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Gaming and Gender: Home as a Place of (Non)conformity for Women Gamers

by

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ABSTRACT

This research examines interactive multimedia video games that are played on technological devices such as: computers, gameboys, PlayStation, Portable PlayStation (PSP) and Xbox. Particular attention is paid to women 30 years of age and older, who engage in gaming activities whilst at home. This is a particularly useful group of women to investigate because it opposes stereotypical and gender-normative notions of what it means to be a 'woman at home'. Also, to the best of my knowledge, there have not been any previous studies conducted that explore this particular group in relation to geographies of home. There is an ever expanding body of literature that focuses on 'home' and the meanings that are associated with it. This research represents an attempt to seek a new way of understanding the mutually constitutive relationship between women, home, and gaming by drawing on feminist and poststructuralist theories of identities, place and space. In this thesis, I argue that there are various ways in which women's identities can become blurred by their engagements with cyber/space, and that gaming is an activity which facilitates levels of empowerment for women within the home.

Key terms: women, gender, identities, home, cyber/space

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Avatar: The term 'avatar' originates from Hindu text and means 'incarnation'. In English, the word avatar has come to represent embodiment, or the bodily manifestation of the divine. In virtual environments 'avatars' are created by real people as a representation of self. Avatars are used within many different contexts. Avatars are utilised in both two-dimensional and three-dimensional virtual environments. They can be viewed as a picture or icon (2D), or as a physical representation of self (3D).

Cyber/space: In this thesis cyberspace emphasises a blurring of boundaries between real and virtual space. In this instance, the backslash in cyber/space "is intended to be emblematic of the mutually constituted, dyadic nature of both spaces" (Madge and O'Connor 2005 83).

First Person Shooter (FPS) Game: FPS games are played from a first-person visual perspective, as though the gamer is looking directly through the eyes of their avatar. FPS games are based on both science fiction (such as *Doom* or *Serious Sam*), and real world scenarios (such as *SWAT* or *Battlefield 1942*).

Massive Multi-Player On-line Role Playing Game (MMORPG): These games are based on role-play but what makes them different is that they allow for large numbers of gamers to enter simultaneously into a virtual environment and interact with one another. In games such as *World of Warcraft* (WOW), and *EverQuest* gamers assume the role of a fictional character. Characters are usually fantasy based and can include: magic users, elves, dwarfs, cyborgs, or a hybrid combination that may include any of the following: animal, human, machine, and mythical being.

Place: "Place" refers to spaces that have been invested with meaning. For example, "house" is a drier term that refers to the physical structure – and perhaps to its relative locations, its arrangement of rooms, and so on. A "house" becomes a "home" when people invest their personal meanings of associations. So we might say also that "spaces" become "places" when we have some personal association with them.

Role Playing Games (RPG): Role-playing video games are similar to MMORPG's, however, there is one distinct difference –

RPG's only accommodate single players and are not capable of connecting with on-line multi-player environments.

Space: All our actions take place in particular locations. In this sense, "space" refers to the three-dimensionality of life - to its material form, patterning and organisation, as well as relative locations.

Strategy Game: Depending on the type of game, strategy games can be played with a group of gamers, or in single-player mode. They emphasise skilful game-play, where a player is required to out-think and out-plan the enemy in order to achieve victory. Well known games such as *Command and Conquer*, *Starcraft*, and *Age of Empires* are typically designed to incorporate military type strategies, where players must build structures and produce armies before initiating any form of conquest.

1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the ways in which women negotiate their identities as 'women at home', with their identities as 'women gamers'. Specifically, I draw on data gathered from a group of eight women, who are 30 years of age and older, and who all participate in various forms of multi-media video game entertainment. The participants' backgrounds vary in relation to age, occupation, marital status, number of children and preferred genre of game. However, they all have one thing in common and that is that they all game at home. 'Women' and 'home' share a close association with each other. For example, Domosh and Seager (2001 1) argue that "the association of women with home and femininity is so commonplace that it is often considered natural".

Domosh and Seager's (ibid.) quote is illustrative of women's position within Cartesian binaries that are embedded in dominant Western discourse, where 'feminine' and 'masculine' genders are situated in opposition of each other (Butler 1990). For example, women are aligned with femininity, nurture and home, while men are aligned with masculinity, work and public spaces. Despite the progress made by women's movements, stereotypical images of women continue to be intimately entangled with constructions of home, such as the 'housewife', or the working mother. Home represents the place that we come from and even when we travel our notions of home travel with us, accompanying us to different places, across different times and different scales (Blunt and Dowling 2006).

In Western societies there are widespread beliefs about how men and women should 'perform', especially when they are at home. Gender ideals remain embedded in New Zealand's dominant socio-cultural values. For example, in the 1950s the 'ideal woman' was someone who stayed at home full-time, raised children, and cooked and cleaned for the family. The 'ideal man' was the primary 'breadwinner', who spent most of his time working outside of, and away from, the home. Today, traditional ideals continue to influence the ways in which both men and women choose to perform gender roles (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Domosh and Seager 2001; and McDowell 1999). Many women still take on the role of the family's primary caregiver but today this is usually accompanied with full-time employment, as it is now common for both parents to work while raising a family. McDowell (1999) argues that even when women work longer hours than their partners, many are still coming home to a place where they are expected to also perform the majority of the work at home.

Stereotypical performances of gender are powerful. Historically they have helped to shape what society now deems to be 'right' and 'proper' behaviour for both men and women (Massey 1994, 1995). Women gamers transgress common-place boundaries because they do not conform to either past or present 'ideal' feminine stereotypes. In short, women gamers disrupt dominant conceptualisations of what it means to be a 'woman at home'. In this study, I seek to explore the ways in which

Cartesian boundaries between masculine/feminine, man/woman, and public/private are challenged, resisted, and/or reinforced.

Research context

Specifically, I investigate the ways in which a small group of women aged 30 years or older, living in the Waikato region of New Zealand negotiate their identities as 'women at home', with their identities as 'women gamers'. My desire to examine the experiences of women gamers comes primarily from my own experiences of gaming (which are discussed in more detail in chapter three – methodology).

The typical stereotype of a gamer depicts a young man between the ages of 16 and 25, who is socially inept, yet, remarkably intelligent. This particular stereotype is in stark contrast to 'mature' women gamers. In the past, I have often witnessed the reactions of other people to the fact that I game. Reactions vary, ranging from mild surprise to obvious disapproval. It is these interactions, coupled with my geographic interest in home, that has prompted three research questions. First, how do women aged 30 and older negotiate their identities as 'women gamers' with their identities as 'women at home'? Second, what is the gendered relationship between bodies and technology in the home environment? The third and final question (which is closely linked to the first two) is: in what ways do women gamers' 'real' lives affect their gaming experiences, and vice

versa?¹ By exploring the topic of women who game at home, this research aims to shed light onto a subject that has so far remained unexplored by geographers.

Why it is important to study this topic

The importance of this work is to gain a better understanding cyber/space, as it is interpreted and negotiated by women gamers. I have adopted the phrase 'cyber/space' from Madge and O'Connor (2005), as it emphasises a blurring of boundaries between real and virtual space. In this instance, the backslash in 'cyber/space' "is intended to be emblematic of the mutually constituted, dyadic nature of both spaces" (Madge and O'Connor *ibid.* 83). This is significant because the notion of 'inbetweenness' signifies the beginning of a new way in which to understand the theorising of cyberspace in relation to gendered bodies.

I chose to focus specifically on women gamers aged 30 and older for several reasons. First, in this research I position myself as an 'insider' because I also fit the research participant criteria (that is, I too am over the age of 30 and game at home). I situate myself as both researcher, and the researched because I wanted to be able to draw from my own experiences as a woman who games at home (Holloway 1997). In doing so, it could be argued that I am better equipped to give 'voice' to women who share similar experiences because feminist researchers such as Bondi (2003)

¹ I use quote marks around the word 'real' when referring to physical places or bodies. From this point onwards I do not use quote marks, however, whenever I use the word 'real', it is used with this same reference to differentiate between the virtual and the real.

and Haynes (2006) argue that the relationship between the researcher and the researched should be based on shared understanding and empathy.

Second, there is a growing body of research being conducted with 'girl gamers' from a much younger age group. These studies (examining young gamers) however, have not paid any real attention to the ways in which gaming affects relationships within the home environment. This is most likely due to the fact that 'girls' do not often have the same levels of responsibility in the home as older women. Given the main aim of this thesis (to examine the ways in which women negotiate their identities as 'women at home', with their identities as 'women gamers'), I believe focusing on an older age group of women provides a new avenue for furthering understandings of women and home.

The focal point of this thesis is geographies of home. This is because homes are important sites for both women and gamers. It might not be clear, however, as to why home is an important place for gamers but the explanation is simple and that is, gaming is a home-based activity for the majority of gamers. It is also important to note that each year there is a reported increase in the number of women who are now becoming involved in gaming activities (Schott and Horrell 2000; and Taylor 2003).

Domosh and Seager (2001) argue that hegemonic ideals are deeply embedded in Western thought, to such an extent that the 'idea' of a

woman at home is often conceptualised as 'natural'. Therefore, reflecting on dominant discourses while studying gaming in the context of home will produce a more nuanced and contemporary understanding of women's changing relationships with home. By examining the specificity of this relationship, I hope that another space might begin to open up for the re-conceptualisation of the gendered body in geography. Furthermore, this research does not attempt to be representative of all women gamers. Rather, I offer a select, in-depth qualitative analysis of a small group of women who game at home and who reside in the Waikato region of New Zealand.

A brief look at the history of games

The radio was introduced to homes over fifty years ago and the television followed soon after. Technological items such as these are now standard in most Western homes. They are commonly situated in the living areas, such as bedrooms, kitchens and lounges. Computers and video games were introduced into homes during the 1970s. The first home-based video game to be produced was called *Odyssey* (see Figure 1.1) (Flynn 2003).

Compared to today's games, the *Odyssey* was a simplistic design that incorporated 12 sports and maze games (Flynn 2003). One of the critical differences between the earlier and later games is not in the games themselves but in the way they have been advertised. For example, originally gaming was promoted as a group activity and advertisements were directed at the whole family, young or old, man or woman.



Figure 1.1 Odyssey video game console²

Krotoski (2005 2) states:

Like advertisements for television from the 1950s, promotion for this early video game was focused on its ability to bring the family together through a blend of education, social fun and entertainment. However, sometime between the release of Nintendo's Entertainment System (NES) in 1986 and Sony's PlayStation in 1995, this sentiment was replaced by the pervasive view that girls don't play computer games, and applications for their machines followed suit.

In this early stage, game developers did not place any emphasis on gender. This is evident when highlighting popular games produced in the 1970s, such as *Pong* (electronic ping-pong), *Pac Man* and *Space Invaders* (Atari) (Krotoski, 2005). Schott and Horrell (2000) argue that ever since the release of Nintendo's Entertainment System (NES) in 1986, there has been a pervasive view that women and girls do not want to play digital games. The majority of gaming applications from this point onwards were directed at a male audience. Recently, however, research has begun to show a steady increase in the number of women engaging in gaming

² The image used in Figure 1.1 was retrieved 2 December, 2008 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magnavox_Odyssey

activities, and in turn, the design and advertising of digital games has also begun to change.

Gender and games

Today, there are is an increasing number of academics becoming interested in examining the relationship between technology and gender. Schott and Horrell (2000 36) argue that “technology embodies a culture that is expressive of masculinity”. Research conducted in the early 1990s (focusing on a content analysis of Nintendo games) revealed that female game characters were an obvious minority. The few that were visible were predominantly portrayed in marginal, submissive, and/or sexualised roles (Provenzo 1991). Many writers argue that this is due to the dominant position of men working within the gaming industry (see, for example, Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Featherston and Burrows 1995; and Schott and Horrell 2000).

More recent studies show that the number of female characters in games has not only increased but that many ‘masculine’ attributes are now accessible to female virtual characters. Players creating woman characters can now make their avatars³ as strong, independent, and combat ready, as any male game character (MacCallum-Stewart 2008; and Taylor 2003).

³In this thesis, the term ‘avatar’ is used interchangeably with ‘virtual character’ and ‘game character’. In video games avatars are created by ‘real’ people as self-representations in virtual environments. Avatars are used in various dimensions and within many different contexts. For example, avatars are utilised in both two-dimensional and three-dimensional virtual environments, as a picture or icon (2D), or as a physical representation of self (3D) (Lessig 1999).

Schott and Horrell (2000) argue that although the representation of virtual women in games has increased over the last decade, game developers have stated that the primary reason for this increase is not to attract more women to gaming. Rather it is based upon the premise that men enjoy games more if the in-game content contains attractive virtual women.

Schott and Horrell (2000 37) explain:

When it comes to video games, teenage boys are the ones with the positive female role models. A game such as *Tomb Raider* may have sold over 16 billion games, but the majority of its players remain male.

Gaming platforms (such as PlayStation and Xbox) are now becoming more common-place in homes, and recent studies continue to show that the number of women gamers is rising (Krotoski 2005). Women gamers, however, are still a minority and dominant discourses within gaming culture continue to construct gaming as an activity that is more suitable for boys and men, rather than women and girls (Schott and Horrell 2000; and Taylor 2003). It is also important to note that the positioning of masculinity with technology is also reinforced by gender-specific marketing campaigns that continue to endorse the idea that men have a more 'natural' inclination for playing video games (Consalvo and Paasonen 2002). At present, these views remain dominant and any involvement with games continues to be perceived of as masculine (Wajcman 1991).

Women gamers occupy a marginalised position within the culture of gaming and as such present a challenge to dominant socio-cultural gender

ideals. In this thesis, I draw on Butler's (1990, 1991) theory of performativity to aid in gaining a better understanding of marginalised identities that both disrupt and reinforce hegemonic binary distinctions of masculinity/femininity, man/woman, and public/private.

Thesis Outline

In this chapter I have introduced the topic by reflecting on the mutually constitutive relationship between gender, home and technology. I have explained the term 'cyber/space' and discussed geographies of the home in relation to Cartesian binaries. I argued that dualistic notions continue to influence contemporary dominant ideals of women's relationship with home. A discussion concerning the context of this research was presented and I outlined my research questions: how do women aged 30 and older negotiate their identities as 'women gamers' with their identities as 'women at home'? What is the gendered relationship between bodies and technology in the home environment? In what ways do women gamers' real lives affect their gaming experiences, and vice versa? The reasons why this particular topic deserves to be investigated were then reflected upon. This was followed by an examination of the history of gaming and the ways in which advertising went from promoting gaming as a family based activity in the '70s, to a form of advertising that is specifically targeted at boys and men. Finally, I provided a brief overview, which highlighted relevant literature relating to gaming, gender, and home. I also begun to situate myself within the research. I discuss this further, in more detail, in chapter 3.

In chapter 2 I review theoretical debates relating to home, bodies, gender identity, gaming and virtual space. This chapter emphasises the contrary and complex positionings of gender dichotomies. I further problematise Cartesian binaries by focusing on how they relate to women gamers and also how they are understood across several geographical scales: gendered bodies, home, and virtual space.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodological considerations that have informed and shaped this thesis. I highlight each of the methods employed for collecting data and explain in detail the uses of participant observation and autoethnography. I also reflect on the methods utilised for data analysis. This is followed by an in-depth discussion relating to 'positionality'.

In chapter 4 I consider both historical and contemporary spatialities of gendered place, space and identity. I explore the reasons why women choose to game, what they get from it, and how it affects relationship dynamics within the home. By examining how gendered norms are reinforced and/or resisted I discuss the ways in which women gamers interpret and negotiate their gaming activities with their roles and responsibilities at home.

Chapter 5 provides an in-depth discussion on cyber/space, which looks at how the real world intersects with the virtual. I examine cyber/space as a performative space and explore the embodied experiences of women

gamers and their relationships with game characters. In doing so, I highlight some of the ways that women gamers choose to portray their virtual (re)presentations of self. Prior to concluding I drawing on wider debates, which aid in an examination of the role that the gaming industry and mass media plays in the construction and maintenance of dominant masculine discourses within gaming cultures.

In chapter 6 I conclude my thesis and suggest avenues for further research. I revisit my initial research questions and summarise the main findings of this research. I highlight the current gap in geographical knowledge in relation to women and technology and I argue that there is a need for further examination of women's involvement with gaming, technology and home.

2. THEORISING WOMEN, HOME AND GENDER

Introduction

Over the past two decades there has been a growing body of literature that focuses on varying dimensions of virtual phenomena – from virtual landscapes to on-line activities. Despite this, geographers have paid little attention to the topic of gaming, and (to the best of my knowledge) none to women gamers at home. My research investigates this gap in the literature. Using the subject of gaming, I aim to open up a new area of study within this field to further understand the relationship between identity and place for a small group of women who live in the Waikato region. In this thesis, I consider the complex and diverse ways that women game at home and discussions will challenge long standing hegemonic conceptualisations of women, domesticity and home.

The qualitative approach adopted for this thesis is guided by feminist poststructural and geographical theories.⁴ In this chapter, I address the theoretical issues and relevant literature that informs my research. I highlight areas of theoretical debate (that aid in contextualising this project), beginning with a summary of feminist poststructural literature that relates to the ways in which binary distinctions are embedded in Western thought, and consequently, influence the construction of dominant socio-cultural values and norms (Laurie *et al.* 1999; and Longhurst 1995, 1997). Similarly, I reflect on Foucault's (1977) work concerning 'panopticism', the

⁴ For example Judith Butler (1990, 1993), Gill Valentine and Sarah Holloway (2001, 2002), Holloway and Valentine (2001) Clare Madge and Henrietta O'Connor (2002, 2005), and Mike Crang, Phil Crang and Jon May (1999).

'surveillant gaze', and 'disciplining of the female body'. Following this, I present a critical discussion of geographical literature on women and home, in order to illustrate how feminist poststructural theories can aid in bringing about a more nuanced understanding of contemporary topics such as gaming (Blunt and Dowling 2006; and Domosh and Seager 2001). I then draw on work from both within and outside of geography that illustrates the ways in which gaming can be understood as an embodied activity – where gamers occupy a space that is *inbetween* real and virtual worlds, and where these two worlds are seen as mutually constituted (Crang *et al.* 1999; and Featherstone and Burrows 1995). Finally, I review the work of a few feminist geographers, who offer examinations of cyber/space, and who also provide new ways of theorising embodied subjectivities and cyber/space (Crang *et al.* 1999; and Madge and O'Connor 2006).

Feminism and gender

In the past, poststructural feminist theorists have critiqued binary frameworks to highlight uneven power structures between men and women, and 'other' marginalised groups. In order to progress understandings of gender it is often necessary to first revisit deconstructions of the public/private binary that underpin much of the current literature. Feminist poststructuralists have identified that subjectivity needs to be contextually understood and that it is not absolute or fixed but temporally and spatially contingent. Western social constructs, however, are often underpinned by binary distinctions, such as

public/private, masculine/feminine, and culture/nature. Therefore, it is not surprising that binary relationships have been the topic of much debate amongst feminist theorists (such as: McDowell 1995, 1997, 1999; and Rose 1993). These debates are relevant to this study because dualistic constructs (such as masculine/feminine and man/woman) are embedded in Western thought and as such, affect the ways in which gaming is generally perceived.

Hegemonic discourses not only continue to influence the ways in which people make sense of the world but also how they choose to perform within it. Throughout history, dominant discourses have aided in constructing particular activities as being more suited to a particular gender. For example, Domosh and Seager (2001 1) argue that women are positioned at the ideological centre of home, and this is a view that continues to dominate Western thought.

Home and work are constructed in opposition to each other and framed within the binary of private/public (Valentine 2001). The home is considered to be an important site for consolidating and maintaining familial relationships, and historically women have been charged with the responsibility of making a 'house' into a 'home'. This continues to be a dominant ideal, hence, our familiarity with common sayings such as "a woman's place is in the home". Also, people have a propensity to think of particular roles as being more appropriate for a particular gender, such as women as nurturers and men as 'breadwinners'. In this sense, it is

possible to understand homes as hegemonically gendered spaces, where the performances of particular roles and tasks reflect dominant socio-cultural values and norms, which are also subject to varying degrees of influence, control and repression.

Nast and Pile (1998 2) argue that the human body is geopolitically located and that “its location is marked by its position within specific historical and geographical circumstances” (quoting Rose 1993). Nast and Pile (1998) also argue that certain places are automatically associated with a particular gender, and that these relationships to both place and gender are important because they are a reflection of societal mediums. For example, there are many descriptions associated with what it means to be a ‘woman at home’, and there are also many different descriptions associated with what it means to be a gamer. Singularly, these two constructs are aligned with dualistic understandings of gender, in that gaming is viewed predominantly as ‘masculine’, and home is viewed predominantly as ‘feminine’.

<p>Woman at home Feminine Housework Family Mediator Safe haven</p>	<p>Woman gamer at home Masculine Leisure Friends Competitor Exploration and adventure</p>
--	---

Figure 2.1 Woman at home / Woman gamer at home

As Figure 2.1 shows, the identities of a ‘woman at home’ and a ‘woman gamer at home’ are conflicted at a fundamental level because the idea of

a woman gaming at home, in this sense, disrupts dominant conceptualisations of 'what it means to be a woman at home'.

Gendered bodies

In the past, there has been much debate concerning the topic of gender, in relation to whether it is learned, or an innate element that we are born with, or a combination of the two. Butler (2004) contends that the body is the central locus of gendered meanings. In particular, Butler (1993, 1999) argues against the notion that gender identity is founded on a natural, sexual division between man and woman. "Rather, that distinction is 'performed' through a multiplicity of institutionalised social practices and sites of 'expert' power that invoke, materialise and naturalise sexual identity" (Martin 2005 100). Domosh (1998) argues that previous studies with children have confirmed that both parenting and schooling are highly gendered activities, and that from birth, a child's basic understanding of the world is influenced by a multitude of informal learnings via their interactions with others. Children continue to receive countless messages as they mature, which convey a myriad of meanings in relation to society's cultural values and norms regarding 'right' and 'wrong' gender behaviour.

In Western societies, the vast majority of individual's representations of self conform to dominant ideals, and as a result, are usually overlooked. Bodily representations that tend to receive more attention are the ones that resist or challenge dominant ideals. Discursive meanings are central to constructions of power which can be simultaneously empowering and

oppressive (Madge and O'Conner 2005 85). In this sense, discursive meanings have the potential to evoke resistances to, and non-conformity of, stereotypical performances of gender. King (2004) provides an excellent examination of Foucault's (1977) meditations relating to discipline, power, sexuality and subjectivity, and contends that disciplinary power manifests itself in modern society, as an effective form of social control that affects the ways in which women produce their feminine and bodily identities.

Understanding the power of discourse is useful in my analysis of women gamers because in this instance, home is the nexus of constantly shifting power relationships. I argue that women gamers both (re)produce, as well as subvert dominant discourses and knowledges. In chapters 4 and 5, I provide numerous examples of how performances of gender are simultaneously resisted and reinforced.

Domination and resistance

Works by feminist geographers who look at: the material realities of bodies; the multiple ways in which gender is linked to place; virtual space and embodiment; and socio-spatial exclusionary practices based on differences of gender are also drawn on in this research.⁵ These works offer excellent examples of how embodied meanings and experiences of gender can be reproduced in ways that challenge dominant norms, while simultaneously shifting and reshaping in ways which produce alternative

⁵ See, for example, Bondi 2005, Hillis (1998), Johnston (1996), Longhurst (2001), and Pile and Keith 1997.

possibilities for gendered embodiment. In *Entanglements of Power*, Sharp *et al.* (2000 27) argue:

We duly understand the geography of domination/resistance as a contingent and continuous bundle of relations; a geography that enacts a contested encounter within and between dominant and resistant practices which are themselves hybrid, rather than binary and which are contingent upon and enmeshed within social networks, communication processes and economic relations. And this is also a geography that comprises 'webs of tension'.

Sharp *et al.* argue for an "ambiguous, entangled view of power", with an explicit intent to raise questions about the spatiality of power relations that are inherent in domination and resistance. In the introduction to this thesis, I explained how the idea of a woman gamer contradicts dominant conceptualisations of what it means to be a 'woman at home'. This is because home is a place that is imbued with many different meanings and which exists within these same 'webs of tension' and power relations.

Mohanty (1991 2) states that:

We occupy...a world that is definable only in relational terms, a world traversed with intersecting lines of [dominating] power and resistance...of gender, color, class, sexuality, and nation.

Home is also a place where gender plays a significant part in determining a person's roles, relations and positions of power within household relationships. Butler's (1990, 1993) work on gender identities as embodied performances has helped disrupt common binary distinctions of masculinity and femininity, with the idea that gender difference is fluid and capable of change through self-reflexive practice. In particular, Butler argues that gender identities do not pre-exist but are constructed and

normalised through the routinised practices of cultural everyday life. I use Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of performativity to understand marginalised identities (such as 'mature' women gamers), who as a consequence, do not fit into stereotypical or gender-normative frameworks. In this thesis, I also examine the ways in which these gendered boundaries between women and men are negotiated.

Stereotypical notions of gender are influential, in that they often influence positions of power within the home for both men and women. During the course of the research, it became evident that women gamers also experience these same relationships of domination and resistance (I discuss this in more detail in chapters 4 and 5). Home is the primary location for most gaming activities, and technological pursuits are most commonly associated with masculinity, therefore, many people view gaming as something that is more suited to boys and men (Bryce and Rutter 2003). Keeping this in mind, it is understandable how women who game come to be viewed as deviant, as they are, in this sense, resisting and challenging dominant norms. Also, as a result of their involvement with games, women undoubtedly develop unique relationships with friends, family members and associates that reflect certain elements of domination and resistance. For example, in this thesis, I report that each woman has (at various times and to varying degrees) conformed to expectations of gender performativity. However, participants are also aware that when they game, they are actively resisting dominant socio-cultural values and norms.

Bodies and technology

Feminist authors Haraway (1991, 2000) and Balsamo (1995, 2000) have covered the topic of the dualistic 'nature' of bodies and technology extensively. Haraway believes that we are already cyborgs and her work on women, bodies and technology is particularly useful as it outlays the historic fusion of technology and organic, which has (over time) been forged by cultural practices. According to popular fiction, cyborgs are defined as human (flesh and blood) bodies that have been enhanced through the surgical integration of technology with flesh. However, according to Haraway (ibid.), being 'cyborg' is also defined as, bodies that have *any connection* with technology. This includes the keyboard at the end of your fingers, gaming on a PlayStation, or just making use of the kitchen microwave.

In Western societies the constructions of boundaries between nature and culture have remained dominant. Balsamo's (1995) work is intriguing as she considers some of the implications for competing systems of meaning between the 'technological' and the 'cultural'. In the following passage Balsamo (1995 215) highlights the dualistic 'nature' of bodies and technology, framing the 'technological-human' as a:

[r]econceptualization of the human body as a boundary figure belonging simultaneously to at least two previously incompatible systems of meaning – 'the organic/natural' and 'the technological/cultural'. At the point at which the body is reconceptualized not as a fixed part of nature, but as a boundary concept, we witness an ideological tug-of-war

between competing systems of meaning which include and in part define the material struggles of physical bodies.

Balsamo's (1995) and Haraway's (2004) work is useful for this research because it effectively illustrates how the boundaries between bodies and technology can become blurred. King (2004 31) explains:

Woman's association with body/nature is strengthened by biological essentialist and determinist paradigms which define woman according to her reproductive physiology. She is thus feeble and passive...Woman as other is inferior but also unknowable, enigmatic and disquieting. She represents that which must be investigated and dissected until her secrets are relinquished. Consequently the female body has been subjected to the scrutinizing gaze of the human sciences far more than the male.

Today, Western culture places much emphasis on physical appearance, and as a result, many women are left with the impression that they are not 'pretty' enough. In 1993, breast augmentations in the U.S. were the second most requested cosmetic surgery procedure (Bordo 1993). The cosmetic industry is one of the largest in the Western world, with many businesses making a profit from women's (and an increasing number of men's) insecurities about their physical appearance (Gimlin 2006). Most of the women involved in this study are familiar with 'role-playing' games, where a player creates a new character to represent 'self' in a virtual environment. Given the level of scrutiny that is directed at women in relation to how they 'maintain' their bodies, I am interested in examining the ways in which women view their real bodies, in comparison to the virtual bodies they create as (re)presentations of self.

The ability to alter our real world physical appearance has become increasingly important, especially since the advent of 'makeover' television programmes (Heyes 2007). The options for changing our appearances, however, vary greatly. For instance, minor changes might include changing hair colour, dressing differently, or putting on make-up, whereas, more dramatic methods include cosmetic surgery to modify body size and shape (Yee and Bailenson 2007). Heyes (2007 18) argues that:

[d]espite the rationality of the age, we seem more than ever to act as if (even though we may not believe that) one's outer form reflects one's virtues: the ever more minutely detailed visual objectification of (especially female) bodies, the extraordinary popularity of diet and exercise regimens, the plethora of beauty products, and, finally, the explosive growth of cosmetic surgery, all indicate that how we look has become more, not less, important to how we understand ourselves.

Today, many people feel compelled to conform to dominant socio-cultural ideals of beauty, and the ways in which an individual chooses to alter their appearance is often reflective of these dominant ideals. Writers such Young (1990a, 1990b) have done much to prompt debate about bodies and spaces, yet very few have paid attention to the ways in which bodies are often viewed as abject, leaky, or messy (Longhurst 2001).

Longhurst's (1995, 1996, 2001) work provides a more nuanced understanding of corporeality by focusing on the 'fluidity' of bodies, in relation to theoretical disciplinary boundaries, people's bodily boundaries and also the flows and filtrations that occur between them. Longhurst discusses how women's and men's bodies are socially constructed in ways that are aligned with Cartesian understandings. For instance, men's

bodies (in comparison to women's), are constructed as strong and solid, as they do not lactate, or undergo menstrual cycles, which in many ways, gives the impression that men are more in control of their bodies. Yet, all bodies fart, burp, bleed, urinate and expel faeces. I draw on these theories relating to real bodies, fluid identities and bodily boundaries because they offer a new way of examining how gamers might perceive game-play as an embodied experience.⁶ Previous studies have shown that both men and women gain a sense of empowerment from their virtual identities, and in chapters 4 and 5, I take a closer look at the ways in which some women gamers interpret their relationships with virtual characters (Kolko 1999; and Taylor 2007).

Stone (2001) argues that “no matter how virtual the subject may become, there is always a body attached”. Perhaps, it is because of this that avatars are such an attractive option for gamers wishing to experiment with different identities and personalities. For example, most men game as virtual women and it is considered to be a ‘normal’ part of gaming (MacCallum-Stewart 2008). Yee (2007) estimates that as many as 80 percent of male gamers play as virtual woman. Kennedy's (2002) study of the popular video game *Lara Croft, Tomb Raider* suggests:

One potential way of exploring this transgendering is to consider the fusion of player and game character as a kind of queer embodiment, the merger of the flesh of the (male) player with Lara's elaborated feminine body of pure information. This new queer identity potentially subverts stable distinctions between identification and desire and also

⁶ For work on embodied or situated game-play see Cassell and Jenkins (1998), Consalvo and Paasonen (2002), Featherstone and Burrows (1995), Flynn (2004), Murphy (2004), and Stone (1991, 2001).

by extension the secure and heavily defended polarities of masculine and feminine subjectivity.

Kennedy's (2002) insights are interesting precisely because they blur the common boundaries between masculine and feminine polarities. Kennedy's main focus is on subjective game-play from the perspective of a male gamer, and as a result, there is no mention of the dynamic relationship that transpires when women choose to game as virtual men. This line of thought is particularly relevant in chapter 5, where I discuss Gran's relationship with her favourite (male) avatar.⁷ Kennedy (ibid.) argues that many more identities are possible via virtual embodiment, as the mobility of virtual bodies often satisfies the desire for omnipresence and omnipotence, as well as fulfilling the fantasies of those whose real body's mobility is impaired in one way or another.

Geographies of home

The primary location for most gaming activities is home, and as such, gamers are usually subject to the rules and regulations of that space (whether they be explicit or implied). Blunt and Dowling (2006 2) describe home as:

An idea, an imaginary that is imbued with feelings. These may be feelings of belonging, desire, intimacy (as, for instance, in the phrase 'feeling at home'), but can also be feelings of fear, violence and alienation.

⁷ Pseudonyms have been used for all of the participants involved in this thesis. All participants were given the option of choosing their own pseudonyms. All chose actual 'names' except for Gran, who opted to use 'Gran' because that is what her family calls her. Although Gran uses this title in everyday life, it is generic and as such it maintains her anonymity.

Blunt and Dowling (ibid. 2) go on to state that these ideas, feelings and imaginaries are part of an intrinsically 'spatial imaginary' – a network of overlapping and variable ideas and feelings, "which are related to context, and which construct places, extend across spaces and scales, and connect places".

Feminist frameworks have played a crucial role in the development of geographical thinking on home. This is in part due to an emphasis being placed on gender and the ways in which it influences people's lived experiences and imaginaries of home. McDowell (1999) highlights the ways in which domestic spaces of home reflect material representations of the social order. For example, in the past, "housework and childcare in particular were seen as women's 'sacred' duty", and:

The home was constructed as the locus of love, emotion and empathy, and the burdens of nurturing and caring for others were placed on the shoulders of women who were, however, constructed as 'angels' rather than 'workers' (McDowell 1999 75-76).

McDowell's work is relevant to this thesis because it illustrates that the ways in which labour is undertaken within the home is significant, as it gives an indication of the extent to which patriarchal structures are being maintained or resisted. For example, each of the eight women involved in this study, occupies a 'key' position within her household and plays an important role in managing family life. Similarly, Blunt and Dowling (2006 15) argue that the domestic relationships within homes continue to be critically gendered, stating that these "gendered expectations and experiences flow through all these social relations and their materialities".

Domosh and Seager (2001 1) argue that “women seem to derive more of their identities from their domestic life than do men” because it is usually women who worry most about what judgements their visitors might make when arriving at their home. Will they think the house is tidy? Or, is the food nice enough? Some of the women interviewed for this study also experienced concerns over the thought of being judged by others, in relation their roles as women at home and the extent of their gaming activities. Overall, home is typically constructed as a place of safety and nurturance, however, it is important to recognise that home is also a key site of oppression for many women because it can also be a place of violence and alienation. Blunt and Varley (2004 3) state:

As a space of belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, desire and fear, the home is invested with meanings, emotions, experiences and relationships that lie at the heart of human life.

Literature relating to geographies of fear are also drawn on in this study (Bondi and Rose 2003; and Valentine 1989) because they provide yet another useful lens through which to examine women, home, and gender. It is also very pertinent to the topic of gaming. It is useful to contemplate geographies of fear in relation to gaming because in many ways virtual environments are considered ‘safer’ places for individuals wanting to ‘try out’ alternative identities. A greater sense of security is also achievable through anonymity. Gamers create virtual characters as (re)presentations of self but the identity of the real person controlling an avatar often remains unknown. Research shows that on-line personas are not always

accurate representations of real people and the fact that physical bodies are not actually in virtual environments provides many players with a greater sense of freedom and empowerment (Taylor 2006). A negative outcome of this is that many on-line gamers have heard of, or experienced instances where other gamers have 'attacked' them verbally or physically within a virtual environment (Beavis and Charles 2007).

To a large degree, homes and the relationships that exist within them are reflective of temporal and socio-cultural values. The literature I have highlighted above allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the complex natures of home. Homes are lived-in places and what they mean and how they are manifested materially is continually produced and reproduced through everyday practices (Blunt and Dowling 2006).

Virtual space, gaming, and gender

Currently there is growing social and geographical debate over the significance of computer mediated communications and other new technologies. Crang, Crang and May (1999) argue that technologies need to be viewed as social constructs because they are not separate or disconnected from the real world. Crang, Crang and May's (ibid.) work provides excellent examples which illustrate how productions of knowledge are embodied. Technologies are created by real people, and as such, they arrive already imbued with the same kinds of networks of socialisation and understandings that exist in the real world. Therefore, it

stands to reason that games and technologies mirror (to varying degrees) real world socio-cultural values and norms.

Crang *et al.* (1999) provide various examples of how virtual and real worlds intersect. For example, Crang *et al.* (*ibid.* 2) state that “just as technology does not come into being outside of the social, so the social does not come into being outside of the technical”. In this sense, the relationship between bodies and technology can be defined as ‘mutually constitutive’.

Within the last two decades ‘gaming and gender’ has become a popular topic of debate, although the majority of these debates have originated from outside of geography (such as Screen and Media Studies). Some of these debates are most interesting (Bryce and Rutter 2003; Carr 2005; and Hayes 2007). For example, research shows a marked increase in the number of children now using computers and video games for educational purposes, as well as for socialising with peers (Beavis, 2005; Taylor *et al.* 2007; and Valentine and Holloway 2002). A recent study by Schott and Selwyn (2000), however, revealed that the gamer stereotype has had a negative affect on some children’s willingness to participate in computer learning activities. Their findings showed that girls were more accepting of boys who used computers but less accepting of girls who like to use computers. Furthermore, girls viewed other girls’ use of computers negatively by associating it with loneliness and potential problems with sexual identity.

In short, feminist debates surrounding technology often incorporate discussions concerning gender, as masculine discourses continue to be dominant within gaming and technological industries (Gill and Grint 1995; Murphie and Potts 2003; and Wajcman 1991). In the past, women who showed an interest in computers or Information Technology were often considered to be tomboys. Today, the same assumption continues to be made concerning women gamers (Schott and Thomas 2008). However, the assigning of masculinity onto technology is reinforced by dominant media representations, and it has already been well established that men have a dominant presence within the gaming industry, spanning across all levels, from design and production, to media representation (Krotoski 2005; and Taylor *et al.* 2007).

Summary

In different spaces and places both men and women conform to (as well as subvert, resist and challenge) socialised expectations of gender performativity. This study positions home as the nexus point because it is within this environment that most women game. In this sense, it is important to strive for a contextualised understanding which advances current levels of knowledge in relation to women, home, and gaming. There is an increasing trend of women becoming involved in games. Therefore, it is essential that we continue to build our awareness of how women interpret and negotiate their positions in relation to dominant values and norms as they shift between real and virtual environments.

I began this chapter by critically engaging with feminist poststructuralist approaches to women, gender, bodies, home, and virtual space, as they relate to the topic of this thesis – women and gaming. This was followed by a discussion relating to how the above elements are interconnected in complex, yet, contradictory ways. I focused on relevant literature from both within and outside of geography and developed feminist frameworks that look at the lived experiences of women in order to understand how space becomes both a force of conformity and a challenge of resistance for women gamers in particular.

I reflect on the popular stereotype of a gamer (young male, intelligent yet socially inept), which continues to persist even though the number of women and 'girls' becoming involved in gaming each year continues to grow. It is my intention to challenge Cartesian frameworks by drawing on feminist poststructuralist approaches that illustrate the ways in which gender identities are fluid and in a constant state of flux. As such, I have chosen a qualitative methodological research framework that incorporates two key informant interviews, in-depth semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and participant observation.

3. FINDING OUT ABOUT WOMEN GAMERS

In this research I use multiple methods informed by feminist poststructuralist theory to gain insights into the worlds of 'women gamers'. Qualitative methods have been used extensively by geographers, whose aim is to further develop the existing bodies of knowledge pertaining to human environments within an array of conceptual frameworks (Laurie *et al.* 1999; Moss 2002; Shurmer-Smith 2002; and Winchester 2000). Moss (2002 10) maintains that when it comes to feminist geography:

[t]here doesn't seem to be a question as to whether feminists "should" be using qualitative or quantitative either for data collection or analysis. Rather, the predominant view seems to be choosing a method *appropriate* to the research question [*emphasis in original*].

The methodology adopted for this particular research has enabled an in-depth understanding of the dynamic and multifaceted ways in which gendered identities are constructed and contested through different spaces.

In this chapter I first, explain my use of qualitative techniques. Second, I outline the specific methods used for data collection and provide a critical examination of these methods and forms of analysis. The methods used include questionnaires, semi-structured in-depth interviews with key informants and women gamers, participant observation, and autoethnography. Third, I discuss how data were analysed, and finally, I highlight my 'position' as a researcher and reflect critically on my 'situatedness' within this study. Throughout this chapter I provide an

overview of the research methods in relation to the theoretical framework underpinning this study.

Qualitative research methodology

To conduct this research, I used multiple methods which are compatible with qualitative and feminist poststructuralist analysis. The methods used draw on critical social theories and methodologies that value difference and non-hierarchical ways of conducting research (Johnston and Valentine 1995; Longhurst 2003; and McDowell 1997).

The multiple methods utilised in this study were chosen because they are particularly well-suited to feminist poststructuralist analysis. Feminist geography offers an epistemology that transforms geographic ways of knowing. The overarching goal of feminism is to bring about the betterment of women's lives. To aid in meeting this goal, it has now become commonplace for feminist researchers to use multiple methods in order to better understand the dynamics, spatiality and sources of women's oppression but most importantly, to effect changes by being able to suggest particular strategies of resistance (Aitken and Valentine 2006).

In this thesis, feminism underpins many decisions regarding the methodology used. It is important to note, however, that the concept of feminism has various meanings attached to it which are subject to both temporal and spatial elements. Feminists such as Butler (1990) and Holloway (1997 69) argue that feminism represents a rejection of

objectivism and “truth” seeking and that all knowledge is acquired within particular social contexts. Feminist research highlights the marginalised positions, experiences and perceptions of women, making them more visible. It also addresses the power relations at play, particularly between the researcher and the researched. There is, however, no distinct feminist methodology. The utilisation of a method or methods is assessed on how suitably it is aligned to the research question/s and data. More importantly, feminist research has a political agenda that is capable of bringing empowerment and emancipation to the communities that it serves (Alice 1999; Holloway 1997; and Jones *et al.* 1997). It is for these reasons that feminism is best understood as a collection of multiple feminisms, with sometimes competing and conflicting debates (Butler 1999; and Holloway 1997).

Keeping this in mind, there is the potential for research methodology to prove problematic and it should be considered very carefully when studies are conducted from a feminist perspective (Beere 2007). In this research I decided that the best way forward (in relation to engaging with the research question) was to situate myself within the relevant socio-spatial and temporal contexts as both the researcher and the researched (Laurie *et al.* 1999). In the following section, I explain my approach for recruiting both key informants and women gamers for interviews, the types of methods used during interviews and the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches.

Methods employed for data collection

Recruitment of participants

The majority of data collected during this research was gathered during interviews with women gamers, however, in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of contemporary gaming cultures, I decided to first talk to key informants. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants, both women gamers and key informants.

Key Informants

In this research key informants are people who hold managerial positions within retail businesses that specialise in the sale of multimedia video games. Finding key informants was relatively easy because it was just a matter of locating a phone number in the directory listings. Through this two key informants were successfully recruited over the phone. An interview date was set and an Information Sheet (see Appendix 1, page 124) was posted out to each interviewee immediately after my initial phone call with them. Both key informants were interviewed separately during their lunch hours and at cafés near to their places of work.

The interviews with key informants were audio recorded and transcribed. Both interviews were completed within one hour, however, the interviews did not feel rushed partly because the questionnaire guide for key informants was designed to be brief, and in both interviews there was plenty of discussion that went above and beyond the questions listed in

the guide. These interviews provided valuable information which aided in the construction of the questionnaire used for interviews with women gamers. Both key informants also agreed to pass on Information Sheets (see Appendix 2, page 126) to women gamers visiting their stores, who fitted the recruitment criteria.

Women Gamers

Gaming is an activity that is most commonly associated with boys and men. There is a large body of literature that focuses on the 'phenomenon' of women gamers, however, the majority of these studies typically focus on younger women, under the age of 30. When people think about gamers, they do not typically associate gaming activities with 'mature' women. Therefore, I chose to focus solely on women gamers aged 30 and older because this group in particular, is understudied. One of the main aims of this thesis is to examine the ways in which women negotiate their gendered identities within a home space. Homes are places that are imbued with particular stereotypical and social norms in relation to gender. Identities are performed by both men and women at home and I argue that when a woman games she is demonstrating resistance to gendered norms.

I recruited a total of eight women gamers. Finding these participants, however, was at times difficult because this particular group of gamers is often invisible. As a result, various methods of recruitment were employed for recruitment of women gamers. For example, a modified

snowballing technique was the primary method of recruitment, which began with me passing along Information Sheets (see Appendix 2, 126) to someone that I knew, and they then passed them along to women they knew, who fitted the research criteria. This method was then modified to be carried out via e-mails. Both ways proved to be equally effective, with three participants being recruited using the former method and another four using the later.

I personally recruited the first participant because she was the only other woman I knew of who gamed at home. Fortunately, she agreed to be interviewed and this first interview as a pilot test. This proved to be extremely beneficial, as I was able to improve upon the questionnaire guide for later interviews. The next two participants made contact after they were handed an Information Sheet from a key informant and meeting times were organised accordingly. After these first three interviews the next two weeks were uneventful and it was at this stage that I began to formulate a way to recruit participants via emails. An Introduction Letter was created specifically for emails and a copy of the Information Sheet was sent as an attachment (see Appendix 3, page 128). Recruitment emails were then sent out to all of the addresses under the University of Waikato listings and over the following three weeks another four participants were recruited.

The eighth and final recruitment was unexpected yet very welcome. The opportunity to interview the eighth participant arose after presenting some

of my research to a third year university class. One of the students in this class spoke to me and offered to show one of my flyers to her friend, who also fitted the eligibility criteria (woman gamer, living in the Waikato region, aged 30 or older). Within the next two days I was contacted via email, where the participant expressed an interest in my research and asked me to contact her over the phone to arrange a possible interview time. I contacted her immediately and during our conversation, I offered to send out a copy of the Information Sheet via post and a suitable time to conduct the interview was scheduled for the following week.

Questionnaires

At the beginning of each interview with women gamers a one page questionnaire (see Appendix 4, page 129) was administered. Questionnaires were completed within fifteen minutes and aimed at gaining a better understanding of the participant and her circumstances. The data collected contained information about each participant's: age; ethnicity; family size and type; and average number of hours spent gaming per week. This questionnaire has been instrumental on two fronts. First, it aided in highlighting important background details; and second, it provided an excellent way to 'break the ice' and get to know each participant before we got to the in-depth questions.

The majority of the information contained in Figure 3.1 was gathered using the questionnaire. Participants vary in age, the eldest being 58 and the youngest 31. The average amount of time spent gaming also varies

significantly – from 6 to 80 plus hours per week. Participants live in various household types. For example, two live in classic nuclear type families (husband, wife and children), while three live at home as sole parents. Of these three, two live with various other family members, and all three women work in paid employment. Two participants live in de facto relationships. One woman is married and expecting her first child. Also, of these eight women, six are mothers, one is pregnant with her first child, and one does not have children.

In the 'relationship status' column, I decided to include each participant's personal relationship status, alongside the different gaming platforms that they have at home. This particular column is structured in this way because in many of the interviews it seemed as though participants were making 'confessions' about how many gaming devices that they actually had at home. Also recorded in the questionnaire, were ethnicity, occupation, household type and number of rooms in the house, rooms that are used for gaming, and favourite games to play. The questionnaire usually took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Once it had been completed, I began asking the in-depth (semi-structured) interview questions.

Name	Age	Gaming	Relationship Status	Lives With	Occupation	Fav. Game
Gran	58	16 years (20hrs per week at home/ 80hrs p.w. if at the lake house)	Divorced / PlayStation3, Poker machine, PS2 (x2), Nintendo 64, Nintendo DS, Gameboy (x2), Laptop	Cat, Daughter, son-in- law & grandkids stay in 'main house'	Retired but does admin for the family business	The Godfather: Don's Edition
Suzy	49	22 years - "feels like forever" (80+ hrs per week)	Married / Computer (x2) PS2	Husband & 3 children	Housewife / Ptime Student	Runescape
Sheryl	42	28 years (6 hrs per week)	Divorced / Computer (x2), PS1, PS2, Nintendo DS, Nintendo Wii, Laptop	Teenage son & cat	IT Worker	Command & Conquer
Mitch	36	5 years (28+ hrs per week)	De facto / Computer (x2) PS2, PlayStation Portable	Partner & 2 dogs. Son & daughter stay weekends	Web Administrator	World of Warcraft
Nika	35	20+ years (6-10hrs per week)	Married / Computer, laptop, Xbox, Wii, Sega	Husband & son	IT Worker	On-line Brgo
Wendy	33	20 years (40+ hrs per week)	Married / Computer (x3) Nintendo 64, Nintendo DS (x2), Nintendo Wii, Nintendo Gameboy (x2), Laptop	Husband & 'one on the way'	Housewife	World of Warcraft
Talca	32	15 years (15hrs per week)	De facto / PlayStation2 (x2)	Partner, father & cat	Public Servant	Champions
Jordan	31	8 years (25hrs per week)	Single / Computer (x2), Laptop, PS2, PS1, Cellphone games	2 sons, elder sister & 2 cats	Retail	World of Warcraft

Figure 3.1 Overview of women gamer research participants

Interviewing

The interviewing component of the data collection consisted of a total of ten semi-structured in-depth interviews (made up of eight women gamers and two key informants). In preparation for these interviews I constructed two different sets of questionnaire guides: one specifically for key informants (see Appendix 5, page 130), and the other for women gamers (see Appendix 6, page 131).

The interview guide was divided into three themes, consisting of: 'gaming and virtual world dynamics'; 'home-life and real world dynamics'; and 'the

two-way relationship between gaming and home'. Although a question guide was used, interviews tended to be more like long conversations, in which I also shared some of my own experiences. In fact, I was often intrigued by participant's conversations and I encouraged them to explore issues that were clearly relevant and therefore important. This research focuses upon geographies of the home and in hindsight, these deviations away from the interview questions often proved to be very beneficial because much of the information gathered during these periods was rich in detail and nuance. More often than not, it provided useful background information in relation to the research question. In a more structured setting, this information would have most likely remained hidden. Bryman (2001) suggests that semi-structured interviews are flexible and that the participant has a great deal of leeway and flexibility in relation to how they can respond to questions.

I attempted to maintain this degree of flexibility by allowing each interviewee to explore the ideas that they presented. However, during all of the interviews I kept on hand a list of my key research questions. This proved to be a good strategy because at the end of each interview I read this list, and on several occasions this helped me to think of a number of other relevant questions to ask that had not been included in the interview questionnaire guide.

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with women gamers. Interviews varied in length, from one hour to three and a half hours. One

participant preferred to have the interview at my house, while the other seven were all interviewed in their own homes. The three categories that were used for separating the research questions ('gaming and virtual world dynamics', 'home-life and real world dynamics', and 'the two-way relationship between gaming and home') are distinct in some respects, however, it is also important to note that they also flow into and across each other. This is because particular attention was paid to developing questions which aided in an examination of how experiences of gaming intersect with experiences of the home. These conceptual threads were chosen because I am interested in exploring this two-way relationship between gaming and home, and in particular, how women perceive 'home' whilst participating in gaming activities.

All of the women who were interviewed were invited to participate in a focus group at a later date and five of the eight women agreed. However, I explained to each participant that a focus group was another potential option for collecting data but that it would only be held if there was a need to gather further data. Fortunately, the data collected from the eight interviews with women gamers was abundantly rich in information and I did not think it was necessary to collect more. Also, I consider myself fortunate to have been able to interview as many as eight women, given the degree of difficulty encountered in finding eligible participants. Photos were taken with participant's consent during some of the interviews, and all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Participant observation

Participant observation was conducted in several interviews when participants opted to show me one or more of the games that they were currently playing. Participant observation, however, was not conducted in all of the interviews. From the outset of this project, I purposely chose to make observing in this manner an optional and non-compulsory method of data collection. The reason for doing so is because I felt that it was important for participants to initiate game play in a manner that was 'natural' and flowing, rather than forced and potentially unwelcome. This cautionary approach worked well because there were at least two interviews where participant observation would have been impractical, inconvenient and/or unwelcomed.

Participant observation was overt and on several occasions I was able to take several photos of participants sitting in front of their television and computer screens, while they showed me their preferred games. I also believe that as an insider to this research participants felt that they were more able to elaborate on their likes and dislikes of gaming culture simply because (through my own experiences as a gamer) I could more easily relate to their own experiences (Cook 2005). Later in this chapter I discuss in more detail my own position within this study as both the researcher and the researched.

During participant observation spatial and social elements are active, in which bodies become defined by age, 'race', gender, and sexuality. Nairn (2002 150) states that participant observation enables researchers to:

Access embodied forms of knowing more readily than any other form of data collection ... This meant that I collected data about my own as well as about other participants' embodied experiences.

Like Nairn, I had several opportunities to include myself as a subject rather than gather information solely about the object of the research. As a participant and an observer, I am aware of power relations and the ways in which discursive constructs of both femininity and masculinity can be reproduced. This process has allowed me to gain a better understanding of my own positioning by enabling me to deconstruct my position as a researcher who not only examines but also participates in gaming.

Overall, participant observation has enabled me to gain a better understanding of home as a gendered space. Furthermore, it has helped me to understand home as a place where boundaries between gendered behaviours can become transgressed, fluid or non-existent (McDowell 1999; and Valentine 2001). Most importantly, for all participants, home was a place where they felt they could challenge and resist these stereotypical gender norms when it suited them to do so.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography contributes to the burgeoning methodological possibilities of representing human action. It is one tool among many designed to work in the fields, unseating the privileged

scholar from the desk in the Master's House, and de-exoticizing the non-White-male-objective scholar from the realms of the academically othered. And it is a method that calls upon the body as a site of scholarly awareness and corporeal literacy (Spry 2001 727).

Since beginning this project I have kept an autoethnographical account of my own research and gaming experiences. Undertaking this has helped me to become more aware of various social and environmental factors which would normally be overlooked or ignored. This includes an examination of the ways in which language is used, the ways that player's choose to (re)present themselves in a virtual environment, and my own responses to certain situations. One of the benefits of using this particular method is that autoethnography becomes subjected to a frequent critiquing of "cultural values that norm one's self-conception" (McKay 2002 195).

According to McKay (ibid.) "personal and autobiographical responses to ethnographic descriptions can also be described as autoethnographic". McKay argues that it is possible to analyse a research interview as autoethnography because it would then acknowledge both acquiescence and resistance to the research process. Spry (2001 727) explains:

Human experience is chaotic and messy, requiring a pluralism of discursive and interpretive methods that critically turn texts back upon themselves in the constant emancipation of meanings. These texts, however, are not just subjective accounts of experience, they attempt to reflexively map multiple discourses that occur in a given social space.

The following extract is from my autoethnographical journal and is reflective of my own positioning as a gamer in a virtual environment.

I was playing *Guildwars* today and had to go into Piken Square, and once again there were players there that were chatting publicly about some really gross stuff. What made it worse was that they were enacting a lude sex/rape scene in the middle of the Square. It made me really angry! (Autoethnography Journal Entry 11/06/08).

Whilst recording this particular incident in *Guildwars*,⁸ I took note of my own internal responses, which were (at the time) very conflicted. On the one hand, I wanted very much to tell the players concerned to stop being so insensitive and stupid. On the other hand, I was acutely aware of my place as a researcher/observer, and as such I chose to be non-confrontational. However, I am also aware that in making this decision, I lost an opportunity to explore another dimension of this social network by failing to react. Consequently, I also have to consider how my own interpretation of this event affects the ways in which I write-up and present this information in the future.

According to Bennett and Shurmer-Smith (2002 213) being able to recognise the researcher's subjective stance is a standard that many readers have become used to, however, "in the hands of self-centred people this degenerates into an excuse for auto-ethnography (writing about that fascinating person 'me')". As a result, many now cite this as a weakness of the new ethnography but Bennett and Shurmer-Smith (ibid. 213) argue that it is also a strength, as these new textual conventions aid the reader in recognising authors who "depict themselves as the heroes of the text and unwittingly show how limited the authorial gaze has been".

⁸ *Guildwars* is a Massive Multi-player On-line Role Playing Game (MMORPG). For a more detailed explanation of MMORPG see the Glossary on page vi.

When conducting autoethnography it is highly recommended that authors take the time to write *everything*, including interpretations “which are genuinely self-reflexive and always conscious of the growth and change through the previous stages of one’s research” (ibid. 214).

Analysis of data

The general form of analysis used in this research is a poststructural approach to discourse analysis, which attempts to develop a more nuanced reading that unpacks in detail a particular text, in the cultural context in which it is embedded (Hannam 2002). In this sense, texts can be understood as “constitutive of larger, more open-ended structures that are often termed discourses. They can be thought of as frameworks for understanding and communicating” (ibid. 194). Therefore, discourses (for the most part) have a largely unnoticed power because they are capable of forming and building specific institutions (Foucault 1977). Wylie (2006 307) explains that “discourse *is* everyday practice – not an invisible web of ‘powerful’ ideas imposing themselves from above”.

Discourse analysis is a critical method which seeks to describe how certain identities and narratives are produced, privileged, sometimes naturalized, and asserted over identities and narratives which are comparatively marginalized, excluded or silenced [emphasis in original] (Wylie 2006 305).

In this thesis, discourse analysis is used as a supplement to other methods, however, it remains a crucial component because gaming like any other activity exists within a culture of its own. It therefore, needs to be understood through the discursive contexts of gaming cultures. To make

discourse analysis possible, I made an audio recording of each interview and later transcribed them verbatim.⁹ I attempted to complete the transcription of an interview before another began, however, this proved to be quite challenging at times because most of the interviews went for more than two hours. As a result, the time between interviews and transcribing often overlapped. I endeavoured, however, to complete each interview as early as possible because doing so helped me to critique and make minor adjustments to the arrangement of questions for subsequent interviews. Upon completion, full copies of all transcripts were printed.

My analysis of interviews incorporated what McDowell (1997) describes as a 'listening guide'. This method involves several stages of listening when playing back recorded interviews. The first time listening to an interview requires the researcher to "listen for the plot: what happens, how the events unfold and how the narrator is situated in the plot" (ibid. 394). In the second stage, the researcher will: "listen for 'self' – the voice of the speaking I" in the relationship. This time the emphasis is on the voice of the other, to ensure that, as interviewers, we allow our 'subjects' to speak for themselves before we speak for them. In the third stage, the emphasis is on listening for self-silencing or capitulation. In the fourth stage, it is necessary for the researcher to listen for signs of political resistance. In these last two stages, listening is focused on "how people talk about

⁹ The transcribing codes are as follows: a word underscored indicates participants' emphasis on particular words. I have inserted words contained in [square brackets] in order to make sentences more understandable. Italicised words contained in (*brackets*) are indicative of the conversational tone, such as (*laughing*). Successive full stops (...) indicate instances where text has been removed in order to make a sentence more understandable. This is usually in instances where the speaker might begin another sentence before finishing the previous one.

relationships – how they experience themselves within the context of the social structures within which they are embedded” (ibid. 394). Also using data from the interviews, I created a spreadsheet table that summarised some of the main findings. This made it easier to discern the similarities and differences between participants, across different fields, such as age, marital status, family type, preferred game genre, and reasons for gaming (see Appendix 7, page 135).

Finally, this research also draws on a form visual analysis. Rose’s (1993, 2001) perspectives on ‘visual methodologies’ and feminist geography play an important part in the construction, design and analysis of this research. According to Rose (2001 136) “the diversity of forms through which a discourse can be articulated means that intertextuality is important to understanding discourse”.¹⁰ Rose (ibid. 136) also states that using this approach refers to the way “meanings of any one discursive image or text depend not only on that one text or image, but also on the meanings carried by other images and text”. In short, visual methodologies offer a form of analysis that allows for a more holistic way of “understanding symbolic qualities of text, [and] the way that elements of the text always refer to the wider cultural context of which they are a part” (ibid. 55).

Although I did not gather visual texts for this research there was much discussion in interviews that focused on the critique of visual texts. Gaming is an activity that relies heavily upon visual stimulus and it is

¹⁰ ‘Intertextuality’ refers to ‘the way that the meanings of any one discursive image or text depend not only on that one text or image, but also on the meanings carried by other images and texts’ (Rose 2001 136).

therefore, crucial to reflect on forms of visual analysis. Rose (2001 16) states:

If the ways of seeing are historically, geographically, culturally and socially specific, then how you or I look is not natural or innocent. So it is necessary to reflect on how you as a critic of visual images are looking.

During interviews all participants were asked for their opinion of game designs and graphic content, as well as virtual representations of gender. Responses varied and ranged from reflections on mission objectives in games, to comparisons between real and virtual bodies. These findings are discussed in-depth in chapters 4 and 5. In this research, I also reflect on the visual methodological approaches highlighted by Carr *et al.* (2006), Gregson and Rose (2000), as well as Rose (1993, 2001).

Positionality

Positionality refers to the way that our own experiences, beliefs and social location affect the way we understand the world and go about researching it (Aitken and Valentine 2006 340).

If ten people witness the exact same event and are then asked to recall it, undoubtedly there would be a retelling of ten similar but slightly different stories. Valentine (2002 116) states that feminism draws attention to the fact that “all knowledge is produced in specific contexts or circumstances and that these situated knowledges are marked by their origins”. Pratt (1992 325), for example, states:

I was shaped by my relation to those buildings and by the people in the buildings, by ideas of who should be working in the board of education, of who should be in the bank

handling money, of who should have the guns and the keys to the jail, of who should be in the jail; I was shaped by what I didn't see, or didn't notice on those streets (cited in McDowell 1999 107).

Pratt argues that it is sometimes painful to accept that there are limits to our thinking but we must first recognise that what we think of as universal truths are in fact only partial truths. As individuals, we each view the world from different embodied locations, and acknowledging situatedness has had a significant impact on the ways in which feminist scholars have come to view their own subject positions as researchers (Valentine 2005).

'Positionality' is emphasised in this particular study because as a researcher I position myself as an 'insider', given that, like my participants, I too am over the age of 30, live in the Waikato region and 'game' at home. As mentioned earlier, the desire to examine the experiences of other women gamers comes primarily from my own past experiences and during interviews it was common for there to be an exchange of stories between myself and participants. One thing that was noticeable about the interview process was how levels of rapport (between my self and each participant) varied during each interview. For example, I found that the more I shared stories of my own, the more comfortable participants became with sharing their own thoughts and opinions with me, which directly affected how much I learned from them.

McKay (2002 189) discusses the ways in which her approach to interviews with Philippine women about gender and economic development changed

during her research. I like this particular quote by McKay because it is also an apt description of my own interview experiences:

I tried to contextualize particular exchanges as “research interview” and others as “just talk” but my respondents resisted attempts to create this distinction. They used all their interactions with me to map similarities and differences between our positionings and experiences. The space of dialogue between us never vanished, but changed shape, being constantly recreated from both sides. As friends and respondents, these women taught me that my entire field experience was my project, not just the activities I undertook with lists of questions. What I learned is limited by the level of comfort they found with me.

I shared with participants, stories of my own experiences of other people’s reactions to the fact that I game, and the participants, in turn, described stories of their own. It is these interactions, coupled with an interest in geographies of the home that prompted this project. It is my intention to subvert the hierarchical nature of the researcher/researched relationship by drawing on my own personal experiences as a gamer and placing myself on the same level as my participants (Holloway 1997). I realise this is a tenuous position and that it could be argued that this approach lends itself to bias. However, all research is ‘subjective’ and all researchers are subject to complex socio-cultural frameworks, which serve to inform their perceptions of phenomena.¹¹ It therefore becomes the responsibility of the researcher to maintain an adequate level of ‘reflexivity’ in relation to their processes of understanding.¹²

¹¹ Subjective research is that which acknowledges the personal judgments, experiences, tastes, values, and so on of the researcher (Cook *et al.* 2005).

¹² ‘Reflexivity’ refers to a process of reflection about who we are, what we know, and how we come to know it (Aitken and Valentine 2006 341).

Summary

In this chapter I have discussed a wide range of methods and methodology. Feminist theory informs the entire research process. Using a combination of semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, participant observation, and autoethnography, I have illustrated that qualitative research techniques are extremely useful for gathering rich data that brings to light the complexities of everyday life. My own autoethnographic account is drawn upon to enrich the findings. I also provide reflections on the research process, paying particular attention to my role as an 'insider' and the complexities that this produces. It is important to note that the findings of this thesis are not representative and the approaches to data collection and analysis were qualitative which aided in gaining deep, rather than representative insights. In the following chapter, I draw on data gathered from questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and autoethnography in order to discuss the ways in which the women gamers occupy the places and spaces of home.

4. “PUTTING WOMEN IN PLACE”

Feminist poststructuralist theory tends to position home at a cross-road between public and private worlds (McDowell 1993a, 1993b). In many ways, women are still expected to conform to particular ways of being. A mother, for example, usually takes on the role of primary caregiver within a family network. Yet, it is not so surprising anymore when women choose to resist more traditional ideas of feminine gender stereotypes (Bondi 2005; and Dyck 2005). Home is place that is influenced and affected by public, political and virtual spheres. Geographers such as McDowell (1999), and Valentine and Holloway (2002) effectively illustrate the ways in which people at home share mutually constituted relationships with the world outside.

Homes and domestic relationships are shaped by ‘outside’ influences and it is with this in mind that I challenge underlying dualistic understandings of both home and gaming (McDowell 1999).¹³ In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which space is gendered. In particular, I present an examination of the gendered spaces of homes, as they are ‘lived’ by eight women, who reside in Hamilton and the surrounding Waikato region. In the first half of this chapter, I examine home in relation to Western philosophical dualities and discuss the ways in which both homes and the bodies within them reinforce, as well as disrupt common binaries of woman/man and private/public. In order to illustrate this, I draw on the data gathered from

¹³ See Chapter 2, “Theorising women and gaming” for a more in-depth discussion about dualistic understandings.

interviews with women gamers and highlight findings that uncover participants' main reasons for choosing to game. In particular, I explore gaming as a goal oriented activity, as a form of escapism, and as a way to build-on social networks. In the second half of this chapter, I reflect on how gender roles and relations have changed for women over the past 50 years. I reflect on how women gamers manage their time between housework and gaming activities. This is followed by a discussion on the ways in which women gamers negotiate their identities as 'women at home', with their identities as 'women gamers'. I also consider how the negotiation these identities affects relationships with other family members. This chapter addresses my first research question (how do women negotiate their identities as 'women gamers', with their identities as 'women at home'?). It also has relevance to my second and third research questions (what is the gendered relationship between bodies and technology in the home environment? And in what ways do women gamer's real lives affect their gaming experiences, and vice versa?).

The title of this chapter is borrowed from feminist geographers Domosh and Seager's (2001) book. Their book addresses a variety of temporal and spatial scales and provides an in-depth examination of what it means to negotiate space (including home), as a woman. Domosh and Seager (ibid. xix) explain:

Sometimes the most everyday and seemingly unimportant facets of our lives can turn out to be profound and provocative. The way we arrange our furniture, for example, tells a lot about our economic situation, our ideas of good taste, perhaps even our ethnic or national identity. It can also tell us about gender relationships.

Cartesian dualisms construct private and public spaces in opposition of each other. For example, home is most commonly thought of as a place of privacy and it is also associated, first and foremost, with women and femininity. Public spaces and places of work, however, and are most commonly linked to men and masculinity (Bondi 2005; and Sharp 2003). I problematise this concept of gendered space by paying attention to both the discursive meanings of place and space, and the ways in which typical notions of home become subject to change. I draw on data gathered during the course of this research to illustrate the ways in which these discursive meanings both reinforce and resist hegemonic notions of home. Blunt and Dowling's (2006) work reflects on home as an open place of intersecting emotional and social relations. They view home as 'multi-scalar', neither private nor public but a combination of the two.

Cartesian binaries and western thought

In the past, normative notions of femininity instructed women to maintain family relationships and manage the home. Furthermore, it was *expected* that women and young girls fulfil these roles within the family. To resist these expectations was unthinkable. Indeed, it would have been considered 'unnatural' for a woman *not* to conform to a particular performance of gender, especially when at home. Today, however, it is not so uncommon for women to demonstrate resistance to traditional gender stereotypes but it is also important to note that even in contemporary times, it can still sometimes be considered improper for women to resist or

challenge particular social norms. For example, Gran (aged 58 and the eldest participant in this study) makes the following statement after I asked her what she thought about common phrases such as “a woman’s place is in the home”:

Ah, they're dated. They're like old movies, some are still relevant but some movies made way, way back are still really good today and others haven't survived the test of time. I like watching old movies. I like all of the old John Wayne's, any of those old ones and then going back to the 30's but I couldn't stand *Gone with the Wind*. I watched it and it never grabbed me and it hasn't dated well. Hasn't dated and I think some of those sayings are like that but I think some of them are very relevant. I throw them at the kids all the time. Some adjust with time and others are timeless. It's actually a good way of looking at how times have changed and then you also get the ones that were made before their time. Catherine Hepburn was ahead of her time playing the independent female, strong female leading roles and thinking for herself. Whereas, today she would fit right in, but back then she did movies that no other leading lady would touch because of this problem. So she was ahead of her time.

Here, Gran recalls early movies in which Catherine Hepburn starred as a strong and independent woman. Gran's remark is useful because it shows that she has an understanding of the political implications of these types of roles for women, especially in earlier periods. McDowell (1999 34) states that the most immediate 'place' is the body, and “although geographers might not readily think of the body as a place, it is one”. Gran was born in the late 1940s when there was a much greater degree of social control that was directed at young women in particular, especially in relation to how they should look and behave.

Mitch is 36 years old and works as an administrator in the field of Information Technology. She has two children who live primarily with their father but stay with her and her de facto partner during the weekends. I asked Mitch what she thinks about sayings like 'a woman's place is in the home', and she states:

Oh, they make me laugh. I would use them jokingly as well but more in a sarcastic kind of way. But [the kids are] used to Simon being the person that cooks all the meals. So for them, there's a role reversal already, and they've had their dad of course cooking all their meals for quite a large portion of their small lives anyway. And their granddad cooks most of their meals because he's home during the day more than [their grandmother]. So I think for them, that whole concept of what 'a woman's place is in the home' is going to be significantly different to anything that we grew up with, as opposed to what our mums grew up with and what they were *expected* to be in the home.

Both Gran and Mitch's comments in relation to discourses of gender highlight the level of awareness that women can and do have in relation to temporal shifts in gender relations. Nast and Pile (1998) contend that individuals' experience life as culturally, historically, and geographically centred beings. It is evident from Gran's statement that she very much admires Catherine Hepburn's independence and mentions that "today she would fit right in" because as Gran suggests, times have changed for women and it is now more common for women to resist conforming to traditional values.

Schott and Thomas (2008 41) state that it is common for women gamers to be thought of as somewhat 'different'. For instance, at one point during this study, I was catching a taxi to the airport after having just presented

my research at a conference. During the taxi ride I had the opportunity to discuss my work with the cab driver. We began to talk about common stereotypes and what it means to be a 'woman at home' when the driver said "I don't know much about gaming really but wouldn't a girl who games be more like a tom-boy?" The driver then went on to explain that he thought it was alright for women to be tom-boys. This conversation is interesting because it is an excellent example of how gaming is predominantly thought of as a male oriented activity, and also how women who choose to participate in this activity can be thought of as 'out of the ordinary'.

Why women game

Although there are an increasing number of women who are now choosing to participate in gaming, gaming environments continue to be viewed predominantly as masculine spaces (Krotoski 2005). Therefore, in this section I examine some of the reasons for women's participation in gaming.

Taylor (2003) states that previous studies have shown that women gamers in general, prefer the socialisation and ethical quandaries of games, whereas 'guy gamers' like the raw power they are able to exert in them. It is not my intention to refute this claim. In fact, for six participants, being able to socialise with their friends in an on-line gaming environment is incredibly important to them. However, this rationale simply does not apply to women such as Gran and Talon, who prefer to play games off-line.

Therefore, each woman interviewed was asked the question: why do you like to game and what do you get from it? Figure 4.1 lists each participant's response.

Reasons for gaming	
Talon	Escapism, zone out, destress, relax.
Suzy	Feels like I'm achieving something. Stops boredom and I enjoy it.
Gran	Relaxation, pleasure, mental stimulation, knitting bores me, never liked joining clubs, keeps your mind active, entertainment - some people get that going for hike but I get that from gaming.
Mitch	Responsibilities as Guild Leader, experiencing achievements in-game, the thrill of taking down a big boss, and catching up with friends on-line.
Wendy	Hobby, it's no different than playing sport. It's something that I enjoy doing.
Sheryl	Time out, and switching my mind off from other things that might be worrying me.
Mika	Gaming is a bit addictive, experiencing progress in games, not into sporty stuff, got a young one at home so have to hang around home and may as well jump online and occupy time that way.
Jordan	Nice and warm at home, can be myself, or be with friends - depends on your mood, you can do whatever you want, it's just a break away from the real world and go off into fantasy land and have fun.

Figure 4.1 Reasons for gaming

As demonstrated in Figure 4.1, each participant has given some thought as to why they like gaming, and all offer more than one answer. Gran for instance, reflects on why gaming as an activity suits her, stating she has never been the sort of person who likes the idea of joining clubs and other activities such as knitting bore her. She also views gaming from a health perspective, stating that it helps to keep her mind active. In my interview with Jordan, she talked a lot about gaming as an arena where anything is possible. Being able to game in an on-line environment and interact socially with other players is an important aspect of gaming for Jordan.

Gaming gives Jordan a sense of liberation and empowerment and this is reflected in the ways in which she chooses to represent herself in the virtual world via her avatars. Jordan also states that she would not know what she would do without a computer. This particular statement reflects how gaming and technology have become an integral part of Jordan's life at home.

Out of all of the participants, Sheryl spends the least amount of time gaming (six hours per week) but stated emphatically during our interview that she would like to spend more time gaming. Sheryl likes to game because it allows her to take her mind off issues that might be worrying her. Similarly, Talon chooses to utilize gaming as a way of escaping or 'zoning out' from the real world. Both of these women prioritised their work over and above gaming, and consciously choose to use gaming as a way to 'unwind' and relax.

Suzy associates gaming primarily with achievement. She does not view her time spent in-game as a waste because as she games, her virtual character gains higher skill levels. As a result, her character becomes stronger and more competent overall. Suzy in turn, internalises this achievement and makes it her own.

On the one hand, Wendy describes gaming as a hobby, comparing it to playing a sport, which she sees as being practically the same as gaming. On the other hand, Mika states that she enjoys gaming specifically

because she is not a 'sporty' person. Both Wendy and Mika, however, are currently spending between ten to 15 hours per week, and both stated that they would like to spend more time gaming if they could.

Mitch now plays an important role within her on-line guild as their Guild Leader, and she gets a lot of enjoyment through socialising with her on-line friends. Mitch also games with her partner and views gaming as an activity that allows them to share a common interest. However, she also stated that if her partner did not game, she probably would not game either. This suggests that Mitch's real world relationship with her partner takes priority over her on-line relationships.

Highlighting the various benefits of gaming for different women illustrates how home space and virtual space blend to produce cyber/space. It is important to note, however, that gaming is not always a positive experience for some women. For example, previous research shows that women gamers are often subjected to nasty verbal harassments (Wakeford 1999). Participants Nikki and Jordan reported experiencing severe levels of harassment. Jordan's experience upset her so much that she actually stopped gaming for a period of time. She explains:

I was the Guild Master and I had two sets of friends that were fighting and I was trying to be diplomatic but they were like 'well you're the guild master. You should be sorting this out', and I was like 'well if I side with one lot of friends then the other lot of friends isn't gonna be happy'. Then one of them started saying 'this is why your real life is a mess' and this and that and the other thing, and it just got really personal even though I've never met him before. He just got really personal, attacking me and I was like 'Whoa!' My whole thing was, 'it's just a game'. Don't bring all this aggro

to a game, in which you are supposed to be playing to relax and have fun. That's why I stopped playing for five months because I couldn't be bothered with all that crap. But it's a lot better now because that particular person is not [gaming] on that server anymore.

All of other the participants, however, reported having less traumatic but still troublesome experiences, where other gamers used joking and offensive language, which succeeded in making them feel uncomfortable and 'out' of place. Work by Schott and Thomas (2008) highlights the ways in which gaming culture continues to be 'policed by hostile males', who wish to exclude 'others' from entering their territory. They state:

It does not take a great deal of effort to unearth on-line accounts provided by females, of harassment experience for being female whilst playing games (Shott and Thomas 2008 43).

Given the extent of discrimination that women gamers are subjected to (coming from both the gendered assumptions of game designs and the masculine discourses that dominate gaming spaces), it is of interest to explore the reasons why women choose to game. With the examples presented in this chapter, understanding why these women choose to game does not make the issue any less complicated. Rather, it has the potential to raise even more questions that are pertinent to each woman's experience of cyber/space. One thing that does become clear, however, is that they do not game for just one reason. Rather, they game for many different reasons. It is also evident that women gamers remain intimately and inextricably linked to their real world environment – home. In other words, while they game they do not disassociate or disconnect

themselves from their families. Instead, they experience gaming in a ways that highlight the interconnected two-way relationship that exists between real and virtual worlds.

Homes as gendered spaces

One of the common themes in this thesis is the idea that places are gendered. Therefore, all places are capable of (re)producing particular standards of behaviour. Home is a particularly important place in the construction of gendered spaces and subjectivities. In this sense, home is understood as a place that is intimately tied to a person's sense of self (Massey and Jess 1995). Furthermore, it is now recognised that houses are designed with 'inbuilt' ideas about gendered spaces (Valentine 2001).

Blunt and Dowling (2006 3) suggest:

Whilst house and household are components of home, on their own they do not capture the complex socio-spatial relations and emotions that define home. A house is not necessarily nor automatically a home, and personal relations that constitute home extend beyond those of the household.

Homes are typified as heterosexual spaces which produce nuclear families, and most spaces inside a home are constructed as feminine. For women, there is strong discursive connection linking them to home, in such a way that makes it seem as though they are in place while at home (Cresswell 1999). For example, spaces such as kitchens, dining rooms, and laundries are discursively constructed as feminine and it is common-place for chores such as cooking and cleaning to be referred to as 'women's work'. It continues to be common-place in many households for

most of the chores to be left to women to carry out (Domosh and Seager 2001).

Jordan is 31 years old and works in a retail store. She lives at home with her two sons (aged ten and 14) and her older sister, with whom she has a close relationship. Jordan believes that they have a good system for maintaining their home. Her sons are responsible for keeping their rooms tidy and Jordan shares most of the other the household chores with her sister. In the past, however, it had been slightly more complicated, as the following remark by Jordan illustrates:

[My sister has] been here 15 months and we had another border during that time, and he'd cook every third night but that was it. He wouldn't do anything else. He wouldn't do the dishes, wouldn't tidy up the house. He would keep his room clean because he played WOW [World of Warcraft¹⁴]. He'd go to work, come home, play WOW - that was it. So ever since he's left we've gotten into a routine where we cook every second night and do dishes and try to keep the place clean.

Massey's (1995) work on dualisms, masculinity and high technology, contends that it is acceptable for men to *not* be good at carrying out chores around the home. Furthermore, Massey states that men (who work) tend to be much more dismissive about domestic labour and men will often leave a chore until it *needs* to be done. While this is true for many men, it is also true for many women who may, for instance, prioritise paid work outside of the home over domestic work at home. However, in these situations women are challenged more often than men, which is often due to traditional norms and values that have become embedded in

¹⁴ *World of Warcraft* (WoW) is a Massive Multi-player On-line Role Playing Game (MMORPG).

Western thought (ibid.). After Jordan's experience of having a border, she explained that she is much more appreciative of the reciprocal relationship that she and her sister have developed.

The idea that men and women are better suited to particular roles is common in many Western cultures. Valentine (2001 66) suggests:

Women were perceived as having the sort of emotional qualities necessary to nurture families and run the house (i.e. gentle, mild, passive, whereas men were seen as fiery, active, aggressive and so more suited to the public world of work. Soon the idea that a mother/wife was necessary for the healthy functioning of the family home became an accepted 'norm'.

Home was, and continues to be, an "idealised centre for emotional life ... where the burdens of nurturing and caring for others were placed on the shoulders of women" (McDowell 1999 75). In comparison, men seem to have a lesser connection to home. For men, there are few places inside a home where they could be considered to be 'in' place (Butler 1990). In fact, when men do occupy spaces such as the laundry or kitchen, they are much more likely to be viewed as 'out' of place and often receive praise due to their *extraordinary* efforts.

There are some places, such as the garage, basement or outside yard, which are typically thought of as masculine spaces (Longhurst 2000). These places, however, are either positioned outside of the house, or away from the living areas in a home. Traditionally, the 'den' was referred to as a masculine space inside a home. Ironically, however, 'dens' are often referred to as caves, where men can retreat in order to gain 'peace

of mind' and structured quiet (Spain 1992). Modern day 'dens' might include places such as the study, library, office, or computer room, however, these contemporary 'dens' are not necessarily thought of as isolated or 'male-only' spaces anymore, as they are increasingly being occupied by women (Butler 1990). Butler's work is particularly relevant as it identifies various possibilities in relation to transgressions of gender binaries through cultural practices.

Conforming to, or subverting gender norms?

Sharp *et al.* (2000) argue that although dominant imaginations of home portray a place filled with positive connotations, it is also one of the primary locations where the marginalisation, oppression and abuse of women takes place. However, according to hooks (1991), home can also be a key site in the formation of resistance, and states that homes are spaces where people can gain a sense of self-dignity and solidarity, and also organise and conceptualise forms of resistance. For, even in seemingly safe places (such as homes), difference, silence, distance, and violence can be present. Pile and Keith (1997) highlight the ways in which place and space everywhere are affected by relationships of power and geographies of resistance.

The material effects of power are everywhere. Or, maybe, one of power's most pervasive effects is that it seems to be everywhere – for better or for worse. It matters that power *seems* to be everywhere, but wherever we look, power is open to gaps, tears, inconsistencies, ambivalences, possibilities for inversion, mimicry, parody and so on, open, that is, to more than one geography of resistance (Pile and Keith 1997 27 italics in original).

Pile and Keith (ibid.) recognise that locations become places through the territorial politics of power. In the same way, homes are also territorialised locations. At home, power means having control over the regulation of space and to influence how a space should be lived in, even in ways which contradict dominant ideals. For instance, women who game at home contradict this ideal.

Suzy is 49 years old and lives at home with her husband and three children. She considers herself to be a housewife and a mother but she is also a gamer. Each week Suzy spends about 80 hours (on average) gaming. In many previous gaming studies (such as, Jansz and Martens 2005; and Royse *et al.* 2007), 80 hours per week would be considered to be a significant amount of time for any person to spend in-game. Some studies categorise and label gamers according to how much time they spend gaming per week. According Royse *et al.* (2007 557), Suzy would be placed in a high-end category and labelled a 'power user'. For many gamers, this would mean that they might spend most of their waking hours gaming and not have very much time left over to spend on other things. Yet during my interview with Suzy, she emphasised on several occasions how important the care of her family was to her, and she placed a great deal of significance on her role within the family as their main caregiver. For example, Suzy's daily routines are structured around her family's needs and not around her enjoyment of gaming, which the following section of transcript illustrates:

Cherie: Some people might think that gaming takes a person away from their life, their primary

responsibilities around the home, would you agree or disagree?

Suzy: Not my responsibilities around the home because I always do those, and gaming for me is pretty much timed.

Suzy also explained that for her, 80 hours per week is possible because she does not require more than six hours sleep at night. While her children sleep and her husband works, Suzy games for several hours each night. During the day, she also finds time to game while her husband sleeps and while the children are at school. Despite the sheer number of hours Suzy spends gaming, she is adamant that her first priority is to her family and home. Out of the eight participants interviewed, Suzy spends the most time gaming each week but she also emphasises her role as housewife and caregiver more so than any other participant. This is obviously a genuine concern for Suzy, however, I do wonder if her concern is due, in part, to Suzy's wariness of others' criticism of her spending long hours gaming. In fact, seven out of the eight participants' were familiar with implied criticisms, such as 'the look', which Suzy describes:

Suzy: Most think it's a bit weird. They go [Suzy mimics 'the look' with her head turned side-ways look and her eyebrows raised]. They give me that shocked look.

In the following discussion, I ask Suzy what would happen if she (hypothetically) just stopped cooking, cleaning, and other chores. She replied:

Suzy: (*laughs*) Well, my husband would get very upset. He's had one day where he was a bit shitty with me and it's like, I wasn't really...I think he thought I wasn't really pulling my weight that day.

Cherie: What were you doing?

Suzy: Oh I was gaming (*laughter*). Usually he's really supportive but I think he was having a day where he was feeling a bit...and I know there have been a couple of days where he felt I wasn't paying *him* enough attention but if he comes over and makes an effort then...I mean then I will pay attention to him but he's not here at night anyway and he sleeps a lot during the day and so then he wants the attention as soon as he gets up. I usually turn the computer off as soon as he gets up and it's not on for me to game when he comes home, so I try to give him the attention but on the weekends I like to play on the weekends because if he's having the weekend off, why can't I?

Towards the end of the interview, Suzy and I talked about some of the stereotypical notions that are captured in sayings like 'a woman's place is in the home'. This prompted Suzy to discuss particular aspects of her relationship with her husband which illustrate her awareness of inequalities in relation to performances of gender.

Cherie: When we grow up we hear stuff like 'a woman's place is in the kitchen'. What do you think about these types of sayings?

Suzy: People do have that expectation. I was brought up a little bit differently so it's a bit hard to say because it wasn't quite the same. But my husband, even though he helps a lot, he still has those expectations...yeah. He works really long hours and he's really good at his work and he's also really good at helping by picking up the vacuum cleaner and stuff like that but at the same time, he doesn't see anything wrong with coming home and putting the TV on and just sitting in front of the TV and doing nothing. Hasn't said 'can I help you?' Hasn't said 'should I do this?' Hasn't just picked up something, and sometimes he'll go 'oh this floor needs vacuuming', as if it's my job. And then I ignore him.

Cherie: So it would be fair to say that you're expected to be a certain way when you're at home?

Suzy: Yeah, even...like even when I'm working. When I was full-time as a student, I was still expected to do the same job.

Suzy's comments highlight an awareness of existing gender relations in the home. Suzy mentions that the same level of nurturing and care is still expected of her even when she is involved in paid employment or part-time study. Valentine (2001: 79) points out that people 'at work' are interrupted less often than someone who works at home. This is because house work is often not thought of as real work.

Despite the increased participation of women in employment, the home continues to be regarded as a safe haven for the family, and for many people there is still an expectation that women should continue to fulfil their 'natural' roles as nurturers of family and home (McDowell 1999; and Valentine 2001). Suzy's statement (above) reflects the burden of having to perform the same amount of work at home even when she has taken on work outside of the home. However, this is not a new phenomenon, as previous studies show that many women feel conflicted when having to fulfil two or more roles, as mothers, caregivers, housekeepers, students, and also wage/salary earners (McDowell 1999; and Longhurst 2000). All of the women gamers interviewed demonstrated that they were very familiar with managing their time and prioritising particular jobs around the house, in order to find time to game. They were, however, also familiar with putting chores off in order to game. It is important to note, however, that most participants spoke about their 'avoidance' to chores in such a

way gave the impression that they viewed this as a form of neglect to their families and responsibilities at home.

Nikki is 34 years old and works in the field of Information Technology. She lives at home with her (male) partner, son (aged 8), and younger brother. Nikki carries out most of the household chores but job-shares the cooking with her partner. Nikki is part of a household where all of the members within it like to game, however, there is only one computer that is used for gaming and it is situated in the lounge. As a result, there are sometimes debates over whose turn it is to be on the computer. In the following transcript, Nikki talks about how she sometimes puts off daily chores so that she can spend more time gaming:

You need to get your shit together and do other things or it will be 'oh I should have got into the garden, or oh I should have mown the lawns, or oh shit, my washings still on the line'. But then I might go 'oh well it's still going to be there tomorrow' (*laughs*). So, yeah it does take you away from your responsibilities a bit.

Nikki's comment suggests that (on some levels) she thinks that she might be somewhat inattentive to her family and her responsibilities around the home. Nikki, however, does not view this as a serious issue because all of the family members within the home like to spend time gaming. Nikki's family members manage to share their gaming time at home and consequently, they have a more relaxed attitude about gaming activities even when it is disruptive to family routine.

Interestingly, the majority of the women interviewed for this study preferred to stay within the communal areas of their homes when they game. Seven out of the eight situate themselves in either the dining area or lounge room of their homes. Talon is the only participant who chooses to game in her bedroom, away from communal areas. It is interesting to note, however, that Talon was the only participant who did not have children. Also, of the eight participants interviewed, she was the only woman to state that she did less housework than her other family members:

[I do] the laundry...oh not even that really. Put my clothes away. Clean the bathroom and the toilet and that's about it (*laughs*). 'Living the dream man.' Everything else is done.

Talon's comment illustrates that she is aware of how uncommon her situation is in comparison to other women, however, she also has very strong opinions about gamers who lose themselves in games and fail to accomplish anything else in real life. Talon explains:

If you're sitting on computer for 48 hours over the weekend, what are you getting done? ... Nothing. You know, how does the room clean itself? The laundry doesn't clean itself and if you're stupid enough to sit there and do that for all of your spare time then that's what's going to happen. You just game out all the time.

Talon chooses to game so that she can 'zone out' and relax but only during the weekends. Throughout the week she organises her time so that work takes priority, which in turn, ensures that she has enough spare time in the weekends for gaming. Although Talon acknowledges that she does the least amount of chores at home, she also shows that she is very adept

at managing both her working hours and the household chores so that there is enough time spare in the weekends for gaming.

Wendy is 31 years old and is a stay-at-home housewife. She lives with her partner and is expecting her first child. Before becoming pregnant, Wendy completed a degree in Information Technology and also worked as a receptionist. During our interview Wendy mentioned that sitting and watching the television at home is something that many people view as an acceptable form of leisure (see, for example, work by Adams (1992) and Flynn (2003)). Wendy, however, prefers to game rather than watch television because she sees gaming as a more productive activity.

Wendy: To be honest, if you keep your house to a point where all it takes is a couple of minutes in the morning just to load the dishwasher and press the start button, what is there left for the rest of the day? I only have to mow once a week, so what else do I do? I don't want to sit and watch TV. To be honest, I consider playing computer games a little bit more constructive than sitting there watching *Tyra* or *Oprah*. At least when you're playing you feel like you are actually achieving something, whereas sitting on the TV, munching away on the cookies and cream mallowpuffs, you're not getting anywhere. At least if I was sitting there playing my WOW, I'd be getting my characters levelled up or working on a profession or just achieving something.

Unlike Nikki, who sometimes puts off doing housework for another time, Wendy sees household chores as being more important than gaming but does *confess* to sometimes being a little late with dinner when her husband is arriving home from work (as the following comment shows):

Cherie: Do you ever feel like your real life activities might be interfering with your game time?

Wendy: All the time (*laughs*), all the time. Sitting there playing a game and all of a sudden I realise 'oh it's four o'clock, bugger! I have to start cooking dinner now' and 'what am I cooking for dinner tonight?' - Rice risotto. 'Yeah, I know how long that takes. I'll just give myself 20 minutes more'. I just keep going a little bit longer and usually end up being a little bit late. 'Took a little longer to chop the onions than I thought it would dear' (*laughs*).

On one hand, several participants (including Suzy, Gran and Sheryl) stated that they take full responsibility for taking care of the home by doing almost all of the cooking and cleaning. On the other hand, four participants (Talon, Mitch, Nikki and Jordan) actively job shared (in different ways and to varying degrees) particular chores with their respective partners and other family members.

In many Western households, masculine pursuits are given greater importance. For example, when men undertake 'homely' tasks such as cooking and cleaning there tends to be a greater emphasis placed on the importance of what is being accomplished. Whereas tasks completed by women are often 'taken-for-granted' and overlooked. In some households, however, contradictory gender differences can be present. For instance, Mitch and her partner divide their household chores equally but Mitch's partner does most of the cooking because she does not like to cook.

Mitch: I have been sitting at my desk thinking 'I'll do cheese toast first', and I'll be at my desk playing on-line and I'll go 'oh my god, I can smell burning!' (*laughs*). And then I look around and the kitchen's full of smoke because I'm burning my cheese toast.

Mitch also went on to state that although her partner does all of the cooking, “every now and again he stomps his foot and says he’s had enough of cooking and I’ll do it. Or if he’s unwell I cook”. Mitch also cooks when she is at home alone but “can’t be bothered cooking a hot meal for one”, and prefers to “live on toast and peanut butter”.

Family relationships and performances of gender

Social constructions of home can affect the ways in which a place is lived in, and also how it is presented to other people, such as visitors (Johnston 1996). For example, during my interview with Jordan, she revealed that when her parents visit her at home, she chooses not to let them see her on the computer at all. Of course, it would be perfectly reasonable to argue that most people would choose not to game or even be on a computer when visitors are present, simply because it is unsociable, or even rude. This is true for Jordan also, however, it is also coupled with her belief that her parents are disapproving of her gaming activities. She explains:

They don’t say it directly to me but because when my sister was living with her partner and he played WOW [*World of Warcraft*]...you know, he’d come home from work, he’d play WOW. And my boarder, he’d come home from work, he’d play WOW. So they came over to visit and he was always in his room, you know, unsocial kind of thing. They’d comment on that, [saying that he] ‘should be doing other things instead of playing that stupid game’. So they didn’t actually say it about me because when they were here I didn’t play WOW (*laughs*). I didn’t go near my computer just in case I got in trouble. But yeah I don’t talk about my gaming to them because they don’t understand.

Both of Jordan's sons participate in gaming activities. Her sister, however, does not like gaming at all. Jordan made the following comment when I asked her if her sister also gamed:

Oh no, her partner left her for a chick he met on WOW [*World of Warcraft*]. He went to America and he's been there for about 15 months. So he broke up with her [my sister] after eight years, then went over to America to be with this chick he'd never met. So she hates gaming with a vengeance (*laughs*) and won't go near it.

Given Jordan's sister's experience, it is not surprising that she dislikes gaming in general. What is interesting, however, are the ways in which Jordan (and the other women gamers) choose to manage other people's negative views of gaming. For example, Jordan made the following comment when I asked her:

Cherie: Has anyone ever tried to discourage you from gaming?

Jordan: Oh yeah of course! (*laughs*) I started seeing a guy and he had no interest in gaming at all so he'd try and make me do other things and just try and keep me from being on the computer at all, and I hate people telling me what to do. I mean okay I wouldn't play when he was here and if he turned up I would stop playing but I wouldn't completely stop (*laughs*).

Studies show that gaming activities within homes between men and women, and boys and girls possessed elements of unequal access and opportunity, and furthermore:

Gaming rights appeared to be embedded in existing social dynamics and gender hierarchies, a conclusion that was supported further by findings that relate to the way gaming becomes an issue within household politics (Schott and Horrell 20004).

A recent study by Schott and Thomas (2008 43) pays attention to the ways in which women gamers experience barriers to on-line game-play, stating that women are sometimes harassed by “hostile males wising to defend what they perceive as their territory”. This study also revealed that the level of parity in gaming is heavily weighted against women both on-line and at home. Regardless of these conflicts, however, more women in the Western world are choosing to become involved in gaming every year. This rising statistic is confirmed by Krotoski (2005) who states that in 1993 women made up 53 percent of the total on-line gaming population. By 2004 the number of adult women gamers (both on-line and off-line) was higher than the figure for boys aged 6-17.

Gran is an excellent example of how women gamers resist dominant discourses. Gran’s identity – that is, who she is, is performed in a manner that goes against Western society’s socio-cultural ideals of how a woman of her age *should* behave. Gran knows that her actions transgress acceptable ‘norms’ for someone of her age and she is used to others of her own age group judging her negatively because of it. Gran explains:

Most people just accept me for who I am. Some people of my own age ... well most people of my own age look at me funny, while others say, ‘good for you’. I think there is a stereotype of what you're expected to be all throughout your life, like at whatever age you're at and the older you get the more you're supposed to be wise, knowledgeable and accepting and not step out of this area that people have of what you are with your age. And when the [grand]kids say at school, ‘Gran’s played that, I’ll ask her for you’. [Then their friends say], ‘Your Grandma plays?! Oh cool!’ So the young ones think it’s cool. And they tell their parents or their grandparents and [Gran mimics whispering] ‘oh my goodness, she doesn’t play those things does she?!’ And so

you get that type of thing, and I just say 'I'm a Gran of this century'. I don't knit or sew but I do bake now.

Gran's connection with gaming is quite remarkable for a number of reasons. Firstly, Gran is an independent and forthright woman, who gains a sense of empowerment from gaming. Her preferred gaming genres are First Person Shooter¹⁵ (FPS) games and role-playing action games¹⁶ (see, for example, Figure 4.2). These genres, however, are most commonly associated with providing individuals the gaming experience of an uncomplicated masculine identity, which rarely challenges hegemonic

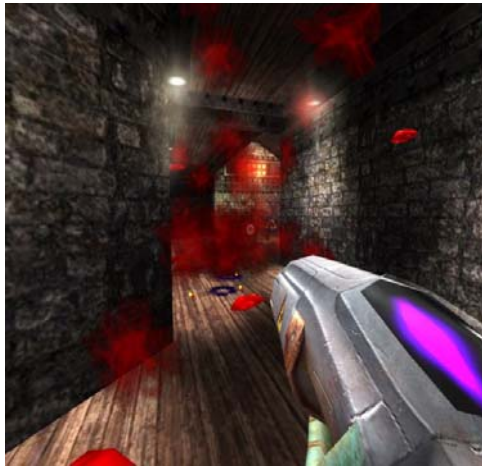


Figure 4.2 Screenshot from the First Person Shooter (FPS) game *Doom*.

sexist stereotypes.¹⁷ For Gran, however, gaming allows her the opportunity to resist conforming to *expected* performances of gender, and provides her with a space where she has the freedom to express herself as she chooses.

There is a growing body of research which looks at the ways in which gaming affects household relationships (see, for example, the website Gamerwidows.com for forum discussion and links to published articles).

¹⁵ First Person Shooter (FPS) games are most well known for their screen angles, where all the player sees of themselves is their hands holding a gun and looking down the barrel (see Figure 4.2).

¹⁶ Role-playing action games are very similar to FPS games, except role-playing games allow more options for alteration of avatar appearances. Also, unlike FPS games, the player is able to see the entire body of their avatar on the screen.

¹⁷ The image used in Figure 4.2 was retrieved 1 March, 2008 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First-person_shooter

Much of this research sits outside of the discipline of geography and tends to focus mainly on levels of gaming addiction and/or abuse (see, for example, Griffiths 2000; and Ng and Weimer-Hastings 2005).

Feminist geographers Holloway and Valentine (2003) have recently begun to examine the effects of video gaming on family relationships. While I am aware that 'addiction' may be a factor for participants in this study, it is not a primary focus. Out of the eight women gamers interviewed, only Nikki drew attention to the fact, that for her, gaming was 'a bit addictive'. However, the time that Nikki actually spends gaming each week (six to ten hours), would suggest that addiction is not an issue for her at present (Royse *et al.* 2007). Overall, Nikki has the second lowest score in relation to how much time she spends gaming but also suggested (jokingly) during our interview that she might spend more time gaming if it was not for both her husband and son competing with her for use of the computer. When I asked Nikki if anyone had ever tried to discourage her from gaming, she replied: "[My husband] when he wants a go (*laughs*) but otherwise, no. Or [my son] when he wants a go, or if he's hungry".

Five out of the eight women in this study have (male) partners. Interestingly, all of their partners game, however, it is crucial to note that none of their partners game more than they do. Overall, two participants (Talon and Mitch) spend around the same number of hours as their partners gaming each week. Suzy, Wendy, and Nikki, however, all spend more time gaming than their respective partners. Although this is not a

representative study, this is a surprising discovery because many studies have shown that overall, men and boys typically spend much longer hours gaming than women and girls (see, for example, work by Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Schott and Horrell 2000; and Schott and Thomas 2008).

Schott and Horrell's (2000) research showed that women gamers generally avoided male dominated gaming environments (such as internet cafés and LAN events) preferring to play video games at home, where they felt less exposed to critiques from other male players. However, their examination also reveals that the time adults spent gaming differed according to gender. They explain:

For adult gamers it would seem that male gaming habits compete with other activities while girl gamers' gaming is often consigned to second place following housework. Therefore, for adult gamers it appeared that gaming slots into the existing nexus of domestic power (Schott and Horrell 2000 49).

Schott and Horrell (ibid.) go on to state that there is a need for further investigation because women appear to experience greater limitations and barriers to game-play. Wendy and Nikki are the only women gamers in this study that stated they do not recall a time when anyone has ever tried to discourage them from gaming. When I asked Gran if anyone ever tried to dampen her enthusiasm for gaming, she replied:

Oh, I've got the little comments like 'oh you're still playing that stupid thing?' But the people who make those comments, I just go 'I don't care'. So I don't leave and think of it as...I just think 'to each his own'. You do your thing, I do my thing. I don't gamble, you know?

Gran's comment illustrates an instance that six out of the eight women interviewed had experienced, where another person had subtly implied a negative attitude towards their participation in games. Gran stated that for her gaming is a good way of keeping her "mind ticking over", and she is also of the opinion that it could be of benefit to many other elderly people, especially those with ailments like memory problems, alchemizes, or just for those who would like more mental stimulation. Gran also believes gaming is a good way for her grandchildren to improve their hand-eye coordination skills. Overall, six of the eight women interviewed for this study have children, and in accordance with their own household customs, all of them (Suzy, Gran, Sheryl, Mika, Mitch and Jordan) allow their children to game. Participants such as Gran and Suzy actively encourage their family members to game in ways that are intended to promote and strengthen family relationships as well as enhance levels of interaction and communication with their children and also with their family as a whole.

Summary

In this chapter, I have shown that both understandings and performances of gender appropriate behaviour (for men and women at home) continue to be influenced by dominant values and norms embedded in Western thought. For instance, dominant imaginations of gender roles tend to put women 'in' place and put men 'out' of place in the home environment (Bondi 2005; and McDowell 1999).

This chapter provides numerous examples that highlight the ways in which women gamers experience home. They do not disconnect from their physical environments. Rather, as gamers they are intimately and inextricably entangled within complex socio-cultural relationships that span across both real and virtual worlds.

Haraway (1991) contends that we are already cyborgs, she does not mean to imply that we are all robots. Rather, Haraway believes that the relationship between people and technology is now so intimate that it is often difficult to discern where machines and people end and begin. Furthermore, given that the boundaries between the technological and the 'natural' have collapsed, then so should the many assumptions that are connected with these terms. It is this interconnected and two-way relationship that people share with technology that I examine further in the next chapter.

5. CYBER/SPACE – THE INTERSECTION OF TWO WORLDS

[c]yberspace is a performative space, one where new subject positions are 'tried out' in and through practices of everyday life and these acts, or fabrications, produce over time an identity 'effect' (Thrift and Dewsbury 2000 412 quoted in Madge and O'Connor 2005 85).

The notion that cyber/space is a performative liminal space is key to understanding the subjectivities of women gamers. Madge and O'Connor (2005) argue that cyber/space is neither entirely separate from physical societal spaces nor is it wholly representative of these spaces. Rather, it is understood within its context, that is, as a space that is 'inbetween' places. Furthermore, cyber/space (once thought of as a space of disconnected and disembodied experience) is also increasingly being recognised as a place that is experienced *through* the body. As such, cyber/space is also subject to a myriad of real world entanglements such as physical place, representation, identity and politics (see, for example, work by Crang *et al.* 1999). Butler (1990) argues that gendered identities are *always* created out of fluid, dynamic, performances, whether simulated or real. In the same sense, I argue that gamers share an embodied identity with their characters in virtual worlds, and as such virtual environments mirror many real world dominant values and norms in relation to gendered identities.

Dominant imaginations of what gaming represents is greatly influenced by the media. However, media representations tend to portray gamers as either boys or men, and women are often depicted as inferior or sexualised subjects. Subsequently, the dominant stereotype of a gamer, is

not linked to images of women over the age of 30 (Royse *et al.* 2007). Regardless of the inferior and highly sexualised positioning of women within gaming culture, some women still choose to participate in gaming.

In this chapter, I draw on interview data and explore the ways in which women negotiate their way through cyber/space. First, I reflect further on the positioning of cyber/space with homes, as it is important to illustrate the ways in which virtual and real spaces intersect. Second, I discuss the notion of cyber/space as a performative space, one which simultaneously reflects and opposes real world dominant values. I draw on data that aide in illustrating how 'cyber/space' can become a space for challenging and resisting dominant real world values and norms. Third, I explore participants' views on (re)presentations of the self in virtual environments. This is followed by a discussion that reflects on how gender is typically portrayed in virtual games and how women gamers interpret these images. Finally, I return to the main theme of cyber/space and conclude by illustrating how home and its family members are not excluded from the virtual experience of gamers, rather, they become an integral part of these women's subjective gaming experiences.

Positioning cyber/space and everyday life

It is relatively easy to begin to argue that the physical body is sometimes forgotten in virtual space, and seek to recall it as an academic project. It is less easy to understand how virtual space both enables a sense of technological disembodiment and yet simultaneously reconstitutes and reinforces the physical body (Parr 2002 75).

Conceptualising and understanding the interconnectedness of virtual and real worlds is often difficult. Featherstone and Burrows (1999 11) state that virtual and real worlds are often perceived as separate and distinct: “at one end we have ‘pure’ human beings and at the other fully simulated disembodied post-humans which can only exist in cyberspace”. Yet, this understanding does not account for the real feelings and intense emotional responses that a gamer may experience when certain events occur, such as the death of a virtual character, or when two people living in different countries fall in love through the interactions of their virtual avatars.

Recently, a growing number of authors have argued that if we are to gain a better insight into the interconnectivity between technology and everyday life, we need to first understand our interactions with virtual space as embodied activities (Crang *et al.* 1999; Madge and O’Connor 2005; and Parr 2002). Stone (1991 113) sums up the topic of embodiment succinctly when stating that “even in the age of the technosocial subject, life is lived through bodies”. In order to better illustrate this interconnectedness, I draw on the data gathered from interviews with eight women gamers.

Sharing women's experiences of gaming at home

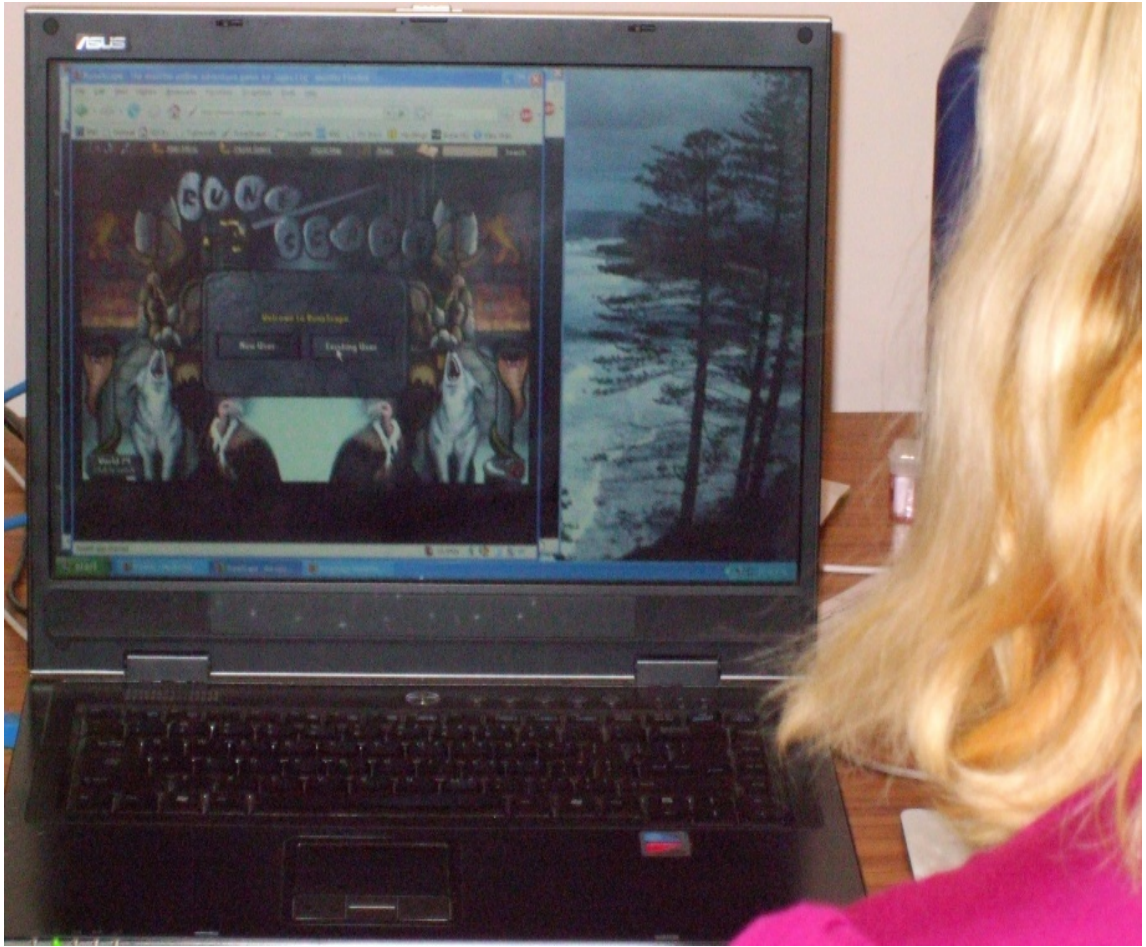


Figure 5.1 Suzy in front of her laptop at home, about to log-in to *RuneScape*.

When Suzy (age 49) games at home she chooses to situate herself in the centre of her house (in the dining and lounge area). Suzy stressed that this is important because it allows her to stay connected with her family whilst she is on the computer. Suzy emphasised that she would not allow her children to game alone or in isolation, as doing so would disrupt the level of connectedness that she is careful to maintain. Suzy also believes that it is good for her children to game but she has definite opinions about what types of games they play. As such, Suzy does not approve of competitive games and only allows the children to participate in games

that encourage group play and co-operation (such as *Buzz Junior* and *The Muppets*), which are played on the PlayStation2 console. Suzy also lets the children game with her on-line in *RuneScape* when both computers are set up. The following transcript illustrates this:

Suzy: I often play when we've got both computers set up. The kids and I will play together because the characters can react together in the game.

Cherie: And you're at home participating in a family activity?

Suzy: Yeah, as a family in an activity and we're talking on the computer as well as in real life and sometimes, particularly [my son] will say something on the computer that he wouldn't say out loud because he's twelve.

Cherie: So, would you say that the way that you game as a family enhances your communication within your family?

Suzy: Oh yeah.

Cherie: Or, do you think that it might sometimes take away from your time as a family?

Suzy: Oh no, this particular game adds to it. Some of the other games we've noticed take away.

For Suzy, particular games allow her to create extra opportunities for her family to spend time together in an activity that they all enjoy participating in. However, Valentine and Holloway (2001) argue that many parents have concerns about the safety of their children while they are involved in on-line activities. Their research concludes that the use of on-line computers emerged:

...in different ways in different households depending on parents' differential understandings of technology and conceptions of off-line and on-line space, family regimes and parenting styles, and differential levels of social and

technological competencies among household members. In this way, parents, children, and Internet-connected PCs mutually enrol, constitute, and order each other (ibid. 81).

Recent research examining video game play and its affects on families has shown that gaming can be beneficial and enhance communication among family members but only if it is applied and managed in a way that is intended for group play (Squire 2002). Suzy's previous comment shows that she has given due consideration to potentially positive and negative elements of gaming. For instance, she has noticed that certain games help improve vocabulary, especially for her eight year old son. However, other games that they have played have not been as conducive to group play and co-operation. Valentine and Holloway's (2002 306) work supports this and they contend that computers and other forms of interactive technologies play different roles for children within their different communities of practice, "and so emerge as very different tools, depending on the way different communities of practice make use of them".

For Gran, gaming is more than just playing games. Her 'love affair' with technology began at an early age. Gran recalls the first time that she ever saw a television in 1956. She was very young and she was walking home one day when she happened to see a television for the very first time in an electronic store front window. In this instance, Gran vividly recalls being filled with awe and running home as fast as she could to tell her mother all about it:

It's a box with pictures! I thought it was the most wonderful thing I had ever seen in my life and I ran home and I got my mother and my brother and said 'look at that', so we immediately got a TV and its been a love affair ever since.

To this day, Gran's 'love affair' with technology continues with the latest PlayStation3 gaming platform. Gran describes the first time she turned on her PlayStation3:

The graphics, when I first put it on, I noticed the difference. I had Christmas dinner in there and I came over here in the afternoon and I put on a disk and went 'oh look at that!' His flesh is falling off his bones, it's wonderful! It's so detailed and the heat was rising off the car engines and things like that in *Call to Duty*.

Gran's PlayStation3 is of great sentimental value to her because her daughter, son-in-law, and grandchildren bought it for her as a Christmas present the previous year. Gran refers to her PlayStation3 as a 'worship shrine'. When it is not in use, she covers it with a cloth so that it does not get dust on it. Gran identifies as an elderly woman, as a grandmother, and also as a gamer. She is also deeply aware that it is very unusual for an elderly woman to participate in gaming activities, especially role-playing action, or FPS games, which are written as combat based storylines involving violent scenarios. Being a gamer, however, is as much a part of Gran's identity as is being an older adult and a grandmother. In the following section, I offer an examination of cyber/space by drawing on interview data that highlights the ways in which women gamers view their virtual performances of self in comparison to their real world performances of self.

Cyber/space as a performative space

In geography, capturing the simultaneity between performance, performativity and performative spaces can at times be challenging. Madge and O'Connor (2005 85) state that "performance suggests an intentional conscious agent, that identities exist in order to act". Gregson and Rose (2000 433-34) also suggest that performativity is about what people say, do or 'act out'. For gamers like Gran, virtual space offers a new avenue for expressing oneself thorough difference and contestation. Yet, virtual space is inescapably influenced by our own understandings of gender performance. For instance, Haraway contends that:

Technology is not neutral. We're inside of what we make, and it's inside of us. We're living in a world of connections and it matters which get made and unmade (Haraway quoted in Kunzru 1997 6).

Haraway's statement is one that has been reiterated by many writers as scholars from various disciplines have argued that gender is an element that is embedded in technology. In other words, Haraway (ibid.) argues that technology is gendered even before it is even designed, and the gender in question is inevitably masculine (see, for example, work by Crang *et al.* 1999; de Castell and Bryson 1998; Featherstone and Burrows 1995; and Fron *et al.* 2007). There is a wealth of literature to support this claim and it has already been established that the culture of games privileges masculinist discourses. Take, for example, female avatars in games. Although there are more women avatars in games today, they are still an obvious minority and the majority of illustrations portray women as inferior and/or sexualised bodies (Dickey 2006).

Schott and Horrell (2000 37) reflect on how male game designers develop games in ways which preserve the traditional “male dominance within the gaming industry, which is informed by their own tastes and cultural assumptions”. Other writers, such as Dickey (2006 787), also argue that the present lack of female representation has “resulted in a ‘space’ that is too often designed to construct gameplayers as male subjects with female representations being the object of the male gaze”. It is now also well established that the majority of game designers and game players are men (Schleiner 2001; and Yates and Littleton 1999). Therefore, it stands to reason that the gaming industry not only (re)produces but also reinforces hegemonic ideals representative of a masculinist worldview.

This particular argument was also reiterated by the two key informants, Brian and Tracey.¹⁸ Brian confirmed that the number of leading female game characters has recently increased. However, he also maintained that the inclusion of more female game characters is most likely due to current marketing strategies which are targeted at men and boys, rather than at women. Schott and Horrell (2001 37) make the same argument, stating:

Although gender representation has altered during the last decade, game developers openly state that their rationale for the inclusion of female characters is based upon the premise that they appeal more to the average boy gamer than an equivalent male character.

¹⁸ Both Brian and Tracey are managers of retail stores in Hamilton that sell multi-media video games. Pseudonyms have been used.

An example of this is the creation of the fictional animated character Lara Croft (see Figure 5.2) from the game *Tomb Raider*. The Lara Croft avatar has received an intense amount of speculation because she is the first



Figure 5.2 Lara Croft, the lead character in the game *Tomb Raider*.

game heroine to become so immensely popular. The character Lara Croft has a huge fan base and is also well renowned as a ‘cyberstar’ sex symbol. Furthermore, it is important to note that the majority of people who make up this fan base and play the game *Tomb Raider* happen to be men and boys, and *not* women (Schleiner 2001; and Schott and Horrell 2000).

Games such as *Tomb Raider*¹⁹ (which feature strong and ‘sexy’ female lead characters) have successfully managed to draw in more men to gaming. However, according to Cassell and Jenkins

(1998) past attempts by game designers to attract more ‘girl’ gamers has been met with much criticism. The primary example of such attempts include the design and production of ‘pink games’, that is, games that are

¹⁹ The image of Lara Croft in Figure 5.2 was retrieved on 1 March, 2008 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lara_Croft

specifically designed for young females with 'feminine' interests. They include games such as *Barbie Fashion Designer* and *The Baby Sitter Club*. Gran who prefers to play PlayStation3 action games, offers her opinion on 'pink games':

They're horrible, horrible! When I went to buy the new one [PlayStation3], my granddaughter said, 'Oh! Get the pink one!' I said 'I'm not having a pink PlayStation, that's just not right'. I think they're just not understanding and I think perhaps, if maybe more women get into the development side of the game then it will bring about change and then they might get it – that yes, women can fire a gun and women can do that but I think it's just something that boys or males gravitate to, in wanting instant gratification with the games, the cars, whatever. And I think that if women get into the development then you'll see games aimed at women but not treating us like that. There will come a time.

It is clear that Gran has given some previous thought to the issue that games are created as either too feminine or too masculine, and that perhaps there should be less emphasis placed on gender. Gran also contends that it is only a matter of time before game designs start to become less influenced by the subjectivities of masculine ideals, and voices her present frustration with current game designs by stating "yes, women can fire a gun". Gran's statement adds weight to Schott and Thomas' (2008 41-42) recent study, in which they argue that "at a cultural level, females also revealed that they were perturbed by the male coded spaces of game retailers and the sexist nature of unofficial gaming media".

Overall, the majority of gamers and game designers are men and the present dominance of masculine discourses continues to saturate the

gaming industry. Both Brian and Tracey state that regardless of media portrayals, the number of women participating in gaming activities is increasing and has risen dramatically within the past five years. Currently women make up approximately 25 percent of their respective customer bases.²⁰ When I asked Brian for an explanation as to why more women are playing video games, he responded:

Well, it's one of those things. It's a part of women's lib. It doesn't sound right but [more] women are taking on males' roles. It's not so much males' roles, it's just like roles. I don't see [roles] as male, they're just ways to get on in the world and you're seeing it come out in gaming... You'll see an improvement probably in about five to ten years when the girls who are playing now are old enough to design games.

In this comment, Brian reflects on a number of issues as he makes connections which link real world socio-cultural changes with game design and consumer choices. Like Gran, Brian suggests that the idea of particular roles being more suitable for particular genders will continue to decrease over time and as a result the gaming industry will see an increase in the number of women becoming involved in the creative process of game design. Ultimately, this shift is expected to effect changes within game design in the future (Schott and Thomas 2008). At present, however, women gamers must contend with their position as a minority group within a gaming culture that continues to be heavily influenced by hegemonic ideals, which also effectively limit the ways in which gender could potentially be configured into game space. At this point, I highlight Gran's experiences of gaming at home and discuss the

²⁰ This estimate excludes women who buy games for other people.

ways in which women (such as Gran), use gaming as a vehicle for expressing themselves in a safe context.

Family relationships: resisting or reinforcing dominant norms?

In this section, I draw on Gran's experiences in particular, in order to facilitate a more in-depth understanding of gaming and home, and relationship dynamics. Gran was born and raised in Australia. She was still living in Australia when she began gaming at the age of 42, and it was not until the year 2000 that Gran made the decision (with the help of her daughter) to move to New Zealand so that she could be closer to her family. Today, Gran lives in a small cottage with her cat, who she says "runs the place". Right next door to Gran's cottage is the 'main house', and this is where her daughter's family resides. Gran is retired and is supposed to be taking it easy but she insists on helping out in the 'main house' with the cooking and cleaning. Gran describes some of the ways that she helps out:

I take [the grandkids] to school, take them to wherever they've got to go after school or whatever, [and do] housework. I'm not supposed to do anything according to my daughter, just do the washing and offering to take the kids to school but I potter around and clean up, and then I go down to the office twice a week and help them with their office work and that sort of stuff.

Gran's statement shows that her family encourages her to do less. Gran, however, prefers to stay very active. While at home, Gran spends around 20 hours a week gaming. On occasion, when Gran spends the weekend with the family out at the lake house she can spend up to 60 hours gaming

over the course of one week. At present, Gran's favourite game is *The Godfather Don's Edition*. This particular game has a restricted rating of R18 due to the levels of violence. *The Godfather* is an interesting mix of two genres – First Person Shooter (FPS) and role-playing action. In this game Gran can bribe cops, kill people, run over pedestrians and blow up most of the objects within the virtual environment (see Figures 5.3 and 5.4).

During my interview with Gran, it soon became *very* obvious just how she enjoys gaming. For example, when Gran described gun fight scenarios to me, she would imitate holding a machine gun and make automatic machine gun noises, as well as direct loud verbal threats like 'die you bastards!' at the enemies in the game.



Figure 5.3 Gran gaming at home.



Figure 5.4 Gran playing the FPS game *The Don*.

Also during our interview, Gran explained:

I'll play mostly anything. I love having an action game and I love just going in and loading up, getting the gun and just blowing somebody away! You know what I mean?

As Gran's comment illustrates, she is an enthusiastic and passionate person who loves her family and who also loves to game. However, Gran is also aware that others would consider the 'idea' of someone such as herself (who is an elderly woman, a grandmother, and a gamer), as very unusual. Also, the fact that Gran prefers action games over any other type of game makes her even more extraordinary because 'action' games are deliberately designed to attract men, rather than women. Gran explains why it is that she prefers to play action games:

...they have developed some games that aren't as violent but oh, they're so dead boring, so, dead boring. I got one, one day. My daughter said 'can't you get a game mum when you're not shooting somebody or something?' And I was like 'awhhh'. So, I got this game and you just had the camera. Oh well, that went back. I got [to the shop] and I went 'oh this is bleep, bleep'.

Cunningham (2000, cited in Hayes 2007 43) argues:

In most areas of society this violent and aggressive side of a girl/woman's nature has to be repressed in conformity to socially expected norms of what is acceptable 'feminine' behavior. Playing violent games gives female players the chance to express this aggression in a safe context.

In much the same way, action games provide women gamers with an outlet for acting out particular roles that would typically be regarded as masculine. Dodge and Kitchin (2001) point out an examination of cyber/space should consider whether or not the imbalances of real world gender roles are perpetuated in virtual society, as well as highlight the ways in which cyber/space and gaming is utilized by marginalised and oppressed groups to resist real world dominant values and norms.

Studies show that far fewer women play strategy or FPS games in comparison to role-playing games. Therefore, it was surprising to find that out of the eight women interviewed, one (Gran) preferred FPS and action games, and two (Nikki and Sheryl) preferred strategy games. Strategy games are similar to action games, in that they are designed specifically with men in mind. They are based on violent story lines which employ military style attack strategies and are parallel in scale to World War scenarios. Studies reveal that women, more so than men, prefer role-playing games because they like the social aspect of role-playing games (Taylor 2003). These findings show that socialisation was one of the main reasons why four participants liked to play in Massive Multi-player On-line Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). Royse *et al.* (2007 7) state that women who are technologically adept actively choose specific genres “to fulfil their desires for particular pleasures, such as sociability, intellectual stimulation and competitive challenge”. I explore this particular element of gaming later in this chapter.

Family relationships are a crucial part of home life for all of the women involved in this thesis. Gran’s family, for example, is supportive of her choice to game. In fact, it was Gran’s own daughter that first helped her to choose gaming as a new activity when Gran first arrived in New Zealand. Her daughter, however, has voiced concerns relating to both the type of language Gran uses while gaming in front of the grandchildren, and to the levels of violence in the types of games that she chooses to play. Gran

states that she has played many other games outside of the action genre (such as the *Da Vinci Code*) and admits to enjoying some of them but these games do not compare to the enjoyment that Gran gets from playing action games and being in a space where it is 'okay' for her to 'act' out in a violent and aggressive manner.

In this section, I have highlighted the ways in which masculine discourses are prevalent in games, through the 'typical' designing criteria of action games. I have also discussed how it is common place for virtual representations of women to be presented as either inferior bodies that are weak, fragile and usually in need of being rescuing, or as bodies that are heavily sexualised. In particular, I have drawn on Gran's experiences of gaming, as she presents an excellent example of how women can use the virtual spaces of gaming as a way of resisting dominant socio-cultural values and norms. In the following section, I examine the game genre of Role Playing Games (RPGs) and Massive Multi-player On-line Role Playing Games (MMORPGs), which typically have a myriad of options for virtual representations of self, such as gender, race, species, skin colour, and facial and body structures.

Virtual (re)presentations of self

The women interviewed for this study enjoy gaming. However, gaming spaces are generally viewed as a man's domain. In this section, I focus on the ways in which women negotiate these spaces. In particular, I examine

the ways that women gamers choose to (re)present themselves virtually via their characters/avatars. Many games now provide players with multiple choices in relation to how they would like their virtual characters to look. In Role Playing Games (RPG's) it is common place to have numerous options available for changing an avatar's appearance (such as gender, skin colour, body shape, height, hair colour and length). In the past, female avatars were limited in terms of how they measured up statistically in strength and combat abilities, in comparison to their male counterparts, which were often designed to be much stronger. Today gaming avatars are usually designed to be statistically equal. Regardless of gender, female warrior avatars are now being positioned as equally capable and strong as male warrior avatars (Taylor 2003).

The idea that bodies and technology are disjointed is one that cyborg theorist Balsamo (1995) rejects. Instead, Balsamo (ibid. 215) views bodies and technology as melded, literally as the 'technological-human', "where machines assume organic functions and the body is materially redesigned through the use of new technologies of corporeality". Balsamo (ibid. 216) goes on to state that "gender, like the body, is a boundary concept". It is instantly defined and made sense of in relation to socio-cultural contexts, and despite new technologised ways to rewrite the physical body, "the gendered boundary between male and female is one border that remains heavily guarded" (ibid. 216). To illustrate this, I draw on Suzy's experience of gaming in the world of *RuneScape*, which aides in an examination of gaming and gender that theorists such as Balsamo (1995) bring to light.

Suzy's game of choice is the Massive Multi-player On-line Role Playing Game (MMORPG) game, *RuneScape* (see Figure 5.1). In this game, players use their avatars as virtual (re)presentations of themselves. It is in this sense that everything Suzy experiences whilst gaming at home is experienced via the actions and performances of her favourite avatar – Modern Mary,²¹ (a level 106 woman avatar, specialising in magical abilities). *RuneScape* is the first on-line game that Suzy has ever played and initially she felt uncertain about whether or not she would enjoy it. Suzy is also aware that the majority of people who play this game are boys and men, and most are younger than she is (Kirriemuir 2005).

Suzy's decision to create a feminine magical (as opposed to masculine combat) orientated avatar was a deliberate decision as she does not feel comfortable with the thought of participating in 'Player versus Player' (PvP) scenarios.²² Although Suzy has now been playing *RuneScape* for several months and her avatar's skills are now at a level that would make her a formidable opponent in PvP combat scenarios, she still chooses not to participate in this competitive style of gaming. Suzy explained that when she created Mary she was motivated to do so more for the social element of the game. So Suzy is not used to thinking of her self/avatar as physically 'strong'. Suzy explains:

²¹ A pseudonym has been used.

²² In many on-line Role Playing Games (RPGs) a player is often given the choice of which server to participate in. RPG servers usually offer three different gaming environments. One is 'player versus player' (PvP) where gamers are in direct combat and can kill one another. The second setting (which the majority of players prefer) is 'player versus environment' (PvE), where players can not kill each other by default. The third server option is 'role-playing' (RP), "for players who prefer to 'stay in character' while they game" (Ducheneaut *et al.* 2006 408).

That idea of being strong is quite funny because I have people in my clan²³ and we talk all the time when we're on the game, and this 12 year old boy is one of them. [He and I] were off doing something and he goes 'Whoa Mary, you're a tank!' Which means that I'm just really cool and really strong and really good at fighting, and I'm thinking 'hang on, I didn't make this character to do that and that's not my kind of style of doing it', and I'm sitting here in real life laughing because I think it's so funny that he thinks that my character is just so strong and cool. It's like 'oh, okay'. I've not actually explored that part of the game and people on the game think it's really funny when I say that 'I've not been to that part of the game because it involves fighting and I have never done it', and they've gone 'what!? Gotta drag you there!' And I say, 'yeah, you'll really have to drag me' (*laughter*).

Suzy's comment demonstrates that although she did not intentionally set out to make her character a strong fighter, she likes it that other people think that Mary (and herself by association) is a strong character. Suzy also expressed concern over placing her character in a dangerous environment where she could lose her life. Suzy knows that her character would be instantly resurrected, however, this is also a part of her reasoning for not participating in aggressive game play. In the following transcript Suzy describes what her virtual character looks like and in doing so she also describes the relationship that she shares with this character:

My character wears a lovely dark purpley little push-up bodice thing. Makes her look hot! [*laughter*] And split trousers with the criss-cross [*laces*] down the side. I mean I feel 25 inside so why not make it...my character's got pink and purple hair. I mean I'd love to wear that in real life here but I think I'd get comments like 'you're too old to wear that'.

Suzy's comments are interesting because they demonstrate a blurring of the boundaries between real life and virtual life. They also highlight Suzy's

²³ Clans are similar to guilds. A clan consists of a group of real gamers. When gamers belong to a clan they then use their clan as an identifying feature. Depending on the type of game, both clans and guilds can also be used as a status symbol.

frustrations concerning the restrictions that corporeality and real world values place on bodies, which she then juxtaposes with virtual space where there is the endless possibilities for freedom of expression. In much the same way, Sharon describes her relationship with her avatar in such a way that it implies a tangible connection that passes through the borders of real and virtual worlds. Sharon explains:

I don't know, I suppose [my characters] are just an extension of myself really. I've got multiple characters in WOW but my main character is Aria and I suppose because I've spent so much time with her I kind of identify with her as well because I am Aria – that's me. Admittedly, I don't have white hair and purple skin and [aren't] quite that tall. There is somebody else on [the same server] whose name is exactly the same as mine but one letter different. And I'm thinking to myself 'you better not be wrecking my reputation girly' (*laughs*).

For Sharon, it is evident that she is uncomfortable with the fact that another gamer has almost the exact same name as her own virtual character. After expressing this concern to me, Sharon went on to relate an unpleasant past experience which involved a dispute with another on-line gamer. In short, this gamer attacked Sharon verbally before realising that he had in fact mistaken her for another player.

On one hand, some gamers place a great deal of emphasis on how their avatar performs in virtual environments. On the other hand, virtual spaces offer gamers a certain level of anonymity and safety. Therefore, there are a number of gamers who choose to create avatars with the primary goal of behaving badly and refusing to conform to the socio-cultural values and norms that have been (re)produced within particular virtual environments.

One such phenomenon that *used* to be thought of as transgressive behaviour but has now become normalised within gaming culture is the experimentation of cross-gendering by male gamers, that is, men who game as virtual women. During the interview with Suzy, she mentioned that she knows of many male gamers who have experimented with gender by creating their own woman avatars. Suzy tells me:

The guys on *RuneScape* say they make a female character for about seven reasons. The biggest reason is that they get a different perspective on playing. People interact on the game differently with them. They don't see the swearing. They get to play the game in a more 'softer' manner, rather than their normal male macho attack style. They often get included in things as a female character, where if it was a group of guys they don't include them. They get cheaper armour because nobody wants to wear a skirt (*laughter*), which sounds weird, and they get better looks. Women characters in the game have about 14 different hair styles which can be longer or shorter of the same type, so there's like 42, and men have six hair styles and a beard.

It is important to note that *RuneScape* is an on-line game that offers a more pixellated type of graphic design. This is because it is produced using Java Script as the primary graphic platform. As a result, images in general are less visually defined. The avatars in on-line role-playing games such as *World of Warcraft* (WOW) and *Everquest* (which are renowned for their impressive levels of graphic artistry) have received a massive amount of scrutiny regarding the ways in which avatars are used to represent gamers' gendered identities in a hyper-sexualised manner (MacCallum-Stewart 2008). I argue that the virtual bodies in *RuneScape* are not subjected to the same degree of sexualised fantasy that is otherwise reported in other on-line role-playing games. With this in mind, I

also argue that this affects the ways in which *RuneScape* gamers communicate and experience character development, as opposed to how gamers communicate in higher definition games, such as WOW.

Suzy's comment (above) draws attention to two important points. First, that she noticed that male gamers often play as female characters, and that her own inquiries then produced a list of reasons as to why men would want to game as virtual women in *RuneScape*. The reality that gamers do experiment with cross-gendering is often a surprising discovery for non-gamers in particular, however, MacCallum-Stewart (2008) states that cross-gender gaming is now so common that it has become a 'normal' part of gaming culture.

For several years, I have been gaming with men who use women avatars as (re)presentations of self in virtual worlds. However, I have never asked these men why they use female characters as virtual (re)presentations of self, rather than male characters. Fortunately (during the course of this research), an opportunity did arise, where I was able to inquire about the use of female avatars by men. The following extract is from my autoethnography journal, where I had an on-line conversation with one of the men that I game with often.

Jim:²⁴ Just about all the guys I know game with female avatars. Except for the first time, the first time a guy creates a character it will be a male but then most of the characters he makes after that will be female.

Cherie: But why do you like using women and not men avatars?

²⁴ A pseudonym has been used.

Jim: Well if I'm going to be staring at a screen for several hours, I want something nice to look at and if a guy tells you otherwise, he's lying. In most games there's no difference now between men and women avatars. Women [characters] are just as strong, if not stronger than men [characters]. So why not play as a woman? It just makes better sense. I've got something nice to look at and I kick ass (*laughter*) (Autoethnography Journal Entry 09/04/08).

Jim's comments further illustrate how cross-gendered game play has become a 'normal' part of gaming culture. MacCallum-Stewart (2008 34) explains:

Players argue consistently that they choose women avatars because they like to look at them, specifically because the long term nature of play in MMORPGs means that if they are going to have to look at the same avatar repeatedly they want it to be an attractive one. This is as true of women players who choose to play men, as it is of men who choose to play women.

Yee (2007) estimates that over 80 percent of men game using woman as virtual (re)presentations of self. The majority of women gamers, however, prefer to select same-sex (female) avatars to (re)present their 'self' (Taylor 2003), and this is also true for the women interviewed in this study, where seven out of eight prefer to game as virtual women. Suzy's conversations with other *RuneScape* players have intrigued her and she plans to one day create a male character that specialises in combat, specifically for the purpose of experiencing what it would be like to play *RuneScape* from the perspective of a virtual man.

Interestingly, Gran was the only participant to state that if she had to choose between playing as a male or female avatar, she would prefer to play as a man. Gran explains:

I always go for the male because they usually have the advantage. In most games, to start out with, you need the strength and [male characters] usually have more access to weapons. Once you get past the initial stages they then come into clues or things like that but initially you need strength to build the character.

As mentioned earlier, Gran's favourite gaming genre is action and action games have previously offered a limited range of women avatars. Furthermore, action games more so than any other genre have been criticised for "pandering to the male gaze", as the female characters are too often ineffectual in combat in comparison to their male counterparts (MacCallum-Stewart 2008 31). Fortunately, gaming design teams noticed the success of Lara Croft *Tomb Raider* and there has been a major shift in the general design and effectiveness of female avatars. As a result, women avatars are fast becoming the avatar of choice for both men and women gamers alike (ibid.).

The second point that Suzy's previous comment (page 105) raises is the level of awareness that gamers have about hegemonic discourses that are prevalent in games, such as the in-built assumptions about gendered styles of gaming, and the disproportionate availability of avatar styles that are offered by game designers for both genders. The following quote by Laurel (1998 cited in Carr 2005 467) addresses this issue, stating:

Computer games as we know them were invented by young men around the time of the invention of graphical displays.

They were enjoyed by young men, and young men soon made a very profitable business of them, dovetailing to a certain extent with the existing pinball business. Arcade computer games were sold into male-gendered spaces, and when home computer consoles were invented, they were sold through male-oriented consumer electronics channels to more young men. The whole industry consolidated very quickly around a young male demographic – all the way from the gameplay design to the arcade environment to the retail world.

Keeping this in mind, Fron *et al.* (2007) argue that within gaming culture there exists a 'hegemony of play'. Essentially, Fron *et al.* (ibid. 309) use this term to highlight the ways in which "the exclusionary power structures of the computer game industry have narrowed the conception of both play and the player in the digital sphere". Most of the women gamers interviewed reported feeling apprehensive when first becoming involved in gaming. For example, Suzy has recently become involved in designing virtual maps for the world of *RuneScape*. However, this was a gradual process for Suzy, who explains:

I was a bit kind of scared to say anything or do anything about [designing maps] in the first place, thinking, okay I know quite a bit about computers but maybe I didn't know as much as some of the younger kids who have been brought up with experimenting with computers a lot more. But now I realise that okay I can do it. It's quite interesting and also as an older player like I am, I sometimes have that feeling like 'maybe I'm not going to do it good enough', just because I'm older.

It is clear that Suzy is aware of her minority status as a gamer and has been in doubt of her abilities in relation to the ways in which she is able to contribute. Bryce and Rutter (2003 11) argue that the lack of females participating in games "may be explained by self-consciousness and lack of confidence in competitive ability because of the stereotypical view that

computer gaming” is a male dominant arena. Therefore, according to Bryce and Rutter (ibid.), Suzy’s reluctance to participate in more competitive gaming situations could be seen as a lack of confidence. Initially this may have been true. However, Suzy now actively pursues new opportunities for contributing to the World of *RuneScape*. She is currently acting as a mentor for younger gamers and belongs to an on-line community of older gamers, whose friendships span across numerous international borders. Suzy stated that she has many conversations with her on-line friends that are of a very personal nature, and she states that, “we talk about things that you just wouldn’t talk about to other people in real life”. Suzy went on to describe several instances where other gamers had confided in her about issues. For example, another mature woman gamer residing in the U.S.A. often talks privately to Suzy about her ongoing custody battles for her children.

The ways in which virtual bodies are gendered through avatar designs is yet another example of power structures that privilege dominant ideals and masculine discourses. While it is obvious that the women involved in this study enjoy gaming, it is equally obvious that they each rationalise their positions as woman gamers (to varying degrees) within a ‘hegemony of play’ (Fron *et al.* 2007 309). For instance, the following comments are just a few examples of what women gamers think of how female avatars are portrayed (see, for example, Figures 5.5 and 5.6).

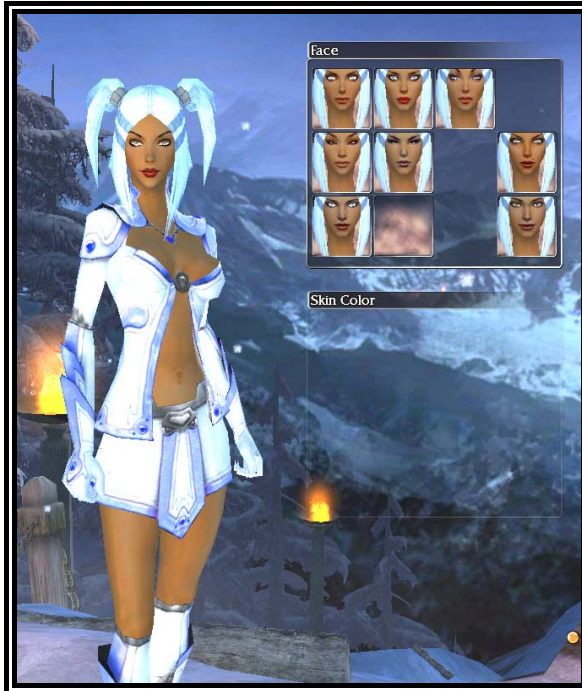


Figure 5.5 Woman 'elementalist' avatar from the MMORPG *Guildwars – Prophecies*.



Figure 5.6 Woman 'elementalist' avatar from the MMORPG *Guildwars – Nightfall*.²⁵

Mitch: It makes me laugh but then I've got used to it with Dungeons and Dragons. You know, just a little iddy biddy bikini, that's not going to save you (*laughter*).

Mitch's comment illustrates how common it is for virtual women to be designed wearing as little armour or clothing as possible. Mitch found this to be very amusing. This is an attitude that is also shared by several of the other participants. In this sense, it could perhaps be argued that laughing is reflective of how some women manage hegemonic gender ideals within in virtual environments.

Gran: Well, that's today's sort of thing. You see them in video clips in the music. That's what they are, they're men's fantasies. So inside a man's head that's what they like. You get inside a woman's head – you could imagine some of the fantasies there.

²⁵ The avatars shown in Figures 5.5 and 5.6 were created by me (the author) through my on-line membership with *Guildwars*.

This comment by Gran acknowledges the prevalence of masculine discourses not only in games but also throughout the popular culture of music. Gran goes on to suggest that women have fantasies too and questions what they might be imagining.

Sheryl: The big busty ones? Well they are designed by guys and it's obvious, and they're just sex symbols and it's obvious. You just roll your eyes and carry on.

Talon: Well, if that's the way they come, that's the way they come. I think it's a bit pointless. You wouldn't be running around wasting people in a bikini would you? ... Unless it was really hot or something (*laughs*). It's fairly typically really. They don't look real. They look like Barbies really, don't they? If they were real life they'd land on their head because [their head is] the biggest thing on their body besides their breasts. So they're not very realistic but then again neither are the dude ones. You don't see a guy with stick pin legs and a big upper body, unless it's Peter Andre with shorts on (*laughs*). Pretty unrealistic as well – I mean guys don't run around in skirts, do they?

Talon highlights several points of interests. Her comment is reflective of a realistic yet pragmatic view of gaming. In short, Talon is stating that she enjoys gaming and will make the best of what is being offered. Furthermore, she illustrates an awareness of the ways in which virtual character's bodies are unrealistic, as does Sharon in the following comment:

Sharon: I do think it's unrealistic. Very unrealistic and it's obvious with that sort of game that I think there's definitely a majority of guys on the design team (*laughs*). There's a WOW community website where people submit comic strips, and there was this one comic strip, which I thought was absolutely true and it was [about] two female characters that wandered up to this store and said 'I want such and such armour' and [the vendor] brings it out. She looks at it

and tries it on and says, 'oh my God, that's so skimpy!' The guy behind the counter was actually wearing the same type of armour and she asked him, 'why does yours cover more than mine?' And he said, 'I'm sorry, that's just the way that the women's armour is', and the woman says, 'I want yours!' He says, 'no'. Then there's a dust cloud and next thing you know she's stalking off in his clothes and he's got hers on – he's just been jammed into the woman's armour, and he's standing behind the counter with a bandage over his face, wearing her armour, and looking beleaguered.

Sharon's remarks about this on-line gaming comic strip emphasises how common it is for humour to be used in relation to the lack of clothing or armour that is accessible for covering of female avatar's body parts.

Suzy: It's a male's view of sexy as much as anything else. See how all the breasts are highlighted.

Nikki: No, I don't like it too much if I've got a bit of an ass and a pair of hips, so I don't really think that it's appropriate for me. I'd rather, like with the Wii, actually measure how tall and skinny you are, or fat and short or whatever.

Nikki was the only participant who expressed an obvious degree of discomfort at the thought of having to project an image of an avatar (that was not an accurate representation of her self) into a virtual environment.

Jordan: Oh yeah, it's definitely made by males. The females are busty and slim hips except for the Taurans because they're cows (*laughs*). So they're not skinny or attractive but the night elves and the blood elves are. And the orcs are pretty ugly (*laughs*). I don't have an orc character because the girls [orcs] are just ugly (*laughs*). So yeah, I'm mostly what males would class as the 'ideal female figure' I guess.

Jordan's comment shows that although she is aware of how virtual women are constructed in ways which pander to the 'male gaze',

she also likes the fact that she is able to (re)present herself in virtual environments as a sexy and attractive women (see Figures 5.7 and 5.8).

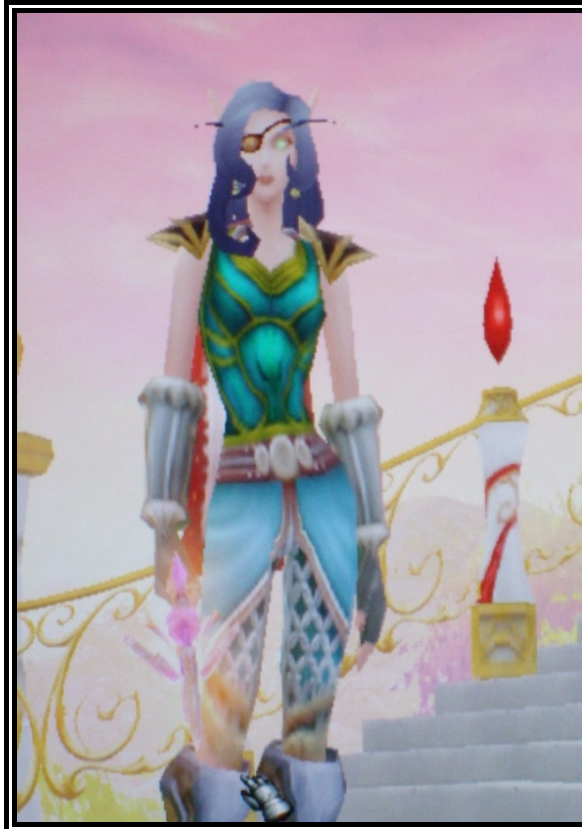


Figure 5.7 Jordan's avatar from the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (WOW).



Figure 5.8 Another of Jordan's favourite avatars from WOW.

All of the above comments draw attention to the ways in which women make sense of a gaming culture that has not made any real attempts to understand the likes and dislikes of women gamers until just recently. Schott and Thomas (2008) state that there is now a sufficient number of support mechanisms in place for the sustenance and growth of women wanting to enter into the gaming industry. The media, however, is having a much greater influence over consumers and efforts to attract potential consumers continue to target a primarily male audience. Schott and

Thomas (ibid.) argue that the current style of advertising (which involves displaying sexualised images of women's bodies) both deters women from gaming, and also implies that a woman's desire to game continues to be secondary to that of a man's.

The women who were interviewed for this research, however, are aware that they take up a place that is situated on the margins of gaming culture. Talon's comment "well, if that's the way they come, that's the way they come", conveys a message that is echoed by all of the women. In this, they all share the same attitude, where they really will make the best of what is being offered in hope that *the best* is yet to come.

Summary

In this chapter, I have focused on the multiple ways in which real world politics and cyber/space are interconnected by providing examples of how cyber/space can be understood as a performative space that allows women to express themselves in ways that are not possible or not 'acceptable' in the real world. In doing so, I further explored the participants' own views on how gender is 'typically' portrayed in games and in advertising. It is also important to note, however, that it in many ways also allows women to act in ways that do conform to real world expectations of gender.

Women gamers disrupt dominant imaginings of what it means to be a gamer. Not only do game designs and media advertising in general

perpetuate the stereotype of the male gamer, but they also position women as subjects of the 'male gaze'. Following a critique of gaming culture's dominant discourses, I examine the participant's own experiences in relation to the ways in which they have chosen to (re)present their 'self' in virtual environments. Several of the women interviewed discussed their relationships with their avatars as though they were one and the same person. This shows that the ways in which a woman chooses to (re)present her 'self' virtually is influenced by her real performances of 'self' and vice versa.

Finally, I argued that gamers do not disassociate their gaming experiences from their lived environment at home, instead, the home-place and people within it become a part of the gamer's subjective experience.

6. CONCLUSION

This thesis adds to a small but expanding body of literature that examines the dyadic and mutually constituted relationship between virtual and real worlds. By examining the ways in which women negotiate their identities as both women at home and as women gamers, I have been able to show that there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of gaming culture and gender. In highlighting the mutually constituted relationship between women, home and gaming, I have illustrated that there are a number of issues that have remained at the margins of inquiry. The number of women choosing to participate in games continues to increase regardless of the dominant status of masculine discourse in gaming cultures. There have also been recent changes incorporated by the gaming industry which attempt to be more inclusive of women's involvement with games. At present, however, these steps forward are sometimes negated by the dominant discourses of gaming cultures, which work to marginalise and 'other' women.

This research has been guided by three separate research questions. It is important to note, however, that these three questions are closely linked. The first research question was: how do women negotiate their identities as 'women at home', with their identities as 'women gamers'? I have found that exploring this question has highlighted many findings, in which home is a space that is both paradoxical and contradictory. All of the women interviewed for this research have been able to successfully negotiate both of their identities as women and as gamers. Furthermore, it is also

evident that women gamers find empowerment through their participation in gaming activities. It is, however, important to note that all of their families were receptive to the idea of gaming but occasionally family members did challenge them about their gaming activities.

Some of the findings relating to this particular question are contradictory. For example, on one hand, findings showed that these women gamers were very adept at managing their time. This was one element that I had not considered prior to beginning this project. In this, all participants demonstrated a skilled ability to effectively balance their gaming activities with their home and family lives. It could be argued that this skill can be attributed to their age and maturity because findings such as this might prove to be a rare if the same research was conducted with a younger group of gamers.

On the other hand, further findings revealed that although all of the women stated that their families were, in general, accepting of their gaming activities, there were occurrences that suggested otherwise, where the woman being interviewed mentioned an occasion where their families did expect them to conform to particular gender roles.

The second question was: what is the gendered relationship between bodies and technology in the home environment? In seeking to build on current understandings of women gamers at home it is also important to reflect on how new technologies have become integrated into homes. In

doing so, homes are easier to conceptualise as gendered spaces and as such, they become more susceptible to scrutiny. The findings relating to this particular question suggest that the idea of men being more suited to technological pursuits is highly disputable because all of the women interviewed had had an equal or greater amount of involvement with technology and gaming in the home. All eight participants were asked the same question, which was do you think the time that you spend gaming each week is 'too much', 'not enough', or 'just right'? For the five participants that live with male partners, none actually spend less time gaming than their respective partners but it is of interest to note that all five of these women answered 'just right'. Whereas, the remaining three who did not have partners answered 'not enough'. This suggests that in households where women do not live with partners there is a greater sense of entitlement concerning their right to spend time gaming.

For the women who live with their partners, however, these findings may be representative of the existing household power relationships, which suggests that their participation in gaming activities may be competing with other home-based activities and relationships. These findings support Schott and Horrell's (2000) claim that gaming and the decisions made regarding gaming rights appear to be embedded in the existing social dynamics and gender hierarchies of households. This particular finding is also connected to the third and final research question was in what ways do women gamer's real lives affect their gaming experiences, and vice versa? Feminist geographers, Madge and O'Connor (2005 85) argue that

“cyberspace is a performative space, one where new subject positions are ‘tried out’ in and through practices of everyday life”. They go on to state that these acts, over time, produce an identity effect. I use this particular quote by Made and O’Connor (2005) because it is relevant to the utilisation of avatars as (re)presentations of self in virtual environments.

Home is the nexus point for women gamers and my findings suggest that they experience cyber/space as a fluid, two-way relationship that crosses the boundaries between real and virtual worlds, and where both influence and inform the other. Taylor (2003) argues that “just as corporeal bodies are integral to our personal and social lives, avatars are central to our experience in digital environments”. Taylor also goes on to re-connect the virtual body with the real body. When women play video games they remain connected to the real world, and when women experience virtual environments via their avatars they also experience it (on an emotional level) through their physical being. Essentially, virtual communities are able to exist precisely because people are capable of maintaining their connections to cyber/space.

In chapter 5 I discussed in-depth the various relationships that women gamers share with their avatars. The level of attention required to develop an avatar’s skill level is often immense in relation to the hours that are actually spent accomplishing this. Several of the women interviewed expressed quite strong levels of emotional attachment to their virtual avatars. In many ways, avatars offer the best of both worlds because if an

avatar is successful, they gain in status and become more powerful. This status is then transferred to the gamer. If an avatar fails, it is usually within the early stages of character development and a player will usually just go about creating a new identity all over again. Krotoski (2005) states that this particular system of (re)presentation affords players many options regarding the personalisation of their favourite characters, and therefore, presents new ways for women to become empowered through their participation in gaming.

The empowerment that is experienced by women gamers is often tempered by various negative elements of gaming. For example, the dominant presence of masculine discourse has often been associated with the disempowerment of women gamers (Jensen and de Castell 2008). It is important to note, however, that regardless of these negative associations, women continue to game, and are consequently discovering new ways to resist and contest gender norms in both virtual and real worlds.

Finally, the implications of this research in geography emphasise the importance of home as a key site for gamers. This is because gaming is an activity that is commonly carried-out within the domestic space of home, and each year there is a reported increase in the number of women gamers. Therefore, studying gaming in this context would mean opening up a new space for the re-conceptualisation of the gendered body in geography. Furthermore, it will also help geographers to rethink the fluid nature of gender and women's relationships with home.

Future research

This research makes a valuable theoretical and methodological contribution to feminist, social, cultural and embodied geographies. It forges a new way of understanding the mutually constitutive relationship between gendered identities, bodies, home, technology and gaming, and virtual space. As such, it produces a myriad of possibilities for future research in geography. From this thesis, I offer two further potential lines of inquiry. First, an examination of avatars that are utilised as vehicles for cross-gendering in virtual environment would be useful for geographers who are interested in the complexities surrounding embodiment and virtual space.

In chapter 5, I cite work by MacCallum-Stewart (2008) which explores the normalisation of 'gender-bending' in on-line games. I reflect briefly on how this informs my own research relating to women gamers' experiences of cross-gendered (re)presentations of self. I drew particular attention to how the act of cross-gender in virtual environments (by men in particular who choose to game as virtual women) has become an accepted and 'normal' part of gaming culture. There are many avenues that could be investigated, which build on work by theorists such as Butler (1990), in relation to the politics of gender performance, or Longhurst's (2001) work which reflects on the positioning of women's bodies as 'abject', 'messy', and 'leaky'. Finally, Foucault's (1977) theory of the 'panoptican' would make for an interesting examination of 'gender-bending' in games.

Finally, the second point of inquiry relates to my interest in how men experience gaming cultures. It would be useful to duplicate this research but with a group of men who game at home. Feminist geographers have learnt a great deal from studying marginalised identities, however, it could also be argued that potential valuable investigations are being overlooked because they are representative of dominant norms. As such, dominant norms can sometimes remain invisible simply because they are part of everyday life and therefore, taken for granted. Men occupy a position of power within gaming cultures, however, they also have to contend with cyber/space and home-life, and are subject to other forms of dominant ideals pertaining to the performance of gender, bodies, and home. It would therefore, be interesting to examine how dominant norms are reinforced, resisted or challenged by men who game.

In summary, there has been much research that focuses on gender and gaming, as well as gender and technology. The majority of these studies however, originate from outside of geography, and as a result, many lack the contextualised understanding of space and place that geographical perspectives bring. In this thesis I have investigated this gap in knowledge and covered new ground by using the subject of gaming to further understand the relationship between identities and place for a small group of women, who reside in the Waikato region of New Zealand.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Information sheet – key informants

**Department of Geography, Tourism
and Environmental Planning**

Te Wahanga Aro Whenua
School of Arts & Social Sciences
Te Kura Kete Aronui
The University of Waikato
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THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Information Sheet

“Women and Gaming at Home”

My name is Cherie Todd and I’m a graduate student in the Department of Geography, Tourism and Environmental Planning at the University of Waikato.

Thank you for considering taking part in this study. I am required to do research for a Masters degree in geography. As my title suggests, I am interested in talking to people about women who ‘game’ at home. I would also like to talk to several owners/managers of retail gaming stores in the Waikato area. This is because you will provide valuable information about how women shop for games, who they buy for, and also what kinds of games they tend to buy.

What does it mean to be a participant in this research?

If you choose to participate, you can contact me through my details on the first page and ask any questions that you might have concerning this research. If you are agreeable to meeting with me, we will then discuss a time and place that is suitable for both of us to talk. The meeting will only be brief (approximately 20 minutes), so if it suits you I am happy to come to your shop and talk to you there. When we meet I will be asking questions such as:

- How long have you been involved in selling games?
- Do you play any of these games yourself? and
- Approximately, what percentage of your customers are women (who buy games for themselves)?
- In general, what kinds of games do women buy? And what are the most popular titles?

What are my rights as a participant?

As a participant you will have rights that protect your personal safety. These rights include:

- The right to refuse to answer any questions;
- The right to ask any further questions about the research that occur to you during your participation in the research;
- The right to anonymity and confidentiality, and
- The right to withdraw from the research at any time up until three weeks after the interview.

What will my information be used for?

The findings of this project will be presented as a Masters Thesis. The findings may also be presented in a graduate seminar later in the year. Other outcomes may include future publication of articles, and presentations at conferences.

So if you want to participate ...

Just call me (Cherie) on 07 838-4466 extn. 8663, or email me at cjto@waikato.ac.nz and I will organise a time for us to meet. You can also ask me any more questions you might have concerning my research.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Cherie Todd

This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Any questions about the ethical conduct of this research may be sent to the Secretary of the Committee, email fass-ethics@waikato.ac.nz, postal address, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Te Kura Kete Aronui, University of Waikato, Te Whare Wananga o Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240.

Appendix 2: Information sheet – women gamers

Department of Geography, Tourism and Environmental Planning

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Information Sheet - Women and Gaming at Home

My name is Cherie Todd and I'm a graduate student in the Department of Geography, Tourism and Environmental Planning at the University of Waikato.



Thank you for considering taking part in this study. The research that I will be conducting is required for a Masters degree in geography. As my title suggests, I am interested in talking to women who 'game' at home, and who are 30 years of age or over. So, if you are 30 or over and you play computer games, Playstation, Xbox, PortablePlayStation (PSP), or any other kind of gaming technology, online or offline, I would really like to meet you. You might ask, why do you want to talk to me? Well, the answer is because I also fit this description but more importantly, I am genuinely interested in finding out more about other women's experiences of gaming at home.

You might also ask, why does it have to be gaming at home? Well, first of all, gaming (in comparison to television) is something that is relatively new to the home-place. Gaming is an activity that is widely accepted as something that kids and men do at home but what about adult women? And second, home is a place that means many different things to all kinds of people. Phrases such as "a women's place is in the home" and "bare foot, pregnant and in the kitchen" are some of our most common sayings and their meanings have helped influence the ways in which both men and women think about 'home' and our roles within it. So, in a nutshell, I am interested in looking at the ways in which gaming at home

is experienced by women, and how it might be accepted, resisted or challenged, by the people that you know, your family, or even by your self.

This research is an exploration. As a researcher I believe there are no right or wrong answers because everyone's experience of gaming at home is going to be different. Some of the things that I will ask you about during an interview include:

- What kinds of games you like to play and why;
- What roles you take on at home;
- What kinds of positive or negative experiences that you might have had while gaming, and
- What your family and friends think about your gaming activities

What does it mean to be a participant in this research?

If you choose to participate, you can contact me through my details on the first page and ask any questions that you might have concerning this research. If you are agreeable to meeting with me, we will then discuss a suitable time and place for us to sit down and do the interview. I will also use a small audio tape-recorder to have an accurate record of our discussion; however, if you do not feel comfortable (for whatever reason) about being recorded that is okay and instead I will only take notes as we go.

What are my rights as a participant?

As a participant you will have:

- The right to refuse to answer any questions;
- The right to ask any further questions about the research that occur to you during your participation in the research;
- The right to anonymity and confidentiality, and
- The right to withdraw from the research at any time (before the printing date of this thesis) without question.

What will my information be used for?

The findings of this project will be presented as a Masters Thesis. The findings may also be presented in a graduate seminar later in the year. Other outcomes may include future publication of articles, and presentations at conferences.

So if you would like to participate or just want some more information...

Call me (Cherie) on 07 838-4466 extn. 8663 (daytime), 08 856-6100 (evening), or email me at cjto@waikato.ac.nz. I look forward to hearing from you.

This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Any questions about the ethical conduct of this research may be sent to the Secretary of the Committee, email fass-ethics@waikato.ac.nz, postal address, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Te Kura Kete Aronui, University of Waikato, Te Whare Wananga o Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240.

Appendix 3: Email introduction letter

Hi,

My name is Cherie Todd and I am a masters student in The Geography, Tourism and Environmental Planning Department. I am carrying out research on women who 'game' at home. I am seeking participants aged 30 years and over, and who are currently living within the Waikato region.

If this sounds like you or someone you know, I would love to hear from you (please see the attached Information Sheet for more details).

Thanks for your time and I look forward to hearing from you,

Cherie

Cherie Todd
Masters Student
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Appendix 4: Questionnaire

“Women and Gaming at Home” –Questionnaire

Participant Profile:

Age: 30-35 36-40 41-45 46-50 51-55 56-60 61+
--

Ethnicity:	Marital Status:	Occupation:
No. of children: Female: Male: (Under 18, living at home)	No. of adults: Female: Male: (18 & over, living at home)	Total no. of people living at home: Average amount of hours spent gaming: (per week)
Out of the people living here, how many ‘game’? Age and gender of people who game?		
No. of computers or game stations at home (including handhelds):		
What rooms of the house are used for gaming?		

Appendix 5: Interview question guide – key informants

Department of Geography, Tourism and Environmental Planning

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
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Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

“Women and Gaming at Home”

Interview Question Guide – Key Informant

1. How long have you been the Owner/Manager of this store?
2. How long have you been involved with selling games?
3. What first attracted you to this particular job?
4. Do you play any digital games yourself? Yes / No
 - a. If ‘yes’, which ones?
5. Approximately, what percentage of your customers are women?
6. (If a low % is stated) Why is it, do you think, that more of your customers are men rather than women?
7. Do women buy mainly for themselves or for other people?
8. In general, what kinds of games do women buy?
9. And what are the most popular titles that you sell to women?
10. In terms of advertising, do you think that sales of games are evenly pitched to both males and females?
11. What do you think about the *idea* of women (30 years and older) who game?
12. Why do you think there are less women gamers than men gamers?
13. Do many women apply for jobs here at this store?
 - a. How many applicants have you had in the past?
 - b. How many of your current employees are women?
14. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix 6: Interview question guide – women gamers

Theme One - Gaming and virtual world dynamics

- How many years have you been gaming?
- What was the first game that you ever played?
- Who is it that first introduced you to gaming?
- What kinds of games do you play at the moment?
 - Why do you like to play this type of game (FPS, RPG etc...)?
- Do you play games on-line, off-line or both?
 - Which do you prefer? _____ And why?
- (Ask only if they game on-line) Have you formed any on-line friendships through gaming?

Yes / No..... (If 'yes') how many?

 - How would you describe your on-line friendships compared to your 'real life' friendships?
- Do you ever discuss your on-line relationships with your off-line friends?
 - And vice-versa. Do you discuss your off-line relationships with your on-line friends?
- Have you gamed at an internet café? Yes / No.....Can you describe your experience of that?
- Have you ever had any negative experiences from gaming? (either online or offline) (Forms of harassment, such as verbal abuse, sexist comments etc....)
 - Has any of it been caused by the fact that you are a 'woman' gamer? Yes / No
 - (If 'yes') Can you tell me about that?

Theme Two – Home-life and real world dynamics

- What is your favourite thing to do when you're at home?
- What kinds of jobs or chores do you do at home?
 - What do you think would happen if you stopped doing these jobs?
- What does your family think about your gaming?
 - Do you think anyone in your family would be happy if you stopped gaming?
- Do any of your real-life friends know that you game?
 - Yes / No..... (If 'yes')What do they think about it?
 - Has anyone ever tried to discourage you from playing? (e.g. my Dad)
 - Yes / No.....If 'yes', what reasons did they give?
- Some people might think that gaming takes a person away from their life and from their responsibilities around the home. Do you agree?
 - Agree / Disagree.....Can you explain further?
- Some people argue that gaming is an activity that isolates people, making them more reclusive and unsociable. Do you agree or disagree with this?
 - Agree / Disagree.....Why is that?
- You said you spend ____ hours gaming per week. Do you think that the time you spend gaming is:

Too much	Just right	Not enough
----------	------------	------------
- You obviously love to game, same with me, but can you tell me what it is about gaming that makes you want to spend so much of your time there, as opposed to here?
 - What do you get from it? What does it give you that RL doesn't?
- In your opinion, what is it that stops most women from playing games?
- Do you prefer to game at home, rather than anywhere else?
 - If 'yes' Why home? If 'no' Where and why?
- What do you think about sayings like "a woman's place is in the home", or "women should be bare foot, pregnant and in the kitchen"?

Theme Three – Two-way relationship between 'gaming' and home

- How would you describe yourself as a person? (e.g. feminine, shy/ extravert, mother figure)
 - How would you describe the characters that you use for gaming?
- Is it okay for you to show me (or describe) some of the game/s you are currently playing?
(Discuss avatars in relation to personality and appearance, sexiness or toughness etc).
- When you game, do you prefer to use a male or female avatar?
- For me, when I create a new character, I can spend quite a lot of time assigning her particular attributes and getting her to look just right. Is this something you have done with your characters?
 - If 'yes' For you personally, what do you think are the most important things for your characters to have?
- What are your thoughts on how female characters are portrayed? (Discuss the portrayal of female game characters. e.g., 'fem-fatale' (sexy yet dangerously feminine), wearing little clothing).
- Hypothetically, if you could take any attributes from your game characters and apply them to yourself in real-life, what attributes would you take? And why?
- For you personally, do you ever feel like your gaming activities might be interfering with your real-life activities? Yes / No.....(If 'yes') In what ways?
 - And vice-versa – Do you ever feel like your real-life activities interfere with your gaming time? Yes / No.....(If 'yes') In what ways?
- For you as a person, do you think gaming at home has changed some of the ways that you might interact with other people, like the people you live with, or your family and friends? Yes / No.....(If 'yes') In what ways?
- Hypothetical statement: There is a small piece of technology (let's say the size of a micro chip) that has been designed to improve and enhance your gaming experience. Perhaps, making it more life like and real; however, in order for it to work it needs to be surgically implanted in your body. Would you ever consider volunteering for a surgical procedure like this?
 - Yes / No.....Can you explain why you would (or wouldn't) have this procedure done?
- **Do you have any questions for me?**

Recap – ‘Key’ research questions include:

- How do women (aged 30 and older) negotiate their identities as ‘women at home’ with their identities as ‘women gamers’?
- What is the gendered relationship between bodies and technology in the home environment?
- In what ways do women gamer’s real lives affect their gaming experiences, and vice versa?

Appendix 7: Summary table of research participants

	Talon	Suzy	Granny	Mitch	Wendy	Sheryl	Nikki	Jordan
Age:	32	49	58	36-40	30-35	42	34	31
Marital status:	De facto	Married	Divorced	De facto	Married	Divorced	Married	Single
Occupation:	Public Servant	Student	Retired	Web Admin.	Housewife	IT Worker	IT Admin.	Retail
Children living at home:	0	3=1m/2f	4=2m/2f	2=1m/1f	0	1m	1m	2m
Adults living at home:	3=2m/1f	4=3m/1f	3=1m/2f	2=1m/1f	2=1m/1f	1f	3=2m/1f	2f
Total no. living at home:	3	7	7	2	2 (1 on the way)	2	4	4
No. of people who game at home:	2	6	5	2	2	2	4	3
What room/s they game in:	Bedroom	Dining/lounge	Lounge	Lounge	Computer nook (in between kitchen & lounge)	Lounge	Lounge	Dining/Lounge
No. of gaming devices:	2	4	9	4	11	7	5	6
Does your partner game?	YES	YES	N/A	YES	YES	N/A	YES	N/A
Do your children game?	N/A (but games with neph's & neices)	Yes (with children)	Yes (with grandkids)	Yes (with kids)	No (not yet)	Yes (teenage son games in room)	Yes (with son)	Yes (with sons)
Do you think the time you spend gaming each week is 'too much', 'not enough', or 'just	Just right	Just right	Not enough	Just right	Just right	Not enough	Just right	Not enough

right'?								
Experienced neg. attitudes (e.g. the look)	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES
Housework job share:	Does the least housework but cleans in the weekend	All most of the time	All, including some of her families	Even job share with partner but doesn't like to cook	All most of the time	All most of the time	All - but job shares the cooking	Job shares with sister
Who games more - you or your partner?	The same	More	N/A	The same	More	N/A	More	N/A
Prefers to game using female avatar:	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Reasons for gaming:	Excapism, Zone out, destress, relax.	Feels like I'm achieving something. Stop boredom and I enjoy it.	Relaxation, pleasure, mental stimulation, knitting bores me, never liked joining clubs, keeps your mind active, entertainment- some people get that going for hike but I get that from gaming.	Responsibilities as Guild Leader, experiencing achievements in-game, taking down a big boss, catching up with people.	Hobby, no different than playing sport. It's something that I enjoy doing.	Time out, switching my mind off from other things that might be worrying me.	A bit addicted, like to progress in games, not into sporty stuff, got a young one at home so have to hang around home and may as well jump online.	Nice and warm at home, can be myself, be with friends - depends on your mood, you can do whatever you want, it's just a break away from the real world and go off into fantasy land and have fun.

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