

Ethics for Cyborgs: On Real Harassment in an “Unreal” Place

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Abstract

Over the last two years public awareness of bigoted and sexual harassment in gaming communities has grown precipitously, but a clear understanding of what causes it and what can be done about it eludes us. Using a feminist theory of social structure-as-practise, this paper argues against the popular notion that anonymity alone causes harassment, and suggests instead that the conventional wisdom of “it’s just a game” is at the heart of this problem. This conceit creates a moral landscape that is a möbius strip of reality and unreality, allowing gaming space to be both at once, thus licencing all manner of prejudicial behaviour. In order to make gaming spaces more welcoming, we must disarticulate anonymity from other social practises that constitute the structure of prejudice in online gaming, and develop solutions that address themselves to fostering a normative ethics that is responsive to the distinct, playful features of online gaming, while encouraging players to make moral choices that respect the participation and humanity of women, people of colour, and LGBTQ people.

Author Keywords

Gaming; anonymity; feminism; sexism; racism; harassment

Introduction

How do we make sense of comments like this, left online: “You’re a Bolshevik feminist jewess that hates white people... and you expect to be taken seriously when you’re ‘critique-ing’ video games? Fucking ovendodger,” or “you probably are a pedophile, 90% of you freaks are after all. Anyways I hope someone kills you so you don’t have to suffer anymore,”?¹

A culture of prejudice and harassment that has long prevailed in the physical world has now made an outpost of the virtual. But it is not enough to regard comments like those above, directed at feminist gaming critics Anita Sarkeesian² and Katharine Haché respectively, as simply a slight variation on the theme of patriarchy. Rather, there is something distinct about the social structure of gaming culture, particularly online, that lends not only strength but also a moral imprimatur to this kind of behaviour. The virtual realm of gaming *refracts*, as well as reflects, the social structure of the physical world.

There is a unique, Möbius-strip of reality and unreality in gaming culture—a two sided and yet one-sided system of norms. The culture becomes real when it is convenient, and unreal when it is

not; real enough to hurt people in, unreal enough to justify doing so. I argue that we need to stop allowing “it’s just the Internet” thinking to short-circuit the necessary mechanisms of accountability that can passively encourage good behaviour. A feminist epistemology that takes its cues from a theory of social structure-as-practice can provide a useful critical lens through which we can see all dimensions of this problem, and potentially devise solutions (Mitchell 1971; Connell, 1983, 1987). As a systematising perspective that recognises the role of norms in shaping the morals of online interaction, *as well as* the role of pre-existing prejudicial schema, this feminist sociology opens doors not only to anti-bullying solutions but also to new kinds of gameplay.

This paper will briefly set forth a theory that explains the moral universe of gaming culture based on the foregoing: my working definition of “morality” will regard moral choices as being any decision that depends on choosing between values (Blanshard, 1966; Ossowska, 1970). One set of values, as we will see, conceives of gaming as a less-than-real shelter from the demands of modern culture—including so called “political correctness”—while another deems it important that people of all backgrounds be able to participate in gaming without fear or favour.

In considering “virtual reality” we must shift our emphasis to the term *reality*; we are confronted not with a pure simulation, but a consequential social world whose vistas are expanding moment to moment and where such moral choices have consequences, particularly for women³. For example, game designer Kathy Sierra was left afraid to leave her own home by threats that seemed to swarm out of nowhere like a plague of locusts from the gaming community—threats of an especially graphic nature were made⁴. Former Bioware writer Jennifer Hepler was inundated with a deluge of hateful comments on social media after six year old comments she had made about making combat optional in roleplaying games resurfaced on Reddit (Polo, 2012). Tech evangelist Adria Richards was sent graphic rape and death threats, including photoshopped snuff pornography, along with a torrent of racist abuse that ultimately cost her job, all after she had taken to Twitter to complain about a male developer’s sex jokes during a conference presentation, complete with a picture of him. Richards’ harassers even took to flooding her clients with abuse and denial-of-service attacks in a bid to pressure her employer into firing her (Holt, 2013). Miranda Pakozdi, a professional competitive gamer, was sexually harassed and verbally abused by her own coach during a live, televised *Street Fighter x Tekken* tournament (Cross, 2013a). *Gamespot* editor Carolyn Petit was vituperated for a video review that gave *Grand Theft Auto V* a 9/10, partially because of what she characterised as its deeply sexist portrayal of women—this harassment included a tremendous amount of transmisogynist abuse (Cross, 2013b)⁵.

By now stories of prejudicial harassment online—whether racial, anti-LGBT, sexist, or some *mélange* of the above—are legion and public, with a legacy stretching back through the length of the internet’s relatively short lifetime (Nakamura, 2000; Kafai *et. al.*, 2008; Citron, 2009; Cross, 2013a). A growing body of social scientific literature supports the idea that online space is specifically hostile to women (Jenkins, 1998; Ballard & Lineberger, 1999; Norris, 2004; Meyer & Cukier, 2006; Kuznekoff & Rose, 2012) and new research suggests, tentatively, that it may even exacerbate hostility to women well beyond the world of gaming (Dill, 2009; Beck *et. al.*, 2012).

Contrary to conventional wisdom, I argue that anonymity's role has been overemphasised at the expense of *accountability* in these cases. While anonymity is certainly part of what can lead to a lack of accountability in gaming spaces, it is not as exhaustive an explanation as is often popularly suggested (Penny Arcade, 2004; Fost, 2007). I contend there is a system of norms that rewards or minimises symbolically violent behaviour in gaming culture.

From there I will discuss how we might use this understanding to address the symbolic violence of online harassment and its chilling, silencing effects. We can do this, I argue, by reshaping the very structure of virtual spaces themselves to enforce new normative values and accountability around harassment and other forms of gendered symbolic violence, while recognising anonymity's *constructive* role in doing this. The Möbius strip I have described need not, after all, be a curse; that real/unreal dyad has also given rise to the more enchanting parts of gaming culture, sowing the seeds of personal reinvention and identity-proliferation.

I. Philosophical Foundations: “It’s Just a Game” and the Discursive Construction of the Virtual

This virulent swarm of harassment is the patriarchal id, a collection of gender inequity's impulses unrestrained by the already vanishingly thin fetters of politesse that prevail in the physical world. It is the very novelty of the space—a new social space akin to the advent of the agora, the university, or the factory, demanding new norms and values—that occasions the moral choices I detailed above. A conflict between values exists in gaming spaces where any values that regard women as equal participants are often destined to lose, in part because gaming culture is fully continuous with the physical world's culture.

This culture provides space for a disaffected man to more easily, as philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2010) argues, aggressively respond to women he perceives as powerful and aloof in order to “dominate and punish them, remaining utterly secure himself” (p. 84).

There is, I argue, a particular belief that prevails online that *makes* that choice considerably easier for male gamers, obviating normative ethics that would disdain harassment. It is the belief that what happens on the internet is less “real” than what transpires in the physical world, and the idea that actions taken online, or words spoken on the internet, are denuded of their real-world power. There are no humans on the internet, only pixels; no society, only websites and forums.

The vernacular distinction between “online” and “the real world” discursively crystallises this understanding. In online gaming spaces in particular, this distinction is manifested in the difference between “play” and “non-play.” Brian Vandenberg (1998) argued, in his analysis of children at play in the physical world, that “the ease with which the real can be rendered not real, by the simple signal ‘This is play,’ reveals the contingency and fluidity of the social construction of reality” (p. 303). I contend that the same is true of online gaming spaces and the Internet more widely, exposing a crucial dynamic that, in the words of Anthropologist Bonnie Nardi (2010), render antisocial behaviour “unaccountable” (p. 155).

The metacommunicative assertion of “this is just a game” or “it’s just the Internet” performs an identical function to Vandenberg’s “this is play”—psychologist John Suler (2004) calls this the

“dissociative imagination.” Such assertions of play are often the first line of defence against someone who asserts that the behaviour of certain individuals in the gaming space is disrespectful, offensive, or triggering. Nardi observed that behaviour like asking a woman gamer for naked pictures of herself would be glossed over as “just a joke!” and made light of (Nardi, 2010, p. 155; deCastell, 2012).

This Möbius strip of seriousness and unseriousness—real social practise folding against the averring of unreality by the practitioners—is a distinct feature of the gaming world. It emerges from practises in the physical world, but in the virtual world it substantively creates the gendering of the space in a more consistent manner because of how neatly it dovetails with the collective, default assumption of “play.” This gendering constructs male gamers as the insiders, whose “play” can encompass harassment that polices the boundaries of the space, while constructing women as invading outsiders.

One is playing a video game, or participating in an online community where games are the central topic of discussion. Therefore, the default state is one of play, and thus “unreality” because it is seen as exceptional to the “real” world.

It then becomes painfully easy to justify public behaviour that would be considered rank and vulgar even in the physical world of patriarchy. In the wake of the public sexual harassment of Pakozdi by her coach at a gaming tournament, one man posting on fan forums about the much-publicised incident said that “the fighting game scene is a chance for them to relax and be themselves, away from an insane, politically correct culture” (Cross, 2013a, p. 34). No thought was given to Ms. Pakozdi’s need to relax and be herself, of course.

And what do male gamers themselves think? We might consider the words of one young man who said, “We all know the PC drill, blah. But c’mon, man. It’s only a goddamned game... it’s just entertainment” (Kimmel, 2008, p. 149), or those of a YouTube commenter who wrote to Anita Sarkeesian telling her to scrap her documentary project about gender in video games because “It’s just a game, those girls [depicted in games] aren’t real now, are they?” (Cross, 2013a, p. 34).

It’s not real, therefore it’s okay; this is the amoral substructure of gaming culture. This, far more than anonymity, is the source of much gender and racial harassment on the internet. Anonymity is, at worst, a lesser accelerant of prejudicial behaviour. People can and do say belligerent or bigoted things online with their real names attached—and in the case of Facebook, even their photos. Rather, we must focus on the amorality of this social structure, and in particular the lack of accountability that prevails online, where bad behaviour is waved off or shrugged at as so much expected piffle. Before discussing solutions, we must also briefly consider two other structures of social practise that support this culture of gendered harassment.

The Ordinary World: Gender, Discipline, and Power Online

I describe life with Chuck as twisted and brutal, demented and violent, insane and sadistic; he describes it as normal—believe it or not, we’re both telling the truth.

~Linda Lovelace, *Out of Bondage*⁶

Like all social systems, the constituent parts are of a piece, necessarily being different facets of the same set of phenomena but with different inflection points. The Möbius strip of real/unreal can be said to underlay a second, distinct issue: the ordinariness of symbolic violence online. I use the term “symbolic violence,” per Bourdieu (1998), to foreground a specific genre of behaviour in gaming spaces that sees male gamers forcibly impose meanings and narratives on their female counterparts; this includes the idea that women in games can only be “fat, ugly, or slutty,” less capable with technology, less skilled gamers, “feminazi” troublemakers and so on⁷ (Corneilussen, 2008; Yee, 2008). This is often executed with the goal of running a particular woman off the internet, shutting down her website, making her quit a game, and so on (Citron, 2010; Cross, 2013a; Hess, 2014).

We see the emergence of these cultural tropes as an outgrowth of the symbolic capital men are believed to possess relative to women (greater technological facility, more gaming skill, et cetera) and they become thoroughly normalised as accepted, conventional wisdom in cyberspace, which—in addition to the moral unseriousness described in the previous section—licences the abuse of women. This abuse, in turn, has a disciplining effect that either obviates women’s online presence, or makes it inordinately difficult.

Journalist Michael Kinsley famously opined “the scandal isn’t what’s illegal, the scandal is what’s legal”—this is a useful way to think through Catharine MacKinnon’s arguments in her essay “Sex and Violence,” predicated as they are on the proposition that oppression lies not in violent aberrations, but in what is *ordinary*. For MacKinnon (1987), the storied banality of evil arises from the crime of what is normal. What we take for granted, and what becomes commonplace is the great moral crime. “[In] criminal law,” she says, “we can’t put everybody in jail who does an ordinary act, right? Crime is supposed to be deviant, not normal” (p. 88), and yet, she argues, rape is actually quite a common practise in our society, contributing to the conceptual faults in our criminal justice system that see so many rapes go unpunished. When we dismiss harassment or other forms of symbolic violence with a hand-wave saying “it’s just the Internet, what can you do?” we are contributing to the perpetuation of the Möbius strip and to a mentality that minimises the very real consequences of this harassment—lost jobs, lost livelihoods, real terror and self-loathing, the silencing of non-white⁸, non-male voices (Citron, 2010; Wall, 2013).

We retain a sharp distinction between exceptional, aberrant behaviour on the one hand, and a supposedly non-violent, non-prejudiced normality on the other when it comes to cyberspace as well, one that holds that harassment is perpetrated by exceptional individuals—either ontologically “mean” people, or people who don’t know any better. But the reality is that this violence is much more normal and woven into the fabric of everyday social practise on the Internet, just as it is in the physical world; what constitutes ordinary gameplay or online interaction is what actually *makes up the substance* of harassment. Norms that suggest, for instance, that harassment of women is morally acceptable if it’s just “trash talk” or “joking around” in the context of escaping “from an insane, politically correct culture,” are part of what constitutes a normalised mode of social interaction that makes abuse inevitable. Far from being exceptional, such behaviour and such justifications render abuse ordinary.

The net effect of this is to discipline women into silence. Drawing on his statistical and qualitative research on the popular online roleplaying game World of Warcraft, psychologist Nick Yee (2008) concluded “many female players have learned that it is dangerous to reveal your real-life gender in [online games] because they will be branded as incompetent and constantly propositioned; in other words, they must either accept the male-subject position silently, or risk constant discrimination and harassment if they reveal they are female,” (p. 94). One woman he quotes said “When I played [EverQuest] I was so sick of being hit on 24/7 that I made a male character,” (Ibid.).

Nardi (2010) argues that men propositioning women gamers for nude photographs, a commonplace practise, leaves women gamers with “two choices; the player can play along and continue to play the game or she can leave. There is no opportunity for reasoned discourse or a way to win through humour” (p. 155). In other words, a condition of participating in gaming communities is passive acceptance of abusive behaviour.

This in and of itself constitutes a disciplinary regime fully continuous with the one identified by Sandra Lee Bartky in her feminist reinterpretation of Michel Foucault’s theories. To paraphrase her discussion of beauty culture and apply it to harassment in cyberspace, the disciplinary power that silences women online is everywhere and it is nowhere: “the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular” (Bartky, 1990, p. 285). Amorphous and omnipresent “people,” rather than any one individual in particular, “act to enforce prevailing standards” in this conception.

It mirrors the diffuse operation of power that feminists like MacKinnon identified in everyday social practise, and the anonymous agglomerations that effect large scale harassment campaigns. “Those systems of micro-power,” to borrow Foucault’s phrase, which are comprised of what he called “tiny, everyday, physical mechanisms,” are both constitutive of and sustaining of online harassment (Foucault, 1977, p. 222). This micrological power conditions women online into silence, into minimising their forms and presence online and leaves women “far more restricted than men in their manner of movement and in their lived spatiality” (Bartky, 1990, p. 280). Bartky was referring to physical motility, but the theory holds for the Internet as well if we think of virtual presence as a new form of embodiment (Stone, 1995; Turkle, 1995; Hayles, 1999; Taylor, 2006; Boellstorff, 2008; Pearce & Artemisia, 2009). In games, women self-police by being silent, constructing male avatars or avatars that are contrary to their tastes/desires, and otherwise playing along to rules they disagree with or find distasteful, (Yee, 2008; Nardi, 2010).

Through it all we see continuity between classical feminist understandings of gender in society, and the possibility of developing a cogent theory of the virtual. What happens online is not something that presents feminists with a unique analytical challenge: we have the tools to understand the Internet’s unique social topography as the latter is continuous with the physically situated patriarchy that has preceded it. The möbius strip of reality and unreality mirrors MacKinnon’s well developed theory of privacy in patriarchy—which hinges on men having greater access to the putative privileges of ‘the private,’ making a space private and thus shielded from moral scrutiny at their discretion (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 184-194). Similarly, in gaming spaces, the space is real or unreal depending on the needs of male players, and disciplinary regimes online cause women to make ourselves ‘virtually’ smaller, just as we make ourselves take up less *physical* space.

If we have the tools to understand the virtual, we also have the tools to make safe this undiscovered but familiar country. But first we have to confront what is, hands down, the most popular argument about what causes harassment in gaming.

To Do and To Be: Anonymity as Capability

It is, by now, standard in both academia and the press to suggest that anonymity is the primary source of symbolic violence online (Levmore, 2010; Nussbaum, 2010). But this belief ignores ample empirical evidence available to even the casual internet user—Facebook is filled with millions of people, most of whom use their legal names and photos when they post things that may be considered antisocial, aggressive, prejudicial, or even harassing. Much like an online game’s cresting tide of report backlogs, Facebook can also barely keep up with the number of abuse reports it receives daily. Anonymity plays its role, but as Suler (2004) documented it is one of only several social mechanisms bearing on this question.

While I would not want to entirely dismiss the role of anonymity, it has become so vastly overemphasised in popular discourse that it can lead to ham-handed non-solutions that exacerbate existing problems. For instance, Blizzard Entertainment’s abortive ReallID proposal would have made it impossible for players to be anonymous in its flagship online game *World of Warcraft*; their legal names would have been revealed in both the live game every time they tried to chat, or in the game’s web forums, where much needful social interaction took place. The rationale for this was, putatively, to prevent harassment and bad behaviour. The idea was that if one had to post hate speech under their legal name, they would be less likely to do so.

The backlash against this proposal was swift and seemingly universal, inspired by any number of philosophies. But feminism revealed a very particular and oft unrecognised truth about the situation: anonymity is both an accelerant to abuse *and* a shield against it. After all, having users post under their legal names opened *them* up to harassment outside the gaming environment by making them easier to track.

But above and beyond this, anonymity is part and parcel of what can make video gaming so enchanting; that grand *ballo in maschera* makes any online game what it is. It is the flip-side of the möbius strip: the conceit of play facilitates the construction of new identities that might prove difficult or impossible in the physical world. This is what is, in part, at work in the constitution of the “fictive ethnicity” of the *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* diaspora gamers studied by Celia Pearce which led to her creation of an avatar, Artemisia, that became her “coauthor” (Pearce & Artemisia, 2009, p. 62). To be someone else, someone new, is where much of the emancipatory potential of gaming lies, and we would do well not to squander it.

A feminist epistemology worthy of the name would see this, and not be swayed by false protestations that we must shed our anonymity in the name of women’s rights—the absconding of anonymity in online gaming would, after all, disadvantage private women, transgender women, women who do not wish to be found by stalkers or abusive exes and so on. If feminism is to create a solution, it will not lie in removing a vital tool that gives marginalised voices in cyberspace some control over their identities; transgender people in particular benefit from the mercurial nature of identity afforded by many online games (Cross, 2012). New evidence even

suggests that women in particular benefit from the cloak of anonymity and are more forthcoming about their lives when not personally identified (Hollenbaugh & Everett, 2013).

We might well be robbing women (and all Internet users, for that matter) of a capability that they cannot meaningfully consent to losing; in the process, we put the cart well before the horse and remove a resourceful innovation that women have used to mitigate or combat harassment while failing to get at the source of the abuse. Anonymity is not only a negative condition in the sense of hiding one's "real" or legal identity, but also a positive one; anonymity contains the potential for reinvention and the beginnings of a *new* identity altogether—something it should surely be our right to create. Here is where the seeds of freedom, and perhaps even resistance, might well germinate.

II. Bending the Rainbow: The Feminist Prism

A feminist sociology that accounts for structure as a form of social practise can allow us to better understand the mechanics of gendered social phenomena in gaming. It does this, in part, through refusing to individually pathologize bigoted behaviour and instead recognise these seemingly monadic incidents of abuse as part of a larger dance of social practise that creates a functionally prejudicial environment. The practise *is* the structure (Connell, 1987; Connell, 2011).

This epistemological quality of the feminist theory I employ here refracts chaotic social heat into orderly light, and in the bands of colour that emerge we might well see solutions to the maladies of the gaming world.

If feminism can see structural problems, feminism can see structural solutions.

In the previous section we moved away from thinking of anonymity as the cause of symbolic gender violence online and turned instead to seeing a lack of accountability actualised in an ethically suspended moral universe as a primary cause, continuous with gender violence in the physical world and *its* structural supports. Enforcing accountability requires two things: (1) a normative value system that stands opposed to prejudice in all forms and expressions, and (2) a social structure of practise that discourages symbolic violence. It is tempting to think the solution lies only in punishment and opprobrium but I contend that these are best seen as tools of last resort to "mop up" what more elegant and effective social mechanisms leave behind.

It is no longer enough to say that a lone gamer must individually /ignore and /report⁹ harassers, leaving overworked GMs and customer service representatives to deal with an impossibly growing backlog of investigations and possible bans. Instead, we might be more productively served by structural changes that stem the tide of people that one needs to /report to begin with.

A Cyber Society Approach

In order to make such changes, we must disarticulate anonymity from other more problematic social practises in virtual worlds. If we can accept the idea that there is a powerful social good that results from the capability of exercising anonymity, then it behooves us to find reforms that allow us to preserve its existence—rather than throwing out the baby with the digital bathwater,

so to speak. Fresh research by sociologist Rachael Pierotti (2013) might give us the earliest elements of an answer.

World society theory is a recent framework used to suggest what should be obvious: that politics and economics is about more than state actors. It posits instead a complex network of “transnational actors” who include international organisations, activists, nonprofits, and charities, called “world society.” Pierotti argues that this world society is able to “define and promote new cultural scripts and models of policy and activism” and that it is capable of “exert[ing] power at the individual level” to “produce relatively rapid changes in individual attitudes” (Pierotti, 2013, p. 241-242). Of particular interest is her argument that her data shows how “global cultural scripts... provide moralised individual behavioural scripts that can influence individuals” (p. 260). These scripts are disseminated through, among other things, interpersonal networks, often circumventing or bypassing entrenched legal authorities (p. 261). This all provides us with interesting parallels and lessons for what I would call “cyber society.”

We might consider “terms of service” and other explicit rules in virtual spaces to be analogous to laws here. Pierotti argues that rapid cultural change occurred in the countries she surveyed because of dissemination of values from places other than formal legal strictures. Concomitantly, I believe it is time for game developers to admit that a stated policy on harassment and other such behaviours is not enough. A new normative “script” has to be developed and disseminated by means other than an end user licence agreement that no one save a handful of lawyers actually reads.

There is a “cyber society” consisting of games journalists, prominent fans and community leaders, website owners, cartoonists, modders, famous players, and so on who exist in a liminal space of power between the rank and file gamer and the top tier of game development staff. It is worth noting many achieve their positions in part through being able to cleave these prominent cyber identities from their physical world ones through strategic use of anonymity. Many of these people are, increasingly, speaking out against prejudice in online spaces but yet more encouragement is needed—this can begin with game development staff being more visible, public, and vocal about the harm being perpetrated on women, LGBT people, and people of colour in cyberspace.

Some developers have already begun to do this. When Bioware writer Jennifer Hepler was attacked by misogynist mobs on social media because of an opinion she had given on game design some six years earlier, Bioware made official pronouncements condemning the behaviour, supporting Hepler, and even ultimately donating a thousand dollars to a Canadian anti-bullying charity in Hepler’s name. This is a model for other companies who want to find a way to flip the script on acceptable behaviour and cut the möbius strip once and for all in their communities. There is a fear that one ‘dignifies’ such churlish and vulgar behaviour with ‘official responses,’ but the benefits outweigh the costs here—to do nothing and remain silent, save for parenthetical footnotes in licence agreements, is tantamount to endorsing the abuse.

Women in Cyber Society

In another act of resistance, game developer Richard Hofmeier used his platform at the annual Game Developers Conference to help promote a novel independent game created by Porpentine,

a writer, critic, and indie developer who makes her games on her own with no budget. Hofmeier vandalised signs promoting *his own* game to help draw attention to Porpentine's *Howling Dogs*. By doing so, he situates Porpentine—a woman of trans experience—as a community member, rather than an outsider to be harassed and shunned. This too models the kind of extralegal action that can bring about a shift in social scripts, and productively models how men can collaborate with female creators in the gaming community as well. People who belong to “cyber society” using positions of prominence at important industry conferences to begin changing the narrative on gender in virtual worlds can, in theory, have the same impact that “world society” has had on gender norms globally.

The recognition of women inherent in Hofmeier's actions is a form of interactive practise that reconstructs cyber society in a way that is not only “inclusive” (the term itself presupposes that women are not already there, which is a fallacious assumption), but embodies that society as a broader community of recognition and respect.

Women are also taking the lead in that reconstitution of cyber society. For all the controversy about Anita Sarkeesian's work and the hateful response of many in the world of gaming, others have embraced her and other feminist gamers as voices *of* the community rather than apart from it. In addition to Porpentine, there are many other transgender women who comprise a vocal and prolific cadre of storytellers, designers and activists, like Merritt Kopas, Anna Anthropy, Autumn Nicole Bradley, Mattie Brice, and Samantha Allen, just to name a few; their work has explored trauma, healing, embodiment, sexuality, oppression, and a host of other themes (Anthropy, 2012).

Meanwhile, Jennifer Hepler was attacked because she voiced an opinion about game design, arguing that players should be able to press a button to skip combat in video games, just as one is often able to skip dialogue. A cyber society approach would see women like her as not mere victims of bad behaviour, but as knowledge producers who were attacked precisely because of the role they play in the gaming community as thinkers and creators, whose ideas should not be cast off in the wake of harassment. We run the risk of constructing such women as ontological victims defined only by how they have been hurt, and not by what they believe or do.

This approach does not merely begin from a question of “making space” for such women, with its implication of male gamers tacit ownership of space that women must be allowed into, but instead from *recognition* for work that is already going on and part of the community in practise if not always in name, as well as recognising women's mere presence.

Pierotti's research demonstrated that extrajudicial behavioural scripts¹⁰ could bring about rapid change in transnational views on domestic violence—norms shift rapidly, especially when new values are promoted by powerful actors outside of the traditionally staid realm of law (important as the latter is, it must act in concert with other, often informal institutions). In the virtual worlds of gaming we can use this framework to help see elements of a “cyber society” comprised of influential individuals who have a moral responsibility to intervene in these debates, and people whose practise ought to be recognised as legitimate expressions of gamer-dom. But if it is not enough to change policies in individual games, what role might developers have besides simply speaking out as cyber society members in the way described here?

New Directions in Design

Nardi (2010) argues that game design is powerfully consequential not only for the fun gamers have, but also for the very shape of their social interactions. She shows how the designers of the online roleplaying game *Lineage* structured certain social forms through the game's very code—making, for instance, ‘ganking’,¹¹ an inevitable social practise which players dealt with in a variety of ways. After reflecting on how easy it would be to change the game's code to prevent this behaviour, she observes “[a] world in which ganking is possible was precisely the world intended by designers, and it was that world they encoded into the rules” (p. 71).

From here, we should proceed with the understanding that perfect anarchic freedom in an online space is an illusion. The notion that a space without rules, order, or structure is therefore entirely free is mostly a fantasy. We have recourse to Nardi's excellent summaries of social disorder in the online game *Second Life* (p. 77-79), but also once more to a feminist perspective on society itself which holds that power and various other constraints on freedom can exist at informal and micrological levels. In other words, even in a society where there are no oppressive laws on the books, oppression is still possible because social formations themselves can cohere in informal, unlabelled, but clearly oppressive forms (MacKinnon, 1993; Connell, 2011). For instance, if sexually harassing speech is permitted under the guise of freedom, in *practise* this can silence the speech of others directly impacted by it.

These are the wages of the informal ‘discipline’ discussed earlier, per Bartky. There are no official rules here, but the *lack of them* enables the dominance of unchecked behaviours that become their own form of policing. In a similar vein, Nardi argues about *Second Life*: “in practise, the freedoms cherished by *Second Life*'s designers resulted in the dominance of certain activities, pushing away other activities into which the potential participants, disaffected by the dominant activities, might have entered,” (Nardi, 2010, p. 78). We cannot shirk the responsibilities of rulemaking, in other words. One way or another, social practises will be regulated—certain behaviours will be encouraged and discouraged; it is up to us, then, to ensure that they are regulated in a way that minimises symbolic violence.

This is already something that has proved eminently possible. For example, *Guild Wars 2* uses a radically new ‘mob tagging’ system to encourage cooperation between strangers rather than competition, which often creates fertile ground for abusiveness. In an online game, when one attacks a computer-controlled enemy, that enemy is ‘tagged’ as belonging to you—ensuring that only you get the experience points and loot from its kill. Thus, even if someone comes along to help you halfway through the fight, they get no reward. This ratchets up competition and makes players possible enemies/competitors rather than allies. *Guild Wars 2* uses a smart reward system that remunerates everyone involved in a fight, whenever they happened to join it. Having played in the game's alpha, I can testify to the vastly different experience this created—rather than sighing when I saw someone else in the same woods I was questing in, thinking that my task would take twice as long because we were competing for the same spawns of enemies, I cheered because under this new system that player was a tremendous *help* to me. A change of code (admittedly, not likely a simple one) made this possible, and made a new social order at a stroke.

But what about a simpler change of code? Riot Games' *League of Legends* employs three Social Systems Designers—Jeffrey Lin, Renjie Li, and Davin Pavlas—who found ways of improving player behaviour in their notoriously competitive and often toxic multiplayer online game, usually through relatively simple means. They were guided by a few key “pillars” that evoke both the cyber-society approach and new game design strategies outlined above, showing preliminarily how they could work in harmony. Those “pillars” include: (1) shield players from negative behaviour; (2) reform or remove toxic players; (3) create a culture of sportsmanship; and (4) reinforce positive behaviours (Lin, 2013).

With these goals in mind they made small but significant changes. Making all chat “opt-in” rather than “opt-out” (text communication between opposing teams is turned off by default now), saw a 17% drop in offensive language reports, and a 34.5% increase in positive communication between players, according to Riot's internal numbers. Through using the new in-game “Tribunal” to crowdsource accountability—players could report bad behaviour and then vote on whether or not to punish the allegedly offending player—harassing and toxic behaviour decreased further still. Despite the potential for abuse of such a system, the community rose to the occasion when actualised as moral agents; according to Riot, the judgements of the players coincided with developer judgements on bad behaviour 80% of the time, suggesting ethical isomorphism between the well-intentioned designers and the average player (Lin, 2013). In other words, gamers are not intrinsically bad people. If treated like citizens, they will act like citizens.

The developers also began giving feedback to offending players, explaining why sexist, racist, and homophobic language and bullying were, in Lin's words, “not okay.” Lin believes accountability is important, just as I have argued here, and it seems to be working in *League of Legends*. The game now uses ‘tips’ that appear on loading screens, such as “teammates perform worse if you harass them after a mistake” that do seem to reduce negative behaviour. Anonymity was never targeted in Riot Games' approach, either. Their focus was, instead, on cultivating community and accountability (Lin, 2013).

Such minor changes have had an impact. If we take for granted that reducing symbolic violence online is a worthy goal, as Lin and his colleagues have done¹², and accept that such behaviour is amenable to change we can see solutions to the problem—sometimes surprisingly simple ones.

Concluding Thoughts: A Feminist Project for the 21st Century

What links the preliminary solutions given here is their lack of dependence on removing anonymity. Taking a feminist perspective seriously ought to end all argument about such proposals and seriously challenge the conventional wisdom about whether anonymity alone is the source of what ails us in the virtual world. This epistemology allows us to do two things: one, it enables us to see anonymity more holistically, not only as the negative absence of a legal identity, but a site upon which a new one (or several new ones) may be built; two, with this in mind, it allows us to untangle anonymity from other social forces where reform efforts might be better directed, particularly around reshaping norms.

A feminist view on the virtual society of games shows us that there, first and foremost, *is* a society to speak of and that like any society it is not a collection of inevitabilities but *possibilities*

forever contested and open to change (Taylor, 2006). Future philosophical work might examine the fact that though we have been social creatures for some 150,000 years, we have only been telecommunicating creatures for the last 150; we still lack normative ethics for avatars—those social selves projected across vast distances that still engage in all the meaningful interaction that makes us human. This is a feminist project for the 21st Century.

That process of ethical discovery will not be an easy one, but it can begin from gamers thinking critically about the values that they hold, what they truly believe about each other, their hobby, the space they inhabit, and what play truly means for them. Getting at this requires a search for what Nussbaum (1986) calls “ethical truth, on the Aristotelian understanding of truth:”

[A]s Aristotle stresses... most people, when asked to generalise, make claims that are false to the complexity and the content of their actual beliefs. They need to learn what they really think. When, through work on the alternatives and through dialogue with one another, they have arrived at a harmonious adjustment of their beliefs, both singly and in community with one another, this will be the ethical truth... (p. 10-11)

If a gamer claims that all are welcome in this hobby, is that the substance of what he or she actually practises with regards to the participation of women, gamers of colour, or queer gamers? This is where ethics and the structure of social practise can be said to meet. To be in community with one another would, for instance, require meaningful engagement with the ideas of those like Jennifer Hepler rather than fusillades of abuse.

Such values would further allow the realisation of everything I have hitherto described: they would be the basis for new “cultural scripts” that encourage behaviour not rooted in prejudice, empowering players to make moral choices that affirmatively accept and welcome diversity, and they can guide us when attempting to design games that encourage play without its less savoury manifestations, as *Guild Wars 2* or *League of Legends* have just begun to do.¹³

The feminist prism clearly demonstrates the continuity of gendered/racialized symbolic violence between the physical and virtual worlds (Nakamura, 1995). We see that there is a regime of disciplinary power that can stifle voices and make full, equal participation difficult for everyone involved, particularly women, people of colour, and LGBTQ people. It reveals that möbius strip of real and unreal that, far more than anonymity, licences so much abusive behaviour, and whose social dynamics can be understood by extrapolating from similar phenomena feminists have studied for years. These are perspectives that can provide new visions of the virtual where anonymity is a capability and not just a necessary evil, and where we might think of new norms and structures for virtual spaces like online games to have.

These “structures” I have described are really the widespread elaborations of social practise between players—such interactions *are* the gaming community. The nature of these interactions must be the at the heart of our study, in a way that refuses to simply blame anonymity for the conflagration of harassment in online gaming today, if we are to use academic tools to fashion solutions to our online troubles. As sociologist Raewyn Connell (1983) puts it, “the concept of liberation must be embodied in practises that work *through* the structures of the person, towards the abolition of relations of oppression and exploitation *between* people” (p. 62).

For gaming, this begins with refusing to see ‘play’ as carte-blanche to manifest *hate* as a social practise.

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¹ Quotes sourced from Cross, 2013a, and Haché, 2014.

² For examples of this, including pornographic Wikipedia vandalism, and a game consisting entirely of punching Sarkeesian in the face, see the following posts on Sarkeesian’s website: <http://www.feministfrequency.com/tag/harassment/>

³ While I would argue that there is formal isomorphism between the dynamics of harassment within gaming communities, and those outside of it—culminating in hate campaigns against women such as Suey Park, Rebecca Watson, Jill Filipovic, or Caroline Criado-Perez—it is beyond the scope of this paper to address that homology and thus my examples will be limited to those cases that retain some direct link to gaming communities.

⁴ “[Attackers on her blog and websites] threatened rape and strangulation. They revealed her home address and Social Security number. They posted doctored photographs of Ms. Sierra. One picture featured her with a noose beside her neck; the other depicted her screaming while being suffocated by lingerie,” Citron 2010, p. 31.

⁵ For a fuller discussion of transmisogyny, see Serano, 2007.

⁶ Quoted in MacKinnon, 1987, p. 126

⁷ This website provides a rich survey of the gender discourse in online games: <http://fatuglyorslutty.com/> It was started and maintained by a gaming woman, known publicly only as Grace, who sought to combat this harassment through shining a public light upon it.

⁸ “After the author of ‘Ask This Black Woman’ posted commentary about a video game, anonymous posters attacked her on her blog and other sites. She received death threats. Posters told her to “[g]et back into the cotton fields you filthy [n****r]” and threatened to overrun her blog,” Citron 2010, p. 36.

⁹ These are ‘slash commands’ that one usually types into a chat box in an online game to execute a given command—in this case to ‘ignore’ an offending player (preventing you from hearing them or seeing their messages) or ‘report’ them (send a red flag to customer service representatives who have the power to ban or punish an unruly player).

¹⁰ Though the focus here is on extralegal solutions, it is worth considering Danielle Keats Citron’s (2009) vision of law as expressing normative values: “By changing the social meaning of online harassment and recharacterising it as a civil rights violation, we may be able to transform online behaviour in a manner that permits women to claim the internet as equally their own,” (p. 415). This proposal is also one of the fruits of feminist analysis, and surely worth pursuing with vigour.

¹¹ This is the act of, essentially, a high level player killing a very low level one. The power difference between the two is so great that it is impossible for the latter to fight back—they will always lose and die quickly, robbing them of the chance to experience the game in any fun, self-directed way.

¹² Although it must be said their approach was not explicitly feminist per se, they have similar goals to feminist gamers, particularly on questions of ending bigoted harassment. Lin's presentation named various forms of prejudice expressed by some *League of Legends* players as problems for him and his team to solve.

¹³ It should be noted, however, that *Guild Wars 2* still quite arguably objectifies many female characters through unnecessarily revealing outfits, particularly for magic-using classes. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address, but an argument could be made that such images prime male gamers to treat female gamers in a negative way, thus offsetting the gains of the game's technical improvements.