a game, without taking into account specific details of the player context. (2006)

Here, Malliet steers away from reductive formalism, acknowledging that many different players will work their way through an identical game in many different ways. While challenges posed by a video game might be structurally similar, the way in which skills are employed to surmount these challenges can vary. A player-centric focus is needed.

Similarly, Espen Aarseth (2003) notes the importance of researching games from a number of different play styles and positions of expertise. For quick classification purposes, a few minutes with the game may be enough, but for more in-depth analysis of meaning production or rule structures of a video game, the researcher may need to be prepared to play repeatedly and acquire a set of masteries, or skills, in order to do so. I agree with these perspectives, as it seems ludicrous to assume that one could hope to understand a game without playing it sufficiently enough to understand and appreciate its challenges, and the skills necessary to overcome them. A blogger for townhall.com named Kevin McCullough, for example, raised ire in gaming communities for publishing a story on the presumable sexual depravity of the game *Mass Effect*. McCullough describes lesbian orgies and graphic rape scenes, none of which appears in the game whatsoever.⁵ McCullough's misinformation was based on hearsay and YouTube videos; he had no contextual basis for his understanding of the game's sex scenes which comprise an extremely small percentage of the player's overall experience. Eventually

⁵ The full story (with external links) was published at: <http://kotaku.com/344873/mass-effect-political-dickery-corrected>

FOX News picked up the story, making equivalent claims based on an equivalent (non-existent) degree of expertise in actually playing the game.⁶ Electronic Arts, the publisher of *Mass Effect*, would eventually file a formal complaint alongside the wave of Internet-based fan indignation.

Without the skills (or the inclination, it seems) to experience a video game on its own terms, to *play the game*, important context is lost and analysis can only be conducted on a superficial, representational level. Someone who has never once played *Starcraft*, a Real-Time Strategy (RTS) game which is immensely popular in South Korea, will have trouble watching a broadcast of a professional match on public television there. Masses of critters move about the screen and an announcer screams, incomprehensively, with excitement at seemingly random moments. However, a viewer who lacks the language skills but holds expertise in playing the game will view the scene from an entirely different, strategically rich, angle: the announcer is excited because the Protoss player has just scouted out the Zerg player's resource expansions, and a tide-turning battle is forming for control of the area and, most likely, the entire match. An appreciation of video game skill thus demands, in turn, a comparative level of expertise with the game under consideration. As Aarseth, Malliet and Kücklich argue, to properly understand is to *play*.

2.11 Workable Conceptualizations and Models of Skill

Craig Lindley, writing from a designer's perspective, points out that games can be partially characterized by a recursive learning loop he terms the "*gameplay gestalt*,"

⁶ More on the FOX News and *Mass Effect* story is available at: <http://kotaku.com/347350/keighley-sets-mass-effect-record-straight-or-tries-to>

understood as a pattern of interaction with the game system” (2003). Although the gameplay gestalt is only part of a greater design taxonomy which includes simulation, ludological and narratological components, Lindley states that there are a number of complexities involved in examining the player’s role:

A gameplay gestalt can have many forms for a particular game, capturing different playing styles, tactics and approaches to progressing through the game and (perhaps) eventually winning. In general, it is a particular way of thinking about the game state from the perspective of a player, together with a pattern of repetitive perceptual, cognitive, and motor operations. A particular gameplay gestalt could be unique to a person, a game, or even a playing occasion. More generally though, recurrent gameplay gestalts can be identified across games, game genres, and players. (2003)

Lindley, in many ways, is tracing the paths of what has previously been termed player *skill* in other frameworks. He acknowledges the multivariate approaches people might, and will, apply against game challenges. While Lindley understandably avoids a comprehensive list of gaming gestalts, he offers some rudimentary examples of how gameplay gestalts might emerge for games within specific genres. The action game, he suggests, follows the pattern of, “shoot while being hit, strafe to hiding spot, take health, repeat”, while for Role Playing Games (RPGs), the pattern might be, “send fast character to lure enemy from group, all characters kill enemy, take health, repeat” (2003). These looping actions are greatly oversimplified, obviously, and ignore the many, many intermediate decisions that must take place in between: working one’s way through a hostile environment strategically, for shooters, or the social squabbles which occur in online RPGs over distribution of character-enhancing loot. It was not Lindley’s intent to create a formalized typology characteristic of all games of a genre, but rather to point out that such repetitive systems of player interaction form the core of video game play. The skills required to enact such patterns – what Lindley identifies as “repetitive perceptual,

cognitive, and motor operations” – are the foundation of a video game. The designer must first ask herself what the player might find themselves *doing*, whether just once or twice or throughout the entire play experience, and build the game’s rule structures and narratological context around these mechanics. As Lindley points out, these core gaming gestalts are frequently reproduced across games and genres.

Clearly the type of mastery needed in order to win a *Guitar Hero* contest is drastically different from the micromanagement abilities necessary to play *Starcraft*, the visual pattern recognition skills needed to play most casual puzzle games, or the lightning-fast twitch-speed needed to play most First-Person Shooters (FPSs), like *Quake* or *Halo*, effectively. The numerous genres and play styles which can be subsumed under the label ‘video game’ do not lend themselves well to formal typologies: solidly delineated categorization will be routinely thwarted by new games which hybridize genres, remap gaming conventions, and introduce unprecedented game play challenges to players.

Still, along the same general lines as Lindley, I believe individual case studies on long-standing genres such as the aforementioned real-time strategy and first-person shooter video games will reveal ‘clusters’ of skill sets which, more or less, can be transferred from one individual game iteration to the next. Player familiarity factors heavily here. James Paul Gee takes a semiotic approach to understanding this clustering of skills in his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*:

In the larger semiotic domain of video games, first- and third-person shooter games are a well defined subdomain. However, such games often have elements that are similar to features found in arcade games, games (like Space Invaders, Pacman, and Frogger) that involve a good deal of fast hand-eye coordination to move and respond quickly. (In fact, one of the original first-person shooter games, a game that helped start the genre – Wolfenstein 3D – operates very

much like an arcade game.) Thus, someone who has mastered the domain of arcade games has mastered a precursor domain for shooter games, though such games now contain many other elements, as well. (p. 47, 2003)

Gee suggests that there is overlap in skill between games and between genres, but is ultimately more interested in how practices of skill development in games can be modeled in a more pedagogical environment. Still, his claim carries interesting implications: that players might expect to see a certain progression of skills in a video game, both ‘in text’ as the player completes challenges and moves on to apply skills against harder difficulties, and as part of a greater “subdomain” system where a particular game’s expectations are weighted against player *familiarity* with other, similar games. Game genre provides an entry point into understanding skill as an intricate weaving of these familiarities, which precede and facilitate expertise. Familiarity represents a broad conceptual umbrella under which numerous, multivariate player perspectives on the role of skill in understanding and experiencing game play can be coalesced and addressed.

2.12 Cultural Aesthetics and Performativity

There may also be an aesthetic component, or a question of style, which accentuates technical mastery. Behrenshausen argues that a more holistic perspective of games must include performance studies, stating that, “we cannot forget that this body also bears the weighty marks of the past – past encounters, past tradition, and past discipline – that materializes in its always-present performative reiteration at the site of engagement with the video game” (p. 336, 2007). He bases this contention on interviews and observation of *Dance Dance Revolution* players, who note the environmental aspects of playing the game in front of peers. Questions of abstraction colour their concerns: how

is DDR like dancing? How is it different? A socio-cultural evaluation of one's finesse, or the ability to look 'cool' while playing, runs parallel to a player's quantitative score. Similarly, the Major League Gaming competition for *Guitar Hero* adds a performative aspect to the game's innate scoring system, with judges rendering decisions in categories such as 'showmanship' for each contestant. Consequentially, the gamers artificially increase the difficulty of their challenge by choosing to play using different styles: with their controllers behind their head (disorienting), without watching the notes on the screen (memorization), and switching hands between fret and strum bar (dexterity). Here, skill seems to partially detach from the game's rule structures and become imbued, as well, in the materiality and performativity of play which is then subjectively evaluated by others. As I have previously pointed out, skill and mastery are, in large part, socially formulated and recognized by peers and other players, but a closer focus on localized group play highlights social performativity as a particularly fruitful area of investigation. What happens when a player succeeds, according to a game, but looks foolish to others in the process? Or, conversely, how might players gracefully negotiate failure in front of their peers? Social performativity emerges as another nexus point of analysis for a player-skill perspective, intertwined with questions of gender and familiarity.

2.13 The Pleasures of Flow

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's conceptualization of *flow* is theoretical framework frequently employed within games studies texts to explore the pleasure which players might take from a video game. In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Csikszentmihalyi suggests that participants who are wholly engaged in an activity, that is,

in a state of flow, demonstrate the most positive and productive mental state. A state of flow is characterized by a decreased awareness of passing time or external concerns (the need to eat, for example), and can be brought about by situations such as a “challenging activity that requires skills” (p. 49, 1990). Other relevant aspects of flow include the necessity of realistic goal-setting by the participant, and an inherent belief that mastery of a task *is* indeed possible for them. Importantly, a state of flow is only achieved when a player feels that their skills are adequately challenged: too little challenge results in boredom, while too much challenge leads to frustration and anxiety (p. 74, 1990).

Csikszentmihalyi’s observations interlock well with Koster’s (2005) claim that players are pattern recognizers who grow bored with a game once the underlying patterns have been revealed and interpreted; the player, by this point, will be reduced to mechanistic reproduction of predictable actions, stripped of the need for cognitive exploration. In short, a benchmark degree of automaticity is implied here: before the player can move on to more complex cognitive tasks, they must first internalize and automate basic communication with the game. It is easy to see how the mind might more easily wander to other activities under these circumstances; ‘farming’, or repetitiously performing the same looting operation over and over, in MMORPGs is often described by players as “work” rather than “play”, and the automaticity of such activities lends itself to players simultaneously working on other things while their avatars grind away on-screen.⁷

While Csikszentmihalyi’s flow model augments and informs an understanding the pleasures to be taken from playing video games, it also points to the necessity of skill in facilitating these pleasures. Is the player who is constantly looking down at their

⁷ See Nick Yee’s Daedalus Project on the psychology of MMORPGs, specifically the section outlining the blurring of work and play here: <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000819.php>

controller, hunting for buttons that correspond to prompts on the screen, ever able to enter a state of flow? Are they able to engage with what Mia Consalvo terms “epiphanic moments” in video game play? (p. 90, 2007). Not right away, certainly, until they have gained an initial mastery of how use of the controller corresponds to the perceptual and cognitive functions of the game on-screen, and move past the unfamiliar material object in their hands.

2.14 The Controller Between Player and Game

One type of ability emerges as an area of primacy in the formulation of a skill-based approach to games studies. If the game can indeed be characterized by a “cybernetic loop” (p. 163, 2003), as Lahti argues, between player and game, where, then, is the choke point in the looping model between a player’s physical and the machine’s virtual chatter? In the controller, of course, where player intent is remediated into an intelligible response to a game state. Gee’s reference to the “fast hand-eye coordination” (p. 47, 2003) needed for arcade games points to a key characteristic of skill development in video games: the question of how such skills are enacted, how they are materially inputted into the technological device which is the video game system. Lindley, as well, notes the “motor operations” (2003) which, alongside cognitive and perceptual abilities, is an essential part of a player’s gaming gestalt. Before one can enact cognitive mastery by interpreting and responding skillfully to patterns in play, the cycle between player input and the game’s perceptual feedback must be intelligible; Janet Murray’s “agency”, where the game world responds “expressively and coherently” to the player’s influence, needs to be in place (p. 10, 2004). Even ‘open-ended’ or casual games require initial

interface competency, although experience with basic computing devices (the mouse and keyboard) can often be adapted easily here.

Any given video game may be a triumph, in terms of narrative complexity or ludological structure, but without the expertise required to *play the game* – that is, to engage meaningfully with the game through a controller – the player’s experience is prematurely arrested. Maureen Thorson, for example, recalls her problematic childhood experiences with the two-button Nintendo Entertainment System gamepad:

I sucked. And not just because I hadn’t played before. I could see that sucking was going to turn out to be a permanent condition. I realized, sadly, that the same quick-thinking hand-eye coordination one needed to play, say, soccer was also needed to excel at video games. The virtual, pixilated enemies relieved you only of the need for muscles, not reflexes. Hand/eye coordination has never been my strong suite. (pp. 162-163, 2004)

Thorson’s memory clearly indicates that mastery of (or its absence) the NES controller was a prohibitive interjection between her and the game: without an adequate level of hand-eye coordination, Thorson was relegated to the position of observer as her friends conquered *Super Mario Bros*. In many console games, interface agency is a precluding factor. In a similar example from PC gaming, the blog ‘How do I play game? –

Adventures of a Non-Gamer’ highlights the material mastery of the game controller as a crucial barrier between player and success. This account, written by a self-identified male with the handle ‘PapaBoo’, consists of the author playing an hour or so of the PC first-person shooter game *Half-Life*, and then blogging about difficulties he encounters during his session. In PapaBoo’s first play session, he immediately encounters problems with the standard control scheme for PC FPS games:

Controls configured? - not checked yet

See this is where my first problem begins. I can type, pretty well. But using the keyboard to move around in a game, well that's a little un-natural to me. My first instinct is to move around using the arrows. I confer with pupismynname who sends me his default gaming configurations that uses e,s,d,f to move around. I play around with this a little while and am o.k. with it. But when I start training I still want to use the arrows ---- frustration ensues. (2008)

Months later, PapaBoo is still wrestling with the material concerns of controlling his character (although a large number of his problems stem from problem-solving puzzles, or not understanding many of the navigation conventions of the genre). He refers back to the difficulty of configuring his keyboard, admitting that, "Something as simple as getting into a crawlspace posed a new challenge when trying to use WASD. I wanted to crouch without moving my right hand off the mouse. My default setting has been the cntrl key but I think may move it over to the mouse some way or maybe use the A key and switch the movement keys to ESDF. Who knows?" (2008). PapaBoo's documentation of his learning process while playing *Half-Life* shows that, for some players, it may take many hours to master a game controller to the point where its configuration and material difficulties are no longer a preoccupation. The video game controller thus presents a site where player skill can be most readily practiced and observed. For the player, learning to manipulate a controller is a precedent for developing other types of mastery in video games; it is the gatekeeper between player and game. This is not to say that there are not *other* gatekeepers – genre conventions in on-screen interfaces and the necessity of maintaining concentration on one's avatar amidst colourful carnage also come to mind – but mastery of the controller is a more universal gatekeeper, a skill set which precludes any other type of meaningful engagement with any video game.

2.15 On Materiality

Giddings and Kennedy take a ‘technist’ stance in pointing out that there must be middle ground somewhere between the interpretationalist tendencies of a textual approach and the dangers of lapsing into the trap of technological determinism which often accompanies materialist analysis. They state explicitly that, “Media technologies are not only decoded, they are *used*, they facilitate new uses and activities ... In important ways their effects *are* both limited and facilitated by their physical form and capabilities” (p. 131, 2006). A material perspective on games must therefore examine, specifically, the technological and material conditions under which a medium such as the video game is brought into, and used, within the social sphere. The acknowledgement that technology presents facilitation rather than deterministic prescription is important; people will dynamically adopt new, unforeseen ways of using and ‘playing’ with technology. Still, materiality informs and intersects with other areas singled out for player-skill analysis. Familiarity with the game controller is seen as a crucial component of acquiring experience and skill. The material aspects of a game playing environment prescribe and/or preclude certain performative actions. Access to technology – to gaming consoles – is linked closely with gendered notions of ‘ownership’ which, in turn, influence and characterize development of gaming abilities. Faulkner (2001), in synthesizing many feminist perspectives on technology, concludes that, “technological artifacts can be gendered, both materially and symbolically”, and the game console represents a techno-material site of such gendered contention. Furthermore, technological failure can drastically influence the way players experience and perceive video games: the materiality of video games is never more noticeable than when a system glitches, or

when a controller has orange juice spilt on it and becomes ‘the sticky controller’, generally avoided and reserved for unsuspecting household guests. Materiality of hardware represents a third synthesis point which this thesis will explore in further depth.

2.16 Overview

A selective review of games studies literature points to the oversimplification or outright omission of the role of the player’s abilities within several prevalent frameworks. Nonetheless, several ‘starting points’ for a player-skill perspective can be identified.

Consalvo (2007) and Jones (2008) rightly note that gaining skill in video games is often a socio-cultural experience, and that players look to each other and to paratexts for assistance, to varying degrees, as part of their gaming sessions. Skill is not bounded-off within the confines of the game; indeed, formulations of l33tness suggest that skill represents a set of socially prescribed norms as to how games should ‘properly’ be played. Formal and informal hierarchies of skill which emerge through socially ascribed recognition are deeply tied to existent systems of patriarchal ‘ownership’ of technology, where access and permissibility emerge as significant barriers for many potential female players.

The video game itself plays a large role in how a player’s skill is determined, challenged, and evaluated. High score lists, specific conditions of victory and defeat, and the successful advancement into later, more difficult, stages of play are only some of the mechanisms of feedback implicated in video game rule structures against which player skills are quantified. Indeed, most games demand mastery before they can be experienced, or traversed, to a satisfactory degree. To appreciate and understand the

knowledge or tactics which are disseminated about a particular game, one must have a corresponding point of reference. Without a contextual, experiential anchor, information about a game is not really useful and at worst, such as in the case of FOX News and *Mass Effect*, representational and perceptual characteristics may be grossly misunderstood or misinterpreted. More practically, Gee's discussion of subdomains and Lindley's framework of the gaming gestalt point to an interrelation between skills, a kind of migration of a player's skill sets from one game to another and across game genres. These examples can be subsumed and analyzed as a categorical *familiarity* with video games.

There appears to be an aesthetic or performative component in social gaming, where a task may be completed adequately but to garner respect and attribution of skill from other players requires a certain degree of *flair*. Addressing social performativity takes on board the specific challenge of expanding notions of skill to encompass player-to-player interactions, in addition to the player-game feedback loop conceptualized by Lahti (2003). Positioning players as active, sociable subjects requires a further look at skill as mediated by group dynamics, as many players experience video games primarily as a peer-based activity. Social performativity is tightly wrapped up in gender formations, and these areas will be examined within a specific, concurrent chapter.

Finally, several theories of pleasure in games can be employed to understand *why* players might want to develop or acquire game-related skills: Consalvo (2007) points to an epiphanic moment of self-discovery, Koster (2005) suggests that players have a need to understand the patterns inherent in a game's rule structures, and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) argues that the testing of skill against appropriate levels of challenge can result in

a pleasurable flow state. Pleasure in video games is seen to be necessarily precluded by a material mastery of the game controller, a device which facilitates interaction between player and game but which, nonetheless, can be framed as a gatekeeper. Without initial control a player is effectively barred from further inspection of a game, including a majority of its rule structures or narrative storytelling. Player recollections of their gaming experiences often highlight the material conditions of video games as prominent features of the medium: one writer (Thorson, 2004) notes that her lack of hand-eye coordination relegated her to the role of video game spectator. The material and technological components of video games, with a particular focus on how the failure of these devices influences experience and perception, forms a third area of further inquisition into player skill.

Chapter 3: Research and Methodology

The research for this thesis was conducted partially in response to a perceived lack of skill-based inquiry within games studies, particularly relating to the practice of play in small groups. Games scholarship is currently focused heavily on single-player experiences or, if addressing the social realm, online communities such as those found in popular MMORPGs. Expanding qualitative analysis further into localized play, the ‘living room’ environment where video game consoles are most commonly found, seemed to be a worthwhile endeavor. While work has been done on social game play and children (Walkerdine, 2007) and pre-teens (Jenson & de Castell, 2008a), young adults playing in small groups remain relatively understudied.

This study also serves to introduce a greater variety of Canadian playing voices into the field of games studies; although responses are not positioned here as uniquely Canadian (versus, say, American gamers), their situated experiences are nonetheless valuable as wholly Canadian qualitative data. Furthermore, women formed the majority of respondents here. Rather than engage in gender tokenism and generalization, I wanted to specifically emphasize these perspectives in order to tease out a more nuanced range of female responses to video games. This research thus takes a feminist approach in its design. As Brayton states, the expressed goals of feminist research are to “take women’s standpoint as the perspective and restructure power imbalances in the research relationship” (2008); privileging female voices seemed to be a good way to begin such a restructuring.

The project was conducted as a qualitative, exploratory study, purposefully designed to facilitate 'rich' data-gathering. A constructivist paradigm was employed during research design, meaning that the study did not pursue statistical significance to be applied to a generalized majority but was instead interested in gathering the opinions of participants who were understood to come from a wide array of multivariate, socially-situated locations. As Edith Ackermann identifies, constructivist methodology following the work of Piaget focuses on "auto-determination and negotiation – i.e. self-expression and exchanges", and acknowledges and privileges an understanding of learning and knowledge as "experience that is acquired through interaction with the world, people and things" (2001). Individual context and agency, in other words, are important. Both participant observation and qualitative interviews were conducted with a minimum of researcher intervention to best tease out 'real-world' practices of game play and discourse participants might experience in everyday life, despite the contrived premise and environment of academic study. Similarly, topics of discussion during interviews were very loosely arranged, allowing for a degree of fluidity, or 'play', in how conversations amongst participants were navigated. In short, this research was not intended to be used to make widespread claims about the characteristics of Canadian game players, or women in general, but rather to serve as a set of unique social intersections out of which, it was expected, fruitful interactions and observations would emerge. Recruitment began following approval of the project through the Ryerson University ethics review board.

3.1 Participant Selection

Criteria for subject inclusion in this study were quite broad: potential participants were young Canadians, between the ages of twenty and thirty, residing in or near Toronto. This selection was made with the express intent of gathering data from people who had ostensibly grown up with an acute awareness of video games, either through direct experiences with play or simply by perceiving video games as a cultural medium peripheral to their lives.

Potential participants were gathered through a snowball sampling methodology, reflecting the constructivist nature of the study. Snowball sampling, here, describes the informal practice of gathering willing participants through existing interpersonal connections and outlying networks of criteria-fulfilling, available candidates. It is most useful in social science work for examining 'hidden' populations; nonetheless, with qualitative data gathering it can also represent a speedy way to gather rich data (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004). Demographically, it was understood that it would not be difficult to find appropriate candidates and, since this research group did not require precise representation for statistical or quantitative purposes, snowball sampling was more than adequate for locating and recruiting subjects. The social networking site *Facebook* was used as an organizational staging ground for the introduction of interested candidates, as well as interpersonal, casual interactions in day to day life. Participants tended to be 'one stage removed' from the researcher (for example, family members of friends), or acquaintances such as former students in undergraduate classes for which I was a Teaching Assistant.

Sex, as previously mentioned, factored heavily into the selection process: eighteen females participated in this project, as opposed to only five males. While severe lopsidedness might appear to present methodological difficulties in a quantitative or reductive study, for the purposes of gathering a diversity of qualitative perspectives it was ideal. Diversity, it must be noted, extends well beyond gender issues into questions of race, disability and other social locations which certainly influence play experiences; the focus of this study, however, was on gender and gaming. The culture and, indeed, the medium of video games are predominantly considered to be a masculine pastime despite the gender breakdown in North American game players approaching parity.⁸ Women are dramatically underrepresented in the gaming industry, which contributes significantly to gendered assumptions of the medium (Haines, 2004). Given these features of the contemporary gaming landscape, skewing exposure in the *opposite* direction – giving primacy to female voices – seems to be less of a problematic methodology than a long overdue auto-correction. Females were actively recruited in order to form a majority of total participants and, as Cook and Fonow identify as a key caveat of feminist research design, “validate a new perspective and definition of events” (p. 5, 1986).

3.2 Study Design

Participants were asked to attend a two hour evening session, and groups were compiled according to subject availability. Every group ended up containing a ‘pair’: two participants who had had previous social contact. Although it was anticipated that these individuals would be more comfortable than others and perhaps dominate the group, it seemed as though this dynamic spread quickly to other participants and, in fact, resulted

⁸ Gender data for game players taken from <http://www.theesa.com/facts/index.asp>

in a greater level of ease amongst *all* subjects. This configuration was a result of limited subject availability (times, dates) for participation. However, upon completion of data analysis, the participation of two friends (in one group), a couple (in another), and colleagues (in the third and fourth groups) added an unanticipated richness to interview data and, in fact, more accurately represented everyday practices of video game play. It is rare indeed that six strangers spontaneously gather to play games together, but far more common for small groups to coalesce around a few mutual friends and use video games as a social icebreaker, serving a social integrative function. If the project were to be redesigned with additional resources, I would choose to reproduce this particular dynamic: it seemed to facilitate good-natured interaction and, in one case, participants even exchanged phone numbers at the session's conclusion so they could perhaps get together in the future. Two groups consisted of six females each, and the other two groups comprised a male-female split: one with three males and three females, and one with two males and three females due to a no-show participant.

All sessions were conducted in television studios at Ryerson University. This environment posed somewhat of a design problem as I was hoping to reproduce a typical 'living room' setup for game play, with couches and other props intended to put participants at ease (as with Saxe, 1994). Instead, the study backdrops were heavy production curtains, rows of high-end camera equipment and, in one studio, a vertical lift crane. In short, the environment served as a close replication of an actual socio-cultural gaming space rather than a material one. This setup was both practical (with storage space for video game and audio-visual equipment) and convenient for participants (Ryerson University is easily accessible by public transit and car). Accessibility to all

participants resulted in a higher degree of participation. Each session was furnished with six chairs and a few tables in the centre of the room, with the television cart and video game systems set up at one end. Snacks were also provided to give non-playing participants something other than the game to focus on, if they wished.

Each session was divided into two halves, each consisting of one hour. The first hour was dedicated to participant observation. As subjects arrived, they were introduced to the environment (and each other). One of my primary concerns was that participants would be able to develop an 'ownership' of the space; that is, to feel free to reconfigure the area to their liking. Participants were encouraged to move chairs and tables around as they saw fit. Video data shows that most participants were unlikely to explore the space and begin moving things around until well into the hour, perhaps reflecting a growing sense of confidence and comfort within the environment. All reconfigurations were practical: chairs were moved so participants could sit and see the screen at the same time, and video game equipment was moved out of the way once a new game had been chosen. One group avoided the chairs entirely and stood the entire hour. Regardless of *how* the room was changed, I felt it important to explicitly provide the option to help participants feel more 'at home' despite the unfamiliar surroundings.

In each session, the television set was flanked by two video cameras on tripods. These gathered the research data, as the researcher (me) was not present during the study. From standard social science convention, the researcher represents an authoritative figure that can drastically alter subject behaviour unless given enough introduction and acclimatization time; similarly, a male figure conducting research with an all-female participant group can be terribly problematic (see Hesse-Biber, 2007). I also recognized

that I might be tempted to pose myself as the 'expert' should I be present, and domineer situations which would be more richly (data-wise) resolved by the participants themselves. This decision also had its basis in feminist research principles, as Brayton notes: "The location of the researcher also plays a significant role in the research process through the dynamics of the interactions between researcher and participant" (2006). By removing myself as a male authority figure, I hoped to avoid replicating existing power structures related to technology.

Before each session began, participants were encouraged to use the two cameras if they wished; to zoom and change angles and configure their own documentation of play. While I felt that participant camera control might make the data more interesting or, perhaps, aesthetically appealing, this design was also intended to help participants share ownership of the study: to feel less like lab-rats and more like active, autonomous individuals. 'Empowering' actions are well-situated and derived from within feminist action research techniques, where participants are encouraged to inquire of each other: to interview and analyze alongside the researcher (Reinharz, p. 185, 1992). Several participants assured me at the end of their session that they had managed to capture what they perceived as "interesting stuff" and have been unflinchingly persistent in pursuing their own copy of the research video since, claiming partial authorship.

In each session, a variety of games were provided for play, selected both for mass appeal (critical and financial) and, more importantly, because each facilitated or encouraged four-player action. Available games included *Rock Band* (Xbox 360, music/rhythm), *Mario Kart Wii* (Wii, racing), *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* (Wii, fighting) and *Wii Sports* (Wii, casual sports). Although several two-player games were also

considered for use, I decided that since the study was to focus on gaming in small groups, it would be best to provide only games which would be inclusive to the majority. Additionally, each game available to the group was characterized by popular genre or series precedents: the game play in *Rock Band* is largely preceded by the *Guitar Hero* series, and both the *Super Smash Bros.* and *Mario Kart* franchises span numerous Nintendo consoles and generally reiterate the same representational features, play mechanics, and gaming gestalts. *Wii Sports*, on the other hand, represents a unique foray into gaming convention, although it is packaged with the Wii and often serves as an introductory vehicle to showcase or demonstrate the features of the motion-sensing Wiimote controller. It is, nonetheless, a game which many people will end up playing upon first encountering the Wii. These games were selected with the hope that at least one player in each group would have some familiarity with them – a referent basis – and be able to assist other players during the session if necessary.

After participants had arrived, I began recording on both cameras and removed myself well away from the research environment. The group was left entirely to their own devices for an hour, after which I returned to set up the second half of the study.

Following Reinharz, who suggests that, “For a woman to be understood in a social research project, it may be necessary for her to be interviewed by a woman” (p. 23, 1992), I selected a female participant in each group to serve as a discussion facilitator for the qualitative interview hour prior to each study. As I had already decided to actively remove myself from the research, a feminist perspective indicated that a female participant would be the best choice to facilitate discussion, both for consistency (men were only present in two of the four groups) and to avoid replicating any sort of

patriarchal systems of dominance through bestowed authority. Each facilitator arrived slightly before the study began for briefing, which was largely informal in nature. I did, however, provide them with a short outline of important topics to cover. The session was to begin with a reflection on the first hour of play, and a general conversation about participant experience with video games as young children, as teenagers and, contemporarily, as young adults. Other highlighted topics included materiality (“experiences with game controllers and hardware”), gender (I left particular issues here up to each facilitator), and the sociability/performativity of gaming (“anecdotes and reflections on play in small social groups”). Like other areas of this study, the assembly of discussion topics was constructivist in nature: facilitators took a large role in shaping the interviews and, in many cases, dynamically added content they felt would be useful. One facilitator, for example, suggested that discussion of materiality would be best augmented by the physical presence of game controllers on the table, for participants to examine and play with while talking. This proved to be a useful jumping-off point for discussion, generating some interesting comparisons. Involving these women in informal questionnaire design is also somewhat in line with a feminist approach to qualitative research, as Brayton notes: “Changing the power relationship entails involving the participants at all levels of the research process” (2008). Framing facilitators as co-researchers largely serves as a means to break down a rigid researcher-participant dichotomy and enable unanticipated forms of data to emerge.

Interviews were conducted around the table provided in each studio with the facilitator acting as both discussion guide and documenter, panning a camera placed beside her on a tripod around the group as necessary. As with the first portion of the

study, I helped configure the area and then left for an hour. Upon returning, participants were asked to sign consent and release forms and the study was concluded. Oftentimes several participants would ask to keep playing, post-interview, and many had additional interesting reflections during this 'free' time which were informally noted.

3.3 Limitations

Certainly there are limitations to such a study, particularly given the limited resources and time available to a Masters project. More time could have been spent discussing cognitive content in games, for example, as opposed to a direct focus on hardware and controllers. The space within which the study took place was not especially conducive to replicating a 'living room' environment. A larger number of participants would have provided a greater range of opinions and experiences, and at least one group containing only males would be useful for comparative purposes. More detailed demographic information might expand the usefulness of this study into quantitative areas, or simply provide more data for analysis. Participants could have been contacted for post-session feedback interviews, extending the usefulness of the project significantly. And, finally, data analysis would have benefited from having more researchers present to offset the biases of a single qualitative interpreter (me). All of these limitations could be addressed by moving the scope of the project beyond its current form into a more well-funded and staffed venture.

3.4 Overview

This research was designed to collect explorative, qualitative data about how small groups play video games together, in perceived response to a lack of demographically equivalent (Canadian young adults) work. Constructivist design placed an emphasis on involving participants directly in the study's construction and facilitation, entitling them to a degree of 'ownership' of the research which was seen to increase active involvement. Feminist methods for qualitative research further framed these choices as productive, particularly the use of female facilitators for interviews. Enlisting a majority of female voices and responses ensures that women are not "simply added to the research equation", as Brayton (2008) puts it, but rather positioned in a role of primacy and valued expertise. This selection is in contrast to most game-related research currently available, although studies by Jenson and de Castell (2008b), for example, lay strong groundwork for future qualitative inquiries into gendered group play. Future work might expand the number of groups for a more broad-ranging set of experiences, particularly those of male subjects, despite the rich set of observational and articulated data gathered from the study's current design.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis - Skill and Familiarity

The remainder of this thesis consists of a systematic analysis of observational and interview data. Reflecting topics identified in the literature review to which a player-skill approach in games studies might be fruitfully applied, this data comprises three distinct areas of inquiry: familiarity, social performativity and gender, and materiality. Participant responses often traversed these categorizations, revealing a complex, interrelated system of understandings about video games: seeking to *definitively* delineate video game experiences with formal boundaries is reductionist and most likely unproductive. Arranging data into these foundational areas of interest necessarily demonstrates how they intermingle and inform each other in a myriad of ways. Relevant theoretical frameworks and texts serve as support or, alternatively, contrast to prominent participant viewpoints. Findings from the literature review suggested that player accounts represented a fruitful source of anecdote and opinion on skill and mastery within gaming culture which academic alternatives did not necessarily address. Consequentially, informal sources such as blogs and game community texts will fill out the remainder of analysis. It should be noted here that in accordance with privacy wishes, all participant names have been changed.

4.1 On Familiarity

Familiarity initially appears to be a problematic way to characterize skilled experience with video games; the term is difficult in that it can simultaneously describe a brief observational encounter with a game, many hours exploring that same game's

intricacies both alone and with others, and seemingly anything in between. Yet for these very reasons it can be useful as well, encompassing and reflecting the wide range of potential engagements a player might have with video games: from third-party news reports to informal discourse with peers to actual play. As James Paul Gee (2003) points out, skills relevant to player success in a game play context can migrate, both to other experiences with video games and, possibly, for uses external to games as well.

Familiarity is not bounded by the 'game itself', but rather draws upon referents found elsewhere as well. Familiarity describes a broad spectrum of relationships that players have with video games, including representational content, techno-material expertise, and everyday socio-cultural engagements. Lindley's (2003) conceptualization of the *gaming gestalt* points to the importance of familiarity: players will, through prolonged exposure to a game, begin to identify patterns of interaction which form the crux of the play experience and, importantly, begin to see how such patterns are replicated elsewhere, in other games, in equivalent genres. Mia Consalvo notes experiential divisions in mastery, stating:

Even among the best players, gameplay difficulties can occur, such as when a highly skilled 2D platform gamer moves to 3D FPS games for the first time. Different screen-reading tactics, methods for controlling the interface, and recognition of iconic elements all come together to create an experience that can be exciting and fresh, but also confusing and potentially discouraging.
(p. 95, 2007)

Of course, actual play represents the best access point to a more complex familiarity with particular games, but discourse *about* games is seen to be precluded by a baseline familiarity as well.

4.2 Familiarity and Discourse

Familiarity tended to heavily frame topics of discussion with many research participants, who demonstrated varying degrees of knowledge about conventional gaming genres when discussing their favourite games. Some participants chose to describe their preferences in terms of technological affiliation; for example, one player, Cornelius, noted that he mostly played “nostalgic games”, characterized by their appearance on early console systems. Others adhered to a vague classification system (“strategy games”, “role-playing games”) but often added additional qualifiers to clarify what they meant by each term (“you know, where you command armies and have to take out the other team’s base”, “like collecting items for your little guys and building them up and such”). The most frequent way in which participants expressed their gaming preferences was through evoking the name of a popular game title which they felt properly described the types of experiences they enjoyed. For example, Emily stated, “I always liked the jumping and running, you know, like *Mario* and that.” Although such games could be wrapped up in the ‘platform game’ genre, the player instead employed a few verbs which described the primary activities involved in these games, and used an example to characterize them. If she had mentioned a 3D run-and-jump game such as *Ratchet and Clank* rather than *Mario*, the meaning behind her description would have changed significantly. As it was, other members of the group picked up on her intent and quickly volunteered other examples of platform games to flesh out the definition:

Cornelius: Oh, like *Mega Man*.

Sunni: Yes *Mega Man*! Oh, or *Castlevania*.

Emily: Yeah! That kind of stuff.

The word “like” often formed a link which drew specific game examples together into a haphazard cluster of what players perceived to be similar experiences. Participants drew upon prior knowledge and/or expertise with the proffered examples to expand the list with titles from their own gaming history, or to offer a brief (verb-centric) synopsis of what playing such games might entail. Depending on how familiar other group members were with the games being evoked, some participants had to work harder to clarify their meaning:

Maria: I always liked role-playing games.

Ophelia: What, like that *World of Wow* [*Warcraft*] thing?

Evelyn: My brother plays that! He’s addicted I think.

Maria: No, no, like the Japanese ones, like the *Final Fantasy* and *Xenogears* and... well, actually, I like *Harvest Moon* the best. It’s like those other ones, but you’re on a farm.

The group responded with awkward silence here, indicating unfamiliarity with these games despite *Harvest Moon*’s informal billing as a female-centric title. Without a common reference point the group seemingly had trouble comprehending the loose genre assemblage of games to which Maria referred: slow-paced, story-centric titles which emphasize collection and maintenance of in-game items, resources and characters. Maria had to launch into a rather detailed description of what one might do while playing *Harvest Moon*, and even then was mostly met with confused responses: “So, you have to fight the vegetables?” Note that Evelyn drew upon a second-hand referent – her *brother*’s play experience – as an access point into the conversation, a phenomenon that was replicated in other groups. Many female participants relied upon passing familiarity with

games for discursive contribution, facilitated by the play habits of male figures in their lives. As Jessica, in another all-female group, noted, “Yeah, my boyfriend plays all these shooting games and there was one, yeah one, where he just totally got into it and forgot to meet me downtown.” Familiarity, for Jessica, consisted of a brief assessment of what her boyfriend was *doing* within the game (“shooting”) but, more importantly, represented a standing assessment of video games as a socio-cultural *competitor* for his time and attention. Several others in Jessica’s group shared similar stories. In this case video games were framed prominently as a negative pastime, reflecting an opaque, one-track familiarity with “shooting games” and, additionally, providing distinct context for an instance of feminine “reticence to technology” as identified by Brayton (p. 761, 2006).

Data showed that the more familiarity a participant had with a game – characterized by time spent observing or, more likely, *playing* – the more they were able to discursively reflect on their experiences in multivariate ways. That is, a fair degree of familiarity permitted participants to talk about things like comparative rule structures, narratives and story, anecdotal play experiences, and genre/game similarities and differences, whereas less familiarity limited discourse to accounts such as Jessica’s, where video games represented a vaguely nebulous and often inconceivable formation of activity for *others*. This is similar to the *Mass Effect* example referred to in the literature review, where FOX News took representational elements from the game – in this case, sex – and demonized them ‘as such’ without contextual awareness of their miniscule role within a larger play experience.

Likewise, Ernest Hilbert, who writes extensively on experiences with arcade shooters, nonetheless has difficulty in exploring contemporary games with any real depth

because of his lack of familiarity. He writes, “Games today are so sophisticated, and so damned fast, that I generally back slowly out of the room when I encounter one.

Whatever their athletic merits, they do not seem to require much imagination at all. The game does all the work. All you have to do is play” (p. 61, 2004). For Hilbert, then, the arcade titles he played are worthy of discussion, whereas “games today” are lumped together and superficially attacked for their sophistication and speed. Jessica, like Hilbert, noted that she had historical intersections with video games with which she was more personally involved; she recalled playing *Super Mario Bros.* for hours on her family NES console. These examples show that familiarity with games can take many forms across a spectrum of technological and socio-cultural framings, that, as Gee puts it, “mastering a precursor domain” (p. 47, 2003) does not *necessarily* translate into a pace-keeping familiarity with the games and gaming communities.

4.3 Genre

A surprising finding from the research data suggested that genre was only infrequently referred to by participants when attempting to describe various games. Genre is a particularly problematic formulation within games studies, in part because categorization of games in popular discourse is very loosely standardized. A cursory examination of three prominent game website reviews of the popular Xbox 360 game *Gears of War* illustrates this haphazardness: the game is classified as “sci-fi shooter” by *GameSpot*⁹, “action” by *Game Revolution*¹⁰ and “third-person shooter” by *IGN*¹¹. Some descriptors reference representational characteristics (“sci-fi”), some note

⁹ GameSpot review can be found at <http://www.gamespot.com/xbox360/action/gearsofwar/review.html>

¹⁰ Game Revolution review can be found at http://www.gamerevolution.com/review/xbox360/gears_of_war

¹¹ IGN review can be found at <http://xbox360.ign.com/articles/744/744356p1.html>

perceptual/interface convention (the “third-person” perspective), and even the type of game play one might expect from *Gears of War* is articulated using varying terminology (“shooter” versus “action”). It is consequentially rather difficult to address game genre from established theoretical stances. While genre theory in film, for example, creates taxonomy based on representational similarities such as visual style, iconography and common themes – film noir, the spaghetti Western, and the sci-fi flick – popular genre classification in video games most frequently refers to ludological constructs of *play*. By this I mean that genre classification will reflect the degree and type of agency a player can commonly expect to have within the game world, the rule structures that define the limitations and effects of a player’s actions, and the visual and control interfaces that facilitate a feedback loop between player and game. Moreover, genre fundamentally indicates what type of skills will be required of players who play these games; it functions by evoking familiarity with other, similar play experiences.

Mark Wolf suggests that video games are dynamically categorized through an informal process of mutual consent between game producers and their audience; in other words, genre is constructed ‘as needed’ rather than formally typified by any centralized discourse (p. 113, 2001). More precisely, Thomas Apperley claims that video game genre is best understood in terms of player interactivity rather than by representational or visual aesthetic criteria (2006). Both of these claims seemed to hold true amongst participants when genre *was* addressed: use of the word “like” was more frequently employed to help participants informally construct their own understanding of game categorization through collective assembly of familiar examples.

Likewise, participants rarely brought up a game's theme or setting unless the underlying play activity of a particular type of game had been elucidated and (apparently) understood by most participants. Sunni, discussing the game *Bioshock* which was critically acclaimed for its storytelling and thematic prowess, introduced it in such a way: "You guys know first-person shooters, right? *Affirmation from the group* Okay, well, there's this game *Bioshock* and it's so scary in the dark! The best way to play it is at night, with everything shut and your doors are locked, and all the windows. Because you hear something moving and..." Sunni felt the need to clarify the type of game play experience *Bioshock* offered (first-person shooter) before moving on to discuss how such an experience could present itself as "scary in the dark". Without a reference point of play, an anchor of shared understanding about *how* a game might go about eliciting emotion or telling a story or facilitating pleasure, participants were unlikely to carry forward into discussing game-specific features such as setting or narrative.

Just as Malliet (2006) and Aarseth (2003) prescribe a degree of expertise in researchers studying games, players involved in discourse *about* games require an experiential reference point. Saying that a game is "like" others, in attempting to describe its play challenges, appears to be fruitless if others have no experience or familiarity with similar examples. Similarly, employing a genre archetype such as "strategy" or "role-playing" may put others in the same ballpark of meaning, but without further elaboration they may draw on their own understandings of what these classifications might entail and end up thinking of a different type of game play entirely. A baseline of familiarity with different games and, consequentially, an understanding of and/or development of the

types of skills and masteries which lead to play success, appears to be a prerequisite for informed discussion of video games and genres.

4.4 A Ramping-Up of Sophistication

Discussing genre is predicated on participants and players having a wide range of familiarity with video games, an informed expertise about how game rules, challenges, and interfaces reproduce themselves through and across genres. Even Hilbert's scrolling shooter games have next-gen console iterants such as *Ikaruga*, which was critically acclaimed for its panache in returning to arcade levels of difficulty and skill requirement.¹² Just as Hilbert identifies a ramping-up of sophistication within video game genres, many participants noted similar concerns. Jerry, for example, pointed out, "I think you have to spend a lot more time starting from the ground up to get into these games... Like I've played those Sim games for years, and they all basically have the same interface and you can figure them out easily, but with other stuff like on the Xbox I basically have no idea [where to start]." Contemporary games are indeed, for the most part, more complex than their historical precedents, although modeled on familiar modes of play and requiring similar skill sets. If familiarity and expertise can be transferable across genre lines, repetitive, consistent exposure and play nonetheless seem to be important in maintaining and updating the skills and abilities required to take on newer, contemporary games.

¹² See *Ikaruga* review at GameSpot: <http://www.gamespot.com/gamecube/action/ikaruga/review.html>

My own experiences with the Vortex game design competition¹³, which takes place annually as part of the *McLuhan International Festival of the Future* in Toronto, informs how game genres are steadily and systematically complexified. In this contest, participants submit proposals for original game design and are treated to lectures and assistance from various Canadian industry professionals on subjects such as pitching, marketing, and developing games. More than once we were told by well-established publishers that a good pitch required reference to *genre*: What kind of game is it? What games is it like? This necessity was described as being interlocked with profitability, as publishers are generally unlikely to introduce a game into the market without a precedent for financial success. Furthermore, a ‘good’ game pitch should evoke a successful iteration of a genre (such as *Halo* for first-person shooters) and then list a few ways in which the new game would be markedly *different* in some way: its primary selling points. An ideal pitch, then, would sound something like, “It’s like [insert popular game example], but with [insert original feature or variation].” If this is the way in which the video game industry develops, it is no surprise that traditional, long-standing genres with decades of history have become so complex: the addition of new caveats to existent forms of game play occasionally result in critical or financial success, these caveats become a near-standardized feature of the genre and, as a whole, the genre progresses to demand more and more skill sets and types of mastery from its players.

Tracing a cursory path through the *Halo* series of console first-person shooters illustrates a series of systematic complexifications which hold true for most other longstanding game franchises. The original *Halo* was very much an exercise in porting

¹³ More information on the Vortex Competition can be found here:
<http://www.mcluhanfestival.com/vortex.php>

the first-person shooter, a staple of PC gaming, to the console. It contained many of the necessary skills players expected to deploy in PC shooters such as *Quake*: movement and orientation within a three-dimensional environment, ammunition and weapon acquisition and tactical choices about the use of these resources, and twitch-speed aim in mowing down hordes of enemies. *Halo 2* added the ability to dual-wield weapons, one in each avatar hand, which deepened its strategic element and, consequentially, rendered the controller configuration slightly more difficult. *Halo 3* introduced a brand-new class of auxiliary grenades (which required an additional button to deploy). While this progression might seem ‘natural’ to fans of the game and, indeed, changes to game play are *demande*d with the release of new series iterations, it nonetheless begs the question: what about players who are coming to first-person shooters for the first time via *Halo 3*?

They are entering a gaming environment which is predicated on assumptions of accumulated mastery, of prior experience ‘building up’ skill within *Halo* and *Halo 2*. While new players could surely spend the time and effort in building up their abilities, competitive multiplayer (which, as any seasoned *Halo* player will say, is the bread and butter of the series) poses a difficult challenge. One research participant, Greg, fondly recalled his early experiences with *Halo 3* online: “Oh yeah, it was great then... all these people had just got the game, and it was clear they weren’t very good eh? They were just sitting at spawn, looking around, not really playing right. And I would come up behind them and BAM! Whack them in the back of their heads. They would get so mad and yell at me on the mic, but I just kept killing. Gotta get that score up, right?” Greg mentioned that he had played the previous *Halo* games extensively, and noted that he was not the only “newbie hunter”: other expert players were also quickly building ranks by killing

unskilled beginners. Some players were outclassed on the very first day of the game's release.

I am not arguing here that the bar of difficulty should be lowered in contemporary video games but merely highlighting that certain genres, like the first-person shooter, have given some players a long history of skill acquisition, an accumulated mastery with the conventions and interfaces and tactics which have become characteristically demanded by these games, and the material expertise to operationalize these understandings effectively while playing. While new players are not 'locked out' of the experience – indeed, young faces emerge all the time on the professional gaming circuit to take on, and beat, well-established pros – games within these genres can nonetheless be seen as somewhat prohibitive, as many participants admitted. Shirley, for example, professed interest in contemporary first-person shooters but noted inhibitions: "Yeah, it looks interesting... but yeah, way too hard. The aiming and the looking for prizes... I just watch people do it and think, 'What the hell?'" Shirley was among a few female participants to refer to 'classic' PC FPSs like *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom* as some of their childhood favourites. However, the genre has progressed since then: more than a decade of one-step innovations in real-time strategy or first-person shooter video games has necessarily added feature to feature, meaning to meaning, which results in semiotic domains overloaded with nuance. The palimpsest – a reusable manuscript page – is a good metaphor here, as new games within pre-modeled genres carry assumptions of player skill and knowledge which have been inscribed, layer by layer, over each preceding game's slightly less complicated expectations. A beginning player will see

only the surface, while those familiar with the genre (unless, as was the case with Shirley, experience is characterized by large gaps of absence) will see the tablet.

4.5 A Ramping-Up of Familiarity

As Jesper Juul notes in examining the role of abstraction in games, beginning players decode on-screen elements primarily through *fiction*, the graphical elements they can identify through previous everyday knowledge and deduct what roles those elements might play. Conversely, the experienced player will recognize the *genre*: the “interface layout” (usually a map and command bar located along the bottom of the screen) and the “birds-eye view” (a top-down perspective of many little units, and generally a base of operations) immediately signify the core characteristics of a real-time strategy game. In other words, the representational features of the game indicate what kinds of agency the player can expect within the game world, whether they will control the fate of one avatar or entire armies. Juul summarizes:

The experienced player comes to the game with an idea of the rule structure of the game, and the general limits in which the interaction take place: Tell units where to go, but don't deal with the path finding of the individual unit. Deal with battles, but not with making food. Accept that human units can be "built" in a few minutes. However, the experienced game player does not know where the borders lie in this specific game. Perhaps this is a game that adds political or social structure as new component to the real-time strategy genre? Perhaps in this game, resource units become fatigued?

This means that the player's view of the game changes over time, while playing the game. (2007b)

Juul makes an important point here: although video games within a certain genre will possess, by definition, certain recognizable characteristics, each iteration will twist the rule structures in some way, add new features, or otherwise distinguish itself as a ‘new’ game. From a player-skill perspective, herein lies a crucial form of pleasure in video games: *to*

take existent skill sets within a familiar game environment and apply them against new challenges. To understand, as Koster (2005) would put it, the patterns of each new game; how experience vary, and how they are the same. Each game iterant within a genre will allow players to develop core competencies such as material expertise with a controller, to retest old strategies and tactics, and to generally become more skilled with a particular type of play. In short, the genre represents a formation where a necessary set of player abilities are trained, each game iterant a new arena where a player's understanding of the genre is expanded in some way and who is required to recall and adapt these skills in order to play successfully.

As Emily noted, "To get good, I think you just have to *play* it, over and over, until it just makes sense. And then other ones get easier and before you know it, you aren't going out on Friday nights anymore." Emily also pointed out that many of the games she sees her (male) friends playing have little to no referent point for her, that she has trouble identifying goals and objectives from her casual observations. Her friends, on the other hand, are "playing something different every time... and just as good, like they've been doing it for forever and it's no trouble at all."

Gee's claim that, "Active learning in a domain also involves preparation for future learning within the domain and within related domains" (p. 39, 2003) appears to hold true: genres do indeed "prepare" gamers for a certain type of play, and learning the mechanisms of one video game can transfer into a speedy understanding of another, similar game. Interestingly, many contemporary console games have begun to combine or amalgamate skill sets from multivariate sources. More and more console video games can be seen as coming from hybridized genres. *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, for

example, is first and foremost about driving and shooting, but also contains a character stat-building element taken from role-playing games, a handful of rhythm-based challenges, a dating simulation and much more. *Blue Dragon* is primarily a role-playing game but features several shooting scenes which require controller expertise and interactive cut scenes, like those popularly pioneered in games like *God of War* or *Resident Evil 4*, which require precise input at certain points during an otherwise non-interactive clip. If genre was ever once ‘affixed’ to a player – that is, if players could focus specifically on one set of masteries revolving around a favourite genre of game, calling themselves a ‘strategy gamer’ or ‘sim gamer’ – it seems that many genres are now becoming affixed to each other, demanding a more universal set of expertise from players. It is easy to see how games like these, featuring amalgamated genre conventions, might elicit confusion in participants like Emily: without a wide range of game-related familiarities, many contemporary console games are rendered largely incomprehensible.

4.6 Genre and Configurative Practice

Just as a baseline of familiarity appears to be necessary for players conducting discourse about games, a self-perceived degree of expertise with a genre (or lack thereof) is seen to influence how people will configure new games. One *Rock Band* play session involved the following discussion while players were selecting a skill level for their instruments:

Sara: Are you playing medium?

Megan: Easy... I’ve never played this before!

Felicia: You want to play hard? You guys are hardcore.

Sara & Megan: We play on expert!

Megan: Well for guitar, yeah, but for drums... not so much.

Felicia: Expert? For guitar you can do expert?

Sara: I have *Guitar Hero* at home...

Felicia: I can do hard on *Guitar Hero* but not expert.

Sara: Only on *Guitar Hero* 1 and 2. 3 is too hard. 3 is like playing on extra-expert.

Here skill is a self-evaluated categorization, predicated on previous experience with similar music-rhythm games: genre serves as a reasonable inference as to how well a player might fare playing a game similar to those the player is already familiar with. An increase in skill level across *Guitar Hero* is also mentioned, as the player notes that she can play expert guitar on the first two games but the third iteration is “extra-expert”, more difficult. Participants in other groups went through similar processes of referral when configuring games they hadn’t seen before. Shirley, for example, justified her choice in *Mario Kart Wii* avatar through familiarity with Mario Kart games on other platforms: “I’m Toad. I always win with Toad, he’s so small and faaaast!” Her assessment was predicated on past successes with the Toad character, in similar and yet not *identical* contexts.

Interestingly enough, familiarity (and, by association, skill) was introduced to the study before research sessions even began. Potential subjects were explicitly told that they did not need to have existing expertise with games and, in fact, that a wide range of experience would be useful. Many participants nonetheless volunteered information about their abilities (or lack thereof) openly. For example, one participant suggested, in an email, that if any rhythm skills were involved she would “suck horribly” and be “an

embarrassment” but would nonetheless come and “try anyway”. Others showed enthusiasm for particular games mentioned in the study outline, declaring mastery, and one even pledged to practice some of these games before attending. Nearly everyone, at one point or another during the recruiting process, felt the need to voluntarily front-load, or characterize, their relative abilities with video games. Situating or configuring themselves within gaming culture was seen to be a fundamental ‘entry point’ into the research for these players; an initial self-disclosure placing them along hierarchal lines of experience and mastery. By identifying themselves as n00b or l33t (or somewhere in between) before the study even began, these participants were actively buying in to a perceived skill-based ranking system.

Gender did not emerge as a prominent aspect of how familiarity and mastery were distributed amongst participants. In both mixed-gender groups, males appeared to be equaled or, at times, bested by women in displays of gaming capital, or multivariate knowledge of different games and game-related phenomena. There were no distinct patterns in genre or game preference (contrasting findings by Barnett, Vitaglione et al., 1997; Yates and Littleton, 1999, among others), although a subsection of females had only superficial experiences with games as technological ‘roadblocks’, like Jessica. These accounts were often tied to a tendency to identify gaming technology as a masculine pursuit, as evidenced by stories of familiarity with video games as a by-product of encounters with male friends and family. Participants were, however, largely able to avoid reductionist formulations of video games based on what ‘girl games’ or ‘boy games’ entail, working against perspectives of how gender roles translate essentially into game play preferences (as with Jenkins, 2006).

More telling were reactions from all-female groups to participants who demonstrated a nuanced familiarity with games and gaming culture. Maria, in particular, met with a type of resistance from others in her group: many demonstrated an inability or unwillingness to engage with video games to the degree which she proposed. After the session, one of these participants told me, “That one girl... [Maria], she knew a *lot*. Like, a *lot* about games and game stuff. It was a little strange.” This response speaks to the position of technology writer Sherry Turkle, who suggests that women framed as experts in ‘unfeminine’ fields can be negatively perceived to have exchanged their womanhood for said expertise (1995). “Strange”, in this case, represents a break with ‘normal’ framings of what level of acceptable experience women should have with video games. Men, predictably, did not receive such responses. Discourse and configurative practice was seen to be characterized by a ‘sweet spot’ for the women in this study: too little familiarity and knowledge inspired other female participants to flaunt their expertise, but too *much* represented a transgression into a perceived ‘male’ domain of experience. As Brayton suggests, “dominant cultural ideology connects technology with masculinity” (p. 760, 2006); amongst these women, gaming capital and familiarity appeared to reflect similar delineations of gender appropriateness. To bolster these findings, gender will be addressed more closely in the next chapter.

4.7 Overview

From a player-skill perspective, familiarity is seen to have a significant impact on the way players describe game experiences. The most applicable formation for familiarity within game-related discourse appears to be *genre*, although many research participants

constructed genres based on immediate needs, using referential examples to dynamically build a grouping of games which best described their intent. A degree of expertise with games and game genres emerges as a facilitating aspect of fruitful discourse and, indeed, an understanding of *how a game is played* seems to be a prerequisite for further discussion of a game's narrative, say, or thematic concerns. Familiarity with genres also serves as reference points for how players assess and predict their own abilities, and thus characterizes how they may approach new games.

Genre describes the way in which games are fundamentally similar in terms of play, and appears to be developed through a systematic process of complexification in which previously successful games are remodeled and enhanced with new features and caveats. Longstanding genres such as first-person shooters and real-time strategy games have undergone many such revisions and may represent a prohibitively difficult learning curve for new players, who must not only contend with assumptions of pre-existing expertise by developers but also other players who have a long history of experience with similar games. One of the pleasures of video game play is to take existent skill sets within a familiar game environment and apply them against new challenges; genre serves as a formation where additional challenges emerge as 'new' games, where player skills can be transferred, adapted, and trained further. Contemporary genres have begun to hybridize somewhat, borrowing game mechanics from other, often radically different, genres.

Many participants reported 'losing touch' with once-familiar genres of video games, citing newly complexified layers of game play and additional functionalities. Finally, although many female responses contrasted with academic findings, reflecting a nuanced set of perspectives, familiarity is seen to take on board a gendered component

where a trend in framing gaming capital and knowledge was seen to be appropriate for females *to a certain degree*.

Chapter 5: Data Analysis - Skill, Social Performativity, & Gender

This chapter briefly points a player-skill lens at issues of social performativity and gender in small group play. Although playing video games is often seen to be a passive, reclusive solo activity in mainstream discourse (the ‘lonely basement nerd’ archetype), video games are represented here as a socially vibrant site of interaction between players, similarly to Bart Simon’s sociological work on cyber-spatial places (2007). Skill – with the game, with the console hardware, with the controller – is, however, seen to be a primary site of negotiation and mediation amongst participants in many instances. Reflections on gender are not meant to be generalized and applied to a reductive understanding of ‘what girl gamers want’: this tactic has been attempted before (Ray, 2004; Jenkins, 2006) with arguments ranging from essentialism to outright support of stereotypical formulations of masculinity and femininity. Continuing the constructivist paradigm of this research, observations of gender are represented as a small sub-section of the experiences players have in a larger social sphere rather than serving a prescriptive or instructive function; it acknowledges that there is much more to be said and heard on the topic.

5.1 Sociability

A significant divide was seen to colour research participant perception of console systems compared to other video games (handheld devices, PC games): participants repeatedly indicated that they preferred to play console games in groups, with other people, while computer games and handheld systems such as the Nintendo Game Boy or

Portable Sony Playstation represented more private experiences. Levels of engagement emerged as a key point of comparison, as Emily noted: "I think I'd rather play with other people, like maybe that was why computer games weren't as fun as video games, because with video games most of the time you are playing with other people, there's more interaction." Liz, in another group, independently correlated this observation, stating, "For some reason I feel that with video games I just got more into it, whereas with computer games you feel like you're just sitting in front of a screen, clicking on stuff." Even when participants noted that they played computer games online, with or against other humans, the console was still acknowledged as a more social venue due to its facilitation of numerous players in *close physical proximity*. Console gaming was compared to other activities which were also perceived to be enhanced by the presence of others. Cornelius pointed out that, "For me it's a social thing, it's like drinking... you need to have someone else around. I just can't get into a video game if there's not someone else there, for commentary or whatever."

Even single-player console games were posited as an experience which was enriched by the presence of others. Gary noted that, "Back when I had the Nintendo I'd be playing with my brother constantly, even if it was a single player game like *Zelda*. We'd be sitting there, just telling each other what to do, how to fight the bad guys, stuff like that." Maureen Thorson similarly addresses the pleasures of watching others play, which for her were characterized by a certain degree of frustration: "She was pretty hardcore... she spent all her time playing it, but only one person could play at a time. So I spent a lot of time watching it, my thumbs itching to master the classic plus-sign-and-button format of the Nintendo controller..." (p. 162, 2004). Later in her life, Thorson

recalls becoming a “back-seat driver” for her boyfriend, which was more positively framed as a bonding experience:

Rockstar Games, creators of *Vice City*, had done the impossible. They had turned a first-person shooter into an interminable buddy-buddy roadtrip. Driver. Navigator. “No. Your other left.” And you could argue over which of Vice City’s fine 80s-rock radio stations to listen to. Being a Vice City gun moll wasn’t that different from regular passenger-side existence, except that instead of clicking my tongue over run-through red lights, I clicked it over run-over cops. “Was that really necessary?” (p. 165, 2004).

Thorson played a directorial role in her gaming sessions: she would decide the strategy, while her partner would enact it (often, as she notes, imperfectly). It may very well be that long-term observation of a game provides pleasure in the form of a deeper understanding, or familiarity, of the game’s mechanics, where the recognition of patterns lends itself to feelings of accomplishment and mastery. Still, the frustrations inherent in operationalizing tactics ‘one step removed’ from the game – mediated first through another player – seem to be a prohibitive experience. As Thorson notes, barring her hand-eye difficulties, she would have liked to play herself.

Gary, who played *Zelda* with his brother, pointed out that they constructed a complex system of what can be described as ‘meta-rules’ concerning swapping of the controller back and forth, a sharing of control. Completing what was perceived as a ‘major’ task within the game constituted a temporary conclusion of one’s play time; acquiring a new weapon or defeating a boss meant that it was the other player’s turn. Failure (in the form of avatar death or, less frequently, an inability to pass a particular puzzle-solving problem), as well, represented a turn-ending event. When asked by the facilitator whether he would’ve spent as much time with the game if he hadn’t got to play at all, Gary answered, “Probably not.” The *playing* or *doing* of a video game is once

again seen as an important factor in long-term cohesion and familiarity with the medium. Males and females alike reported near-identical preferences for playing console video games in groups.

However, not all participants reserved console game play as a primarily social experience. Many of the best-selling contemporary games feature single-player components which require upwards of thirty hours to complete: it is difficult to believe that such endeavours might be undertaken in a group environment without a significant degree of planning and coordination. As Sunni pointed out adamantly, “I always liked to play by myself.” A female participant in a different group also echoed this sentiment, along with three males. Is this a gendered response? Yes, once issues of hardware accessibility are considered.

These participants each pointed out that they had unfettered access to a television and game console, which indicates a factor of environmental and material access in facilitating solo play. The everyday conflicts of multiple young adults seeking to use limited technological entertainment resources (roommates or couples fighting over the TV, for example) characterize a player’s potential level of experience with video game. If, for example, acquisition of skill sets are developed through prolonged play, the player who rarely, if ever, has an opportunity to sit down with a game and explore it on their own terms will have difficulty mastering these necessary abilities. A gender-based analysis becomes more useful once *access* is highlighted in this manner: a large study by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2005), found that only 33% of surveyed girls had unfettered access to a console (in their bedroom), compared to 63% of their male counterparts. Qualitative responses from my research pool reflect a similar degree of

disparity in console ownership between groups; male respondents reported owning more consoles than female respondents over the course of their respective lives, particularly during teenage years. The problem of technological access as a site of gendered inequality appears to migrate across generational gaps. Bryce and Rutter note that the, “invisibility of female gaming may also be reflected by a more casual commitment to gaming as a leisure activity, and also reflect the lower numbers of females who are frequent consumers or purchasers of gaming hardware and software” (p. 11, 2003). Purchasing power, in other words, may be an important factor in shifting video games away from masculine-oriented themes.

A player-skill perspective illustrates the problems which a lack of access might pose. Many console games introduce new players to game concepts and mechanics procedurally, through tutorials and challenges which are designed to become increasingly difficult in conjunction with a player’s expertise. These learning curves are useless to the player who only encounters console games in a social context, where competitive or cooperative multiplayer play is characterized by a simultaneous deployment of *all* of a game’s tactics and controller functionality. As Tina noted, “For me it’s all about confidence. If I’ve done something before in a game, and I *know* I can do it, then it’s okay. But if you just throw me in and I have no idea what’s going on, and I’m getting killed or beat or whatever, it’s a little demoralizing, you know?” Familiarity with a game, then, usually requires experience with the single-player component; effective social gaming is predicated upon, and assumes, that players have developed appropriate skills over time against ability-appropriate challenges. If a player does poorly in a social environment the usual recommendation from others is that they “play more” or

“practice”, which begs the question: what if they *can't*? A player's level of access to console gaming systems is an important factor in skill acquisition, and participants appeared to indicate that gender did indeed play a role in determining how these devices were distributed within their socio-cultural sphere.

5.2 Gender, Access, and the Next-Gen Divide

Among female participants there was a frequently articulated assumption that males would play more games and thus be more skilled. Lisa, for example, articulated her aversion to gaming in this way: “I wouldn't be interested in getting into games because the guy will always beat me, and that's just not fun. He'd always play and get better.” Competition against males was also a frequent topic of discussion amongst female participants, challenging dominant discourses describing male gamers as essentially competitive and female gamers as sociable and cooperative. Katie recalled playing more than she usually would for the sole purpose of eventually defeating her boyfriend: “I had never played GameCube before and he got *Mario Kart*, and after three solid months of playing I started to be able to beat him. It was very rewarding!” Ophelia had a less rewarding experience, stating, “I probably would enjoy playing with other people more so than on my own, but when I played with my brother he always beat me... but if I was sitting down, playing Wii by myself, I probably wouldn't like that as much.” It is interesting that even defeat in a social setting was preferable to a solo video game experience for Ophelia. Cassell and Jenkins (1998) suggest that females are more likely to orient themselves towards social play, a perspective which Ophelia reinforces through her affirmation that losing with others is more appealing than winning alone. A thematic

discourse which arose out of these qualitative interviews was that many of these females reported feeling *competitive* while playing games (against males), but simultaneously perceived themselves as lacking the play experience which would lead to success, except – like Katie – in a very few instances.

Most female participants reported their gaming experiences as being facilitated by males or playing alongside males, once again highlighting access as an important site of gendered analysis. As Jenson and de Castell found in conducting similar group sessions with younger, pre-teen, girls, “even when they did claim to have played, upon further questioning, many would say that they played by ‘watching’ their brothers, or uncles or fathers or male cousins play” (2008b). Among the young adults here there were similar claims, characterized by the following summary by Kim:

I think I have every opportunity to get reintroduced into gaming, but I need a male figure... like a boyfriend probably, a catalyst. If it's there and he can teach me without me having to pay for it, then I'd do it, but I'm not going to go out and get it myself. I wouldn't know where to begin, I want somebody to teach me. I don't want to go out on that limb financially unless I know what I'm doing. Even if I had a roommate who was a girl, that'd be okay, but at this point in my life that's not going to happen.

Kim is not *necessarily* looking for a male entry point into games, but seems resigned to the fact that her socio-cultural context precludes female equivalents. Others also referred to financial cost when justifying a lack of console ownership, in addition to referencing their own self-perceived lack of gaming capital, or expertise: “They update too often... it's like you buy a Nintendo Wii and then something else will come out and top it. And it'll be socially unacceptable because it's old.” Rapid technological progression was framed as daunting by many female participants who did not self-identify as gamers. These accounts inform, in part, the Kaiser figures which indicate that a predominance of

video game consoles appear within masculine spaces. It seems that a vicious cycle is in place for many of these women, where knowledge and mastery of video games predicates the purchase and ownership of game hardware, but without access to the hardware where such familiarities are formed and reinforced, little interest in pursuing a further relationship with games is evident. An 'entry point' is sorely needed. Faulkner (2001) points to a greater female role within the design and construction of technological artefacts as a beginning step towards de-masculinization, and perhaps this might be a workable solution.

Interestingly, when questioned about their lifetime history with video games, a vast majority of participants, both male and female, reported playing often as children. Females, however, noted that their level of engagement dropped off around their teenage years while males noted that they had maintained more or less consistent play habits through their life. As Tina explained, "It kind of slowed down because you know, your social life picks up or you play sports or whatever." Beth cited a different hobby attracting her attention instead: "I got out of games at that point... I started drawing comics instead. I really don't have much of a history beyond my teens." Among these young females, their teenage years – the mid- to late 1990s – represented a near-systematic falling-out with video game play, although many report playing again in their 20s. Correspondingly, a study conducted by Electronic Arts found that only 40% of female respondents reported playing console games during their teenage years, compared to 90% of males.¹⁴ This gap in experience with games incidentally corresponds with a rapid complexification of game genres and control devices, where three-dimensional environments were introduced and standardized in the medium, and where the average

¹⁴ An overview of EA's research can be found here: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/5271852.stm>

console gamepad added more and more buttons and functionality. While a few female participants reported playing through their teens and experiencing these changes, the majority noted that they lost interest or access to console games during this formative period. As Sara realized:

Up until I moved out of my house, around the time of *Playstation 1*, I had full access to my brother's various gaming systems. Then I moved to university and got stuck in an all-girl's residence where nobody had anything. I lost touch with the new technology and the new systems and the new games coming out. There was a gap, and I basically stopped having access at the pinnacle... like right before they became so complicated. They're like movies now. The game and the controller became so intricate, like a Blockbuster hit. A wasn't just jump anymore. Basically, I had an interest in them – I was an avid player, when my brother wasn't home I played a *lot* – but by the time I became old enough or had the money to buy my own system, I didn't know where to begin anymore.

For these female participants, the divide between childhood and adult play was often characterized by an absence; a lack of experience and a lack of access. From a player-skill perspective this gap might represent a disjunction in game-related skill training and mastery between genders, a period of time in which male players were more likely than females to spend time with video games during an historical period in which games steadily became more complex. Although several female participants reported spending plenty of time with next-gen consoles, comparable with male subjects, many felt they had “missed out on something” between the simplicity of their early console systems and now.

The now-common trope of representational misogyny also factored into many female participants' aversion to contemporary games. One subject pointed out that, “I don't know if this is relevant, but every girl in a video game has *huge* boobs.” Heavily sexualized gendered representation within games is often referred to as an exclusionary

factor for female players (see Greenfeld, 1996; Kafai, 1996; Dietz, 1998). Groups also tended to attribute ‘ownership’ of the most popular console games to a male audience:

Gary: I don’t really know any girls that do play video games, but I think that’s mainly due to the types of games that are out there – Grand Theft Auto.

Edith: Yeah, they kind of seem more directed to that.

Beth: Anything they put out girlie is like a Barbie thing... you know, it’s dress up or like a shopping thing.

Female participants in groups tended to deride ‘pink’ video games as painful stereotyping or token displays of inclusion; not “real games”. When asked about how gender representation in video games has changed over the past decade, respondents didn’t seem to think it had. As Sunni noticed, “I don’t think it’s changed very much, at all. I guess because women’s issues are becoming more important in society, and I don’t really see video games changing as much as maybe some other mediums, like movies or TV shows.” For a majority of these females the video game represented a distinctly prohibitive space during their teenaged years: faced with predominantly male-oriented representation and thematic concerns in games, reduced access to gaming consoles, and a steeper learning curve in mastering new controllers and complexified genres, video games were essentially no longer seen as a viable form of entertainment. A distinct deviation from this perspective referenced social play, as most participants recalled occasionally gaming in small groups with others in recent years.

5.3 Skill and Performativity

Ian Bogost writes that, “Performativity in video games couple gameplay to real-world action. Performative gameplay describes mechanics that change the state of the

world through play actions themselves...” (2008). In other words, personal performativity¹⁵ in games encompasses a distinct embodiment during play, an awareness of one’s physical movement within a game playing environment whether socially ‘loaded’ or not. It addresses the material manipulation of controllers by players, and the bodily interactions between participants in a game-playing environment. Performativity might describe kicking over a table in frustration over losing a competitive game, or visible facial reactions to on-screen action; it eschews a dichotomous player-game relationship in favour of a more contextual, holistic perspective of what type of interactions might occur during a play session.

Paul Zumthor, writing from materialist standpoint in addressing performativity in theatre, suggests that, “Performance is, in this sense, play. It is ... a mirror, a doubling split between action and actor. Beyond an intentional distance often marked by regulated signals, the participants reciprocally observe their play, they enjoy a play that is free of normal sanctions. The latent threat of reality disappears for the short reality of the play” (p. 224, 1994). Observation and interviews in this study, however, contrast this notion: players did not report enjoying “a play that is free of normal sanctions”; the “latent threat of reality” was, in fact, a very real concern for many during play. As Megan put it, “You want to do well, but you also don’t care to look stupid either.” In a socially-mediated space, players reported a simultaneous tension between in-game success and an embodied awareness of their surroundings, particularly in mixed-gendered environments.

Behrenshausen, who takes a performance studies approach in analyzing *Dance Dance Revolution* players to describe the nexus between body and game, uses a similar example:

¹⁵ Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) is perhaps the most prominent theoretical framing of performativity. The complexity of her text, however, precludes direct assessment for the purposes of this thesis – work for the future.

She critiques her own performance, noting the awkward and precarious position of her arms while playing—movements prereflectively enacted to help her “keep her balance” and simply comply with the machine’s instructions. She is not “makin’ it fancy,” not performing in line with cultural definitions of dance that she feels would somehow legitimate her practice... She experiences her performative movements always in relation to cultural imperatives. (p. 344-345, 2007)

Social awareness, then, colours and characterizes the way games may be performed. *Rock Band*, which simulates playing an instrument in a full-piece band, is a good avenue for exploring these tensions. One all-female group was by far the most rambunctious while playing, kicking their legs out, head-banging, and generally performing as they thought an actual band might. These actions were closely linked with mastery: group members who had professed previous experience with *Rock Band* (or similar games like *Guitar Hero*) seemed more comfortable, more *familiar*, with the game and seemed to be more likely to include movement and active performance into their play. It is also relevant to note that the two ‘paired’ participants in this group, Megan and Sara, were both well-versed in this type of game and benefited from the comfort of having a friend present; their familiarity may have led the way in inspiring more performance activity from other participants.

Contrastingly, other groups tended to be somewhat less explicit in their social theatricality. Some players nodded their heads in rhythm with the song, others added flourish to their play (windmill arm strums on the guitar, for instance), and still others appeared to be concentrating deeply on their task. Once again, newer players tended to be less performative and more static, immersed in game play challenge, while those more familiar with the game’s structure clearly felt more comfortable adding embodied, performative motion as they played. Differences along gender divides were not apparent,

despite many participants, both male and female, suggesting in interviews that mixed-gender environments heightened awareness of how they moved and acted while playing. Social performativity was seen to be linked most strongly to a given player's level of comfort, which in turn was correlated with familiarity and expertise with the game being played. Of course, performance while playing video games must be framed as socially contextual: in certain groups some actions will be seen as more appropriate than others. In observing casual *Rock Band* get-togethers over the course of a year, I have noticed an overwhelming tendency amongst male groups to avoid using the microphone unless at least one female was playing, even when more than enough potential players were available; 'permission' to sing required a mixed-gender environment. This is a distinct reversal of feminist perspectives on technological artifacts as masculine gendered: the microphone (and singing) is culturally constructed within these groups as a female domain. Gender differentials are nonetheless clearly at work here.

A handful of female participants effectively performed 'helplessness', usually as a response to the game telling them that they had failed. Silvia represented the most prominent example: video data shows her failing on *Rock Band*'s drum kit time and time again, each time throwing her drum sticks up in exasperation until finally she quits in the middle of a song, handing control over to Tina (who, it must be noted, was all too willing to step in and try herself). Contrastingly, no male participants ever responded to failure with a similar display of helplessness – comparative persistence in mastering the game ties into gendered understandings of how men and women are expected to come to terms with negative feedback.

5.4 Performing Intuitively

Some players appreciated how motion-based games using the Wiimote translated their natural inclinations and tendencies towards bodily performance into actual game play. Emily encapsulates this perspective:

I get overly frustrated, and I guess that's because I don't play a lot. And you can only move so much on the screen and I think that's why I move my body when I'm playing games, because it frustrates me ... why isn't my guy moving? And I'll be running into a wall... knowing that I can't physically do something, I have to push the buttons to make them do something. That's why I like the Wii, because you actually can physically move.

A recurring topic of discussion during interviews was a perceived tendency (particularly, as both male and female participants noted, in female players) to 'jump' gamepad controllers alongside a character's movements, or to 'steer' a controller left or right when playing a racing game, even when such motions had no in-game effect. As Karen explained, "I always pushed down the button to make my car go *so hard*, like, even when people would explain to me that it didn't change the game at all, I still felt like it would somehow speed me up." Tactility and the material controller can facilitate a type of 'skill-less' performativity, an over-enthusiastic set of input responses which are often associated with a lack of experience. Gary pointed out that his brother would engage in such practices while playing NES games until taunts from his peer group resulted in him actively learning to avoid moving the controller while playing. In this instance, mastery was framed as a demonstrated *bodily* control in conjunction with *game* control; a 'good' player would accomplish goals using a modicum of perceivable effort. Arnold and Faulker suggest such restrictions embody a gendered component, as, for men,

technological interaction evokes a, “means of learning to 'dominate' their feminine emotions, and as an outlet for them” (p. 50, 1985).

Console controllers such as the Wiimote and *Rock Band* instruments upend this understanding, shifting game play into a necessarily performative space where the body is required to be in motion, and where this motion not only corresponds to in-game success but also invites peer scrutiny and/or approval. If video game practices related to mastery can be framed as masculine, including prescriptive standardization of how controllers ‘should’ be used (a minimum display of effort), then a gendered perspective might highlight devices such as these as inclusive of female players; recognizing and rewarding actions more people will perceive as “intuitive”, acknowledging a wider range of material interactions which take place within existent understandings of embodied motion.

5.5 Overview

The experiences of many participants position video game play as a social activity, where games facilitate group interaction. However, familiarity with a game characterizes the level of enjoyment a player may take from the experience, and oftentimes issues of *access* influence a player’s ability to practice playing games and engage with single-player content, which can be framed as a far more effective way to learn game-required abilities than throwing oneself directly into social multiplayer situations. Those who put time into a console game’s solo play, then, are understandably seen to be more skilled when it comes to social gaming. Access and ownership of

consoles, however, was predominantly perceived as a male domain, which is a prevailing problematic area with regards to mastery and gender.

Many of the females who participated in this study identified a “divide” in their lifelong relationship with video games, particularly with console systems, eschewing contact primarily during their teenage years for various reasons. A lack of material access and non-inclusive representational subject matter led them to frame such games as prohibitive, although many say they are returning to the medium now, in their 20s. With minimal game experience during a time in which console technology rapidly changed, controllers became more complexified, and game genres accumulated additional meaning and challenge, several female participants claim to have felt “locked out” of the medium. Knowledge of the hardware, and skill with the controller and in recognizing game mechanics are two areas in which most female participants felt they were outranked by male counterparts. However, a few pointed out moments of triumph, where access and practice resulted in significant mastery of game-related skills which allowed them to compete with, and defeat, men. The Nintendo Wii, as well as other games which depart from mastery of the gamepad, represent a re-entry point, in a way, where the divide can be crossed if chosen: a “new kind of game”. It must be acknowledged that several female gamers did indeed maintain a relationship with games during this time, but the fact that so many participants from this study put forward or agreed with the divide narrative indicates that a closer look may be fruitful for gender work in games studies.

Finally, performativity and embodiment were seen to be related to skill, as participant observation revealed those most comfortable with games like *Rock Band* as more willing to actively ‘perform’. Familiarity comes into play here. With an experienced

understanding of how a game operates, players seem to be more able to *have fun* with their controllers, to merge game play with social interaction. Conversely, inadvertent performance, such as reflexive motions of a gamepad which have no bearing on in-game events, was generally framed as unskilled; that is, perceived as uncontrolled. Motion and gesture-based material interfaces such as the Wiimote, which facilitate and reward such actions, were described as positive, socially inclusive experiences by female and male participants alike.

Chapter 6: Data Analysis - Skill, Materiality, & Technical Failure

This chapter further explores the notion that the game controller represents a gatekeeper between player and game, a fundamental access point within Lahti's model of the "cybernetic loop with the computer" (p. 163, 2003). Of particular interest here is the material functionality of the controller and game consoles, a reminder that such devices can often break or behave in unforeseen ways. Material devices are understood to carry, as Giddings and Kennedy put it, a socially inscribed and contextually mediated function: "they are *used*, they facilitate new uses and activities ... In important ways their effects *are* both limited and facilitated by their physical form and capabilities" (p. 131, 2006). In other words, material artefacts do not *dictate* activity, in the technologically determinist sense, but rather inform and *guide* usage. With the game controller positioned as a precursor to, and executor of, skill, a brief overview of the systematic complexification of these controllers is important here.

6.1 A Brief History of Control

The gamepad setup has become a standard icon for the console gaming medium. This precedent was clearly set by the archetypical arcade machine, where the joystick (and motion) would be controlled by the left hand and action buttons manipulated by the right. This echo can be construed in skilled-based terms as a technological migration of material mastery from one venue of gaming to another: the transfer of expertise with an arcade joystick to the gamepads of the home console. If game players had already become accustomed to moving their avatar with one hand and deploying game-specific

actions with the other, Nintendo and Sega were clearly unwilling to challenge or drastically alter this material component of play. The NES controller, by today's standards, represents an emblem of simplicity in gaming: only *two* buttons to contend with? And yet there were still those unable to muster the ability to play; recall Maureen Thorson, who resigned herself to the fact that a lack of hand-eye coordination would forever represent an impediment to playing *Super Mario Bros.* with her friends (p. 162-163, 2004).

Predictably, participants reported that early experiences with video games were provided by parents who purchased a console for the family or, for those with no household access, facilitated by friends who owned an NES or Master System. Recollections of play were heavily wrapped up in sociability: when asked about childhood play practices, most participants reported that they rarely, if ever, played alone and video games represented a group activity with their siblings or peers. Three male participants and two females indicated that they did, occasionally, play alone, although Gary qualified this statement with reference to a social dynamic: "I wanted to, you know, get *good* so I didn't look like a tool when my friends came over." Others in his group nodded approvingly at this, a collective understanding which signified that even at a young age comparative levels of mastery played an important role in how video games were deployed and used in a group setting.

In what is commonly termed a 'next-generation' movement in console hardware, the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) built upon the worldwide popularity of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) and Sega Master System in the 1980s. The SNES was released in the early 1990s with enhanced graphical and processing power,

enabling new aspects of play. Mode7 layering, for example, allowed for rudimentary perspective shifts and three-dimensional representation in games released for the console. The controller, meanwhile, added two buttons to the NES's configuration, and two additional shoulder buttons were included at the top of the controller to be manipulated by the player's index fingers, bringing the total to six (plus Start and Select buttons, not often used during play). Thus began a landslide in the increasing complexification of console controllers, as other competitors joined the lucrative gaming market. Sony's PlayStation represented another generational shift in hardware power and added two additional shoulder buttons on its controller, for a total of 8. The Nintendo 64 gamepad featured 9 buttons. Microsoft's Xbox introduced standardized analog control sticks in addition to the now-familiar cross-pad for motion. Analog sticks proved to be a vital aspect of introducing advanced character movement within three-dimensional space, led by the immense popularity of Microsoft's *Halo*. Each successive generational iteration of consoles was lauded as bigger, better and, although not an overt selling point, more complicated. As Gee summarizes, "The games get better and more sophisticated all the time and at a rapid pace" (p. 9, 2003). The controllers and consoles which support these games are no exception.

Alongside official, first-party controllers released in tandem with game consoles, there is a significant market for independently designed, third-party controller hardware. While third-party peripherals are usually cheaper, both in design and in price point, than original controllers, they also offer a tangible alternative for players who often buy up to three additional controllers for their system for local play. It is not unusual to see a current-generation console attached to four controllers of varying makes and models

which only superficially resemble one another. This aspect of video games is under-examined within games studies criticism, particularly in the arena of localized play. What happens when the system's owner reserves the 'good' controller for herself, with guests required to use the controllers with the broken D-pad, with the sticky buttons, or with the ludicrously oversized design? How do the use of third-party peripheral controllers affect competitive play, or even social gatherings around the video game console? As Sunni noted, her favourite Xbox 360 controller took on a personalized aspect: "It's your controller and you play with it better, and if someone wants to use it you're like 'No, it's mine!'" Like the buggy disk that needs to be carefully configured by physical ritual before the game can be accessed, or the NES cartridge that will only work if it is jammed halfway into the console's receptacle, the material features of controllers and games – the understanding that technology is fallible and that games are, indeed, *technology* – must factor into a conceptual understanding of how games operate and are worked upon.

6.2 Material Responses

Research participants tended to view their historical experiences with early home consoles favourably. None volunteered that they had issues with a longstanding inability to use these controllers and, in fact, many pointed to the simplistic design as a reason for why they frequently, when able, returned play to 'classic' games on these systems. Several participants pointed out that the NES systems they had grown up with were still in use in their family household, intended for younger siblings. As Jerry asked vehemently, "Why do these *Holding Xbox 360 controller* have so many buttons? We did fine with just a few." Other participants in the group suggested in return that the

complexification of the gamepad was closely related to technological advancement of consoles (“3D graphics make it harder”) and, inadvertently, referenced a ramping up of player skill (“maybe people want to have more to do?”).

Study participants demonstrated a more wide-ranging set of responses to more contemporary gamepads, in contrast to the near-universal approval of the simplicity of the NES controller. As Kim summarized, “They’ve become more ergonomic, and more complicated. I don’t like that.” *Familiarity* emerged as a recurring theme in conversations about these controllers. Some respondents expressed preference for one system’s controller over another and, when asked by facilitators for clarification, referred to issues of tactility in justifying their opinions. For example, one group had the following exchange:

Cornelius: “The Playstation controller just makes sense in my hands, you know? The Xbox one I’m always having to look down.”

Julie: “I don’t even know the difference between the two.”

Cornelius: “There’s two sets of triggers, right? Going up and down, it’s kind of a strain. I’m sure you build it up.”

Emily: “I can see a little bit of straining going on. But I have small hands.”

In this case, “always having to look down” refers to an unfamiliarity with the Xbox controller: the button configuration and placement on the device is slightly different from that of a Playstation controller, and these differences represent a lack of material confidence, a site of concern for the player. The shoulder triggers on the Xbox controller, additionally, were perceived to be a “strain” on the index fingers although the participant acknowledged that with enough practice and experience, one could “build up” their mastery of the use of these triggers. Mastery in this case, then, refers to a strengthening of

the specific muscles used to materially manipulate an (often) crucial aspect of the console's interface. Emily also brings up a valid issue, in that one's hand size may directly pertain to access and, thus, to the development of skill and familiarity with a particular controller. In fact, the original Xbox console was widely criticised for including a controller which was seen to be too physically *large* for the average gamer.¹⁶ Microsoft would eventually replace this device with a smaller version, which was originally intended solely for the Japanese market. A feminist analysis must take into account that material devices such as controllers are primarily designed by, and marketed to, males, catering to a masculine ideal of ergonomic structure. This may partially account for gendered practices of play.

Michal Erickson points to the controller as a fundamental site where skill is enacted, referring to the example of his brother who was unable to apply his expertise with first-person shooter games to console equivalents: "Much to my surprise, he really struggled with the controls and barely qualified as a 'recruit.' This was interesting. He had played *Halo* on the PC several years ago, but he had no appreciable experience with dual-analog first-person shooters" (2008). It is telling that Erickson noted the controller as the key point of skill separation between himself and his brother. Ostensibly, playing *Halo* on the PC, Erickson's brother would have had at least a basic understanding of the core mechanics (or gaming gestalt) of first-person shooters. Even if appropriate cognitive and perceptual skills were in place, the motor operations required to enact strategies and achieve goals were not yet developed and, consequentially, the player was deemed to have low skills by the game and, "barely qualified as a 'recruit'" (2008). Participants in

¹⁶ See GameSpy's 'Designing Shaq's Controller' for an overview of critical responses to the original Xbox controller: <http://archive.gamespy.com/articles/june03/dumbestmoments/index9.shtml>

my study encountered similar problems; a vast majority of players had played previous incarnations of the *Mario Kart* series of games with a gamepad, but many appeared unskilled when attempting to enact familiar tactics and strategies using a new controller interface (the motion sensitive wheel). The controller represented a crucial point of difficulty for these participants. Conversely, even participants wholly unfamiliar with *Rock Band* were able to ‘skill up’ their use of the guitar and drum controllers quickly, perhaps because these controllers are specifically designed to compliment and work alongside the now-standard game play and screen interface of cascading notes seen in music-rhythm games. Participant difficulties with *Mario Kart Wii* – where many players took their cues from real-world driving, oversteering their wheels dramatically – were a direct result of an unfamiliar control scheme overlaid upon familiar game play.

Finally, it is interesting to see how many nostalgic accounts of early home video games are linked with material hardware. Katie Degentesh, an established poet, recalls, for example: “*Spelunker*, the first of them to capture my undivided attention, was housed on a very buggy floppy disk. Often my sisters and I would wait anxiously for several minutes to load the game only to watch it freeze on the third note of its theme music. When this happened, we took the disk out, blew on it, put it back in the drive, and tried again. We did this as many times as was necessary” (2004, p. 94). Although home consoles were designed as standardized devices, the unstable state of consumer technology at the time resulted in many personalized idiosyncrasies which players shared with their games and game-playing devices. Sunni noted that her favourite childhood game, *Crystal Castles* on the Atari 2600 console, would inexplicably freeze at a certain juncture of play. She recalled replaying the introductory levels of the game again and

again, each time hoping that the hardware would “come through”, although it never did. Other participants remembered computers locking up during play, or times when their consoles broke outright. Technological failure, in other words, formed defining instances in how games were recalled.

6.3 Problematic Hardware and Technological Failure

Steven Jones, as part of his exploration of the multivariate experience the *Halo* series offers fans, spent some time with players. He quickly realized that the materialism and availability of technology had a noticeable effect on his research subjects:

It seems significant that John’s engagements with different versions and experiences of *Halo* on different platforms are determined in large part by the material conditions under which he can play ... His friend’s large-screen TV, his roommate’s console, lapsed subscriptions to Xbox Live, the absence of the infrastructure to allow for system-link LAN parties, all determine what part of the *Halo* universe is available (and perhaps interesting) to him, and these have further effects based on the different processors and different sound cards of the different systems. (p. 88, 2008)

Here the controller is not foregrounded as the primary site of material importance, but rather fits into a larger system of technological access. The enjoyment taken from playing *Halo* is predicated upon perceptual access (television display), social access (the game console belongs to a friend), and connectivity (no Xbox Live, so no internet-based play). It is easy to expand this point to consider that many game players may have only one or two controllers, and thus will never experience, for example, four-player games, unless facilitated by a friend bringing over a few extra gamepads. As Jones notes, players will have different experiences with the same game due to limitations in technological and material access; game reviewers and academics alike must remember that their own

game play sessions will likely take place under optimal conditions with fewer financial constraints.

Issues with materiality in gaming were emphasized, albeit inadvertently, in several ways during participant observation of subjects at play. In terms of *access*, consistency in controllers was undermined by a lack of availability: the study corresponded with the recent release of *Mario Kart Wii*, and although I looked in many different locations around Toronto, I was unable to purchase a full set (four) wheel peripherals. Consequentially, players in each session were faced with the problem of having four Wiimotes, but only three wheels. Although the wheel represents only a superficial, aesthetic quality (a Wiimote, turned on its side, provides the exact same functionality as a Wiimote embedded in a plastic wheel), groups nonetheless addressed this inconsistency in a number of different ways. One group relied on one player volunteering to use the wheel-less controller, although this was perceived as a handicap. The wheel was seen to provide some sort of play advantage, as Felicia noted: "That's kind of why I wanted one of the remotes with the wheels today, because I thought it would help me suck less." Another group set up the game with only three players and 'cycled through', handing the controller to a new participant after each race. Interestingly enough, no groups chose to configure the extra controller with a nunchuk, an alternate control scheme which *is* actually shown to provide a game play advantage according to reviewers.¹⁷ Availability (or lack thereof) of gaming hardware showed a variety of contextual, group-negotiated solutions which significantly affected the way each session experienced the game.

¹⁷ See Kotaku's review of *Mario Kart Wii* for a comparison of control schemes: <http://kotaku.com/385002/mario-kart-wii-review-im-not-angry-just-disappointed>

The second issue which each group faced was a *technological, material* problem: the *Rock Band* bundle I purchased for the study included a faulty guitar. These guitar controllers are designed to deploy a feature called ‘energy’ (‘Star Power’ in *Guitar Hero* games) when the neck of the guitar is lifted skywards or, in more common gaming parlance, “rocked out”. If a player is consistent in hitting their notes, they accumulate this energy, which can be used to either increase their point total or, if another band member has played poorly and failed, ‘revive’ that player or bring them back into the game. Using energy at appropriate times plays an important role in successfully playing *Rock Band*. However, one of the guitars used for the study lacked this component right out of the box: the accelerometers used to detect the guitar’s orientation did not respond. This resulted in a number of hyper-theatrical motions, in which (knowledgeable) players who were aware of the necessity of this game play element wildly waved their broken guitar in the air, prompting others to ask what they were doing.

In every single group, participants who were seen to possess more experience with games like *Rock Band* identified the problem and shared this information with their peers. This did not appear to be an actively gendered decision, but rather one simply predicated on familiarity. In one of the all-female play sessions, Megan, who had visibly suffered difficulties with the guitar controller, offered a solution when passing the device to the next player: “That controller, I found, doesn’t turn on star power... you have to hit the button... and I kept trying to put it up and it didn’t work. Press like the button... no, no, not the start button... *Megan moves to point to the appropriate button on the controller*”. The select button on the controller does indeed offer an alternative solution to the traditional motion-based approach to deploying energy, but in each session this

workaround solution was disseminated by those players who possessed pre-existing knowledge of the game and its hardware functionality. An accumulation of playing experience was thus posited as socially-recognized mastery, as other players tended to listen and then use the faulty guitar in the prescribed manner. Those who demonstrated gaming capital, in other words, were deferred to where manipulation of the controller was concerned.

The two previous issues were not corrected, once discovered, because they represented a data-rich area of observation and comparison. However, participants in the first conducted session were faced with an additional issue: that of *technological interoperability*, the way in which gaming hardware interfaces with other crucial devices like display (television set) and sound (receiver, speakers, television set). High definition televisions can be characterized by their *response time*, a number usually represented in milliseconds to indicate a time differential between input and display. On some televisions this difference is negligible, while on others it can represent a rather severe lapse between when one pushes a button on their controller and when the appropriate on-screen action is enacted. In *Rock Band*, particularly, this issue can become problematic, as game play revolves around precise timing of input and a synchronization of player activity with the music track emitted by the game. If the input and output of the game are not experienced in tandem, game play suffers.

The issue experienced by study participants was this: the Xbox 360 they were playing on had previously been configured for a high-definition television set, with an appropriate 'lag' offset calculated and programmed into the game (a necessary feature, given the wide variety of televisions such a game might be played upon). However, the

study was conducted using older technology, a CRT (Cathode Ray Tube) television which does not display a lag differential between input and output. The game was configured incorrectly: my fault. The group, understandably, failed every *Rock Band* song they attempted to play due to this idiosyncrasy. As Cornelius realized after several attempts, "Something off. There's a way to calibrate the controls so they synch up with what's up there on the TV. I know you can do that in *Guitar Hero*. Something not... it's out of whack. We're better than this." Interestingly, this player had the prior experience and expertise to identify the problem, but not the game-specific method of correcting it. The group consequentially abandoned the game in favour of another, although they felt better about attributing their failures to a material concern rather than sub-par abilities. I recalibrated the game for other groups accordingly, but the one-time occurrence was nonetheless a good example of how hardware failures can impact performance and success, which may then in turn influence how play is enacted. Expertise and knowledge, or lack thereof, with configurative practices in 'setting up' these devices was seen to play a significant role in determining participant experience.

Although I provided no instruction on the operation of the cameras, at least one participant in each group took this role upon themselves while not engaged in actively playing. These were more often women than men. In most cases, their camerawork contributed greatly to the study, capturing subtle moments of teamwork or competition between players or focusing on material confusion with game controllers. One particularly poignant shot consists of Kim complaining loudly that her *Rock Band* guitar isn't working, followed by a close zoom to her strumming hand which reveals that she has not, in fact, been strumming at all which is causing her to fail. Blaming the

technology rather than herself is a distinct departure from conventional feminist understandings of how gender intersects with material technology (see Wajcman, 1991); once again, many of the young women in this study demonstrated an upending of how they are ‘supposed’ to react to technology in such instances.

6.4 Material Shifts

The widespread popularity of the Nintendo Wii, particularly amongst people not considered to be ‘gamers’, might be constituted as a material shift in home gaming. By material shift, I mean here that the cultural impact of the Wii represents a fundamental change in the *tangible, control-based* aspects of game play; that a long history of expertise with a gamepad is rendered largely inconsequential when playing the Wii. There is a ‘flattening’ of acquired skills present here, as new players and seasoned gamers alike are, for a brief time, on the same level skill-wise. The Wii controller, dubbed the Wiimote, departs from many interface conventions in console systems, replacing a plethora of buttons with accelerometers, wireless Bluetooth technology and positional reading to detach players from the console and render them more aware of their own embodied actions while playing. This feature set introduces a new element of performativity into the arena of social game play: where players formerly sat motionless except for the rapid motions of their fingers, they are now encouraged to stand up and swing, twist or shake their wrist wildly to perform in-game actions. As Katie noted, “I always really liked *Mario Kart*, so I loved playing *Mario Kart Wii* because then you can actually move with it, and I do that anyways. Like even when it was just the solid remote, I would move with it so I love how now it makes *sense* to move with it, you know?” Sara

also pointed out the way in which the Wii drew upon everyday experiences in facilitating control of games: “This was my first time playing the Wii... I liked that it was sort of intuitive, you can figure it out – I mean, it takes a lot of time to master obviously – but you can figure out how it works in two minutes, I mean it’s a steering wheel, right?” A steering wheel mechanism, for Sara, represents an area of existing expertise where skills and familiarity developed while driving a car can be roughly approximated and deployed within a game setting; a technological referent point.

Interestingly, the Wiimote’s gesture-based configuration can be linked back to some of the earliest developments in virtual reality technology, where Jaron Larnier hoped to enable participants to intuitively play music in VR and, “wanted to find a way to use the human body as a musical instrument” (Rheingold, p. 160, 1991). Steven Jones, however, notes that the Wii represents more than a simple technological alternative to established control conventions:

In the end, the button combinations are not that much less complex than on any other system (especially once you add the nunchuk), and the movements do not map as precisely as in virtual-reality simulations (players quickly learn that you can just flick your wrist to hit a baseball; it’s not necessary to take a hitter’s stance and swing with two hands using the controller), but what is important to many new users is the relative sense of “freedom” conveyed by the controller as a symbolic object, which means in part relatively freedom from long-established controls and the serious technical expertise with those controls possessed by hardcore gamers, and at a lower price. The difference, in other words, is as much cultural as technical. (pp. 134-135, 2008)

The Wii, then, does require material expertise on the part of the player, especially once one learns that there are motion-based ‘shortcuts’, or alternatives, to full-body exertion. In *Mario Kart Wii*, the experienced player will quickly realize that the game is most easily controlled with small, subtle motions, rather than the big, sweeping turns of the wheel which characterize driving an actual car. It is also true that the representational

characteristics and rule structures of Wii games, for the most part, will echo conventions established on other gaming consoles. The football game *Madden '08*, for example, carries many of the assumptions of expertise across from the Playstation 3 and Xbox 360 versions and, indeed, the sport of football: choosing the correct play for the situation at hand, implementing plays effectively and so forth. The Wiimote, however, upends and remediates the crucial game play aspect of operationalizing selected strategies. Throwing a pass indeed requires the player to mimic throwing a ball with their controller in hand, or at least perform a microcosmic approximation of that task. In this way new players are at least given a chance to compete with 'expert' gamers in competitive play, given that each player will need to acquire new mastery with the physical, material interface to the game before other skill sets can be brought to bear.

Jesper Juul's formulation of "levels of abstraction" in games, which "concerns the border between the content that is purely fictional and the content that is presented in the fiction as well as implemented in the rules of a game" (2007b) is a good entry point into these 'intuitive' controllers, just as it serves to expand notions of genre. He suggests that players who face unprecedented gaming challenges will, lacking other game-related comparison, refer to representational equivalents in 'real world' experience in order to deduce what the game expects of them. As Juul states, "An experienced player may understand the game as a variation on a genre, but a player not used to the genre may use the fiction to understand what type of actions are possible in the game" (2007b). Video game controllers can be perceived in a similar way: a player, faced with an arcade console equipped with a large light-gun and no prior experience with games, will nonetheless understand the gun's presence as signification that some shooting must be

done. In time, the player will come to replace this understanding with a more contextual, game-specific awareness of how the gun might best be used, what on-screen interface conventions indicate, and so forth. Meaning-making practices drawn from the game's fiction are eventually replaced by meaning taken from the game's rules. But for the beginning player a controller which prescribes a certain play style can be an inclusive device, couched in popular representation which reaches beyond gaming culture to tap into a broader set of cultural understandings ("it's a steering wheel, right?").

Music-rhythm titles like *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* work in a similar manner, providing entirely new controllers (in the shape of tiny, plastic guitars or simplified drum kits) which share few precedents with the gamepad tradition in home video gaming. The drum kit, in particular, departs from existent forms of game mastery: keeping rhythm with drum sticks is, as any player will confirm, a drastic change from the tactile, thumb-driven experience of using a gamepad. I have personally witnessed drummers come to *Rock Band* without ever having played it, or any music-rhythm video game for that matter, set their skill level to expert and, after a brief cognitive and perceptual struggle with the interface ('reading' the beats), perform well beyond my own level. Real world experience with drums is, in this case, more valuable than weeks of expertise with *Rock Band*. Of course, mastery of an historical genre iterant of *Rock Band* drumming, such as Konomi's *Beatmania* (an arcade drumming title), might be seen as an equivalent precursor to success, but the important point is that these controllers provide a more representationally comprehensive 'entry point' into gaming than the ubiquitous gamepad. The level of abstraction in using a video game drum kit is seen to be far less than with the

gamepad, where a single button might correspond to any number of actions (shooting, jumping, talking, etc.) depending on the game.

This is what I mean by a material shift in gaming: the highly abstracted, specialized gamepad with which many long-term players have accumulated expertise over the course of its procedural complexification no longer has a tyrannical grip on console game play. A skill-based approach to understanding video games positions such a 'shift' as an industry move towards including new players; leveling the playing field somewhat so it becomes easier for these gamers to come on board and participate meaningfully regardless of prior experience with video games, '133t' or not. New control devices such as the Wiimote and *Rock Band* drum kit controllers take an important role in promoting (or discouraging) competitive and/or social play, and new controller technology such as the Wiimote or *Guitar Hero* guitar lean away from accumulated expertise with gamepads and towards acquisition of a new set of masteries.

Of course, while reducing the level of abstraction of controllers might seem to facilitate a more open field of play, the console system – the material computer – nonetheless remains a technological artefact laden with configurative aspects which can still prove problematic for inexperienced players. One group in the study contained no members who had had prior contact with the Wii. This group spent nearly ten minutes trying to interface the Wiimotes with the system, interlock the Wiimotes with the plastic wheel coverings, and generally wrestling with the hardware. At one point the *Mario Kart Wii* manual was brought out for reference and, as Felicia realized when finally inserting her controller into the wheel correctly, "That... makes a whole lot more sense." As with actual play, the *doing* of configuring a console system is how experience and expertise

are gained. Other groups had difficulties setting up *Rock Band* to recognize and include all instruments, with those possessing expertise with the game seen to be primarily directing activity. The process notably sped up as each play session progressed, with each player learning when to hit the appropriate button to move forward in menus and select options for their plastic instrument. It would be interesting to see what many of these players would do if, alone, faced with a console that needed to be configured for play; as it happened, each group was able to pool collective knowledge to get the job done. One video log reveals an all-female group, encountering a technical problem, looking for me in the hallway outside the television studio: the male 'expert'. Because of my unavailability they were forced to resolve the issue themselves (which they proceeded to solve very quickly). While socio-cultural gendered expectations might have caused these women to instinctively look for assistance with the technology, a little practice and experimentation revealed that they were more than equipped – as a group – to operate the hardware. The social element of console gaming is very much an important part of how such material expertise is shared and disseminated. However, such problematic experiences demonstrate that the systems themselves have a long way to go before matching the reformed, inclusive nature of new controller technologies like the Wiimote. The technology, in other words, remains prohibitive to some.

6.5 Materiality Matters

If, as Csikszentmihalyi (1990) suggests, a player's engagement and level of happiness is predicated upon their ability to maintain a state of flow, then the material function of controllers seems to play a large role within this model. When a player is

continuously sidelined from their game, preoccupied with the physical aspects of their controller – startled by vibrations, hunting for buttons – then it seems obvious that any significant degree of flow is impossible. If, on the other hand, a player is well in-tune with the configuration and material nature of their controller to the point where its machination becomes almost second nature, then the link between game and player is strengthened; the cybernetic loop is maintained. A degree of automaticity in using the controller is an important aspect of how games are skillfully played, freeing up a player's cognitive resources for other game-related tasks such as contending with on-screen interface conventions and in-game pattern recognition. As Emily noted, "A lot of times when I'm playing sports I don't think, my body just does things because I'm so used to playing it. And with video games I find that the ones I play often, my fingers just move, I don't have to think 'Oh what do I have to do to do that?' You know what I mean? But if it's a new game, it takes so much more concentration and is less fun. The more you play a game, the more you know it, and it's something you just *do*." Accumulated experience and expertise with a console gaming controller is crucial to this *doing*; it removes material preoccupation.

In this way the game controller can be seen as a gatekeeper between player and game. The controller acts as conduit between will and action, hinders intent, or, for most, lies somewhere on the spectrum in between. The skills and expertise required to attain this level of connectivity with a game controller seems predicated both on past experience with similar devices, and, perhaps imposingly, on a minimum level of hand-eye coordination. Contemporary shifts away from the longstanding, historically complexified gamepad can be framed as an attempt to include newer players in social

practices of play, largely negating accumulation of skill with various iterations of the gamepad as a fundamental separator between 'expert' and 'part-time' players. Still, material mastery of console video games nonetheless extends beyond the controller to encompass a wide range of configurative tasks, from synching the hardware with televisions and other devices to setting up controllers for each participant prior to actual game play. Technology drives games; it drives their dominant modes of presentation and representation, and most importantly, drives the interface and controller designs which are intended to be used to navigate through these game worlds.

In short, materiality matters. As seen from the preceding accounts of players experiencing the everyday challenges and nuances of video games, material and technological conditions factor heavily into the way they engage with the medium. The reductive formalisms of narratology and ludology generally avoid contact with the material component of video games, just as the notion of player skill is undervalued. Still, areas of games studies are opening up materialism as a valid and important topic of exploration. Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort, for example, have begun work on exploring the cultural and technological conditions of specific game consoles, or *platforms*, acknowledging that the games produced for those systems were very much enframed by the material consoles on which they were intended to appear (see Bogost & Montfort, 2008, forthcoming).

Chapter 7: Conclusions

Here I have intersected games studies texts, popular discourse, and original player accounts in an attempt to highlight the role of player skill as an important aspect of understanding video games more holistically; that is, in contrast to more polemical perspectives on what such games might *mean*. Influential ludological and narrativist texts assume or downplay the player as a site of accumulated mastery, as a crucial point of enactment of video games. If nothing else, this thesis represents an initial attempt to focus specifically on, or 'draw out', the player's role from within these frameworks for critical analysis.

Video games, in all shapes and forms, require multivariate skills depending on their genre, on their platform, and on a player's environment. Cognitive abilities, social skills and pattern recognition represent only a few of these abilities. I have chosen here to focus specifically on material and tactile ability, reflecting a particular interest in console gaming, and predicated on the argument that mastery of controller functions as a precursor to other skill development. With the player (rightly) positioned in a place of import, the material component of the video game controller necessarily emerges as a key area of interest. For console systems in particular the controller represents a technological choke point, a gatekeeper between player and game, where initial mastery and familiarity with this device precludes the development of additional game-required abilities. If a player cannot control the game, cannot *play*, then a vast majority of the game remains locked away. Even the most well-designed rule structures and compelling narratives are inaccessible to those unwilling or unable to acquire the necessary skill sets to experience them.

The console gamepad is positioned as a site of historically accumulated expertise, characterized by a systematic complexification which confronts experienced players with new tactile challenges to overcome. For the beginning player, however, the many buttons and interfaces of the contemporary gamepad may initially represent a prohibitive, confusing device. If mastery requires experience, a fundamental issue here is that of discouragement: without gratification, new players are faced with a steep learning curve and few immediate rewards. Material shifts in controller technology, such as Nintendo's Wiimote, largely negate accumulated expertise with the gamepad and level the playing field, at least temporarily, for players to enter console play alongside peers. This is particularly relevant as the console often appears to take a socio-cultural role, where competitive and cooperative play amongst groups of friends and family members defines many players' experiences with the medium.

An examination of genre reveals roughly the same state of affairs: as new iterations of familiar game play are released to the public, assumptions of pre-existing mastery are built into design as new features and functionalities are added. Experienced players will welcome new challenges to apply familiar skill sets against, but others may find such suppositions problematic. As genres hybridize and require more nuanced, universal sets of skills of players, it will be interesting to see what industry tactics will emerge to reconcile the 'hardcore' gamer with the casual player, the 133t with the n00bs. Of course, the majority of players lie somewhere in the middle of this spectrum, and further discourse with such players will surely give cause to rearticulate player-skill as more than a simplistic binary division.

This thesis also suggests that some degree of experiential play is a prerequisite for genuine discourse *about* games, which may have bearing on how the medium is framed in a larger cultural context. The European Commission, for example, has recently decided to fund video games as artistic endeavours, referring to their cultural importance.¹⁸ Prominent movie critic Roger Ebert has, conversely, referred to video games as “inherently inferior” to other media¹⁹ and, later, “low art”.²⁰ Whether or not video games are indeed an artistic medium is not under consideration here. The point is that games demand, more so than many other types of media, a set of skills on the part of the player in order to be understood properly; that context is important, and that cultural tastemakers lacking these necessary abilities will be limited to a superficial experience of what games can offer. Ebert’s readers begged him to actually *play* some games before judging them harshly, which seems to be the best possible advice.

While this thesis focused most closely on the gamepad controller and technological-material components of mastery, future work within a player-skill perspective might address any number of perceived skills more closely. A more in-depth examination of a particular genre of game would broaden an understanding of how skills are reproduced and standardized across games, for example. It seems unlikely that a definitive taxonomy of player masteries will hold, given the nature of video games to dynamically hybridize genres and generally advance alongside technology to offer players fresh experiences, but perhaps someone might try.

¹⁸ For more information on games as art, see

http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3523/video_games_officially_art_in_.php

¹⁹ For a synopsis of Ebert’s contention, see <http://arstechnica.com/news.ars/post/20051130-5657.html>

²⁰ Ebert’s clarification can be found here:

<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070721/COMMENTARY/70721001>

It is also important to note that I have kept video games in an entertainment domain rather than attempt to illustrate ways in which game-related skills spill out into real-world applicability. This is a hot topic amongst pedagogical researchers and many media effect theorists, with the most extreme examples attempting to demonstrate that games are “murder simulators” which train people to kill without reserve (see Grossman, 1999). While this is an undoubtedly interesting debate, it is far too great in scope to take on here. For now it is enough to say that skills developed in-game most certainly may influence success in other areas (watch, for example, an accomplished real-time strategy player use the mouse and keyboard for other computing tasks).

In many ways a focused examination on skill within video games demonstrates that the ‘textual’ boundaries of any given game are necessarily porous, that a player’s experiences transfer across in applicability to similar games, and that an inherently social discourse informs and enriches player activity. As contemporary games become more nuanced and their challenges increasingly complex, dialogue amongst players facilitates knowledge about how to meet and overcome difficulties. Although the internet is a traditional location for such communities, research participants were observed to be helping each other in small social groups: with controllers and console configuration, and in imparting information about a game’s specific structures. Players drew on their pre-existing knowledge of how video games operate, oftentimes drawing comparisons across genres, when confronting new challenges.

Much work has been done on sociability online, but surprisingly little attention has been paid to the console system within a small group environment. Many participants suggested that interactivity with other, localized players was an important element of

their experience with such games, and that this social element was what separated the console from PC and handheld gaming. Player skill was seen to mediate and define the pleasures to be taken from such play, both socially and in-game. Many contemporary games designed for group play facilitate and encourage a kind of social performativity, where embodied play becomes a factor in how such games are experienced alongside the game's formal evaluation of player skill. Formulation of ability takes on additional nuance here, beyond the cybernetic loop between player and game: the relationship between player and player is also a large part of how video games are characterized and experienced by many. There may be spaces opening for players to participate in play successfully *external* to the game, as with the *Rock Band* participant who hits only 60% of his or her notes but nonetheless heightens a group's experience and enjoyment through sheer theatrical enthusiasm.

Finally and most importantly, I gave intentional weight to female voices in this research project in opposition to a perceived male-centric cultural 'ownership' of video games elsewhere. Although by no means characteristic of girl gamers in general, many participants pointed to a distinct divide in their relationship with console video games; a 'gap' in their experience which often appeared in conjunction with rapid technological and genre complexification historically. They noted that their teenage years represented a departure from gaming and, now, in their 20s, games appear to be prohibitive. Skill factored heavily into their evaluation, as many had foregone conclusions that the males in their lives, who had been 'training' alongside these advancements, would naturally be better than them. These accounts were informed by a gendered perspective of technology, where male 'ownership' of consoles and game spaces was framed as prohibitive. These

participants did, however, point out that with enough time and effort they were able to acquire the necessary abilities to compete effectively. Indeed, individual context and experience was seen to be a factor for many female participants which renegotiated or outright contradicted feminist framings of their victimization or subjugation in a number of ways.

A focus on player skill repositions many aspects of how video games are understood, how they are seen to generate meaning in a socio-cultural context. A game necessarily *assumes* a player; it therefore follows that a productive way to address the game is to position the player at the centre. The video game is not simply a material object, just as it is not simply a story or simply a set of rules. It is hard to believe that any framework or understanding of games that negates or bypasses the player as a crucial point of analysis could even come close to exploring the full range of experiences which video games facilitate in contemporary everyday culture.

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